Background

English and Spanish both have inversion in wh-questions:

What will John say?
What will John say?

A common analysis for this is a-structure movement (Rizzi 1991, Pesetsky & Torrego 2001). This satisfies the Wh-criterion.

Is a-structure used in Spanish?
Can Wh Criterion explain inversion in Spanish?

Differences between Spanish and English

1. Embedded questions
Mary asked what Peter would say.

2. Adverb placement
Con quien fueron a la tienda?

3. Auxiliary verbs
¿Cuándo fue a Juan bailado? When has John danced?

4. Nature of wh-phrase
In Spanish, robustness of inversion depends on wh-phrase (e.g. que yields stronger effect than cuando). This is not known to occur in English

5. Satiation
Goodall (in press): Subjects do repeated judgments of unacceptability sentence types. *What John will buy at the store? *¿Qué Juan compró en la tienda?

Interim conclusions

Verbs are not in C of Spanish wh-questions. Wh-criterion is not satisfied.

Spanish and English use different mechanisms for inversion: English: Close connection between I (finiteness) and inversion (driven by Wh-Criterion), Spanish: No necessary connection between I and inversion.

A question for acquisition

English: Finiteness and inversion correlates (r = .275, p < .001) (Pérez-Gracián et al 2008).

Spanish: Do finiteness and inversion correlate?
Answer unknown. Many studies find children in Spanish and related languages form adult-like interrogatives (e.g. Guest 1996, Serrat & Capdevila 2003), unlike English-speaking children.

Methodological problem: Small number of overt subjects (less than 20%) in spontaneous speech in null subject languages.

If there is a correlation between finiteness and inversion in child Spanish:
• This supports the idea that inversion is similar in Spanish and English.

If there is not a correlation:
• This supports the idea that inversion is fundamentally different in the two languages.

Subject-Verb Inversion and Verb Finiteness in Spanish

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Experiment 1

Methodology

Grammaticality Choice Task (Pratt & Grinstead 2008) A receptive task to get around the small number of overt subjects in spontaneous speech.

Participants

53 monolingual speakers of Spanish, from daycare centers in Mexico City. 11 children excluded for not passing fillers, leaving 42. Mean age of the 44 children: 4;9. Range: 3;2 (59 mo) – 6;6 (80 mo).

Procedure

Children were introduced to two puppets, and were told that the puppets were babies and were learning to talk, and sometimes they made mistakes.

Then, the children was presented with a picture of the puppets performing different actions.

Each of the puppets said a sentence about the picture, using both adult-like and non-adult-like combinations of finite and non-finite forms.

The child then had to decide which puppet said the sentence better:
4 pairs of warm-up items.
8 pairs of fillers.
16 pairs of experimental items.

El gato tiene una flor.

Results

Overall average of correct answers: 90%, SD=10% (N=44).

Finiteness judgments and age were correlated: r = .675, p < .001.

Conclusion


Experiment 2

Methodology

Same as Experiment 1: Grammaticality Choice Task

Participants

Same as Experiment 1: Same 44 children.

Procedure

Same as Experiment 1.

4 pairs of warm-up items.
8 pairs of fillers.
16 pairs of experimental items (distributed evenly among argument que ‘what’, and adjuncts donde ‘where’ and cuándo ‘when’).

Results

Overall average of inverted questions: 58%, SD=12% (N=44).

Inversion was chosen significantly less with cuándo than with que (p<.05).

Conclusion

No correlation between finiteness and inversion (N=44, r=.139, p<.11).

If our tasks measure finiteness and inversion, then our results suggest that finiteness and inversion are not related in Spanish.

Spanish and English compared

Compared finiteness and inversion rates with very similar study on English: Ricci (2009).

English (Ricci 2009)

Mean age of the 44 children: 4;9. Range: 3;2 (59 mo) – 6;6 (80 mo).

Spanish: n = 44, age range = 36-90 months, mean age = 59 months.

Differences between finiteness and inversion scores:
• Spanish-speaking children: 51% difference
• English-speaking children: 6% difference

Finiteness scores in both English (f = 1.125) and Spanish (f = 1.067) are significantly greater than inversion scores. However, the effect size of this difference is dramatically greater in Spanish than it is in English. Partial eta-squared values for finiteness vs. inversion: Spanish: .625 English: .041. This suggests that finiteness and inversion are unrelated in Spanish.

Both adults and children require inversion more robustly with cuándo ‘when’.

Many potentially relevant variables remain to be considered in comparing subject-auxiliary inversion in English and subject-verb inversion in Spanish:
• Tense marking element
• auxiliar?
• modal?
• Subject type
• Full DP
• name pronoun

Conclusion

Finiteness and inversion are not correlated in child Spanish, unlike what has been found for English.

This is consistent with the idea of different mechanisms: English: Wh-criterion forces link between finiteness and movement to C.

Spanish: No movement to C. Wh-criterion not at work here.

References


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