

Subject inversion as a ‘free’ phenomenon

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1. Preliminary assumptions. In Spanish and other Romance languages a distinction between two types of subject inversion has to be made. In the first set of contexts, subject inversion is obligatory (for instance, in *wh*-interrogatives and Focus Fronting), and the postverbal subject is not in focus. The second set of contexts roughly corresponds to what is traditionally called ‘free’ inversion: here inversion is not syntactically induced, and the subject is always in focus. It seems natural to derive the informational value of the subject from the (non-)optionality of inversion by means of general economy principles. From this point of view, ‘free’ subject inversion, together with its competing alternative option –movement of the subject to its canonical preverbal position– is a “free” phenomenon, in the sense of being the result of a speaker’s choice.

2. Aims. The aim of this presentation is to show that subject inversion and its competitor are free options in languages like Spanish and that this view can be maintained even when faced with two apparent difficulties.

The first difficulty concerns language-internal issues. It is well known that VS order with unaccusative predicates is the default, unmarked option, whereas SV is sometimes anomalous, so that inversion does not entirely look like a matter of free choice. In an approach that maintains movement as a free operation, this can however be accommodated, if the constraints that limit acceptability of the output of movement operations are not a part of core syntax, but rather parts of a different component of the grammatical system that includes information structure and prominence hierarchies.

The second difficulty involves cross-linguistic, comparative issues. A potential problem is raised by other Romance languages that allow subject inversion, but in a more restrictive way (Italian, Catalan, and in particular French). My claim is that we should keep core syntax maximally simple, with free operations, and account for cross-linguistic variation by placing most factors responsible for variation out of core syntax, as pieces of a component that filters and restricts word order options (cf. Leonetti 2017).

3. Conclusions. A treatment of free grammatical phenomena along these lines favours a “subtractive” model of grammar like the one described in Struckmeier (2017).

References: • Leonetti, M. 2017. Basic constituent orders. In Stark, E. & A. Dufter. (eds.), *Manual of Romance morphosyntax and syntax*, 885–930. Berlin: De Gruyter. • Struckmeier, V. 2017. Against information structure heads: a relational analysis of German scrambling. *Glossa* 2(1). 1–29.