Spanish VSX*

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This paper addresses the question of why VSX word order is possible in Spanish but excluded in other Romance languages (Catalan and Italian). It aims at offering an overview of the properties of VSX in Spanish, as well as explaining how the availability of VSX depends on interface requirements on the mapping between syntactic structure and information structure. VSX is interpreted as a single informational unit, without internal partitions (topic-comment, focus-background); this typically results in a thetic, wide focus interpretation, related to a stage topic. Languages like Italian and Catalan reject the processing of marked orders as non-partitioned units, which rules out VSX. More permissive languages, like Spanish, allow for the absence of partitions in marked orders.

1. Introduction

Decades of intensive research on Romance subject inversion have shown that it is not a unified phenomenon (cf. Sheehan 2006, 2010; Lahousse 2011; Lahousse & Lamiroy 2012, among others) and that Romance languages display different inversion patterns. A well-known asymmetry concerning subject inversion inside the Romance domain has to do with the VOS/VSO contrast in word order. While Italian, Catalan and French tend to reject VSO, Spanish, Portuguese and

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Romanian accept this pattern along with VOS.[1] The following examples illustrate this basic fact:

(1) a. *Ha*   *comprato Maria il giornale.*   It
Have.PRS.3SG bought   Maria the newspaper

    b. *Ha*   *comprat la Maria el diari.*   Cat
Have.PRS.3SG bought   the Maria the newspaper

    c. *A*   *acheté Marie le journal.*   Fr
Have.PRS.3SG bought Marie the newspaper
'Maria bought the newspaper.'

(2) a. *Ha*   *comprado María el periódico.*   Sp
Have.PRS.3SG bought   Maria the newspaper
'María bought the newspaper.'

    b. *Partiu*   *o Paulo a janela.*   Port
Break.PST.3SG the Paulo the window
'Paulo broke the window.'

    c. *Scrie*   *Ion un articol.* (Soare 2009: 32)   Rom
Write.PRS.3SG Ion an article
'Ion is writing an article.'

The nature of the contrast between (1) and (2) is the problem I intend to discuss in this paper. In what follows, I will use VSX instead of VSO, for reasons that will become clear in the following sections. The main question will thus be why VSX is mostly ungrammatical in the Central Romance languages, whereas it is an acceptable pattern in the western and eastern peripheries of the Romance domain. The comparative analysis will be based on Spanish, Italian and Catalan. I will not deal with word order patterns in the remaining languages, except for some brief and marginal observations.[2] A more comprehensive study covering them, and possibly some non-Romance languages, is left for the future.

    The two connected goals I pursue are the following: the first one, merely descriptive, is obtaining a more precise view of how VSX is used in Spanish, and

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1.   VSO is actually possible in Italian and Catalan if the object is right-dislocated and resumed by a clitic. It goes without saying that such possibility is not considered here, simply because it represents a different word order pattern: VS plus right dislocation. The same holds for cases of VSO in Italian in which the subject is under narrow focus and the object is destressed and 'marginalized'. The relevant point is that right dislocation or marginalization is required for VSO to be acceptable in Italian and Catalan.

2.   For French subject inversion, the basic reference is Lahousse (2011). For (European) Portuguese VSX, I follow Costa (2004), and for Romanian I rely on the observations in Soare (2009). I do not consider Brazilian Portuguese.

the second one, obviously more ambitious, is deriving the availability of VSX in Spanish from some general characterization of the language in terms of Information Structure. This means assigning a very prominent role to Information Structure (IS) in the account of word order. The role of IS represents the point where I depart from previous analyses that are more syntactically oriented. Very briefly, what I want to propose is that at least certain differences in word order among Romance languages may be ultimately explained as a result of interface requirements on the mapping between syntactic structure and IS. Such mapping is maximally transparent in Italian and Catalan, whereas Spanish differs from them in allowing for less transparent mappings. Transparency in the mapping is obtained by imposing informational partitions on the syntactic string (both topic/comment and focus/background partitions). When the need for partitions is strong in a grammatical system, the processing of marked orders as non-partitioned units is clearly avoided and, as a consequence, certain configurations are excluded. This is the case of Italian and Catalan. More permissive systems, like Spanish, exploit the possibility of processing complex constituents as non-partitioned informational units, which permits a more flexible mapping between syntactic configuration and IS.

The paper is organized as follows. First, in Section 2, I review some previous contributions on VSX and make clear my assumptions regarding the relationship between syntax and IS. Section 3 contains descriptive observations on the contexts and discourse functions associated with VSX in Spanish. In Section 4, I present a proposal on the availability of VSX based on the requirements on informational partitions in the mapping between syntax and IS. Section 5, finally, contains the conclusions.

It is important, at this point, to make the limits of the discussion explicit. I will deal with contemporary European Spanish – Castilian Spanish – exclusively. American varieties, as well as old Spanish and medieval Romance languages, will not be considered. There are interesting differences among Spanish varieties concerning the expression of IS, and some of my claims about Spanish might well need to be relativized if a perspective is adopted that takes into account dialectal variation. A case in point is Mexican Spanish, which, according to Gutiérrez Bravo (2007), completely excludes VSX. A study of dialectal variation in Spanish word order falls outside of the limits of this paper, but it could offer a valuable testing ground for my hypothesis, and will surely deserve particular attention in future research.

My Spanish data are mainly extracted from the corpus in *Base de Datos Sintácticos del Español Actual* (BDS, with roughly 300 examples relevant for VSX; see http://www.bds.usc.es), based on the *Archivo de Textos Hispánicos de la Universidad de Santiago*. In most cases I choose examples of declarative sentences with a

verb-initial order, like the one in (2a), instead of examples where VSX is preceded by some kind of fronted or preposed constituent. This is because certain kinds of fronting may count as syntactic triggers for subject inversion, and I am interested in isolating sentences where VSX is not syntactically induced and speakers choose between VSX, SVX and VXS independently of any syntactic constraint. According to this, *wh*-interrogatives and exclamatives are not considered here: they represent a completely different problem in the study of word order. For the same reason, I excluded examples where subject inversion is favored or imposed by other grammatical conditions: for instance, infinitival or gerundial clauses where preverbal subjects are ungrammatical, and only postverbal subjects are allowed. Finally, for clarity's sake, it may be useful to add that the problem I intend to discuss is not the derivation and distribution of VSX as a basic word order in linguistic typology, but rather the availability of VSX in languages that have SVX as their basic, unmarked order. The discussion is limited to some Romance languages, and could be seen as a small, partial contribution to a comparative analysis of subject inversion in Romance.

2.   Background assumptions

2.1   Previous syntactic accounts

The problem of the distribution of VSX in Romance, and in particular the contrast between Spanish on one side and Italian and Catalan on the other, has been intensively investigated in generative syntax (Contreras 1983; Ordóñez 1998, 1999, 2007a, b; Zubizarreta 1998, 2009, 2012; Belletti 2001, 2004; Gutiérrez Bravo 2007; Gallego 2007, 2009, 2013; Mensching & Weingart 2011). Most formal approaches deal with the problem by assuming some kind of syntactic difference between languages that allow for VSX and languages that do not. It is not my intention to review all such proposals in detail. However, some brief comments are in order here, just to clarify to what extent the hypothesis I want to put forward departs from previous work. The central idea in the aforementioned syntactic accounts is that Spanish VSX is the result of an extra functional position for subjects that allows the subject to be licensed postverbally (this is explicitly argued for by Ordóñez, Gallego and Zubizarreta; see Contreras 2009 for a radically different approach). Such position is not available in Catalan and Italian, which is enough to block VSX in these languages. Ordóñez (2007a, b) makes very interesting observations that deserve close attention. On the one hand, he notes that the availability of VSX in Spanish is related to the possibility of having postverbal subjects inside wide focus under certain conditions. I agree that this is crucial. Unfortunately,

his analysis gives no clues about the expected relation between the extra subject position and conditions on wide focus (see Costa 1999 for critical remarks on this point). As I will show in §4, my proposal gives a prominent role to focus structure. On the other hand, he points out that the contrast between Spanish and Catalan is not strictly limited to VSX sentences where the subject is followed by the direct object or some other verbal complement. The following examples, from Ordóñez (2007a, b), show that it also affects the position of subjects with respect to auxiliaries and infinitives, with AuxSV as a possible pattern in Spanish, but not in Catalan (cf. 3a–b), the position of subjects vis-à-vis deadjectival adverbs (cf. 4a–b), and their position in raising constructions (cf. 5a–b), among other relevant facts.

(3) a. *Por fin puede   Juan dormir.*   Sp (Cf. *Por fin puede dormir Juan*)
       Finallycan.PRS.3SG Juan sleep.INF
       'Finally, Juan can sleep.'

   b. *Finalment pot   en*
       Finally   can.PRS.3SG the

      Joan dormir.   Cat (Cf. *Finalmente pot dormir en Joan*)
       Joan   sleep.INF

(4) a. *No juega   la Mafia limpio.*   Sp
       Not play.PRS.3SG the Mafia clean
       'The Mafia does not play clean.'

   b. *Aquí juga   la Mafia brut.*   Cat
       Here play.PRS.3SG the Mafia dirty
       'Here the Mafia plays dirty.'

(5) a. *No parecen   los estudiantes muy felices.*   Sp
       Not look.PRS.3PL the students   very happy
       'The students don't look very happy.'

   b. *No semblen   els estudiants molt feliços.*   Cat
       Not look.PRS.3PL the students   very happy

I think that the aforementioned contrasts in fact derive from the same general principle that governs the availability of VSX, as Ordóñez suggests. They hold in a comparison of Spanish and Italian as well. The data in (3–5) suggest that what bans VSX in Catalan and Italian is not an incompatibility between subject and direct object in that specific order, but some constraint that prevents the subject from being sandwiched between the verb and a verbal complement. However, the overall picture is complicated by some additional facts. Belletti (2004) accounts for the ill-formedness of VSO in Italian by means of case licensing: the subject blocks the Agree relation between the object and the functional head assigning accusative case. This should explain why VSO is ungrammatical. As shown in (6), from

Belletti (2004: 26), VSPP sounds more natural than VSO in Italian, since the PP complement does not need to move to a higher projection to check accusative, and the case problem disappears. The status of (6) is, in any case, "less than perfect".

(6)   ^(?)*Ha   telefonato Maria al   giornale.*   It
        Have.PRS.3SG phoned   Maria to-the newspaper
        'Maria has phoned the newspaper.'

The relative acceptability of VSPP in Italian partially blurs the asymmetrical distribution of VSX in Romance, and it is not easy to capture under a unified account (but see §4.3 for some remarks). VSPP is especially acceptable with saying verbs, in so-called "Quotative Inversion", a construction I will not consider here. Belletti (2004) suggests that languages where VSO is well-formed, like Spanish and Romanian, must have an additional mechanism to assign case to the object. Spanish and Romanian are in fact characterized, among Romance languages, by Differential Object Marking (DOM): animate and specific direct objects are preceded by a special prepositional marker. The relation between VSO and DOM could then explain why Romance languages without DOM typically reject VSO. Unfortunately, such correlation is too weak: in examples like (2a) and (2c), without DOM, VSX is perfectly grammatical. This is probably one of the reasons that lead most researchers to adopt alternative solutions in terms of extra positions for subjects in Western Romance, along the lines of Ordóñez, Zubizarreta and Gallego (but see Gallego 2013: 440–441 for an attempt to revamp the idea of the correlation with DOM). In any case, an account based on case licensing could not cover the contrasts in (3)–(5), where direct objects are not involved.

   With this panorama in mind, it is now easier to define the main lines of my proposal. I depart from previous accounts of VSX in Romance in one basic point: I assume that the asymmetry that is under scrutiny is not strictly configurational – and thus not related to specific positions for subjects –, but rooted in the mapping from syntax to IS. Core syntax, as far as VSX is concerned, is then essentially the same in Western and Central Romance languages – except for French, a non-Null Subject language. What differs from one group of languages to another is the way IS manifests itself in word order patterns. Subject positions are, thus, not relevant. In case one is not willing to abandon syntactic accounts completely, a weaker formulation of my proposal could be the following: there may well be a formal difference concerning an additional position for postverbal subjects in Western Romance, but this is not the crucial factor in explaining why languages differ; it is rather an effect originating in a difference at a non-syntactic level. The asymmetry in the distribution of VSX is ultimately related to the expression of informational partitions. According to this, I will not rely on any particular assumption on the positions occupied by subjects and objects in VSX. Quite simply, I suppose that the

verb has raised to the corresponding inflectional head, and the subject remains in Spec, VP (or Spec vP), as argued in Costa (2004) for Portuguese VSX, where it is licensed with nominative case by Agree. To sum up, it is IS, and not the position of subjects, that I want to focus on. As one reviewer rightly notes, my proposal about IS is, in any case, compatible with a syntactic approach and, thus, with a syntactic difference between Western and Central Romance.

2.2   Syntax and information structure

A brief presentation of my basic assumptions concerning the relation between syntax and IS may be useful to clarify the proposal I would like to put forward. The central idea is that such relation is to a certain extent indirect, in the sense of Fanselow (2008). I assume that syntax does not encode all aspects of IS, in particular focus structure. A very simple illustration of this point is found in the interpretation of unmarked word order patterns. In Romance, SVX is typically unmarked and allows focus projection: three different readings can be assigned to a SVX sentence -focus on the complement, focus on the VP, and focus on the whole sentence (cf. the notion of "focus set" in Reinhart 2006 and in so-called "stress-based approaches to focus"). Disambiguation is dependent on contextual information, and there is no reason to believe that syntax plays any additional role. Then, to what extent is syntax relevant for the calculation of informational partitions? Syntax puts constraints on the interpretive process: what is relevant here is that syntax restricts the available options for informational packaging. Informational partitions are to a certain extent pragmatically inferred, and only partially limited by syntax. The division of labor between syntax and the IS interface is essentially as described in Costa (2004: 2):

> All that is needed from syntax is that it generates an array of well-formed outputs. Such outputs may be evaluated a posteriori by each of the interfaces. If they meet requirements of the interface, they are selected as legitimate. If, on the contrary, some interface condition is violated, they are ruled out.

This view has a number of consequences. On the one hand, it implies that IS acts as a filter on the output of syntax, and that certain strings may be syntactically well-formed but excluded by IS: this is, in fact, what I claim for VSX sentences in Catalan or Italian. On the other hand, it means treating IS as an independent level of representation with its own principles, along the lines of a tradition that includes Vallduví (1992), Erteschik-Shir (1997) and Neeleman and van de Koot (2008). IS constraints are a part of grammatical system and may vary from one language to another. They can make the mapping from syntax to IS more transparent in some languages than in others. Some correspondence

between syntactic constituents and IS units must hold in all languages, but it is not expressed in the same way in all cases. I will not try to develop a detailed analysis of the mapping between syntax and IS here. The central notions of my account are introduced in §4.

3.   VSX in Spanish

3.1   VSX and wide focus

Brief descriptive remarks about VSX are disseminated in Spanish grammars as parts of the presentation of the more general issue of subject inversion, but the VSX pattern itself is seldom singled out as a specific topic, with the exception of Zubizarreta (1999). To my knowledge, no extensive corpus research on Spanish VSX has been completed up to date, and such investigation is seriously needed to (dis)confirm the hypotheses put forward in theoretical studies. In any case, with the data available to us from the *Base de Datos Sintácticos del Español Actual*, two facts can be recognized as the cornerstones for a study of VSX. One is that VSX is interpreted as wide focus – as already indicated in Ordóñez (2007a, b) and Zubizarreta (1999) – or, alternatively, as background, if narrow focus falls on some other constituent, but always as a single informational unit; the other is that, in spite of several observations about the requirement that VSX be preceded by some initial XP, pure verb-initial sequences are widely attested and perfectly natural, as can be observed in the examples in (7–12), all from the *Base de Datos Sintácticos del Español Actual*, except (12) from Zubizarreta (1998).

(7)   …*no   pongas   esa   cara:* ⁱ*va a creer   la   gente   que*
        Not   put.PRS.SUB.2SG   that   face   think.FUT.3SG   the   people   that

   nos   peleamos!   Sp (BDS)
   CL   Fight.PRS.1PL

   'Don't make that face. People will think we' re having an argument.'

(8)   *A:* ⁱ*Qué   precauciones? –   B: Me   dio   una   amiga*
        What   precaution?   Me.OBL   give.PST.3SG   a   friend

   las   píldoras.   Sp (BDS)
   the   pills

   'What precaution? – A friend gave me the pills.'

(9)   …*y   abandonamos   la   Emilia   y   yo   el   edificio…*   Sp (BDS)
        And   leave.PST.1PL   the   Emilia   and   I   the   building
   'And Emilia and I left the building…'

(10) *Tiene   el   Greco una casa   con   un patio,*
     Have.PRS.3SG the   Greek a   house with a   patio,

     unos   jardines…   Sp (BDS)
     some   gardens

     'The Greek has a house with a patio, some gardens…'

(11) *O sea que valía   el   rublo más   que   el   dólar.*   Sp (BDS)
     So   that cost.PST.3SG the   ruble more   than   the   dollar

     'So the ruble was worth more than the dollar.'

(12) *Acaba   de ganar España el   mundial   de fútbol.*
     Finish.PRS.3SG of win   Spain   the   world-championship of   soccer

     'Spain just won the soccer World Cup.'

The two issues, wide focus and verb-initial order, are ultimately connected. However, for reasons of clarity, I deal with them separately in what follows.

3.1.1 *Wide focus interpretation*

The first one raises the question why a thetic, wide focus reading is systematically associated to VSX, with one proviso that I briefly discuss below, at the end of this section. Recall that, although the notion of "thetic reading" has turned out to be notoriously difficult to define, there is a general consensus that it implies that an event is presented as a whole – a single unit of information –, without a partition between a logical subject and a predicate, and without recognition of the participants prior to – or independently of – the presentation of the event. The terms "all-focus" and "neutral description" are quite often used as equivalents of "thetic". I take the absence of an explicit informational partition between topic and comment, or focus and background, as the hallmark of thetic sentences.

    The thetic nature of VSX results from the combination of the following factors:

– there is no topic constituent: a categorical reading is not possible.
– both the subject and the complement are postverbal and occur inside the focal domain (this is the essential feature of inversion).
– narrow focus on S and X is excluded. In the case of S, this is due to its non-final position, as in Romance focused constituents typically appear at the rightmost edge of the sentence – unless emphatically stressed. If S were under narrow focus, X should be right-detached or defocalized, and a different construction, corresponding to VS, would be obtained.
– wide focus emerges as the most natural interpretive solution for VSX.

But there is one striking property of VSX that is left unexplained. As already noted in Costa (2004: 82) for Portuguese, narrow focus on the rightmost constituent (X) is not possible. Thus, (10) is ill-formed with narrow focus on the object.[3]

(10)   #*Tiene el Greco* [$_{FOC}$ *una casa con un patio*].

This property sets VSX apart from SVO and VOS, where the rightmost phrase can be under narrow focus. SVO is usually compatible with wide focus: this interpretation is assigned when there is focus projection and the domain of informational focus is extended from the complement to the VP and the whole sentence. In VSX, on the contrary, there cannot be focus projection, as focus cannot project from the rightmost constituent. Costa (2004:84) rightly claims that so-called focus projection is incompatible with any change in the unmarked word order of the language. Wide focus in VSX is in fact not obtained as the result of focus projection, as explained above. The absence of a narrow focus reading on the complement is probably related to the marked status of VSX as word order pattern. Notice that, if narrow focus were assigned to the complement, the subject should become a part of the background, together with the verb. On the one hand, this clashes with the postverbal position of the subject, which forces a focal reading – recall that external arguments tend to be non-focal, by default, contrary to complements. On the other, the formation of a background built on the verb plus the external argument, excluding the internal argument, is also strongly marked. This kind of focus – background partition requires a very specific context, as indicated in Footnote 3. I conclude that, in most contexts, such factors conspire to exclude narrow focus on the rightmost constituent in VSX (cf. Costa 2004: 88–90 for Portuguese). This is what underlies the choice between SVX and VSX. The first order is the unmarked one in Spanish, as in the other Romance languages, and it receives a wide focus reading when the context and the lexical and phonological factors clearly favor this reading. The second order is much more restrictive: it is wide focus by default, in any context – both topic/comment and focus/background partitions are banned

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3.   VSX sentences can exceptionally receive a narrow focus reading on the complement when the context forces such reading by making available the information that corresponds to VS, which has to be taken as background: for instance, when the string VS has already appeared in the immediately preceding context, and the speaker is merely repeating it to make a correction. Ordóñez (1999: 503) gives an example of bare argument ellipsis where the contrast introduced by the final constituent forces narrow focus on the object in a VSX sentence:

(i)   *No   nos   dio   tu   hermano* [$_{Foc}$ *alegría*],   *sino   tristeza.*
       Not   us   give.PST.3SG   your   brother   happiness   but   sadness
       'Your brother did not give us happiness, but sadness.'

in VSX. It acts as a device to present events as single informational units, and this is its defining feature.

These data from Spanish indicate a discourse value for VSX that is virtually identical to what can be observed in other languages, like Greek (cf. Alexiadou 2000, 2006; Kechagias 2011). In both languages VSX sentences can be used as answers to questions like "what happened?" and with a presentational value. In both languages verb-initial sentences convey wide focus readings, without formal chunking between a logical subject and a predicate; narrow focus on the complement in the rightmost position is excluded (cf. Kechagias 2011: 237).

The situation in Portuguese is slightly different, according to Costa (2004). VSX is inadequate in neutral contexts, in response to a question like "what happened?", and seems to be legitimate only when both the subject and the object are focused -which, incidentally, is a possible use of Spanish VSX too- (but see Sheehan 2006: 128–130 for a contrasting description of Portuguese). It is not clear to me what the nature of this difference actually is, and I leave the matter to future research.

At the beginning of this section I pointed out that some qualification has to be made with respect to the idea that VSX is associated with thetic readings. In fact, VSX may also be interpreted as a background constituent when another expression attracts narrow focus, as in (13), where the adjunct in final position may receive narrow focus.

(13)   *Va a publicar   el   periódico   los   datos   el   lunes*   Sp
       Publish.FUT.3SG   the   newspaper   the   data   the   Monday
       'The newspaper will publish the data on Monday.'

VSX represents background information in other possible contexts, such as subordinate clauses and exclamations that emphatically reassert something that has already been said. This is important because it confirms that the crucial condition VSX imposes on interpretation is the absence of internal partitions. Theticity and wide focus are only specific contextual realizations of this general condition.

3.1.2   *Verb-initial sentences*

The second fact illustrated in the examples in (7–12) is the acceptability of verb-initial sentences ("absolute inversion", following Lahousse 2011:§2.3). It is important to recall that Zubizarreta (1998: 101), Alexiadou (2000), Sheehan (2006: 118) and Gutiérrez Bravo (2007), among others, have pointed out that VSX must be preceded by a fronted constituent in Spanish (cf. Sheehan 2006: 127–129 for similar remarks on Portuguese). Though I believe that VSX does not require the presence of an overt initial constituent, I concede that these observations are indeed motivated. It is true that (14a), with an overt initial topic, sounds more natural

than (14b) as an answer to a neutral question like "what happened?". With a pre-posed topic, the acceptability of VSX sentences often increases.

(14)   a.   *Ayer   ganó   Juan   la   lotería.*
             Yesterday   win.PST.3SG   Juan   the   lottery
             'Yesterday Juan won the lottery.'

   b.   #*Ganó Juan la lotería.*[4]

Nevertheless, I don't think that the presence of an XP in preverbal position responds to a syntactic constraint. On one hand, there is no systematic requirement of overt preverbal elements, as the examples in (7–12) show. On the other hand, there is a way to accommodate descriptive observations like the contrast in (14) in an analysis of VSX without assuming that an overt XP must occupy the preverbal position. The key theoretical tool is the notion of "stage topic" from Gundel (1974) and Erteschik-Shir (1997). Let's assume with Erteschik-Shir that every sentence must have a topic of some kind. Spatio-temporal expressions can play the role of a topic, when they specify the frame within which the predication holds. Such frame-setting elements are known as "stage topics", and can be overt or covert; in case they are implicit, they must correspond to the "here and now" of the discourse situation or to spatio-temporal parameters that have been mentioned or are implied in the context. It is usually assumed that thetic sentences – i.e. all-focus sentences that lack an explicit aboutness topic – must include a covert stage topic that counts as the pivot for the assessment of the clause. If VSX sentences are thetic or all-focus, we can conclude that some kind of stage topic must always be associated with them. In verb-initial sentences like the ones in (7–12) the stage topic is obviously covert (see Giurgea & Remberger 2012: §3.2 for a syntactic implementation of this idea).

Keeping this in mind, it is possible to reinterpret the aforementioned observations on preverbal elements in VSX along the following lines. The problem arises when considering decontextualized examples. Thetic sentences need a stage topic, and when such topic is overt it is relatively straightforward to imagine the context where they would fit in adequately. When the topic is covert and the sentence is mentioned in isolation, "out of the blue", contextualization may not proceed so smoothly, and some vague impression may appear that acceptability decreases. In my view, contrasts like the one in (14) are due to eventual difficulties in contextualization -more precisely, in finding a plausible contextual anchor for VSX-, and not to the violation of a syntactic condition. Thus, the absence of an overt initial

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4.   But (14b) would be a perfect answer to a neutral question if the complementizer *que* 'that' precedes the sentence (cf. *Que ganó Juan la lotería*). See below for some remarks on the role of *que*.

topic does not give rise to ungrammaticality. The same reasoning applies to the contrast in (15), where the presence or absence of the complementizer *que* 'that' is involved:

(15)   A: – *¿Qué   pasó   ayer?*
                 What happen.PST.3SG yesterday
            'What happened yesterday?'

        B: – #*(Que) se   peleó   Luis   con   otro   niño.*
                  That   CL   fight.PST.3SG Luis   with   another   child
            '(That) Luis had a fight with another child.'

The insertion of an initial *que* has the function of facilitating contextualization with respect to a preceding question under discussion. Again, there is no syntactic requirement that the complementizer appears in initial position. I don't think that these facts can be seen as effects of a general principle like the EPP (as tentatively suggested in Sheehan 2006: 118, 135); verb-initial sentences in Spanish are indeed relevant for a proper formulation of the EPP, but this point falls outside the limits of this paper (see Sheehan 2006:§3.5 for extensive discussion).

Notice that the correlation between stage topics and subject inversion is quite systematic in Romance. On the one hand, Lahousse (2008, 2011) has shown that stage topics are crucial in the licensing of nominal inversion in French. On the other hand, Pinto (1999) and Tortora (1999) demonstrated that VS word order with wide focus in Italian is felicitous if the verb selects a locative or temporal argument, which can be overt or covert; I propose to rephrase the generalization in terms of stage topics, by claiming that wide focus inversion is acceptable if the verb makes available a spatio-temporal argument that can satisfy the general requirement on stage topics. From this perspective, the presence of stage topics in Spanish VSX is only a particular case of some general condition on inversion.

3.2   VSX in discourse and theticity

Certain discourse properties of Spanish VSX are particularly salient, and deserve a brief comment. Interestingly, they correspond to some of the basic discourse functions of thetic sentences as described in Sasse (1996). There are also similarities with the contexts that favor absolute inversion in French, according to Lahousse (2008, 2011): the common factor is that in all cases a covert stage topic has to be retrieved from the preceding discourse context.

The first discourse function in Sasse's classification is the so-called "annuntiative function". It is the typical function of exclamations, announcements and even newspaper headlines -in general, utterances that introduce new data with the format of a single informational chunk. VSX is productively linked to the annuntiative

function in Spanish, as the example in (16) shows: quite often an exclamative/ mirative intonational contour is enough to make VSX perfectly acceptable.

(16) *¡Tenía   papá tantos   amigos!*   Sp (BDS)
       Have.PST.IMP.3SG dad   so-many friends
      'Dad had so many friends!'

A second discourse function identified in Sasse (1996) is the *descriptive* or *scene-setting* function, which presents a situation as a background to the main story line. This function manifests itself in two particular environments for Spanish VSX. The first one is related to coordinate structures. Many examples of VSX sound much more natural when followed by another coordinate sentence, in sequences like (17–18):

(17) *Le   ha   traído   Pepe un regalo   a   María,*
       Her.OBL have.PRS.3SG brought Pepe a   present to María,

      y   Ana se ha   enfadado.   Sp
      and Ana CL have.PRS.3SG got angry

      'Pepe brought a present to María, and Ana got angry.'

(18) *…cogía   yo a la   Merche y   nos íbamos*
        Take.PST.IMP.1SG I   to the Merche and CL go.PST.IMP.1PL

      al   cine.   (BDS)
      to the cinema

      '…I used to pick up Merche to go to the cinema.'

In (17–18), the first situation, viewed as a whole, is taken as a background assumption, while the second event represents the foreground in the narration. VSX is an adequate tool for "episode-opening" (cf. Sasse 1996: 44) because of its way of packaging information and its connection with a covert stage topic whose content is recoverable from the preceding context.

Finally, VSX is quite common in stage directions in plays and scripts: again, the sentence presents a situation as a whole to build the background (the "scene setting" function of thetic sentences in Sasse 1996). The stage topic in this case is interpreted as "at the present scene and at the present moment" (Lahousse 2008: 9).

(19) *Abre   Alberto el   bolso y   empieza   a sacar…*   (BDS)
       Open.PRS.3SG Alberto the bag   and begin.PRS.3SG to take out
      'Alberto opens the bag and begins to take out…'

(20) *Asoman   las otras   la   cabeza por sus*
       Stick-out.PRS.3PL the others the head   by   their
      respectivos cuartos.
      respective rooms
      'The others each stick their heads out from their rooms.'

This brief overview of discourse functions highlights the importance of thetic readings in VSX. However, it must be recalled that VSX may receive other interpretations as well, since theticity is just one of the possible outcomes of the absence of informational chunking.

4.   Constraints on wide focus and the acceptability of VSX

4.1   Informational partitions: Restrictive and permissive languages

In this section I intend to give an answer to the central questions concerning VSX in Romance: why is this word order rejected in Catalan and Italian, and why is it possible in Spanish (as well as in Portuguese and Romanian). As I anticipated in previous sections, I will argue that the origin of the contrast lies in the mapping between syntax and IS, more precisely in the diverse interface requirements that languages may impose on informational partitions.

The key factor is how restrictive a language may be with respect to informational partitions (topic/comment, focus/background). Detailed observations on this point have already been made for Catalan (Vallduví 1994, 1995, 2002) and Italian (Benincà 1988; Frascarelli 2000; Cruschina 2011), and provide a solid basis for a comparative analysis. The relevant data are the following. It is well known that Catalan imposes a strict condition on non-focal constituents: they must systematically undergo detachment (left or right dislocation). Focal constituents and the verb remain inside IP, with focus falling on the rightmost constituent, according to the expected behavior in a Romance language, and the focal domain is clearly delimited, as it corresponds to the core clause. This association of focus and IP has the effect of "repelling" non-focal phrases, as Vallduví (1995: 130) puts it. A clear example of this grammatical strategy can be seen in (21), from Vallduví (1995: 128), where both non-focal constituents are right dislocated – only with a neutral basic word order, VOPP, and the corresponding wide focus reading, could dislocation be avoided.

(21)   *L'   hi   ficarem,   al calaix,   el ganivet.*   Cat
       It.CL LOC.CL put.FUT.1PL in the drawer, the knife
       'We'll put the knife in the drawer.'

Moreover, according to Vallduví (2002: 1247), accumulating arguments and adjuncts after the verb in Catalan, without detachments, gives odd results, as shown in (22)–(23), where acceptability would increase if one or two constituents were dislocated:

(22)   *ˀVa   ficar les   galetes al   calaix ma mare.*   Cat
       Put.PST.3SG the   cookies inside the drawer my mother
       'My mother put the cookies inside the drawer.'

(23) *ˀGuanyarà   la   Lliga   el   Barça a l'   ultima jornada.*
      Win.FUT.3SG the championship the Barça in the last   day
      'Barça will win the championship the last day.'

Not surprisingly, in both Catalan and Italian a restriction against complex
sequences of postverbal constituents in inversion sentences has been pointed out
(Vallduví 2002, Vanrell & Fernández Soriano 2013 for Catalan, Benincà 1988: 125;
Zubizarreta 1998: 135, Belletti 2004: 182 for Italian): if lexical complements are
substituted by clitic pronouns – with or without dislocation –, such sentences are
perceived as much more natural, and pragmatically unmarked. The corresponding
contrast is illustrated in (24), from Vanrell & Fernández Soriano (2013), and (25),
from Benincà (1988):

(24) a. *ˀVa donar   la   carta al   vell   el   mariner.*   Cat
          Give.PST.3SG the letter to-the old-man the sailor
          'It was the sailor who gave the letter to the old man.'

      b. *La   hi   va donar   el   mariner, (la   carta),*
          It.CL him.CL give.PST.3SG the sailor   the letter

          (al   vell).   Cat
          to-the old-man

          'It was the sailor who gave it to him.'

(25) a. *ˀHa   mangiato la   torta la   mamma.*[5]   It
          Have.PRS.3SG eaten   the cake the mum
          'It was mum who ate the cake.'

      b. *L'   ha   mangiata la   mamma, (la   torta).* It
          It.CL have.PRS.3SG eaten   the mum   the cake
          'It was mum who ate it.'

Zubizarreta (1998: 135) talks of a "relative weight" effect in cases like (25), since the
constituent *mangiato la torta* is "metrically heavier" than the subject *la mamma*,
whereas the clitic makes the corresponding string *l'ha mangiata* much lighter.
Furthermore, she recalls that Spanish inversion is not sensitive to any constraint
based on the relative heaviness of postverbal constituents. I assume that Italian
(and Catalan) show "relative weight" effects because these languages need to mark
clear informational partitions and avoid having complex or heavy constituents
processed as single chunks. This is actually the same constraint that underlies
the previously noted phenomena in Catalan and is responsible for the systematic

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5.   The contrast in Italian appears with definite inverted subjects, but not with indefinite ones,
according to Benincà (1998: 125). This is a significant fact, but here I cannot deal with the role
of definiteness in subject inversion, which I leave for future research. See §4.3 for more data.

asymmetry with respect to Spanish (Spanish does not require non-focal constituents to undergo detachment, and easily allows for complex postverbal sequences taken as single informational chunks). One can reasonably expect that a language that favors marking partitions and avoids internal complexity in single informational chunks is also sensitive to "weight" factors.

Italian is perhaps less rigid than Catalan in its management of dislocation and in the linear disposition of postverbal constituents, but it certainly displays very similar behavior in its tendency to favor explicit focus-background partitions.[6]

Now a very simple characterization of Spanish vs Catalan and Italian can be reached: Spanish is much less restrictive with informational partitions than Central Romance languages. In Spanish, detachment of all background constituents is an available option, but is not compulsive, and definitely is not the most natural and idiomatic option. Focus – background partitions are not necessarily marked by means of phonological or syntactic devices. Syntactic configurations are often ambiguous, as far as focus structure is concerned, and the choice for wide or narrow focus is strongly context-dependent. It appears that the fact that Spanish does not need to mark informational partitions as explicitly as other languages do is correlated to the possibility of having complex constituents processed as single informational units, i.e. without internal partitions.[7] Catalan and Italian, being more restrictive, tend to avoid such complex informational units: in (21), for instance, the focal domain is reduced to a minimum size through dislocations, and

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6.   Further confirmation of an asymmetry related to IS in Romance comes from Büring's (2010) characterization of Spanish and Italian as "edge languages" in his typology of focus realization. In edge languages, as Büring argues, focus is marked by non-standard constituent order, with the focus in left- or right-peripheral position. Among edge languages, Spanish represents the type in which constituent order is used to make sure that the focused constituent ends up clause-finally. This is probably a too rigid picture of focus structure in Spanish, i.e. one in which marked orders tend to exclude wide focus, while there is evidence that the system is quite flexible, and the distinction between narrow and wide focus is strongly context-dependent. The relevant point here is that, in Büring's analysis, Italian differs from Spanish in the possibility of keeping informational focus in the rightmost position by prosodically separating other post-focal constituents from the rest of the clause: this means that post-focal material prosodically forms its own intonational phrase and is syntactically right-dislocated. Dislocation of certain constituents is a way to ensure that the focused constituent ends up in the rightmost position inside the clause. Moreover, dislocation allows Italian speakers to reduce to a minimum the extension of the focal domain, as in Catalan. The role of dislocation is, then, crucial for distinguishing the two types of edge languages.

7.   It is an open issue to what extent this general feature of Spanish grammar can be correlated with some phonological property of the language, in particular with intonation patterns and prosodic phrasing.

in (24)–(25) a preference for a "lighter" background is shown. This difference will turn out to be important for VSX.

The consequences for the mapping between syntactic configuration and IS are clear. In Catalan and Italian the mapping is quite straightforward and maximally transparent, since word order and structure closely reflect information-packaging relations. Transparency in the mapping is obtained by imposing informational partitions (topic/comment, focus/background). This is a general feature of the grammar of Central Romance languages that materializes as a series of formal strategies. In Spanish the mapping is less straightforward: this means that several syntactic configurations, instead of encoding a precise interpretation -as far as IS is concerned-, are associated with a (small) set of focus structures that are evaluated in context to choose the optimal interpretation. Thus, the grammar underdetermines interpretation – as in so many constructions –, and the interpretive process obtains a relevant reading building on the conditions established by the grammar and the available contextual assumptions. Pragmatic inference plays a main role in managing contextual data. To put it quite briefly, the asymmetry boils down to the amount of IS-related instructions that are included in the grammar of each language: some languages (Catalan, Italian) strongly constrain most aspects of final readings, whereas other languages (Spanish) are less transparent and only partially determine interpretation, thus giving rise to strings that are compatible with a range of possible focus structures that must be filtered by the context.

4.2   Conditions for VSX

The crucial prediction for VSX is that languages that favor explicit partitions will put stronger limitations on the processing of non-partitioned units. Such languages are expected to avoid complex, heavy non-partitioned units, in particular in marked orders. It is in fact in inversion constructions where the consequences of pertaining to the Spanish or the Catalan/Italian type can be observed. Unmarked, neutral word orders – SVX in Romance – do not give rise to noticeable diverging effects in the languages under consideration: wide focus interpretations, the most salient case of absence of informational partitions, are naturally available in SVX sentences in all Romance languages. VSX being a marked form of inversion that is typically interpreted without informational partitions, it should be rejected in languages of the Catalan/Italian type, unless some partition is introduced by means of right dislocation of the complement or in some other way (see Footnote 2); it is, conversely, accepted in more permissive languages of the Spanish type. An intuitive formulation of my proposal on the availability of VSX is enclosed in the following generalization:

(26)   VSX Generalization
       VSX is a possible word order in a language with SVX as unmarked order
       only if the language allows for complex non-partitioned chunks.

Notice that the generalization is not based on the possibility of assigning wide
focus readings to marked orders, but on the more general property of having non-
partitioned chunks, be they focal domains or background domains. I borrow the
term "integration – or "informational non-autonomy" – from Jacobs (1999) to
refer to this property, in order to avoid using more specific – and non equivalent –
terms like "theticity" or "focus projection".

To get a more precise idea of what "complex non-partitioned chunks" means,
it is worth reviewing the conditions favoring wide focus/theticity/integration.
A useful cross-linguistic overview is offered in Sasse (1996), but I take inspiration
mainly from Jacobs (1999) and Sæbø (2007). The basic factors that favor integra-
tion of a verb and its argument(s) into a single informational unit which must be
processed in one step are listed below:

–   Monoargumentality. In combinations of one predicate and one argument,
    integration is made easier by the reduced "weight" of the construction. If
    additional complements or modifiers are inserted, integration becomes more
    costly. The more complex a constituent is, the more it calls for an informa-
    tional partition. This is the central factor I intend to refer to when I mention
    "complex non-partitioned chunks".
–   Indefiniteness of arguments. Indefinite and, in general, non-presuppositional
    DPs are more easily integrated into the predicate by processes like semantic
    incorporation. At the same time, they don't make prototypical topics. With
    definite/presuppositional DPs, the opposite is true: they refer to individu-
    ated, salient participants that make good candidates for topics. Definite DPs –
    except so-called "weak definite" – usually resist semantic incorporation.
–   Non-stative lexical aspect. Stative predicates, and especially Individual-Level
    ones, typically require a topic – comment partition, since their subject argu-
    ments must count as aboutness topics. As a result of this, they tend to be
    excluded in constructions that lack a predication topic, and therefore in thetic
    sentences. Such predicates block integration. Eventive predicates show the
    opposite behavior: they favor the integration of arguments into larger infor-
    mational units.
–   Low thematic prominence of arguments. Sometimes the presence of a Theme
    argument is taken as a condition for integration (Jacobs 1999: 75). Such condi-
    tion is probably too strict. What seems to hold for integration to be straightfor-
    ward is a requirement that arguments are not high in the thematic hierarchy.

> Prominent arguments -for instance, external arguments of transitive verbs- tend to attract focus (narrow focus), as pointed out in Sæbø (2007): their thematic prominence generates sets of alternatives in their interpretation, thus hindering integration. This explains why subjects typically get narrow focus in VOS and VS with unergative verbs.[8]

– Lexical and contextual conditions. The selection of certain lexical items may favor or block integration, as Sæbø (2007) shows. And speaker's perspectives and intentions may have effects on integration as well (cf. Kennedy 1999). I will not consider this kind of factors here.

According to this, definiteness, stativity, thematic prominence and the presence of two or three arguments are the main factors that hinder integration. I believe it is reasonable to assume that languages differ in their sensitivity to these factors: those that tend to favor explicit informational partitions are expected to be more sensitive than those that easily allow for non-partitioned chunks. If this is correct, it is possible to make predictions about VSX, and the first consequence is that Catalan and Italian should not accept VSX interpreted as a single informational unit, with a wide focus reading. In this kind of languages the need for informational partitions forces prominence factors to block integration: as a result, VSX cannot be interpreted neither as a wide focus nor as a "wide background", and it is discarded as an acceptable word order.

Catalan is in this respect stricter than Italian, as confirmed by the limitations on possible word orders inside the focal domain (Vallduví 2002). But the exclusion of VSX is obtained in the same way in both languages. Schematically, the reasoning is as follows: (a) the presence of S obstructs the integration of X, the internal argument, and at the same time the presence of both S and X hinders integration with the verb; (b) S, being a prominent (external) argument, tends to attract narrow focus, instead of integrating into wide focus; (c) a narrow focus reading of S is not possible unless X is dislocated (given that S does not occupy the

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8. The fact that subjects, when external arguments, attract narrow focus is, not surprisingly, correlated to what comparative research has revealed about the grammatical marking of subject focus. It is common to find asymmetries between subject focus and non-subject focus (cf. Fiedler et al. 2010, Skopeteas & Fanselow 2010). On the one hand, subject focus must be marked, whereas non-subject focus need not; on the other hand, in many languages focused subjects are marked differently from focused non-subjects. Such asymmetries suggest that focused subjects have a special status, and this is due to the default interpretation of subjects as aboutness topics. The marked status of subject focus has the same origin as the reluctance of subjects/external arguments to be included inside the domain of informational focus.

rightmost position); (d) as integration is blocked and wide focus is not an inter-pretive option, VSX is ruled out.

In the case of Spanish, VSX can be used because the language is not restrictive with informational partitions and is not sensitive to the factors that interfere with integration: if such factors do not hinder integration in non-partitioned units, and thus integration is possible even in marked orders, irrespective of definiteness, thematic prominence, aspectual factors and the internal complexity of the relevant chunk, then VSX can be interpreted as wide focus or alternatively as background, and it becomes an acceptable grammatical option. In a few words, prominence factors are overridden by a higher-ranked principle, which is the need to interpret VSX as an informational chunk. This gives us a motivated account of why VSX is only possible in one group of languages in the Romance domain.

4.3   Some additional data

In this perspective, cross-linguistic variation depends on (1) how different lan-guages determine informational partitions, and (2) how sensitive each language is to prominence factors. Notice that sensitivity to the factors outlined above is prob-ably to be seen as a scalar or gradual phenomenon, where fine-grained distinctions can be defined and a variety of small-scale differences among languages could find their place. Globally, the main feature of this approach to the distribution of VSX is its being based on IS notions, rather than on purely syntactic conditions (case assignment, functional structure of clauses). I believe there are some advantages in choosing this view.

The first one is the possibility to cover contrasts like the ones in (27)–(29) together with the basic ones in (1)–(2). The examples show VSX strings in which X is not a direct object or an internal argument of V, as in the central examples in the literature on the topic (see also examples (3)–(5) from Ordóñez 1999 for a series of related phenomena), but an adjunct. In all of them I assume a wide focus reading.

(27) a. *Está   fumando Juan en el   baño.*   Sp
          Be.PRS.3SG smoking Juan in   the toilet
          'Juan is smoking in the toilet.'

      b. *#Sta fumando Gianni nel bagno.*   It

      c. *#Está fumant Joan al bany.*   Cat

(28) a. (*Menos mal que*) *ha   reaccionado su   madre*
          (less   bad   that) have.PRS.3SG reacted   his/her mother
          con   calma.   Sp
          with   calm
          'Fortunately his/her mother reacted with calm.'

    b.   #(*Meno male che*) *ha reagito sua madre con calma.*   It

    c.   #(*Gràcies a Dèu*) *ha reaccionat la seva mare con calma.*   Cat

(29)   a.   *Ha*   *ganado Nadal en París.*   Sp
              Have.PRS.3SG won   Nadal in Paris
              'Nadal won in Paris.'

    b.   #*Ha vinto Nadal a Parigi.* (*Cf. Ha vinto Nadal, a Parigi.*)   It

    c.   #*Ha guanyat Nadal a Paris.*   Cat

The contrast may be slightly stronger in some cases than in others, but is systematic: VSX is again fully acceptable in Spanish, but not in Catalan and Italian. In the three cases X is an adjunct, the verb is not unaccusative, and the subject is an external argument: there are no factors favoring integration. The origin of the deviance in Italian and Catalan examples cannot be related to the presence of arguments inside the VP, their relative positions and their case licensing. The nature of the final X constituent seems to be irrelevant. Given this situation, an account in terms of wide focus and integration offers a simple solution, and is general enough to encompass all the variety of VSX strings in the languages under consideration: Catalan and Italian need to impose some kind of partition in (27)–(29), possibly by means of dislocation, because integration is not straightforward.

    Furthermore, such account is able to accommodate other factors that may have an influence on the acceptability of VSX as a single informational chunk: intonation (for instance, the prosodic contour used to announce news), tense (in its interaction with lexical aspect), discourse markers, or subordination (a poorly understood factor that may favor the absence of informational partitions). I will not deal with them here, but it suffices to say that all these issues find their place in the general picture as factors that can provide grounds for integration. The same strategy holds if we look at the Italian examples in (30), from Benincà (1988: 124), which apparently do not fit adequately in my account of VSX, since they represent acceptable sentences with VSX order (and a wide focus reading):

(30)   a.   *È*   *arrivato un marziano a Roma.*   It
              Be.PRS.3SG arrived an alien   to Rome
              'An alien arrived in Rome.'

    b.   *Ha*   *telefonato una ragazza a tuo fratello.* It
              Have.PRS.3SG phoned   a   girl   to your brother
              'A girl phoned to your brother.'

One of the important factors in (30) is that X is not a direct object, but a prepositional complement. There is in fact a certain asymmetry in Italian and Catalan between VSO, systematically rejected, and VSPP, which is sometimes possible (Belletti 2004: 172–174; Vallduví 2002: 1242). Though this is a relevant issue,

I cannot discuss it here; I would tentatively suggest that the VSO/VSPP contrast may be due to some additional constraint operating in Italian and Catalan, possibly of the kind analyzed in Richards (2010) under the label of "Distinctness". However, the crucial factors for the acceptability of VSX in (30) are (1) indefiniteness of the subject, and (2) unaccusativity, or the presence of verbs like *telefonare* 'phone', which licenses wide focus inversion. This means that two of the main obstacles to integration, definiteness and thematic prominence in the subject, are eliminated. If the language is sensitive to these factors, it is not surprising that Italian speakers find the sentences in (30) absolutely natural. Nor is it that the same sentences with a definite subject produce a deviant result (Benincà 1988, 125):

(31)   a.   *#È*   *arrivato Piero a   Roma.*   It
              Be.PRS.3SG arrived   Piero to Rome
              'Piero arrived to Rome.'

       b.   *#Ha*   *telefonato Masiero all'*   *avvocato.*   It
              Have.PRS.3SG phoned   Masiero to the lawyer
              'Masiero phoned the lawyer.'

The definiteness effect arising in (30)–(31) is due to the insertion of a definite subject inside a wide focus, presentational domain: as the language is sensitive to definiteness in this kind of environments, integration cannot succeed in (31), and the sentence is ruled out – similar contrasts can be observed in Catalan. As expected, no definiteness effect appears in the Spanish translations of (31), since the language can assign non-partitioned interpretations to a VSX sentence independently of factors of prominence or internal complexity. In this way cross-linguistic variation is explained by resorting to the interaction of word order and factors favoring or blocking integration. Notice that odd sentences in the examples above are not considered strictly ungrammatical, but rather semantically anomalous.

Finally, there is another important advantage in this view of VSX that I cannot properly discuss here, for reasons of space: this approach allows us to encompass the facts that strictly concern VSX and a cluster of other facts that constitute independent sources of evidence for a basic asymmetry in IS, possibly unveiling the existence of a micro-parameter related to IS in Romance and introducing a new dimension of cross-linguistic variation at this level. Such facts include the frequency of Clitic Right Dislocation (Villalba 2011), the use of clefting in interrogatives, the conditions on possible readings in subject inversion, and the existence of fronting constructions akin to Quantifier Fronting (Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal 2009): they are all related to conditions on informational partitions in Romance. This cluster of phenomena crucially supports an analysis of the distribution of VSX based on IS notions; I can only refer the reader to Leonetti (2013) for a discussion.

5.   Conclusions

The preceding sections aimed at proving that both the description of the main properties of VSX in Spanish and the analysis of the cross-linguistic variation concerning VSX in Romance have to be built on information-structural notions. Once it is established that VSX must be interpreted as a single informational unit (typically, as wide focus, with a thetic reading, and alternatively as background), the dividing line between VSX languages – Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian – and non-VSX languages – Catalan, Italian, French – can be based on the capacity of a language to admit complex constituents processed as single informational chunks, without internal partitions, especially in marked word orders such as subject inversion. The prediction is that languages that do not need to split complex constituents by means of topic/comment or focus/background partitions will have VSX as a possible inversion pattern, whereas languages that strictly assign informational partitions in order to reduce the background or the focal domain to minimal complexity will reject VSX. The survival of VSX depends on the eventual success of a process of "integration" that allows speakers to take the whole string as a complex predicate. Integration is, in turn, the result of a number of factors that can favor it or block it. Languages vary with respect to their sensitivity to such factors (monoargumentality, definiteness, thematic prominence, lexical aspect, among others): languages that are permissive with partitions are not particularly sensitive and allow integration to take place irrespective of favoring conditions, whereas languages that are restrictive imposing informational partitions are usually highly sensitive to factors that can hinder integration.

The theoretical consequences of this view are all related with the place of IS inside the architecture of grammar. The major one is that IS, in line with a series of recent proposals, is viewed as an independent level of representation: it takes well-formed syntactic structures as input and evaluates them with respect to certain conditions. As a result, some structures that the syntax defines as grammatical may be rejected at the IS level and become (IS-)ungrammatical if they do not meet the requirements on informational partitions and focus structure. Notice that IS is not only responsible for issues of contextual adequacy, as usually assumed, but also for issues of idiomatic well-formedness. In languages like Catalan and Italian it must check whether a string obeys the conditions on formal chunking that force dislocations and the marking of focus – background partitions, i.e. what makes these languages different from Spanish (and Romanian, and Greek). If this is correct, the availability of VSX in a language is dependent on IS conditions (provided VSX is not independently ruled out on purely syntactic grounds – for instance, in a language where inversion is strictly forbidden –). The filtering role of IS thus

accounts both for facts that were traditionally considered as syntactic and for facts that are usually seen as stylistic (a preference for right dislocation, or a tendency towards subject inversion with complex strings).

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