Word order variation in Italian and Spanish 'why'-interrogatives: An empirical study

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Most Romance languages exhibit obligatory subject-verb inversion in *wh*-interrogatives. An exception to this rule are interrogatives introduced by the *wh*-element 'why' where subject-verb inversion seems to be optional in most Romance languages. This is shown for Spanish by Torrego (1984), Goodall (1993) and Suñer (1994) and for Italian by Rizzi (2001, 2006):

(1) a. Perché   balla   Maria?   b. Perché   Maria balla?   (Italian)
(2) a. ¿Por qué baila   María?   b. ¿Por qué María baila?   (Spanish)
      why   dances Mary   why   Mary dances

Related studies suggest that preverbal positioning in these clauses is possible because 'why' is first merged in a specific position in the left periphery (IntP) which offers additional positions for the subject to occur in the left periphery (Rizzi 2001, 2006). A pending issue in this context is, ~~however,~~ how the preverbal positioning of the subject is constrained in this context. According to an approach by Bianchi, Bocci & Cruschina (2017), the optionality between (1a) and (1b) in Italian can be explained with differences in the information structure of the subject. Accordingly, the subject in (1a) is interpreted as focal, while in (1b) the subject is non-focal (Bocci & Pozzan 2014, Bianchi, Bocci & Cruschina 2017). The aim of this study is to investigate whether the same constraints also hold for Spanish and, if not, how the two languages differ from each other in this context.

In this talk, I argue that despite the parallelism to Italian, the word order variation in Spanish 'why'-interrogatives (see (2)) has to be explained in a different way than in Italian. To substantiate this claim, I present results from two empirical studies which focus on the word order variation and information structure of the subject in Spanish and Italian 'why'-interrogatives. My first study is a parallel text corpus study which is based on data from Italian and Spanish translations. The second study is a forced-choice experiment in which 157 Italian and 215 Peninsular Spanish participants took part. The results of both studies show that information structure and especially focus affect word order in Italian 'why'-interrogatives (parallel text corpus study: $\beta = 4.5$, $SE = 1.1$, $z = 4.08$, $p < .001$; forced-choice experiment: $\beta = -2.01$, $SE = 0.12$, $z = -17.51$, $p < .001$), while this factor does not have an impact on word order Spanish 'why'-interrogatives (parallel text corpus study: $\beta = -1.0$, $SE = 0.52$, $z = -1.91$, $p > .05$; forced-choice experiment: $\beta = -0.06$, $SE = 0.16$, $z = -0.35$, $p > 0.7$). The results of the parallel text corpus study rather suggests that the 'heaviness' of the subject affects word order in Spanish 'why'-interrogatives.

Accordingly, the two languages differ with respect to word order variation in 'why'-interrogatives. I assume that theses differences can be explained by Leonetti's (2014, 2017) approach, suggesting that the two languages differ with respect to the mapping between syntax and information structure. Leonetti shows for various word order pattern in declaratives that Italian is more restrictive in this respect. For instance, while VOS is mostly restricted to a narrow focus interpretation of the subject in Italian, Spanish allows this word order pattern with a narrow and broad focus interpretation. In 'why'-interrogatives, postverbal subjects seem to be restricted to a narrow focus interpretation of the subject, while Spanish allows a broader range of information structural interpretations.

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