

# Word Order in Bilingual Spanish: Convergence and Intonation Strategy

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## 1. Language Contact and Bilingualism

Numerous studies about the situation of intense contact between English and Spanish have yielded conclusive results about the role contact plays in instigating or accelerating changes in Spanish (Silva-Corvalán 1994, Otheguy & Zentella 2001). This study builds on those conclusions by looking at word order variation in the speech of bilingual Spanish speakers. I argue that the contact situation might provide the backdrop where interaction takes place, but it is the internal features of the linguistic system that provide speakers with the behavioral mobility through which variation manifests itself. If it weren't for the inherent flexibility of word order in Spanish, then it is doubtful that the phenomenon of a higher frequency of SV order for unaccusative verbs (whose most frequent order is VS) in the speech of bilingual Spanish would be promoted to an observable level.

### *1.1 The contact landscape*

I begin by discussing the context of English and Spanish in contact before moving on to describe the details of the contact phenomenon mentioned above (higher frequency of SV order for unaccusatives in the speech of bilingual Spanish). The present study looks at bilingual speakers of English and Spanish currently living in Los Angeles, California. The continual flow of immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries to the Los Angeles area creates a natural laboratory for studying language contact, where the topography of the contact situation is constantly being refreshed.

A number of social factors are taken into consideration when conducting a study of language contact. For the purpose of the present study, I will focus specifically on whether or not the frequency of use of the official (and in this case dominant) language could lead to a linguistic effect on the subordinate language. If there can be said to exist a larger number of domains of use of the superordinate language (English, in this case), and a subsequent reduction of the use of Spanish (subordinate) with regards to possible contexts, then is it plausible to postulate that bilingual speakers whose dominant language is English might map on to one structure (SV order), resulting in production that matches structures possible in both languages?

### *1.2 Research question*

My research question asks whether or not a higher incidence of SV word order for unaccusatives (whose proposed underlying order is VS in Spanish) can be observed in the spontaneous speech of bilingual speakers. If such a phenomenon is attested, I propose two things: first, that the increased production of SV order with unaccusatives is facilitated by the fact that this order is already an option that exists in Spanish, and second, that this extension of use is a case of *indirect transfer* (Silva-Corvalán 1994:4), i.e., – the structure is already present in Spanish, only its use is expanded to more discourse contexts due to the contact with English, whose order is SV with few exceptions. If this is the case, I propose that this would not be a case of structural attrition, but rather of the loss of the sensitivity to discourse - pragmatic factors, which are determinant in information structure and word order.

## 2. Word order and verb class

The two languages in question, Spanish and English, are both classified as having the pragmatically-neutral word order SVO. Where these two languages differ is that English is rigidly SVO, with few and restricted exceptions. Spanish, on the other hand, enjoys flexible word order.

Intransitive verbs are said to consist of two groups, unergatives and unaccusatives, and their membership in the group depends on the semantic characteristics of the subject (Perlmutter 1978). Unergatives are those intransitive verbs that select an external argument, which can be described as being volitionally involved.

Unaccusatives, on the other hand, select an internal theme or patient argument whose base-generated position is inside the verb phrase. According to the Unaccusative Hypothesis, this internal argument can be described as having object-like properties (Perlmutter 1978).

As Universal Grammar (UG) views these verb classes as universal, there would be no difference between Spanish and English with regards to the deep structure representation of word order in the case of unaccusatives (VS). The difference shows up on the surface, as overt movement of the argument is necessary to comply with the fixed SV order of English. So for the same verb in both languages, let's consider examples 1 a and b of discourse neutral order, as responding to the question, "¿Qué pasó?/What happened?".

- 1) a. Llegó María.  
Arrived María            ("Mary arrived")
  
- b. John arrived.

### 2.1 Presentational verbs

Well before the unergative - unaccusative distinction was picked up in generative grammar, the behavior of unaccusative verbs was commented on by Anna Hatcher (1956) in a descriptive grammar work. She had observed the special behavior of some 300 intransitive verbs in Spanish, which she calls "presentational verbs", whose role it is to introduce the subject in the discourse.

"With intransitive verbs in general the theme Existence of the Subject is much more frequent than any other single theme; and in the combination of intransitive verb and Thing-Subject it outweighs all the other themes combined; I have found nearly three hundred verbs, which, in their context, tell us only or mainly that *the subject exists or is present; is absent, begins, continues, is produced, occurs, appears, arrives.*" (Hatcher 1956:7)

Example: "y me acompañaron a la estación. LLEGA el tren..." (Hatcher 1956:10)

While these *existential sentences*, as she calls them, describe the behavior which facilitates classification, they are not part of an analysis which permits us to speculate as to how certain discourse factors could play a role in information structure.

### 2.2 Flexibility and discourse factors

The idea mentioned above is built around the notion that propositions are structured according to the two main categories that make up information structure: presupposition and assertion (grammatical distinction). This corresponds roughly to what the speaker considers to be old or new information (discourse distinction) for the interlocutor (Prince, 1981). Along the informational asymmetry, as Prince calls it, some units convey older information than others. "That is, information-packaging in natural language reflects the sender's hypotheses about the receiver's assumptions and beliefs and strategies." (Prince 1981: 224)

Prince posits discrete categories in her analysis of the informational asymmetry, arranging them into a continuum she calls "the assumed familiarity scale": new (brand-new, unused), inferrable (non-containing vs. containing inferrable) and evoked (textually vs. situationally evoked) (Prince 1981: 237) In the current study I make use of the terms "old vs. new" as well as "topic vs. focus" in order to refer to either end of the scale.

Topic and focus will be defined in the following way for this discussion: focus indicates the domain of the new information, what is *not* presupposed in the sentence; and topic is what the phrase or utterance is about, or presupposed information and shared assumptions. The topic vs. focus distinction is what lies at the interface between the sentence-level and discourse-level grammar.

Syntactic constituents and how they are ordered are among the ways in which information structure is manifested, as is prosody. Prosodic flexibility is an especially important indicator in the case of English where resources to mark focus relationships are otherwise limited. In contrast, flexibility with regards to word order is the primary resource available and used in Spanish in order to contrast the new vs. old information relationship.

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Participants*

There were 37 participants in this study, grouped according to length of time in the United States, and also according to language proficiency. Thirteen speakers of Mexican Spanish comprise the monolingual group. Of those 13, 10 were recorded in Mexico City, Mexico, and the remaining three were recorded in Los Angeles, California. The bilingual group was comprised of 24 participants that were grouped according to length of time in the United States and proficiency in Spanish. There were nine reduced proficiency speakers of Spanish, 11 advanced proficiency bilinguals, and four bilinguals of near-native proficiency.

#### *3.2 Groups by length of time in the U.S.*

The monolingual group is composed of 13 speakers of Spanish from Mexico. Ten participants were living in Mexico at the time of their participation in the study, and three had only recently relocated to the United States.

The second group is made up of bilingual speakers of Spanish who were all born in Mexico but arrived to the United States prior to the age of five. All nine participants in this group received all schooling in English, kindergarten through college.

The third group includes U.S.-born 14 first-generation bilinguals; their parents were born in Mexico. There was one bilingual to include in group four, whose grandparents were born in Mexico.

### **4. Elicitation task and data**

An elicitation task was designed in order to solicit the production of unaccusative verbs. Participants were given a series of drawings and asked to narrate a story. Each narration was recorded and later transcribed.

This elicitation task is “cost-effective” in that it was designed to provide speakers with multiple opportunities to produce unaccusative constructions. Each participant was simply asked to tell a story based on the drawings, and they were asked not to look ahead in order to ensure that all the information presented in the story would be new. Aside from that, the narration was not controlled in any way.

### **5. Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses**

The data include 519 tokens of intransitive verbs (809 including transitive verbs) and were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

The dependent variable is the word order, i.e. the subject’s position with respect to the verb (SV or VS). Additional informational weight was also taken into consideration when looking at word order, such as the position of a prepositional phrase or adverb, etc. within the sentence.

The current study looks at independent variables of two types: linguistic (internal) and social (external). Linguistic, internal independent variables include verb type, clause type, and old vs. new information status. Social, external independent variables include speaker generation and proficiency in Spanish.

In order to test the hypothesis of an increased SV order for unaccusatives in bilingual Spanish, it is first necessary to empirically confirm (based on the data analyzed from this study) the most frequent order for transitive and intransitive verbs. As Table 1 shows, for transitives and unergatives SV is the most frequent order, 92.3% and 84.1% respectively. For unaccusatives, VS is the most frequent order as it appears in 66.7% of the cases. It is important to note that the percentages reported in Tables 1, 2 and 3 are of combined monolingual and bilingual data. Results reported in Table 4 show that there is a difference between populations with respect to SV vs. VS order.

Table 1. Word Order by Verb Type

Word Order	Verb Type		
	Unaccusative	Unergative	Transitive
SV	68/204 <u>33.3%</u>	37/44 <u>84.1%</u>	265/287 <u>92.3%</u>
VS	136/204 <u>66.7%</u>	7/44 <u>15.9%</u>	22/28 <u>7.7%</u>

P&lt;.001

Another factor taken into account in this analysis of word order is the effect that additional informational weight has on word order, as demonstrated by comparing the results reported in Table 1 above with Table 2 below. In the case of unaccusatives, the preverbal position of S goes up only slightly when there is additional information after the V (compare 33.3% from Table 1 with 34.5% from Table 2). But the most frequent order for unaccusatives is still VS, when the additional information precedes the predicate – 44% of the time.

In the case of unergatives, the most common order of SV is still preferred, and in the majority of the cases (66%) the additional information is placed after the predicate. In order to get a clearer picture of how additional information has an effect on order, the nature of the additional information should be examined (see Table 3 below for a discussion of the information continuum).

Table 2. Word Order by Verb Type with Additional Information

Word Order	Verb Type	
	Unaccusative	Unergative
SVX	87/252 <u>34.5%</u>	31/47 <u>66.0%</u>
VSX	36/252 <u>14.3%</u>	0 <u>.0%</u>
XSV	18/252 <u>7.2%</u>	10/47 <u>21.2%</u>
XVS	111/252 <u>44.0%</u>	6/47 <u>12.8%</u>

P&lt;.001

The above analysis is incomplete without considering the nature of the additional information. The results presented in Table 3 below confirm that the status of the information has an effect on word order. When both V and S are new, the order is VS for unaccusatives 93.6% of the time – confirming that this is indeed its most frequent order. When S and V are old, the order is still VS for unaccusatives in 78% of the cases, but there is a marked increase in the SV order.

The preverbal position of S spikes most noticeably when S is old information (and even then only holding on the slightly less than half of all instantiations for that category – 48.9%). This confirms the

information structure strategy at the discourse level that says that old information will occupy a preverbal position, thus leaving the postverbal slot open for new information to fill.

While the scarcity of data for unergatives is not to be overlooked, it can be reemphasized that unergatives are indeed heavily SV. SV is the most frequent order 66.7% of the time when both S and V are new; when S is old information it occupies a preverbal position 90% of the time.

Table 3. Order by Verb and by Old - New Information Continuum

Old Info	Word Order	Verb Type	
		Unaccusative	Unergative
S+V, S+V+X	SV	3/14 <u>21.4%</u>	3/4 <u>75.0%</u>
	VS	11/14 <u>78.6%</u>	1/4 <u>25.0%</u>
All New	SV	3/47 <u>6.4%</u>	4/6 <u>66.7%</u>
	VS	44/47 <u>93.6%</u>	2/6 <u>33.3%</u>
S	SV	45/92 <u>48.9%</u>	27/30 <u>90.0%</u>
	VS	47/92 <u>51.1%</u>	3/30 <u>10.0%</u>
V	SV	2/20 <u>10.0%</u>	1/1 <u>100%</u>
	VS	18/20 <u>90.0%</u>	0 <u>0%</u>

P<.001

Tables 1 – 3 contributed to the analysis by indicating how internal factors such as additional information and information status have an effect on word order. The analysis now turns to examining the effect that the external factor language proficiency has on word order. The results in Table 4 confirm the working hypothesis that bilinguals do produce the SV order for unaccusatives more frequently than monolinguals do; compare monolingual 29.2% with near-native proficiency 36.4%, advanced proficiency 34.5%, and reduced proficiency 35%. I attribute the increase in SV order to contact with English.

It is interesting to note that monolinguals demonstrate a bit more flexibility between orders where both unergatives and transitives are concerned: while SV for both is more common, monolinguals only show an 82.4% and 87.4% frequency (respectively), while the numbers for bilinguals are higher. The greatest differences are those of SV order for unergatives produced by advanced proficiency speakers (92.3%), and SV order for transitives produced by both reduced proficiency and near-native proficiency speakers (95.6% and 93.8%, respectively).

Table 4. Word Order by Verb Type and by Language Proficiency

Language Proficiency	Word Order	SV	Verb Type		
			Unaccusative	Unergative	Transitive
Reduced Proficiency		SV	14/40 <u>35.0%</u>	6/8 <u>75.0%</u>	65/68 <u>95.6%</u>
		VS	26/40 65.0%	2/8 25.0%	3/68 4.4%
Advanced Proficiency		SV	19/55 <u>34.5%</u>	12/13 <u>92.3%</u>	132/152 <u>86.8%</u>
		VS	36/55 65.5%	1/13 7.7%	20/152 13.2%
Near Native Proficiency		SV	16/44 <u>36.4%</u>	5/6 <u>83.3%</u>	30/32 <u>93.8%</u>
		VS	28/44 63.6%	1/6 16.7%	2/32 6.3%
Monolingual		SV	19/65 <u>29.2%</u>	14/17 <u>82.4%</u>	90/103 <u>87.4%</u>
		VS	46/65 70.8%	3/17 17.6%	13/103 12.6%

P&lt;.001

### 5.1 Information structure and language proficiency qualitative analysis

The examples are grouped into contrasting sets, where examples from bilingual speech are contraposed with monolingual speech examples. The first group of examples serves to demonstrate that both monolinguals and bilinguals distinguish among verb classes with respect to word order and subject position.

### 5.2 Examples

#### 2) Unaccusative with expected VS order, both S and V are new:

- a. “Hay varias personas ya en la fiesta, hay 7 personas además del chico.

Y a las 8 de la noche, llega un payaso a la fiesta.” (Monolingual)

V            S

(There are a number of people already at the party, there are seven apart from the guy.

And at eight o'clock at night, arrives a clown to the party)

- b. “... y este mientras estaban en la fiesta todos tomando celebrando,

llega un payaso.” (Mexican-born bilingual)

V            S

(While everybody's there at the party drinking, celebrating, arrives a clown to the party)

The second group of examples shows how both groups likewise make use of the resources available (i.e. word order flexibility) in order to package information at the discourse level.

3) Unaccusative with *expected* SV order (S is old, V is new):

- a. “Y en eso, alguien tira la
- pecera*
- y el pez muere según esto.” (Monolingual)

S V

(And then, somebody knocks over the *fish tank* and the fish dies, according to this.)

- b. “Uno de los invitados tumba
- el pescado*
- de la mesa y se quebra el frasco donde está
- el pescado*
- ...
- 
- El pescado murió, al impacto en el suelo.” (Mexican-born bilingual)

S V

(One of the guests knocks the fish from the table, and the jar where the *fish* is breaks.  
The fish dies, upon hitting the floor.)

And finally, it is the third group of examples that provides evidence supporting the idea of interference from English, as in each of the bilingual examples an SV order is used even though it is not solicited by the discourse.

4) Unaccusative with *unexpected* SV order (both S and V are new):

- a. “Tres horas pasan.” (Mexican-born bilingual)

S V

(Three hours go by.)

- b. “Pasan las horas, ya son las 6 de la tarde.” (Monolingual)

V S

(Go by the hours.)

- c. “Y este y todos sus amigos llegaron a su casa.” (Mexican-born bilingual)

S V

(And all his friends arrived at his house.)

- d. “Y a las 7:30 empiezan a llegar los amigos.” (Monolingual)

V S

(And at 7:30 start to arrive the friends.)

- e. “Ah, en todo el relajo, parece que el pobre pescadito se cayó.” (Bilingual, Second generation)

S V

(And with all the mess happening, looks like the poor fish fell.)

- f. “Uno de los problemas es que se cae el pececito...” (Monolingual)

V S

(One of the problems is that falls the fish.)

**6. Unaccusativity, hierarchies and grammaticalization**

Sorace (2000) proposes a gradient, universal continuum where some verbs are more unaccusative or more unergative, placing the most “prototypical” unaccusatives and unergatives at either extreme. Sorace’s hierarchy makes use of the semantic concepts of telicity and agentivity in establishing distinctions between verbs ranked in the hierarchy.

The Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy (ASH) was originally employed in a comparative analysis of verb behavior in perfective auxiliary selection in Italian: verbs that fell at the unaccusative end were shown to select the “to be” (*essere*) auxiliary, whereas those at the unergative extreme showed a preference for the “to have” (*avere*) auxiliary. Sorace’s analysis showed that “prototypical” verbs manifest little to no variation in auxiliary selection, while those verbs falling into categories in the middle range of the hierarchy demonstrate variable behavior.

The Auxiliary Selection Hierarchy (ASH)

MOST UNACCUSATIVE (Least Variation, selects “essere”)

Change of location

Change of state

Continuation of a pre-existing state

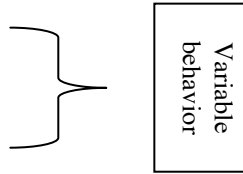
Existence of state

Uncontrolled process

Controlled process (motional)

Controlled process (non-motional)

MOST UNERGATIVE (Least Variation, selects “avere”)



In the current study, the same hierarchy has been applied in a comparative analysis of variable word order in order to determine two things: 1. if the same patterns of variation observed for perfective auxiliary selection hold for word order, and 2. if a difference in variable behavior can be mapped on to the hierarchy for different speaker populations.

The results of the cross-tab analyses presented in Table 5 clearly demonstrate that a hierarchy exists regarding word order and verb class. It is at the unergative end of the continuum where the least amount of variation is observed (high percentages of 87.9%, 94.1%). On the unaccusative end a clear preference for VS order emerges but with much more variation than is observed on the other extreme (it serves to note that “change of location” is also the category with the highest concentration of examples). In the case of unaccusatives, there’s more variation due to the fact that word order for this class is sensitive to the nature of the information: old vs. new. However, unergatives prefer roughly the same order regardless of the informational status. (See Tables 2 and 3)

The percentages for “continuation of a pre-existing state” draw special attention, as this category would appear to mark the invisible line in the sand where order along the hierarchy shifts.

Table 5. Hierarchy and order

	SV	VS
Anticausative	5/24 20.8%	19/24 79.2%
Change of location	121/334 36.2%	213/334 63.8%
Change of state	19/42 45.2%	23/42 54.8%
Continuation of pre-existing state	28/42 66.7%	14/42 33.3%
Existence of state	12/20 60%	8/20 40%
Uncontrolled process	7 100%	0 0%
Controlled process (Motional)	29/33 87.9%	4/33 12/1%
Controlled process (Nonmotional)	16/17 94.1%	1/17 5.9%

P<.001

The results shown below in Table 6 point to the conclusion that there are observable differences among speaker populations with respect to the hierarchy. Both “change of location” and “change of state” verbs receive a more “core” treatment in the case of monolinguals, where bilingual examples in these two categories demonstrate a higher percentage of SV order (compare bilingual SV percentages for “location” (39.2%) and “state” (52.4%) with monolingual (30.8% and 38.1%, respectively).

After viewing these results, my principal observation is that, as the category with the largest concentration of examples for both speaker populations, the treatment of the “change of location” category as homogenous might not be entirely appropriate. Perhaps an internal hierarchy for this class



should be established in order to gain insight as to the nature of its variation. The argument underlying this proposal is that some “change of location” verbs demonstrate more core unaccusative behavior (higher frequency of VS order) than others (for example, *llegar* vs. *ir*).

Table 6. Hierarchy: bilingual vs. monolingual

	Anti-causative	Change of location	Change of State	Continuation of pre-existing	Existence of state	Un-controlled process	Controlled process (motional)	Controlled process (non-motional)
Bilingual SV	2/13 15.4%	85/217 39.2%	11/21 52.4%	17/27 63%	5/12 41.7%	4 100%	22/24 91.7%	8/9 88.9%
Bilingual VS	11/13 84.6%	132/217 60.8%	10/21 47.6%	10/17 37%	7/12 58.3%	0	2/24 8.3%	1/9 11.1%
Monolingual SV	3/11 27.3%	36/117 30.8%	8/21 38.1%	11/15 73.3%	7/8 87.5%	3 100%	7/9 77.8%	8 100%
Monolingual VS	8/11 72.7%	81/117 69.2%	13/21 61.9%	4/15 26.7%	1/8 12.5%	0	2/9 22.2%	0

P<.001

The data presented below in Table 7 clearly show that the change of location class is not a homogenous one. This important observation has led to another conclusion: the “internal hierarchy” owes its ranking to the presentational nature of the verbs in question.

Those verbs that can be considered more presentational in nature are those that demonstrate more ‘core’ unaccusative behavior (for the purpose of the current analysis, ‘core’ refers to a higher frequency of VS order). By core presentational verbs, I am referring specifically to *llegar*, *venir*, *entrar*, *meterse*, *caer(se)* (limiting my observations to the present list). The idea (*a la Hatcher*) is that the change of location verbs with a higher frequency of VS order are those that serve to introduce the subject into the discourse for the first time.

Table 7. Change of Location Verbs by Order

Lexical Verb	SV	VS
Llegar	20/154 13%	134/154 87%
Venir	2/16 12.5%	14/16 87.5%
Caer(se)	5/24 20.8%	19/24 79.2%
Entrar	3/9 33.3%	6/9 66.7%
Regresar	9/17 52.9%	8/17 47.1%
Escaparse	10/15 66.7%	5/15 33.3%
Salir	22/33 66.7%	11/33 33.3%
Ir(se)	43/52 82.7%	9/52 17.3%
Total	118/325 36.3%	207/325 63.7%

P<.001

The most pertinent pieces of data for the present analysis are the ‘core presentational verbs’, as referred to in the description of Table 7. The hierarchy for each population shows a different ranking

for these verbs, where *llegar* receives the “most presentational” treatment by monolinguals (compare 98.2% for monolinguals with 80.8% for bilinguals). In general, these verbs are treated as systematically more presentational by monolinguals than by bilinguals, where in the case of bilinguals there is a higher percentage of SV order.

I suggest that bilinguals have lost sensitivity to the presentational nature of these verbs. In English, such verbs have the same order as any other verb, i.e. their presentational nature is not marked or distinguished from other verbs by its order. So as production of and exposure to these verbs in Spanish (in the case of bilinguals) is reduced or limited, then a subsequent eroding of sensitivity to this resource has occurred.

Table 8. Change of location verbs by Order by Language Proficiency<sup>1</sup>

BILINGUALS	SV	VS
Venir	2/15 13.3%	13/15 86.7%
Caer(se)	2/14 14.3%	12/14 85.7%
Llegar	19/99 19.2%	80/99 80.8%
Regresar	5/10 50%	5/10 50%
Escaparse	5/7 71.4%	2/7 28.6%
Salir	17/23 73.9%	6/23 26.1%
Ir(se)	31/37 83.8%	6/37 16.2%
Total	84/211 39.8%	127/211 60.2%

MONOLINGUALS	SV	VS
Llegar	1/55 1.8%	54/55 98.2%
Caer(se)	3/10 30%	7/10 70%
Salir	5/10 50%	5/10 50%
Regresar	4/7 57.1%	3/7 42.9%
Escaparse	5/8 62.5%	3/8 37.5%
Ir(se)	12/15 80%	3/15 20%
Total	34/114 29.8%	80/114 70.2%

## 7. Discussion and Conclusion

It is safe to conclude that we cannot simply point to any one contextual factor as explaining the word order variation; the data clearly signals that word order variation in the unaccusative verb class in the Spanish of bilinguals is due to the influence of multiple contextual factors. So it’s not about which single factor is responsible for the word order variation, but rather the weight or relative importance of the various factors that seem to play a determining role in variation.

It has been established that verb type and discourse factors condition word order distribution. We’ve seen that the most important internal linguistic factor in determining subject position with respect to the verb is the status of the information within the phrase: the subject appears preverbally when it is old information, and conversely occupies the postverbal position when it is new.

Bilinguals are singled out in the data as producing the highest frequency of SV overall. This suggests a kind of convergence, where speakers with both languages activated produce the structure common to both languages more frequently. This supports the original hypothesis that this word order phenomenon is a consequence of a social and functional interface: external force (in this case language contact) and internal factors (inherent word-order flexibility in Spanish).

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<sup>1</sup> Verbs with less than 5 examples are not reported in the final tables.

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