

## Acquisition of English focus prosody: Evidence from native speakers of Spanish

Recent work on the interfaces has shown that certain interfaces may be subject to persistent problems in second language acquisition (Sorace 2011, White 2011). Prosodic focus, which involves the integration of the prosodic grammar and pragmatic context, is an interface phenomenon that has not yet been examined in second language (L2) acquisition. The purpose of this study was to test the acquisition of prosodic focus in L2 English by means of a perception experiment, which tested the interpretation of prosodic focus by intermediate L2 learners of English whose first language (L1) was Spanish. The results showed that L2 learners have access to their L1 focus-marking strategies and that problems in the acquisition of focus do not persist at an advanced stage of acquisition.

English marks focus with stress shift while Spanish exhibits syntactic inversion in *wh*-question contexts, moving the focussed element to the right edge of the sentence (Belletti 2004, Büring 2010). Previous studies have indicated that advanced-stage English-speakers make errors with the Spanish focus-marking strategy, showing a tendency to employ stress shift in Spanish where the pragmatic context prefers syntactic movement (Domínguez to appear, Lozano 2006). It has not yet been studied how Spanish-speaking learners interpret focus in English, which leaves an empirical question that this study attempts to answer.

The experiment tested 16 native speakers (NS) of English and 14 NS of Spanish with an intermediate level of English on a naturalness-rating task. Participants listened to recorded dialogues which each contained a question-answer pair. They were then asked to rate the dialogue as to how natural it sounded. The answer to each question was manipulated according to 4 conditions (stress-correct, stress-incorrect, clefting-correct, clefting-incorrect); see Table 1. In the stress-correct condition, prosodic stress was shifted to the focused constituent. The stress-incorrect condition instead had stress on the non-focused (given) constituent if focus was on the subject, stress would fall on the object and vice versa. In the clefting conditions, focus was marked syntactically by the use of cleft constructions, which is a pragmatically marked focus-marking strategy in English. The clefting conditions also varied as to whether the cleft extracted the relevant constituent from the relative clause or not.

Results are shown in Figure 1. Both the NS control group and the L2 group gave correct focus conditions higher ratings than incorrect focus conditions. In addition, it was observed that all cleft constructions were given lower ratings, but cleft-correct was significantly higher rated than cleft-incorrect. The differences seen in Figure 1 with respect to stress-correct and stress-incorrect were not significant in the statistical model (i.e. the interaction between focus strategy and L1 was not significant). However, when proficiency level (as measured by a Cloze test) was used as a factor instead of L1, a correlation between proficiency and stress-shift was found (Figure 2). This correlation was not present in the clefting conditions.

These data suggest that Spanish-speaking learners of English at the intermediate level are sensitive to both the syntactic and prosodic marking of focus. Clefting is a structure that is transferred from the L1 while stress-shift is acquired during the intermediate stage of L2 development.

**Word count: 504**

QUD: Who met David?	Focus Strategy	
	Stress shift	Clefting
Correct focus	LISA met David.	It was LISA who met David.
Incorrect focus	Lisa met DAVID.	It was DAVID who Lisa met.

Table 1: Experimental conditions

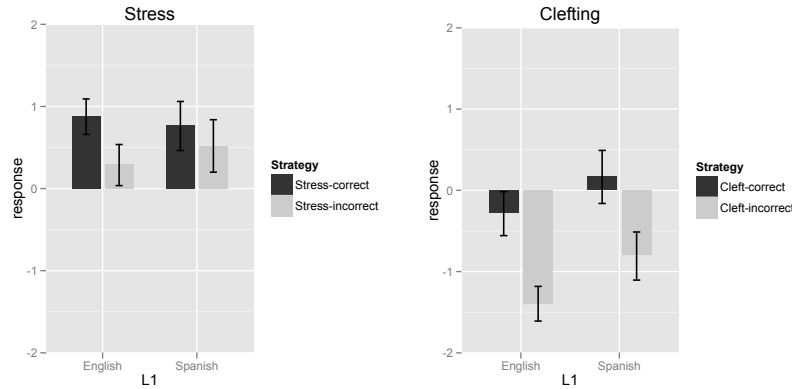


Figure 1: Naturalness Ratings by L1 and Focus Strategy

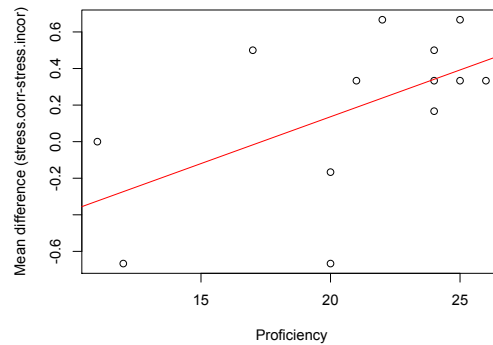


Figure 2: Correlation between proficiency and mean difference between stress-correct and stress-incorrect (L2 group only)

## References

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