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Agent-first in contexts of competition

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Cross-linguistic pervasiveness and effects in L2 grammars

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1. Theoretical background

AGENT-FIRST

One of the principles yielding the utterance organization in the Basic Variety is the semantic constraint that *the NP-referent with highest control comes first*

CONTEXTS OF COMPETITION

Klein and Perdue (1997: 329) report the existence of **discourse contexts in which the protagonist in topic loses control** or where the NP-referent in topic is simply not the controller

2. Research questions

- Which constructions do native speakers of French and Spanish use in contexts of competition? Are patient-first more frequently produced?
- Do cross-linguistic differences exist concerning the argument realization of the NP-referent losing control?
- Do instructed-, post-basic learners produce patient-first constructions at a similar frequency to that of native speakers?
- What grammatical means use learners to solve contexts of competition?

3. Participants

20 Spanish-speaking learners of French

21 native French speakers + 21 native Spanish speakers

B1/B2	#1	#2	#4	#5	#7	#8	#12	#15	#16	#19	#20	#21
Age	21	27	20	21	20	20	35	30	42	25	27	23
Age of onset	10	15	10	12	11	2	34	29	40	24	26	22
Input FR as a child	∃	∅	∅	∅	∅	∃	∅	∅	∅	∅	∅	∅
Proficiency*	B2	B1	B1	B1	B1	B1	B1	B1	B1	B1	B1	B1

A1/A2	#3	#6	#9	#10	#11	#13	#17	#18
Age	22	22	28	34	20	34	29	27
Age of onset	12	12	14	33	19	33	28	26
Input FR as a child	∅	∅	∅	∅	∅	∅	∅	∅
Proficiency*	A2	A2	A2	A1	A1	A2	A2	A2

*Scores obtained from Dialang placement test targeting the vocabulary (Lancaster University)

- Participants whose AoO took place 1-2 years prior to the data collection
- Participants having benefited from instructed learning from puberty
- Participants having benefited from input in French from childhood

4. Corpus and methods

Free available corpus (LLING 2023)

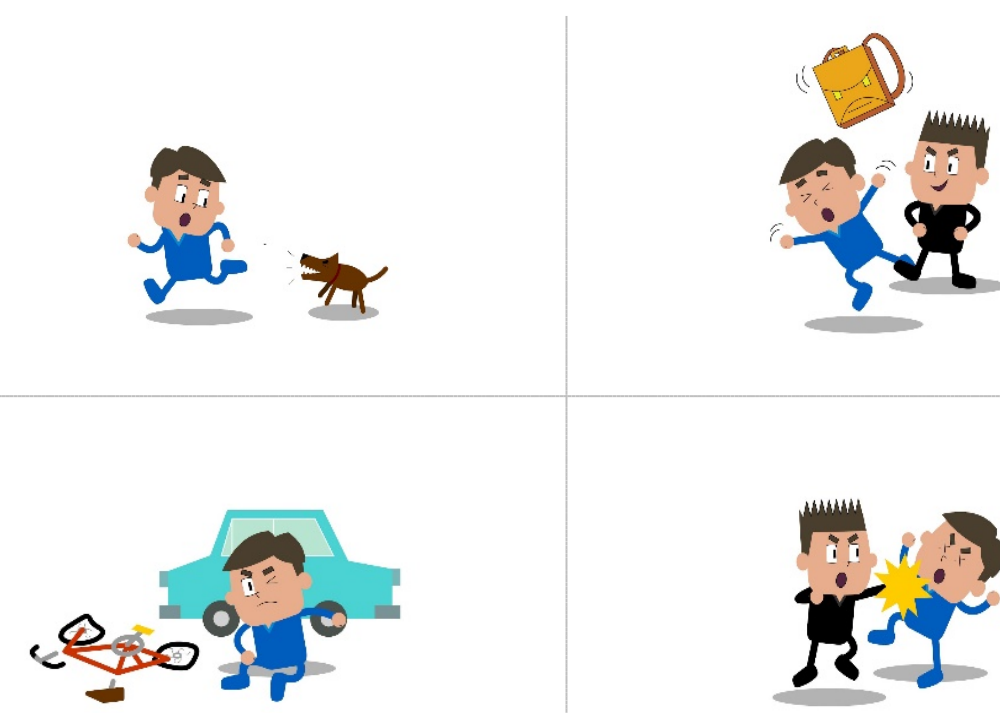
Offline retelling task

Instruction: *Vous allez voir une série de vignettes dont le personnage principal est un bonhomme habillé en bleu. Voici Alex. Racontez ses dernières aventures !*



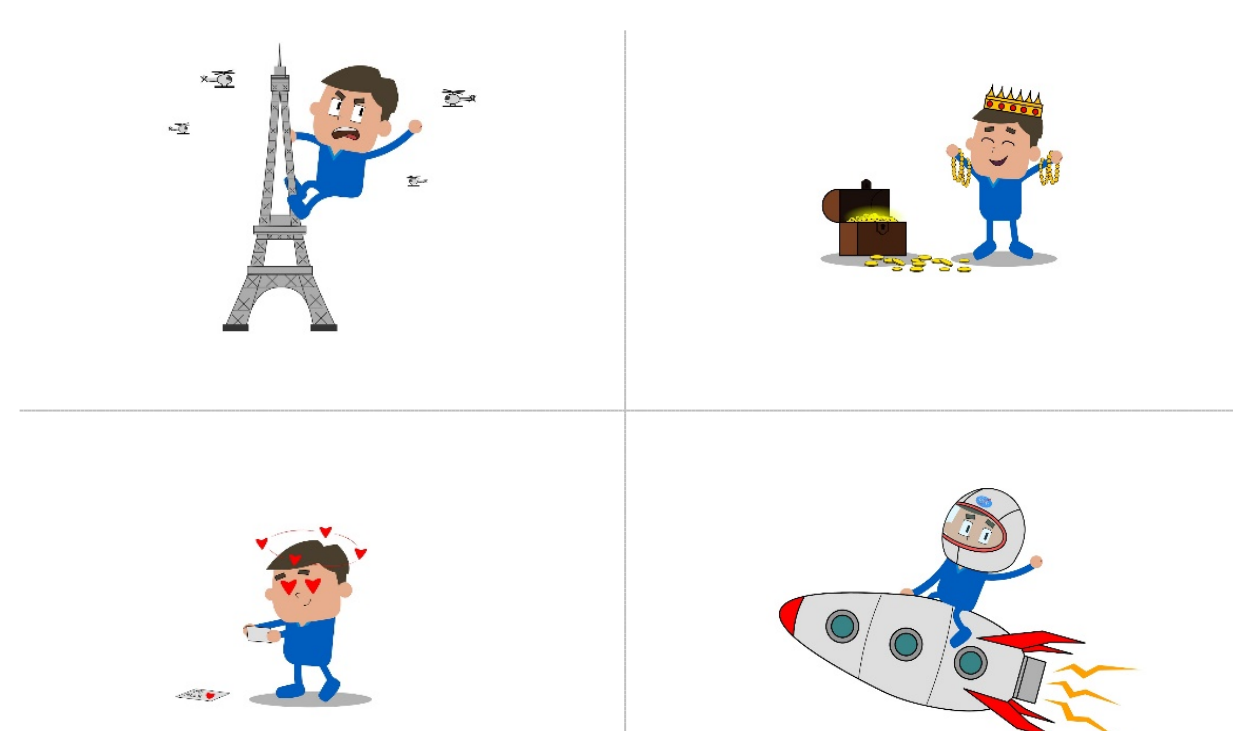
TARGET ITEMS

The NP-referent in topic loses control



FILLERS

The NP-referent in topic performs, effects, instigates, or controls the situation



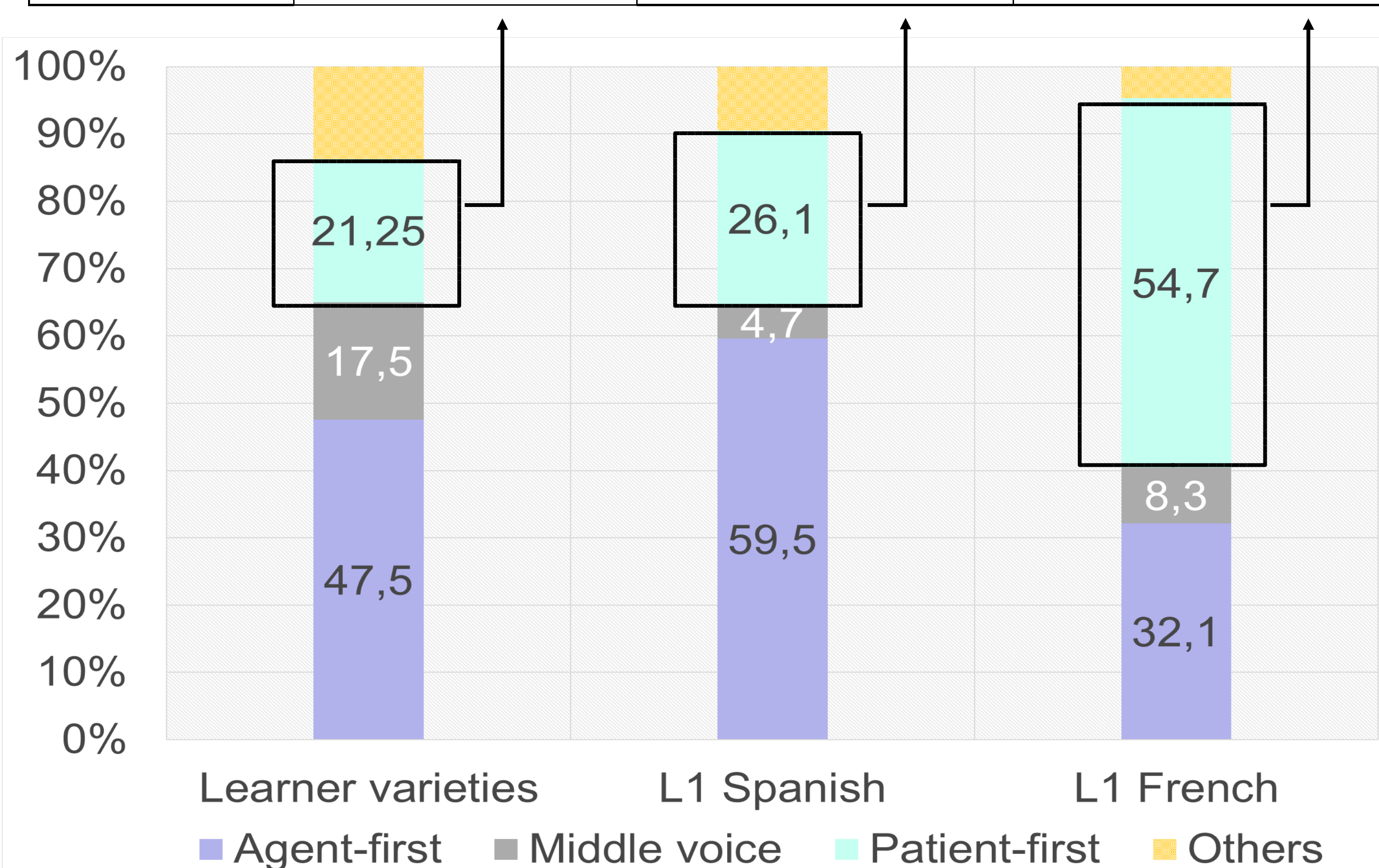
- ✓ 80 responses in L2 French
- ✓ 84 responses in L1 French + 84 responses in L1 Spanish

8. Conclusions

- French native speakers overuse patient-first constructions, whereas Spanish-speaking natives overuse agent-first constructions.
- They do. The NP-referent that loses control is syntactically realized as subject in FR within SVO sentences, and as direct object in SP either within SVO and OV(S) sentences. This results in the patterns below:
 - ✓ FR <= Patient-first\subject (54.7%)
 - ✓ SP <= Agent-first\subject (33.3%) or Patient-first\object (17.8%)
- They do not. Agent-first constructions are more frequently produced in contexts of competition than patient-first (as in L1 SP). Besides, middle voice constructions are more frequently produced than in L1 FR and SP.
- They use either dynamic SVO predicates as in (1), passives with *être* as in (4), and causative periphrasis *faire* + infinitive as in (2).

7. Results

Constructions topicalizing the NP-referent that loses control			
Example	<i>Il a été frappé</i>	<i>A él lo golpearon</i>	<i>Il s'est fait agresser</i>
NP realized as	Subject	Direct objet	Subject
Word order	SV(O)	OV(S)	SV(O)
Frequency	16.2% in L2	17.8% in SP	40.4% in FR



6. How responses were classified

Agent-first constructions. SVO constructions marked by dynamic predicates (1), causative periphrases *faire* + infinitive / *faire que* + subjunctive (2), *se-* reciprocal verbs expressing a control asymmetry (3).

- L'homme habillé en noir a frappé Alex*
- Quelqu'un a fait que euh Alex tombe par terre*
- Alex se battre avec ah un homme*

Patient-first constructions. Passive constructions with the auxiliary *être* (4), passive periphrasis *se faire* + infinitive (5), lexical collocations *verb* + *noun* (6) / *copular verb* + *noun* (7).

- Alex est frappé pour autre garçon*
- Il se fait taper par le méchant*
- Il s'est pris une voiture / (7) Alex est encore victime de violence*

Sort of **middle voice constructions** either expressing internal causation (8) or introducing the NP-referent in topic as an experiencer (9)

- Alex a peur de le chien*
- Il a eu un accident avec un voiture*

5. Data extraction

- Predicates encoding a change in an event participant
- In which the two hierarchical argument slots depending on transitive verbs are fulfilled (i.e., lower- and higher argument)
- If several utterances fulfill these criteria, only the first one is considered

« *Alex se fait encore harceler par son, par un de ses camarades qui le tape violemment et il est presque, il va presque tomber par terre* »

References

KLEIN, Wolfgang & Clive PERDUE. 1997. The Basic Variety. Or: Couldn't natural language be much simpler? *Second Language Research* 13, 301-347.
 Laboratoire de linguistique de Nantes (LLING) (2023). *Les aventures d'Alex* [Corpus]. ORTOLANG (Open Resources and TOols for LANGUAGE) - www.ortolang.fr, v2, <https://hdl.handle.net/11403/les-aventures-dalex/v2>.