

## The production and interpretation of generic/specific NPs in Spanish Heritage Speakers

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Recent studies have argued that the interpretation of Spanish subject plural noun phrases (henceforth Spanish NPs) seem to be particularly vulnerable to cross-linguistic influence in a wide variety of populations, including L2 learners, bilingual children and heritage speakers (Cuza, Guijarro Fuentes, Pires & Rothman, 2012; Ionin, Montrul & Crivos, 2009; Montrul & Ionin, 2010, 2012; Serratrice et al. 2009). These researchers have observed that bilinguals whose dominant language exhibits a bare/definite NP distribution to represent generic and specific entities have difficulties identifying the convergence of these two meanings under one construction in Spanish.

	English	Spanish
Generic	Bare NP: Cars have wheels	Definite NP: Los coches tienen ruedas
Specific	Definite NP: The cars are red	Definite NP: Los coches son rojos

The present work examines the nature of the divergent interpretations documented in previous studies, and complements their results by including a task on production. The first two tasks, an Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT) and a Truth-value Judgment Task (TVJT) were modeled after Montrul and collaborators (2009, 2010, 2012), and explored participants' grammatical preferences and interpretation of subject NPs. Production of determiners in specific and generic contexts was tested by means of a picture-based sentence completion exercise. All tasks were completed in both Spanish and English. In order to control for language dominance and frequency of activation, participants filled out a language background questionnaire (adapted from the Adult Multilingual Questionnaire by Blume, M., Courtney, A. Urzúa, S. Yang, and Lust, B., 2010) as well as a brief vocabulary list given at the end of the investigation, which controlled for the knowledge and frequency of use of the target words. Additionally, all participants were given two proficiency tests to examine their overall linguistic skills. One of them included an adapted version of the *Diploma de Español como Lengua Extranjera* (DELE), and the other was specifically tailored for this study, targeting linguistic structures that expressed genericity and specificity.

Low accuracy levels on interpretation have been previously linked to an inconsistent resetting of Chierchia's (1998) Nominal Mapping Parameter (NMP), by which heritage speakers and L2 learners exhibit an incorrect remapping of semantic features onto the target language's syntax. Additionally, according to Montrul et al. (2010, 2012) transfer effects could be a consequence of generic/specific NPs being at the interface between syntax, semantics and discourse. In this proposal, I would like to argue that the data obtained in these studies informed about the participants' sensitivity to grammatical violations (in the case of Cuza et al. 2012) and their processing strategies (in Montrul et al. 2010, 2012), rather than documenting their interpretation of different types of NPs. In contrast with the aforementioned studies, preliminary results from the Spanish version of the Truth-Value judgment task show similar interpretations of generic and specific NPs across groups: both monolinguals and heritage speakers of Spanish seem to exhibit different response patterns based on their *interpretation* of the proposed task. While there

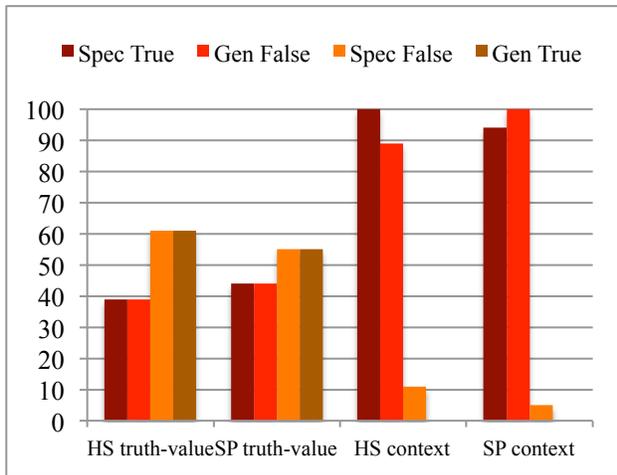
is a group for which the universal truth-value of the statement determines the NP's interpretation<sup>1</sup>, another set of participants makes their choice based on the context provided (Figure 1). These results seem to suggest that heritage speakers' interpretation of generic and specific NPs is not affected by their dominant language (English), since their results pattern like those of the monolinguals. Preliminary results of the AJT and production tasks, however, show that heritage speakers are more likely to accept bare NPs (ungrammatical in Spanish) regardless of their specific/generic nature, a tendency that is marginally observed in production (Figures 2-3). The perceived differences across groups in grammatical acceptability in Spanish, seem to decrease in English, where monolinguals as well as heritage speakers seem to overaccept ungrammatical bare and definite NPs (Figure 4). This tendency has been previously documented in Serratrice et al.'s 2009 work with monolingual and bilingual children, and it would seem to point to a general trend in English-dominant speakers. It is proposed that although high tolerance for ungrammaticality in these structures might be transferred from English to Spanish (which would explain the results in Figure 3), interpretation and production are not noticeably affected.

### **Selected references:**

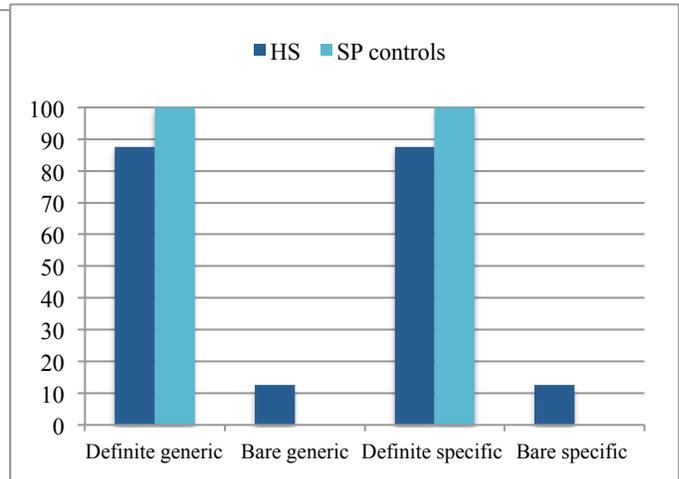
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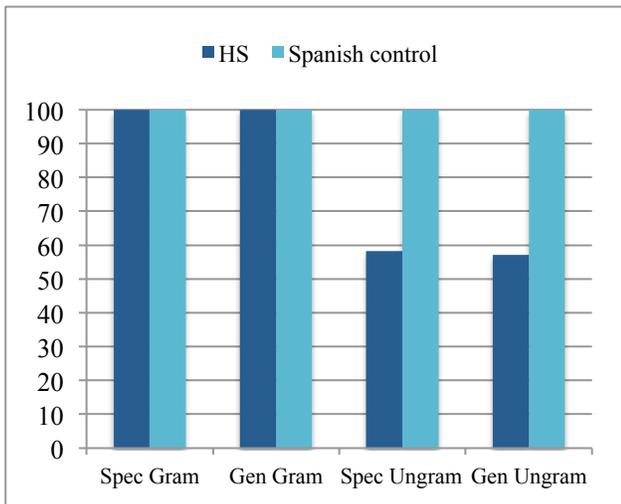
<sup>1</sup> In the TVJT, each trial consisted of a short story where the unexpected properties of a specific object/animal were juxtaposed to those of its generic counterpart. Participants were then presented with a target sentence –either belonging to the generic or specific condition–, which had to be evaluated. While the first group of participants (here called “truth-value”) accept both generic and specific interpretations, the second group only allowed for specific readings of subject definite NPs (generic interpretations being marginally accepted).



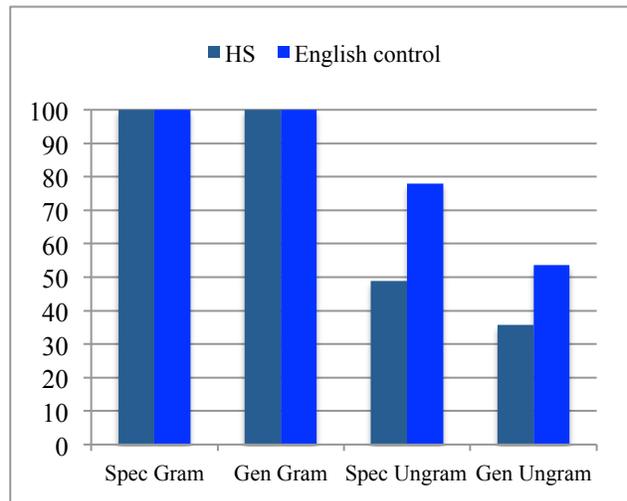
**Figure 1. Patterns of acceptance Spanish TVJT**



**Figure 2. Accuracy in production per group**



**Figure 3. Spanish AJT: acceptance per condition**



**Figure 4. English AJT: acceptance per condition**