

Week 6

Variation in the position of subjects

May 25, 2009

1 Introduction

Spanish allows both preverbal and postverbal subjects. When postverbal, subjects can appear either between the verb and the object (VSO) or following both verb and object (VOS).

(1) *Subject > Verb > Object*

Juan ha leído un libro
Juan has read a book

(2) *Verb > Subject > Object*

Ha leído Juan un libro
has read Juan a book

(3) *Verb > Object > Subject*

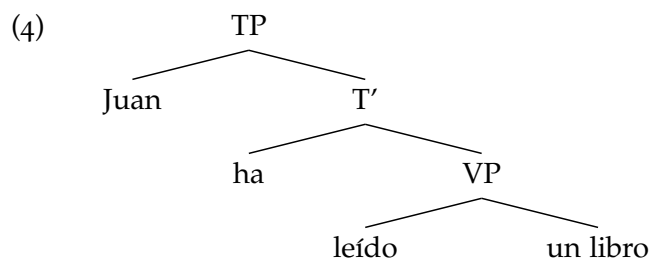
Ha leído un libro Juan
has read a book Juan

Some questions to answer:

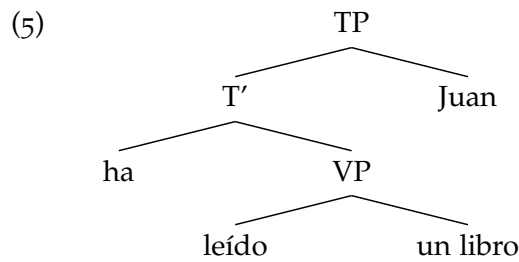
1. Are all these subjects in the same position syntactically?
2. What determines whether we get SVO, VSO, or VOS orders?

2 An early analysis

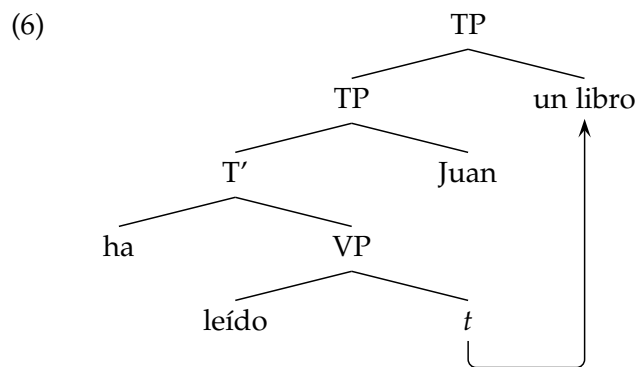
For several years (until approx. the mid-1980s), it was believed that there was only one possible position for subject, and that was SpecTP (this position received different names at different times, but let's not worry about that). The structure for (1) was the following.



To derive a VOS order, people (e.g., Contreras 1976) assumed a rule that allowed the specifier of TP to optionally project to the right.



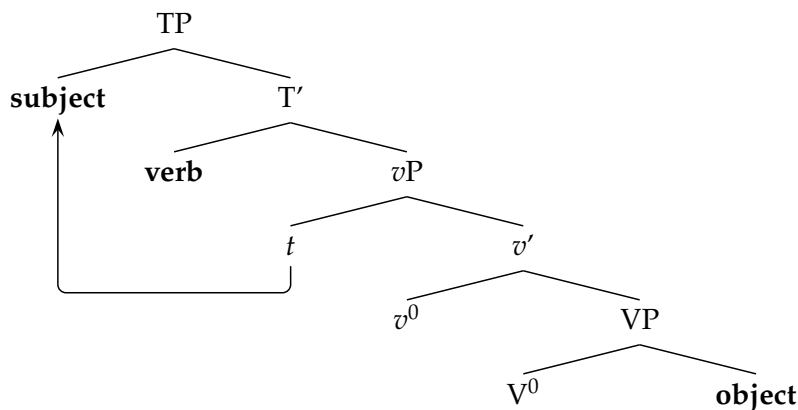
VSO orders remained problematic under this analysis. While no consensus was reached, the simplest solution involved a combination of (5) and object extraposition.



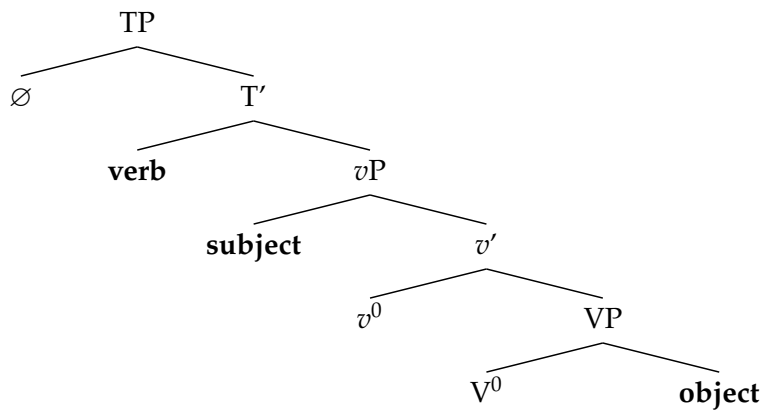
3 A modern analysis

The analysis above is based on the assumption that subjects can only appear in SpecTP. However, we know that this is not correct: subjects are merged in SpecvP and then move to SpecTP. However, what if the movement of the subject is optional? Since verbs in Spanish move obligatorily to T^0 , a subject in SpecvP will be postverbal.

(7) *A derivation for the SVO order*

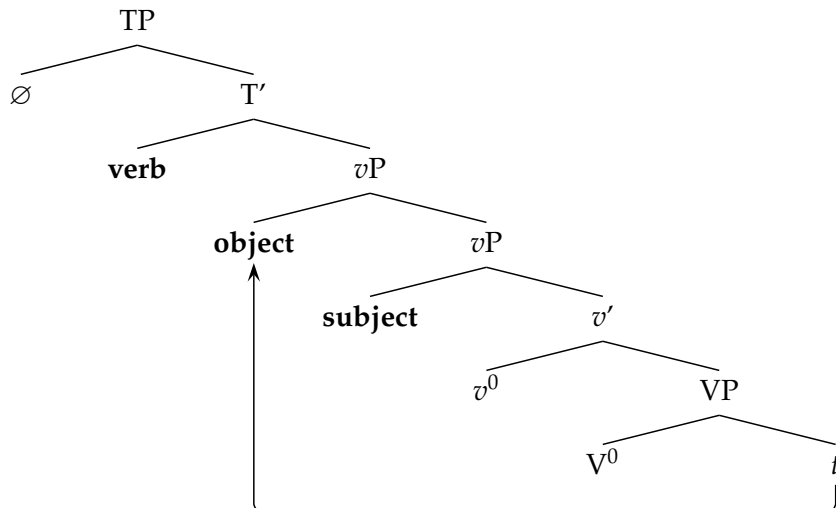


(8) *A derivation for the VSO order*



How does this analysis generate VOS orders? Simply by moving the object to a position between a low subject and the verb in T^0 .

(9) *A derivation for the VOS order*



4 Why the modern analysis is better

An inherent feature of the early analysis is that the difference between the SVO and the VOS order is exclusively one of linear order: by projecting the specifier of TP to the right, we change the order of the subject with respect to the rest of the sentence, but we don't change the hierarchical (c-command) relations. However, Ordóñez showed that this is not the case. Specifically:

(10) *Ordóñez's (1997, 1998) generalization*

In the SVO and VSO orders, the subject c-commands the object.

In the VOS order, the object c-commands the subject.

4.1 Quantifier binding

These data are based on the availability of bound readings of possessive pronouns that are c-commanded by the distributive quantifier *each* (*cada* in Spanish).

- (11) Each mother gave her child a piece of chocolate.
[bound reading: for every mother-child pair, the mother gave the child a piece of chocolate]
- (12) His mother gave each child a piece of chocolate.
[non-bound reading: somebody else's mother gave these children a piece of chocolate]

Testing this in Spanish with SVO orders: as expected the bound reading is possible only when the quantifier is the subject and the possessive pronoun is the object.

- (13) a. Cada marido besó a su mujer
 each husband kissed his wife
[bound reading available]
- b. Su marido besó a cada mujer
 her husband kissed each wife
[bound reading not available]

The same pattern can be replicated in the VSO order.

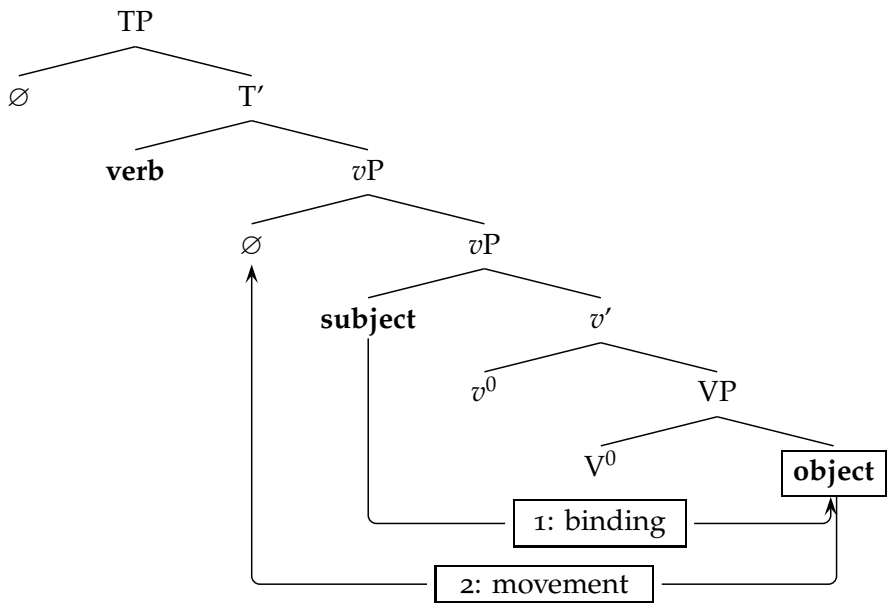
- (14) a. Besó cada marido a su mujer
 kissed each husband his wife
[bound reading available]
- b. Besó su marido a cada mujer
 kissed her husband each wife
[bound reading not available]

In contrast, in the VOS order, the pattern is different: the bound reading is available irrespective of the positions of the pronoun and the quantifier.

- (15) a. Besó a su mujer cada marido
 kissed his wife each husband
[bound reading available]
- b. Besó a cada mujer su marido
 kissed each wife her husband
[bound reading available]

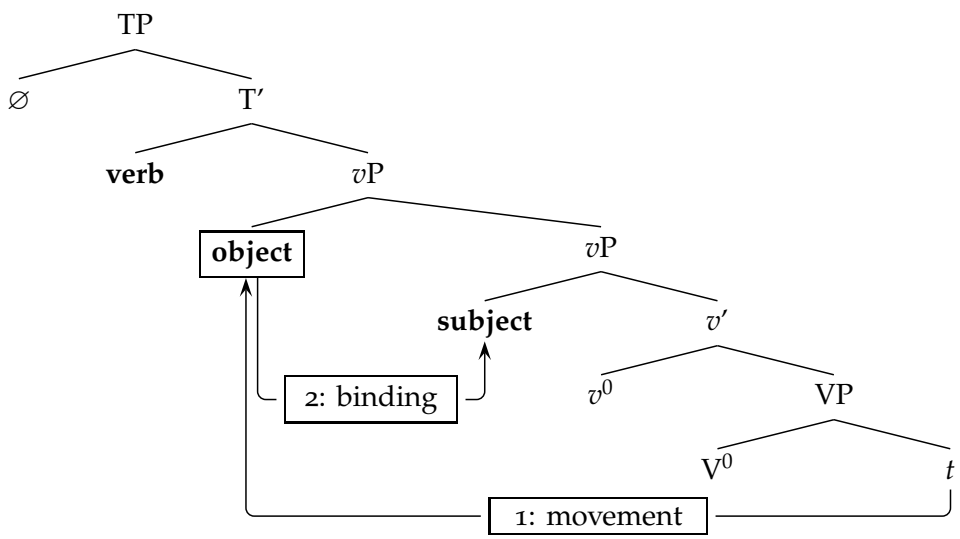
Why is this? Ordóñez assumes that quantifier binding is *derivational* effect: it applies whenever we get the right configuration. In (15a), quantifier binding happens *before* object movement, so it is the subject that binds the object.

- (16) *A derivation for the VOS order*



In contrast, in (15b), binding applies after movement: therefore, it is the object that binds the subject

(17) A derivation for the VOS order



4.2 Principle C effects

Principle C of binding theory states that a referential expression (a proper name) cannot be c-commanded by a coindexed pronoun.

(18) Los hermanos de Eva_i le compraron este libro a ella_i
 the brothers of Eva CL bought this book to her

(19) Este libro, se lo compraron los hermanos de Eva_i a ella_i
 this book CL CL bought the brothers of Eva to her

- (20) Este libro, se lo compraron a ella_i los hermanos de Eva_i
 this book CL CL bought to her the brothers of Eva

If we reverse the relative position of the pronoun and the proper name, we obtain ungrammaticality, as expected.

- (21) * Ella_i les compró este libro a los hermanos de Eva_i
 she CL bought this book to the brothers of Eva
- (22) * Este libro, se lo compró ella_i a los hermanos de Eva_i
 this book CL CL bought her to the brothers of Eva
- (23) * Este libro, se lo compró a los hermanos de Eva_i ella_i
 this book CL CL bought to the brothers of Eva she

Why is (23) ungrammatical? Because, in the same way a quantifier binding, Condition C is a derivational effect, and it applies whenever the right configuration is encountered. In this particular case, there is Condition C configuration *before* movement, so the sentence is filtered out.

4.3 Interpretation of indefinites

This is not evidence directly in favour of a low subject in VOS orders, but rather evidence in favour of object movement. As we saw last week, languages like German get an obligatory specific interpretation of indefinite objects when the object scrambles out of *vP*.

- (24) a. ... weil ja doch zwei Cellisten in diesem Hotel abgestiegen sind
 [=any two cellists]
- b. ... weil zwei Cellisten ja doch in diesem Hotel abgestiegen sind
 [=two specific cellists]

The same effect can be observed in Spanish: in the SVO and VSO orders, a non-specific reading for indefinite objects is possible, because they haven't moved out of *vP*. On the other hand, VOS orders force a specific reading of the object.

- (25) Estos libros se los regalaron todos los estudiantes a un profesor
 these books CL CL gave all the students to a professor
 [=non-specific professor]
- (26) ¿Qué le regalaron todos los estudiantes a un profesor?
 what CL gave all the students to a professor
 [=non-specific professor]
- (27) ¿Qué le regalaron a un profesor todos los estudiantes?
 what CL gave all to a professor all the students
 [=specific professor]

5 Why does the subject move?

In languages where the subject always appears in SpecTP (e.g., English), it is possible to say that it moves because it checks Case/Agreement there. However, languages like Spanish, where it may or may not move, raise a problem:

- if we say that it moves for Case/Agreement, then we don't have an explanation for why sometimes it can stay in SpecvP.
- but if we say that it can check Case/Agreement in SpecvP, then we don't have an explanation for why it moves.

We'll see a solution for this problem in the next session (June 8! –there is no class next Monday). The reading (which I'll distribute later) is:

Ordóñez Francisco, and Estela Treviño. 1999. Left dislocated subjects and the pro-drop parameter: a case study of Spanish. *Lingua* 107:39-68.