

# Teaching Subject Position in Spanish: *Gustar* Verbs, Unaccusatives and the Impersonal Passive

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**Abstract**—This paper explores a misunderstood and frequently ignored topic in the literature dealing with teaching Spanish as an L2: subject position (Vanpatten & Cadierno, 1993). Native speakers of English, and other languages whose subjects have a fixed position in the sentence, find it difficult to acquire the patterns that govern subject placement in Spanish, which may either precede or follow the verb. This difficulty is due in part to cross-linguistic differences associated to the argument structure of certain expressions, but it is also caused by the inadequate treatment of this topic in many textbooks and dictionaries. Subject inversion, i.e. the placement of the subject in postverbal position, is not a random phenomenon, and its occurrence is often limited to specific constructions. This paper examines three structures that are frequently associated with postverbal subjects: verbs of psychological affection, the impersonal passive and unaccusative verbs. Several communicative task-based activities are also presented, in order to ensure that L2 learners of Spanish are able to recognize postverbal subjects as a common phenomenon.

**Index Terms**—unaccusative verbs, impersonal passive, subject position, Spanish, verbs of psychological affection

## I. INTRODUCTION

The variable position of the subject argument in Spanish is a largely ignored topic in textbooks and grammars for learners of Spanish as a non-native language. The cause of this absence is twofold: (i) on the one hand, the rules that govern subject position are not categorical, since they are subject to grammatical variation; (ii) on the other hand, there exists a disconnection between theoretical linguistics research and its application to language teaching. This paper explores several constructions that involve subject inversion, that is, the placement of the subject in postverbal position. Several activities are also suggested so that the more theoretical component can be included during language instruction in a communicative manner.

Postverbal subjects are frequent in certain constructions. Here we describe three structures frequently associated with subject inversion: verbs of psychological affection (*gustar/like* verbs) (1), the impersonal passive (2),<sup>1</sup> and unaccusative verbs (3).

(1) Verbs of psychological affection:

*Me gustan las patatas.*  
*I like potatoes.*

(2) Impersonal passive:

*Finalmente se vendió la casa.*  
*The house was finally sold.*

(3) Unaccusative verbs:

*Ya ha llegado el tren.*  
*The train has already arrived.*

Verbs of psychological affection (VPAs) play a central role in Spanish textbooks, especially in those designed for L1 speakers of English or other languages which lack postverbal subjects, such as French. However, these verbs do not receive a uniform or clear description in the literature, and are presented in confusing and contradictory ways. Section 3 covers the topic of VPAs, since they are probably one of the constructions where the postverbal position for subjects is non-marked.

The use of the periphrastic passive voice in spoken Spanish is very marked, as it rarely occurs in the speech of native speakers. Instead, the use of an impersonal construction with the clitic *se* is preferred (2), which will be presented in section 4. The many uses of the clitic *se* cause a great deal of confusion to Spanish learners as an L2, and to the

<sup>1</sup> In the Spanish literature, the term *pasiva refleja* is used for these constructions. The term *impersonal passive* has been adopted here because the construction has a passive meaning, it requires a transitive verb whose theme becomes the syntactic subject, and the verb can only appear in 3<sup>rd</sup> person. I follow the tradition that postulates that the surface, agreeing subject of these constructions is indeed an underlying object (the object of the corresponding transitive construction), which renders these constructions impersonal, since they would lack a *real* subject. The set of constructions that involve the clitic *se* in Spanish is considerable. There is abundant research dealing with the clitic *se* and its use in the middle and passive voice. See for example Peregrín Otero (1999) and Mendikoetxea (1999) for a more detailed description.

instructors trying to explain its use. A detailed explanation of the use of *se* in Spanish is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, we focus on the impersonal passive constructions, as they normally require the presence of postverbal subjects.

The occurrence of postverbal subjects with unaccusative verbs is a more complicated topic, which is completely ignored in textbooks and in the specialized literature dealing with the pedagogy of Spanish. The terms unaccusative and unergative are used in the linguistic literature that deals with verb types, and it is briefly summarized in section 5. Section 5 also provides several statistical analyses that link subject position with verb types.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the constructions that involve subject inversion, section 2 introduces the main grammatical features that characterize Spanish subjects.

## II. SPANISH SUBJECTS AND THE PHENOMENON OF SUBJECT INVERSION

Spanish subjects have four main properties that students need to understand in order to achieve proficiency in Spanish as an L2: (i) overt agreement, (ii) overt quantification, (iii) ability to be omitted and (iv) variable position.

Spanish subjects can be identified syntactically because they are the only argument in the sentence that overtly agrees with the verb in person and number. Thus, a sentence like (4a) changes to (4b) if the number of the subject is altered.

- (4) a. *El doctor trabaja en el hospital.*  
       *The doctor works at the hospital.*  
       b. *Los doctores trabajan en el hospital.*  
       *The doctors work at the hospital.*

Spanish is a *pro-drop* language, because it may have null subjects, as in (5). When the subject is expressed overtly, it normally occurs in preverbal position, such as in (1), but there are certain constructions that favor subject inversion. This is the case of the three constructions examined here. Examples (1) to (3) have all postverbal subjects, which appear underlined. Subject position is not a random phenomenon, and it is subject to different constraints, as is shown in the following sections. Another important feature of Spanish subjects is that they need to be overtly quantified. Subjects can be quantified in three main ways: (i) by means of a determiner, as in (6a); (ii) by being realized as a proper noun, as in (7), (iii) by being realized as a pronoun, as in (8).

- (5) a. *Yo estudio español.*  
       *I study Spanish.*  
       b. *Estudio español.*  
       *I study Spanish.*  
       (6) a. *Los carros tienen ruedas.*  
       *Cars have wheels.*  
       b. *\*Carros tienen ruedas.*  
       *Cars have wheels.*  
       (7) *Juan estudia empresariales.*  
       *Juan studies business.*  
       (8) *Él estudia empresariales.*  
       *He studies business.*

These four properties are shared by all subjects, irrespective of their position in the sentence, and need to be taken into account in the following sections, as they are pervasive in all constructions.

## III. VERBS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AFFECTION: GUSTAR VERBS

One of the Spanish structures that L2 learners of Spanish find particularly difficult is instantiated by the verb *gustar/like*, a typical verb of psychological affection (VPA). The structure of Spanish VPAs differs from that of languages such as English (*like*) or French (*aimer*). VPAs select two arguments which can be semantically categorized as an experiencer and a theme (9).

- (9) I (EXPERIENCER) like you (THEME).

The problem arises from the fact that these two arguments surface as different syntactic entities across languages. In the case of Spanish, the experiencer surfaces as an indirect object (a dative), while the theme surfaces as the subject (nominative), as in (10).

- (10) *Me gustas tú.*  
       Me.DAT like-2SG you.SG.NOM  
       *I like you.*

The two arguments of the verbs *like* and *gustar* share the same thematic roles, experiencer and theme, but they differ in their morphosyntactic structure. In Table 1, the structures of the verbs *like* and *gustar* are compared. The coinciding features, in this case the thematic structure, appear underlined. Thus, the alignment of thematic roles in English and Spanish coincide (experiencers appear in preverbal position and the theme is typically postverbal), but the alignment of morphosyntactic functions differ, as seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1.  
STRUCTURE OF *GUSTAR* VERBS

<i>I</i>	<i>like</i>	<i>apples</i>
<u>SUBJECT/EXPERIENCER</u>	VERB	<u>OBJECT/THEME</u>
<i>Me</i>	<i>gustan</i>	<i>las manzanas</i>
<u>IO/EXPERIENCER</u>	VERB	<u>SUBJECT/THEME</u>

An additional problem related to VPAs is the fact that not all of them present the same structure when compared to other languages. This is the case of verbs like *molestar/bother*. In Spanish, *molestar/bother* and *gustar/like* share the same morphosyntactic and thematic structures, as they both have an experiencer argument that surfaces as a dative, and a theme that functions as the subject. However, the speakers of languages like English will find an additional problem when comparing Spanish with their native language, as seen in Table 2.

TABLE 2.  
STRUCTURE OF *MOLESTAR* VERBS.

<i>Noise</i>	<i>bothers</i>	<i>me</i>
<u>SUBJECT/THEME</u>	VERB	<u>OBJECT/EXPERIENCER</u>
<i>Me</i>	<i>molesta</i>	<i>el ruido</i>
<u>IO/EXPERIENCER</u>	VERB	<u>SUBJECT/THEME</u>

In the case of *molestar/bother*, both the syntactic and the thematic structures of the Spanish and English counterparts coincide (they both appear underlined in Table 2), since the experiencer is realized as an object and the theme as the subject in both languages. The difference lies on the default position of the arguments, as the subject of Spanish VPAs tends to be postverbal, while English subjects must always be preverbal. Understanding the grammatical differences existing between the native language of the student and the target language is an advantage, as students tend to transfer from their L1 into their L2.

#### A. Inaccuracies Affecting the Teaching of VPAs

An additional problem that L2 learners of Spanish may find when trying to acquire VPAs is the lack of accuracy of Spanish textbooks and verb dictionaries. Spanish textbooks frequently treat *gustar* as defective, ie. as a verb that lacks part of its conjugation. In particular, most textbooks show VPAs conjugated only in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person. Sometimes they even include warnings explaining that *yo gusto* does not exist. This unfortunate mistake affects many verb dictionaries as well, like for example *501 Spanish Verbs*, which explicitly classify the verb *gustar* as defective. The trend in Spanish textbooks published in the USA is to show *gustar* conjugated only in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, while emphasis is put on the declension of the dative pronouns. A typical entry in a verb dictionary published in the USA would conjugate *gustar* as in Table 3. By treating *gustar* as a defective verb, these language methods are spreading an incorrect assumption that for some reason has become the norm.

TABLE 3.  
TYPICAL CONJUGATION OF THE VERB *GUSTAR* (PRESENT TENSE) IN US TEXTBOOKS

me	gusta(n)
te	
le	
nos	
os	
les	

A different trend is observed in verb dictionaries published in Spain, where *gustar* is just classified as a regular 1<sup>st</sup> conjugation verb, but there is no mention of the different argument structure that separates a regular 1<sup>st</sup> conjugation verb, such as *cantar/sing*, from verbs such as *gustar*, which differ in many respects. Both the American and the European trend fail when explaining the peculiarities of VPAs, by either failing to address their idiosyncrasies, as in the case of verb dictionaries from Spain, or by spreading incorrect and incomplete information, as in the case of verb dictionaries published in the USA.

All VPAs are characterized by two main features: (i) the almost obligatory presence of an experiencer pronoun in dative case (indirect object), which occurs preverbally; and (ii) a theme argument in nominative case (subject), whose unmarked position is postverbal. Additionally, a well-known property of indirect objects in Spanish is that they may appear reduplicated, i.e. there may be a full prepositional phrase functioning as indirect object plus a *redundant* obligatory dative pronoun, as in (11b).

- (11) a. *Me gust-as tú.*  
           me.DAT   like-2SG   you.NOM  
           *I like you.*
- b. *A m í me gust-as t ú.*  
           to me.1SG.OBL   me.1SG.DAT   like-2SG   you.NOM  
           *I like you.*

When textbooks ignore the topic of subject position, they lose interesting generalizations, such as the obligatory presence of a determiner in Spanish subjects, which differentiates Spanish and English, as the sentences in (12) and (13) show.

- (12) a. I like Ø apples  
 b. *Me gust-an las manzanas.*  
     me.DAT like-3PL the apples  
     *I like apples.*  
 c. \**Me gustan manzanas.*
- (13) a. Elephants are big.  
 b. *Los elefantes son grandes.*  
     *The elephants are big.*  
     *Elephants are big.*  
 c. \**Elefantes son grandes.*

Summarizing, it is necessary to shed some light on the structure of VPAs and modify the existing textbooks, so that they include more accurate information. The fact that these constructions normally have postverbal subjects needs to be emphasized, as it explains different generalizations that affect all subjects in Spanish, as seen above, such as the presence of determiners, overt agreement with the verb, and the possibility to omit them. The following section describes some activities that can be used to teach VPAs.

### B. How to Teach VPAs in Class

Understanding the structure of these verbs is essential when determining the activities that will be used in class. As pointed out in section 3, the only difference that many of these verbs have when comparing Spanish and English is subject position. Verbs such as *molestar/bother*, *doler/hurt* or *preocupar/worry* share basically the same structure in both languages, with two main differences: (i) Spanish VPAs tend to have postverbal subjects, (ii) Spanish VPAs need the obligatory presence of a dative clitic, even when there is a full prepositional phrase introducing an indirect object. Many students may not benefit from an overt grammatical explanation, but they will still need to understand the properties of this construction. There are several activities that can be used to teach VPAs. The wide availability of YouTube makes possible the use of almost any song. A good option to introduce and practice the structure is the song “Me gustas tú”, by artist Manu Chao. This song contains a total of 54 occurrences of the verb *gustar*, used in 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular (about 27 occurrences), 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular (about 26 occurrences) and 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural (1 occurrence). The verb *gustar* can be erased from the document and substituted by blank spaces, which students will need to fill using the right form of the verb *gustar*. By doing this, students will have to pay attention to postverbal positions in order to introduce the correct form of the verb, since the subject and the verb must always agree. A possible exercise designed to practice *gustar* with an extract of this song is included in (14).

(14) Rellenar los huecos usando la forma apropiada del verbo *gustar* en presente de indicativo. ¿Cuánto crees que es el fúlbol de la canción?

Me \_\_\_\_\_ los aviones, me \_\_\_\_\_ tú  
 Me \_\_\_\_\_ viajar, me \_\_\_\_\_ tú...

Younger students will find other types of songs interesting. For example, there is a song called “A mi burro”, sung by Rosa León, which can be used to practice the verb *doler/hurt*.<sup>2</sup> This particular song can be also used to practice vocabulary related to body parts, and subject-verb agreement. Children will have fun if they are requested to touch the different body parts mentioned in the song as the music sounds.

Introducing vocabulary related to food together with the verb *gustar* will provide a meaningful way to present the structure of VPAs. In order to do so, the instructor must first introduce the necessary vocabulary and practice some structures with the verb *gustar*. Then students can do the following exercise (15).

(15) En grupos de dos, pregunta a tu compañero qué cosas le gustan de las siguientes categorías, y haz una lista. A continuación coméntale a tu compañero qué cosas te gustan a ti. Finalmente, cambia de grupo y explica a tu nuevo compañero cuáles eran los gustos de tu primer compañero.

- Verduras y vegetales frescos (tomate, patata, lechuga, espinacas, judías verdes, alubias, zanahorias, col, guisantes, pepino, aguacate, maíz...).
- Frutas frescas (naranja, manzana, piña, melocotón, albaricoque, ciruela, uva, plátano/banana, pera, sandía, melón, fresas...).
- Comidas preparadas (hamburguesas, pizzas, pollo frito, tacos...).

Given the fact that food is an inherent part of one's culture, students can learn vocabulary, grammar and cultural aspects at the same time.

## IV. THE IMPERSONAL PASSIVE

<sup>2</sup> An interesting version can be found on Youtube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAwMV\\_phDEY&NR=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAwMV_phDEY&NR=1) (accessed 1/10/2011).

The use of the passive construction in Spanish is stylistically marked. Instead, it is more frequent to find impersonal constructions. The impersonal passive construction occurs when the object of a transitive verb becomes the subject of a verb with active morphology in an impersonal construction with the clitic *se*. The impersonal passive is used when the subject of a transitive verb in Spanish is omitted in order to make a generalization, as in (16c).

(16) a. *Él (S) corta las patatas (O)* - ACTIVE VOICE

*He cuts the potatoes.*

b. *Las patatas (S) son cortadas por él.* - PASSIVE VOICE

*The potatoes are cut by him.*

c. *Se cortan las patatas (S).* - IMPERSONAL PASSIVE

*The potatoes are cut.*

The example in (16a) contains a transitive sentence. The second sentence (16b) is the periphrastic passive, whose structure is similar in Spanish and English. Sentence (16c) is an example of impersonal passive, which is characterized by the lack of an agent (*él*), and a subject with patient properties which corresponds with the object of the transitive counterpart (16a). In the impersonal passive, the clitic *se* becomes obligatory. The impersonal passive is limited to the third person. The subjects of the impersonal passive have the same properties seen section 2: they can be omitted, require quantification and display overt agreement with V.

#### *Teaching the Impersonal Passive*

L2 learners of Spanish do not need to know the grammatical explanation provided above, but they must be able to recognize these structures and use them properly. Recipes can be employed to practice the impersonal passive. In cooking instructions, the use of the first person plural to provide directions sounds informal in Spanish. Instead, the impersonal passive is stylistically preferred. Learning recipes becomes an ideal activity to practice vocabulary and grammar.

There exist many different resources online where there are recipes in Spanish. The following recipe has been adapted from <http://www.recetasdemama.es> (accessed 1/10/2011).

(17) Almejas a la marinera; <http://www.recetasdemama.es/2007/07/almejas-a-la-marinera/> (accessed 1/10/2011).

Rellenar los huecos usando la forma apropiada del verbo entre paréntesis, en presente de indicativo.

Los ingredientes:

- 750 gr de almejas
- Un poco de aceite
- 4 dientes de ajo
- Pimentón
- Medio vaso de vino blanco
- Una cucharada de harina
- Perejil

Preparación:

Se \_\_\_\_\_ (poner) al fuego la sartén con el aceite y los ajos, cuando empiezan a dorarse se \_\_\_\_\_ (añadir) la harina y se fríe un poco. Se \_\_\_\_\_ (incorporar) las almejas y el vino y luego el pimentón, y se dejar cocer a fuego vivo hasta que se abren y la salsa queda ligada. Por último se le \_\_\_\_\_ (poner) una rociada de perejil picado, y listo. Las almejas quedan muy sabrosas, y la salsita... Hmmm.

With these activities, students can practice different skills: vocabulary related to food; grammar, such as present tense, subject position and subject-verb agreement; reading comprehension; cultural awareness. Students can also prepare dishes at home for a *Hispanic Cultural Fair*.

#### V. INTRANSITIVE VERBS: UNACCUSATIVES VS UNERGATIVES

This section provides a description of the main properties that differentiate the two types of intransitive verbs, namely unaccusative and unergative, because unaccusative verbs have been shown to have a higher percentage of postverbal subjects. In particular, it gives an introduction to unaccusativity through cross-linguistic comparison, and summarizes the problems that arise when trying to distinguish between unaccusative and unergative verbs in Spanish.

Perlmutter (1978) divided intransitive verbs into two subgroups: unaccusative and unergative. The two classes have different semantic and syntactic features. Perlmutter associated the subject of unergative verbs with a notion of volition or causation, while unaccusatives have affected subjects. These semantic differences have explicit syntactic consequences. For example, Burzio (1981, 1986) described the properties of unaccusative verbs in Italian, and concluded that they can be distinguished from unergatives using different syntactic diagnostics, as presented in (18).

(18)

1. Unaccusative verbs select the auxiliary *essere/be* for periphrastic forms.
2. Unergative verbs select the auxiliary *avere/have* for periphrastic forms.
3. Only unaccusative verbs accept *ne*-cliticization.
4. The participle appearing in periphrastic forms of unaccusative verbs agrees with the subject, while there is no overt agreement with the subject of unergative verbs.

The examples in (19) and (20) include sentences from Dutch and Italian to show the different behavior of unaccusative and unergative verbs with respect to auxiliary selection. Both languages use the auxiliary *be*, *zijn* and *essere* respectively, in unaccusative constructions, while unergative verbs select the auxiliary *have*, *hebben* and *avere* respectively.

- (19) a. *Ik heb in totaal twee dagen gewerkt.* (have) (Dutch)

*I have worked for a total of 2 days.*

- b. *Ik ben gekomen.* (be)

*I have arrived.*

- (20) a. *Giovanni è arrivato.* (be) (Italian)

*Giovanni has arrived.*

- b. *Giovanni ha telefonato.* (have)

*Giovanni has telephoned.*

The Italian partitive clitic *ne* can be used to substitute the quantified NP that functions as a direct object of a transitive verb, as in (21), or the subject of an unaccusative verb, such as in (22). However, it cannot substitute the subject of an unergative verb (23). This test seems to suggest that the subject of unaccusatives behaves in the same way as the object of a transitive verb, since the quantified object of a transitive verb can also be replaced by the pronominal form *ne*, but the subject cannot. In Italian, the past participle of periphrastic forms agrees with the subject in gender and number when the auxiliary *be* is used, i.e. with unaccusative verbs (24a). Unergative verbs, however, disallow this possibility (24b).

- (21) a. *Giovanni inviterà molti esperti.*

*Giovanni will invite many experts.*

- b. *Giovanni ne inviterà molti.*

*Giovanni will invite many (of-them).*

- (22) a. *Arriveranno molti esperti.*

*Many experts will arrive.*

- b. *Ne arriveranno molti.*

*Many of them will arrive.*

- (23) a. *Telefoneranno molti esperti.*

*Many experts will telephone.*

- b. *\*Ne telefoneranno molti.*

*Many of them will telephone.*

- (24) a. *Maria è arrivata.* (Fem, sg)

*Maria has arrived.*

- b. *Maria ha telefonato.* (Mas, sg)

*Maria has telephoned.*

The literature dealing with unaccusativity is very extensive and it is beyond the scope of this paper to include a complete review here. Nevertheless, it is crucial to provide a description of Spanish intransitive verbs in order to determine the right classification of the *swarm* type verbs, which is the central topic of this research. As in Italian, there have been several tests aimed at differentiating unergative from unaccusative verbs in Spanish. However, some of the most uncontroversial tests, such as auxiliary selection, cannot be applied to Spanish, because only *haber/have* can be used as an auxiliary in periphrastic forms. Mendikoetxea (1999) and the references therein are a good source for a detailed description of Spanish intransitive verbs. Mendikoetxea (1999) proposed a classification of Spanish unaccusative verbs, which is summarized in (25):

- (25) a. Verbs of change of state or location:

*abrir(se)/open, hundir(se)/sink, caer/fall, florecer/bloom,...*

- b. Verbs of appearance or existence:

*aparecer/appear, llegar/arrive, existir/exist, venir/come, suceder/happen,...*

Unaccusative verbs are relevant for this article because they have been shown to have a higher percentage of postverbal subjects in Spanish.

#### A. Subject Position and Verb Types in Spanish

Subjects can appear both in the preverbal and postverbal domains, irrespective of the type of verb. The following examples, which have been extracted from the online *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual* (CREA), show sentences that contain unaccusative (26), unergative (27), and transitive (28) verbs with both preverbal and postverbal subjects. The verb appears marked as V, while the subject is marked with the letter S. Although overt subjects can appear both in preverbal or postverbal position, their ordering is not completely random, and ongoing research shows that it depends on various grammatical and sociolinguistic factors (Mayoral Hernández, 2005; Silva-Corvalán, 1982; Zubizarreta, 1998).

- (26) a. Postverbal subject with the unaccusative verb *llegar/to arrive*:

*En febrero llega (V) el grupo Queen a la Argentina (S).*

*In February the band Queen arrives in Argentina.*

- b. Preverbal subject with unaccusative verb:  
 En 1896, Picasso llega a Barcelona.  
*In 1896, Picasso arrives in Barcelona.*
- (27) a. Postverbal subject with the unergative verb *trabajar/to work*:  
 En el coro trabaja (V) un maestro de tracer ús y taraceas (S).  
*In the choir works a master of tracery and marquetry.*
- b. Preverbal position with unergative verb:  
 El minero trabaja durante toda la noche...  
*The miner works during the whole night...*
- (28) a. Postverbal subject with the transitive verb *empujar/to push*:  
Él empuja (V) el libro desde el borde de la mesa, aquel que tensiona la espalda (S).  
*Only the one that bends his back pushes the book from the table end.*
- b. Preverbal position with transitive verb:  
 Un niño chino empuja su carrito en la ciudad de Kunming.  
*A Chinese child pushes his cart in the city of Kunming.*

But are all verbs equally susceptible to have postverbal subjects? Section 5.2. expands on this question.

#### B. A Quantitative Method to Identify Verb Types

The linguistic literature dealing with subject position and verb types in Spanish has observed that postverbal subjects seem to be associated with unaccusative verbs (Torrego, 1989). This can be expected from the fact that in a language like Spanish, where subject position is variable, the subjects of unaccusative verbs will tend to appear in postverbal position more frequently, because they have object properties, and the unmarked position for objects in Spanish is postverbal. Therefore, the subjects of unaccusative verbs seem to be a hybrid linguistic construct, with subject and object properties. Taking this observation as a point of departure, Mayoral Hernández (2005) postulated that it should be possible to determine verb types by carrying out a quantitative analysis of subject position. The general idea is that unaccusative verbs should have a higher percentage of postverbal subjects when compared to unergative, transitive and copulative verbs. The results indicated that while copulative, transitive and unergative verbs showed a similar subject distribution, unaccusative verbs showed a significantly higher percentage of postverbal subjects ( $p < 0.05$ ), as seen in Table 4.

TABLE 4.  
 VERB TYPES AND SUBJECT DISTRIBUTION (MAYORAL HERNÁNDEZ, 2005)

Position of subject	Type of verb				Total
	Intransitive	Copulative	Transitive	Unaccusative	
Postverbal	6 12.2%	12 15.4%	23 11.5%	25 33.8%	66 16.5%
Preverbal	43 87.8%	66 84.6%	177 88.5%	49 66.2%	335 83.5%
Total	49 100.0%	78 100.0%	200 100.0%	74 100.0%	401 100.0%

The crosstabulation presented in Table 4 shows that intransitive (unergative), transitive and copulative verbs tend to occur in preverbal position in about 87% of the cases. Applying Pearson's chi-square test to a contingency table with only intransitive, copulative, and transitive verbs yields no statistically significant difference between them ( $p = 0.678$ ).<sup>3</sup> However, if these three types of verbs are merged together and crosstabulated with the unaccusative verbs, a statistically significant difference arises ( $p < .05$ ), since unaccusatives have a lower percentage of preverbal subjects (66.2%). The fact that unaccusative verbs have a higher percentage of postverbal subjects follows from the assumption that the subjects of unaccusative verbs are supposed to be underlying objects.

However, the analysis in Mayoral Hernández (2005) raises some questions, due to the way in which the experiment was designed. First of all, the experiment was originally intended to study the position of frequency adverbials in Spanish, and subject position was only one of the several independent variables included. Because of this, the rich Spanish verbal morphology was not controlled for, and there is no clear understanding of the consequences this might have had on the results. As an example, one might expect that subject position could vary greatly depending on grammatical person, in particular if we compare first person singular with third person. In fact, the only first person subject possible is the personal pronoun *yo/I*, which always represents given information (Prince, 1981). Considering that Spanish has a preference for placing old information in preverbal position (Silva Corvalán, 2003), and that personal pronouns tend to be old information, it becomes obvious that the lack of control of this grammatical feature might influence the results.

Another possible problem that might derive from the methodology adopted by Mayoral Hernández is that the classification of verbs as unaccusative or unergative, necessary for the coding of data, was based on Mendikoetxea's (1999) non-exhaustive list of unaccusative verbs. Therefore, decisions had to be made regarding the classification of

<sup>3</sup> All the  $p$  values in this paper have been obtained via a Pearson's chi-square test.

some verbs as either unaccusative or unergative when they did not appear in Mendikoetxea's list. The classification adopted might have been perfectly accurate, but again, one might question this procedure after taking into account that the right classification of unaccusative and unergative verbs is still controversial, due to the lack of reliable tests. Owing to the shortcomings found in the methodology adopted, Mayoral Hernández (2006) developed an analysis that was specifically designed to test if transitive, unergative and unaccusative verbs have a unique subject distribution. This time, only those verbs whose classification is uncontroversial were selected. In particular, the verb *empuja* –he/she pushes– represented transitive verbs, while *trabaja* –he/she works– and *llega* –he/she arrives– represented unergative and unaccusative verbs respectively. These verbs show a very stable classification cross-linguistically. In those languages that have overt unaccusative morphology, such as Italian, Dutch or French, the verb *arrive* selects the auxiliary *be* in periphrastic forms, its subject can be substituted by the clitic *ne* in Italian, etc. Similarly, the verb *work* shows very clear unergative properties across languages. Verbal morphology was strictly controlled too, since only the third person singular of the present simple tense, indicative mood, active voice was included. The sentences were extracted from the online corpus CREA. The results of this new study seem to support the primitive difference between unergative and unaccusative verbs. Table 5 shows that there is a statistically significant difference ( $p < .0001$ ) between transitive and unergative verbs as far as subject position is concerned.

TABLE 5.  
SUBJECT DISTRIBUTION IN UNERGATIVE AND TRANSITIVE VERBS ( $p < .0001$ ) (MAYORAL HERNÁNDEZ, 2006)

			Type of Verb		Total	
			Transitive	Unergative		
Subject Position	Postverbal	Count	5	32	37	
		Column %	3.0%	21.5%	11.8%	
	Preverbal	Count	160	117	277	
		Column %	97.0%	78.5%	88.2%	
Total			Count	165	149	314
			Column %	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

While both types of verbs clearly display a higher percentage of preverbal subjects, this preference is much more accentuated in the case of transitive verbs. The comparison between unergative and unaccusative verbs also indicated a statistically significant difference between them ( $p < .0001$ ), since unaccusatives show no clear tendency for either preverbal or postverbal subjects (Table 6).

TABLE 6.  
SUBJECT DISTRIBUTION IN UNERGATIVE AND UNACCUSATIVE VERBS ( $p < .0001$ ) (MAYORAL HERNÁNDEZ, 2006)

			Type of Verb		Total
			Unergative	Unaccusative	
Subject Position	Postverbal	Count	32	62	94
		Column %	21.5%	45.6%	33.0%
	Preverbal	Count	117	74	191
		Column %	78.5%	54.4%	67.0%
Total		Count	149	136	285
		Column %	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

It is interesting to note that Mayoral Hernández (2005), as seen in Table 4, did not find a significant difference between transitive and unergative verbs. A detailed analysis of these results seems to indicate that when only prototypes are selected and other factors are controlled, which is the method adopted in Mayoral Hernández (2006), there is a clear difference between the three types of verbs as far as their subject position is concerned ( $p < 0.05$ ). In particular, only unaccusative verbs show a higher percentage of postverbal subjects.

In order to control other factors, we have here compared the subject distribution of unaccusative and unergative verbs in sentences with no co-occurring XP. Table 7 shows that there is a significant difference between unergative and unaccusative verbs ( $p < 0.05$ ), as far as subject position is concerned. When there is no other XP in the sentence, unergative verbs show a clear tendency to have preverbal subjects. By contrast, unaccusative verbs show a preference for postverbal subjects.

TABLE 7.  
SUBJECT DISTRIBUTION; UNERGATIVE AND UNACCUSATIVE WITH NO CO-OCCURRING XP ( $p < .0001$ )

			Subject Position		Total
			Postverbal	Preverbal	
Type of Verb	Unergative	Count	27	94	121
		Column %	34.2%	63.5%	53.3%
	Unaccusative	Count	52	54	106
		Column %	65.8%	36.5%	46.7%
Total		Count	79	148	227
		Column %	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%



The data presented in this section shows that there is a group of intransitive verbs, called unaccusatives, whose subjects tend to occur postverbally in Spanish. Subject position with unaccusative verbs cannot be accounted for by using categorical rules, as this phenomenon is subject to variation.

### C. Teaching Subject Position with Unaccusative Verbs

Understanding subject distribution with unaccusative verbs presents a high level of difficulty, as it does not depend on categorical rules. Therefore, the activities presented here are for advanced students. There is a special construction where the subjects of unaccusative verbs have an even higher tendency to occur postverbally. Specifically, the presence of a benefactive/malefactive dative pronoun increases the presence of postverbal subjects in sentences such as (29)

(29) a. *Se **me** rompió el reloj.*

*My watch broke.*

b. *Se **le** cayó la sal al suelo.*

*The salt fell on the floor.*

The sentences in (29) contain an unaccusative verb and a dative clitic, marked in bold, whose presence is not. The function of the dative clitic is primarily to introduce a *victim*, a maleficiary. This construction is very frequent when giving excuses, and when someone feels that an uncontrolled event has caused damages or harm. Advanced students can practice this construction by giving excuses about tardiness (*se me ha ido el tren/I missed the train*), or lack of preparedness (*se me han olvidado los deberes/I forgot my homework*), since this structure accentuates the lack of control over events and the involuntary nature of the action.

The song “Se me enamora el alma”, by Isabel Pantoja, can also be used to practice this structure. It includes many occurrences of dative clitics with unaccusative verbs, in order to emphasize the sense of doom and out-of-control destiny. There are several versions available on YouTube.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This article reviews the phenomenon of subject inversion in Spanish. The topic of subject position is frequently ignored in textbooks and other instructional materials. One of the reasons that have caused this omission is the inadequate understanding of the conditions that trigger subject inversion, as they do not obey categorical rules. Here we have provided a linguistic introduction to three specific constructions: verbs of psychological affection, such as *gustar/like*; the impersonal passive; and unaccusative constructions.

It is necessary for the language instructor to be aware of the different structures associated with subject inversion, so that this apparently complicated topic can be presented in a comprehensive manner to Spanish L2 learners. Therefore, we suggest that there should be a more fluent connection between the theoretical linguistics field and its applied use for teaching languages.

We have also provided some activities and exercises suggesting different ways to introduce constructions with postverbal subjects, by using communicative activities, such as songs and food recipes.

Finally, we would like to recommend a thorough revision of the instructional materials that deal with this topic, in order to avoid the inclusion of misleading information regarding the structure of verbs such as *gustar/like*, which are incorrectly categorized as defective on many occasions.

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