

El Tiny or El Escritorio Tiny? Exploring L2's Influence on Adjective Placement in Spanish

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Introduction. In the present study, we investigated the effects of a second language on first-language processing by examining crosslinguistic syntactic differences between Spanish and English. Spanish and English have distinct grammars: notably in terms of adjective placement and noun omission. In Spanish, adjectives are typically postnominal (e.g., *the estudiante responsable*), while in English, they appear prenominal (e.g., *the responsible student*). Moreover, Spanish allows single adjectives to function as nouns (e.g., *el responsable*) — a feature typically not present in English. While linguistic analyses have examined the grammaticality of noun omission in Spanish, to our knowledge, there is no known experimental research on this topic. As a result, our understanding of how individuals actually process these constructions remains limited. To bridge this gap, we conducted a study with two samples of Spanish-English bilinguals, heritage speakers and late bilinguals. Late bilinguals were raised in a Spanish-dominant environment in Mexico and learned English in their late teens, while heritage speakers were simultaneous bilinguals, learning Spanish at home before age 5 and growing up in an English-dominant environment. By including these two samples, our aim was two-fold: to gain a deeper understanding of how Spanish speakers process noun-adjective sequences and to explore how exposure and proficiency could impact their judgments of acceptability in Spanish.

Method. 96 heritage Spanish-English bilinguals and 81 late Spanish-English bilinguals rated 40 Spanish sentences on a scale of 1-5 (1 - Not acceptable, 5 - Very acceptable). We designed four conditions: adjective-noun (*el responsable estudiante*), noun-adjective (*el estudiante responsable*), adjective-only (*el responsable*), or noun-only (*el estudiante*; see Figure 1 for full sentences). Participants also completed a language history questionnaire [1].

Results and Discussion. Our findings revealed that the heritage speakers did not show a significant preference for either the noun-adjective or adjective-noun order, but generally rated the adjective-only condition as the least acceptable (see Figure 2). This is noteworthy because it suggests that heritage speakers do not consider the adjective-only condition (*el estudiante*) as acceptable, despite its grammatical correctness within the noun omission structure in Spanish [2]. Furthermore, the results indicate a lack of differentiation between the adjective-noun and noun-adjective conditions, despite the ungrammatical nature of prenominal descriptive adjectives in Spanish. In contrast to the heritage speakers, the late bilinguals found the adjective-only condition to be grammatical. Additionally, the late bilinguals rated the adjective-noun condition poorly, which was expected of this sample. The asymmetry between the two adjective placement conditions observed in the late bilinguals, but not in the heritage speakers, suggests a potential influence from English to Spanish among the heritage speakers. Since English adjectives are typically placed before nouns, heritage speakers may experience less difficulty processing a similar structure in Spanish due to their exposure to English.

To further explore this difference, we are currently conducting a series of production and comprehension experiments to assess to what extent heritage speakers do, in fact, tolerate noun-adjective sequences. We anticipate their behavior will align with the late-bilinguals, despite the results from our acceptability judgment task. Tasks like self-paced reading or eye-tracking

measure real-time, unconscious language processing in the brain, unlike acceptability judgments, which involve conscious evaluation and post-judgment processing.

Noun: La profesora encontro [al estudiante] frente de la pizarra blanca.

Noun + adjective: La profesora encontro [al estudiante responsable] frente de la pizarra blanca.

Adjective + noun: La profesora encontro [al responsable estudiante] frente de la pizarra blanca.

Adjective: La profesora encontro [al responsable] frente de la pizarra blanca.

Figure 1. Example stimuli.

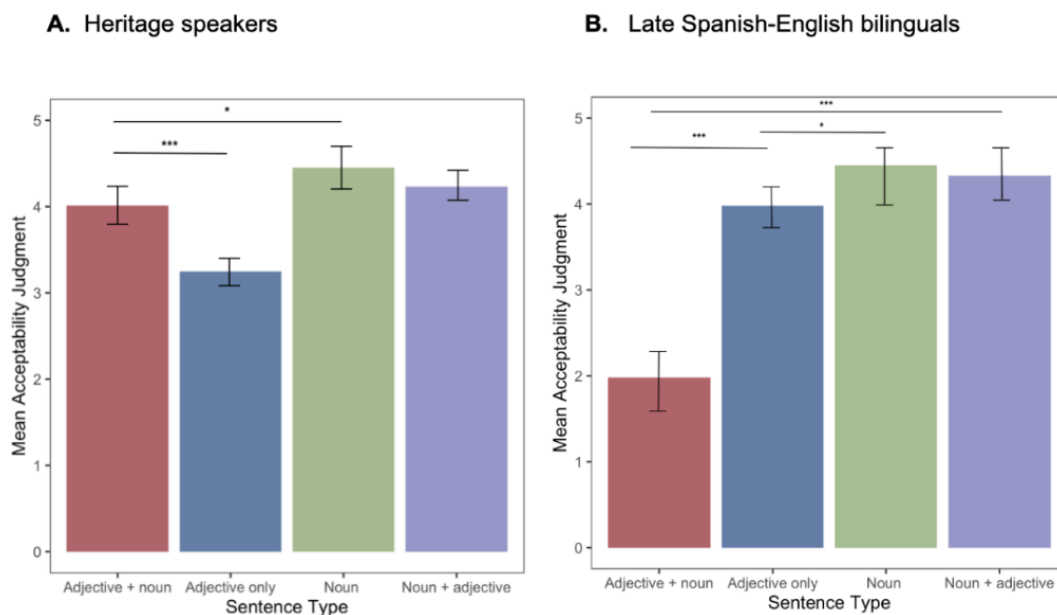


Figure 2. a. Acceptability judgment ratings of heritage speakers of Spanish. The heritage speakers did not show a preference toward a particular adjective placement. b. Acceptability judgment ratings of late Spanish-English bilinguals residing in Mexico at time of participation. The late-bilinguals showed a preference for noun + adjective, which is grammatical in Spanish.

[1] Li, P., Zhang, F., Yu, A., & Zhao, X. (2020). Language History Questionnaire (LHQ3): An enhanced tool for assessing multilingual experience. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*,

23(5), 938-944." in any publications that report data based on LHQ3. [2] Kester, E.P., Sleeman, P., et al. (2002). N-ellipsis in spanish. *Linguistics in the Netherlands*, 19(107-116).