Processing strategies in the interpretation of the Russian word order by Spanish-speaking students

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss the problem of the inverted word order (WO) in the teaching of Russian as a foreign language. We start with the hypothesis that students of Russian tend to process any sentence in Russian as having a **canonic** WO, i.e. Subject-Verb-Object (SVO). This hypothesis is based on classroom observations where students confront difficulties when interpreting sentences with **inverted** WO.

For lack of space, we cannot consider here the theoretical basis of the problem. Still we shall enumerate briefly some important points before describing an experiment carried out at the Foreign Language Center where we work with the purpose of confirming our hypothesis about WO processing.

2. COMPARAISON OF RUSSIAN AND SPANISH FROM THE TYPOLOGICAL AND UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR PERSPECTIVES.

We intended to see the question of WO in Russian and Spanish from different viewpoints.

Thus, language typology approach reveals that both languages belong to the SVO group, both have a pragmatic WO (Ignatieva 1992, 19; see also Hernanz, Brucart 1987, 70 y ss). The difference is perhaps in the degree: Russian is characterized by a much greater freedom of sentence constituyents than Spanish.

Another approach chosen to compare the two languages is a framework of **universal grammar** (UG) and particularly, the **principles** and **parameters** vision. We examined two parameters that have to do with WO: the **head parameter** and the **pro-drop parameter.**

According to the head parameter which specifies the order of elements within the phrase, both Spanish and Russian are **head-first** languages, i.e. languages where the **head** precedes the **complement** in the phrase, although we are speaking again of the **predominant** order of elements which is altered much more frecuenctly in Russian than in Spanish.

As far as another parameter of interest here, the pro-drop, is concerned, Spanish happens to be a typical pro-drop language because it permits both null subjects and an inverse order of the sentence principal components (we take these two as the most important characteristics of this parameter, see Chomsky 1988, 63-4).

As for Russian, it could be also considered a pro-drop language because it permits subject omissions although only in colloquial, informal speech, and the subject-verb inversion is quite frecuent in Russian.

So, the Spanish learners would have the two parameters mentioned above set in the same direction as the native speakers of Russian.

To sum up, both typological considerations and the UG approach show similarities between the two languages and would predict rather certain «easiness» for Spanish-speaking students in the process of acquiring Russian. However, some differences between Russian and Spanish within typological framework, as well as differences associated with the funcioning of the UG parameters in each language always exist.

3. WO PROCESSING FROM A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC POINT OF VIEW.

Another point of importance for this study is language processing which, from the cognitive perspective, is considered as an active process where an individual constructs his meanings. In the process of construction the hearer uses a number of mental strategies with the help of which he isolates the constituyents of the linear chain of words and identifies the clases to which they belong and the meaning they wish to transmit.

Some of these strategies have a relation with WO, for example:

(1) «Look for the first noun-verb-noun secuence to be an agent, action and object, unless the secuence is marked otherwise» (Clark, Clark 1977, 78).
This strategy in found among those that children utilize to accomplish the task of acquiring the language, they are linked to some universals, like the following one:

(2) «Sentences deviating from standard word order will be interpreted at early stages of development as if they were examples of standard word order» (Slobin 1973, 198).
The picture seems to be similar in the area of SLA. When processing the input of a foreign language, learners use some strategies which are analogous to those mentioned above for L1. Van Patten, for example, who proposed some hypotheses in this direction, put forward various strategies, e.g.:

(3) «Learners prefer processing lexical items to grammatical items (e.g. morphological markings) for semantic information» (1996, 14).

Among these strategies also called **principles** by the author, we find the **first noun strategy**:

(4) «Learners possess a default strategy that assigns the role of agent to the first noun (phrase) they encounter in a sentence» (Op. cit., 32).
This is confirmed by our classroom observations which caused us to begin this pilot study.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE EXPERIMENT.

4.1. Goals

The immediate objective of this preliminary experiment was to measure the knowledge that students of Russian possess with respect to an inverse WO and to observe what strategies they use when processing sentences with an inverse WO.

4.2. Subjects.

The participants of the experimental study were learners of Russian at the Foreign Language

Center where we work, the majority of them being full-time students at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, of both sexes, the ages varying between 19 and 30 years old.

4.3. Instrument.

The test was elaborated for the IVth term of the general course of Russian taking into account lexical and syntactic content of the syllabus for the first three terms. The instructions of the test were given in Spanish to guarantee the students' comprehension of each task.

The inverted WO as a grammatical topic is not taught in the textbook «Practical Course» used during the first three terms. Students, however, may find this type of structure in the texts they read. Possibly they received some comments on this topic from the teacher.

The test consists of four tasks with a total number of 48 items. The first task presents a judgement test, students have to identify correct and incorrect sentences, in case they mark a sentence as incorrect, they are asked to produce a correct version of the sentence. The task comprises 20 isolated sentences, 4 of them being distractors. The rest are sentences with inverted WO, our choice of these sentences was based on the inversion patterns most frecuently used in Russian, e.g.:

(5) *Stihi na vechere chital izvestnyi poet.*
    (A famous poet read his verses at the party)

The order of constituyents in this sentence is OVS. The inversion patterns are presented in this task in the following way:

Table 1.

Pattern	Amount
OVS	6 (sentences)
OSV	4
SOV	2
VS	2
OOVS	2

The aim of this task is, therefore, to observe if the students can recognize the sentences with inverted WO as grammatical. Besides, we wanted to see what type of inversion causes major difficulties.

The first task constitutes 40% of the total.

The second task consists of choosing the right sentence in Spanish for its corresponding Russian sentence. There are 10 items in Russian and for each one two Spanish versions are offered, e.g.:

(6) *Vracha zhdala mashina.*
    (A car waited for the doctor)
        a. *El coche esperaba al doctor*
        b. *El doctor esperaba el coche.*

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In this task we pretended to verify the students' interpretation of the inverted (and non-inverted) sentences when they are aided by the Spanish equivalents. This task is euivalent to 20% of the total score.

In the third task the students have to notice the difference of the information that is provided by the change of WO. In other terms, the goal is to test the students' intuitions as far as thematic-rhematic organization of the sentence is concerned.

This task includes 12 sentences: 3 with the «normal» WO, the rest with the inverted patterns. Each sentence is followed by two questions in Russian, e.g.:

(7) *Oleg mechtal o more.*
   (Oleg dreamed of the sea)
       a. *Kto mechtal o more?*
          (Who dreamed of the sea?)
       b. *O chem mechtal Oleg?*
          (What did Oleg dream of?)

The students have to decide if the sentence represents an answer to question (a) or question (b). It must be noted that the division of the sentence into theme and rheme (or topic and comment) is not explicitly taught in the classroom. So it is also of interest to examine whether students can acquire these pragmatic aspects of discourse, anyway.

Finally, task IV is aimed at arranging words into sentences. Separate words are given out of order and students are to produce appropriate sentences, e.g.:

(8) */vstretil/festivale/Ivan/druga/na*
      (met/festival/Ivan/friend/at)

The instruction does not specify WO. We tried to find out if students would try to produce sentences with inverted WO. This task amounts to 10% of the total.

4.4. Procedure.

The test was applied to students in two groups: a morning group of 7 learners, and an afternoon group of 8 learners (both from the IVth term). Hence the total number of the students who participated in the experiment is 15.

The test was realized during normal classes, the students were given an hour to finish the exam. It was explained to them that the test is not a part of the syllabus and would not affect their term grades.

4.5. Data and results.

First, we examined the individual results of each student and the summary result of the whole group.

The maximum score to be obtained in the test is 62 points. The average score of the group was 40, that means the test presented certain difficulties for the students. 7 out of 15 students (almost half) obtained a below average score. The highest score was 52 points (84%), nobody obtained a perfect score.

Table 2 contains the distribution of these results indicating the number of students and their score frequencies. We can see that differences among student scores were small. We can conclude that the group of the participants is rather homogeneous concerning knowledge of inverted WO.

Table 2.

Points	Frequency
60-64	
55-59	
50-54	XX
45-49	XX
40-44	XXXX
35-39	XXXXX
30-34	
25-29	XX
20-25	

Second, we analyzed the results obtained in each task and compared them. In task I the majority of students could not recognize the sentences with inverted WO as grammatical and marked them as incorrect. Table 3 reflects these results and shows the percentage of correct answers in task I: only 43.7% of the items were answered correctly, of which 20% were distractors, i.e. the subjects had the highest ratio of correct answers in the distractors (66.7%).

Table 3.

Inversion patterns	Number of items	% of items	Number of correct answers	% of correct answers
OVS	6	30	34	37.5
OSV	4	20	25	41.7
VS	2	10	11	36.7
SOV	2	10	12	40.0
OOVS	2	10	9	30.0
D	4	20	40	66.1
Total	20	100	131	43.7

As for the inversion patterns, the results could also be observed in Table 3. The most difficult pattern appears to be OOVS which is logical enough, since the students have to interpret two objects before they reach the subject of the sentence. Nevertheless, differences between the five inversion types in the correct answers percentage do not seem significative.

In task II for each Russian sentence, students were given two Spanish sentences from which they selected the one that corresponded to the original. This activity was not so difficult for the students which means that when they have an option they were able to think and recur to other strategies, i.e. they began to process grammatical items for information. As a result, the majority of the students responded correctly in task II.

Task III intended to evaluate students' intuitions about sentence organization. This task

seems to have caused difficulties for the students (approximately half of the answers were correct), which leads us to the conclusion that the IVth term students have not developed a clear notion of the thematic-rhematic organization of the sentence as yet.

Finally, task IV was the easiest for our students, everybody completed the task producing sentences with «natural» WO, there were no attempts at producing sentences with inverted WO.

Thus, tasks I and III presented major difficulties for the students. A comparison of the four tasks is given in Table 4.

Table 4.

Tasks	Number of correct answers	% of correct answers
1	131	43.7
2	131	87.3
3	96	53.3
4	90	100

5. CONCLUSIONS.

Although the results of this study are not complete or definite, some preliminary conclusions may be drawn.

The data corroborated our hypothesis that the inverted WO causes problems for Spanish-speaking students of Russian who tend to process any sentence in Russian as having SVO order.

We could observe that students very frecuently use the first noun strategy, i.e. they interpret the first noun or noun phrase as subject and in this way they asign a wrong meaning to sentences with OVS or OSV order, especially, in cases that permit ambiguity.

Another strategy frequently employed by students is their preference for processing lexical information first and stopping when they can construct a meaning from this information. Only in cases when they have to choose between the two forms, they seem to begin processing grammatical information. It is in these circumstances that they start using some of the L1-based strategies such as paying attention to WO or to affixes for semantic information, hence the necessity of raising our students awareness with respect to this problem. In the final stage of our research project we are planning to create some pedagogical grammatical materials to facilitate acquisition of the inverted WO for Spanish students of Russian.

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