

English Theticity and Focus Expression in Spanish Heritage Speakers

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Abstract : English uses in-situ Nuclear Stress (NS) to express the meanings of theticity and focus. The NS is phonetically represented by an increase in duration, intensity, and pitch range. On the other hand, Spanish conveys the same meanings by aligning the constituent that carries the NS to the end of the sentence via word-order movement. However, little is known about heritage speakers' production of theticity and focus in English or Spanish. The present study investigates heritage speakers' production of thetic and subject focus statements. Participants (n = 11) were heritage speakers of Spanish with varying proficiency enrolled in a writing course at a university in the United States. In the production task, participants observed contextualized images and uttered a sentence to answer a provided question. Duration, intensity, and F0 peak were the correlates to stress considered in this investigation. Results indicated that participants tended to present an intonation closer to what is expected in English monolinguals in subject-focus statements than in thetic sentences. However, participants with lower Spanish proficiency used in-situ NS placement in thetic statements more often than those with higher proficiency. Results are discussed in terms of the production patterns observed in heritage speakers with emphasis on the role of language dominance.

Keywords : focus, heritage speakers, prosody, theticity

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