A Verb Raising Analysis of Interrogatives: The
Preverbal Subject Constraint in Spanish

A major observation in the literature on Spanish interrogatives is that preverbal lexical subjects in
interrogatives cannot cooccur with certain types of wh-. Two prevalent analyses in the field have
been proposed by Torrego (1984) and by Suñer (1994). Accordingly, they consider the phenomenon
to be related to an argument/adjunct distinction. If an argumental wh-word is fronted, the subject
must be postverbal (1)a, but this effect does not occur if the wh-word corresponds to an adjunct -(1)b.
Crucially, these analyses claim that the inflected verb never reaches left peripheral nodes and that the
lexical subject occupies a position within the TP layer or within the VP layer.

This paper proposes that subject-verb inversion in interrogative clauses in Spanish is in no
way related to the argument/adjunct distinction. Instead, I argue that the inversion effects and their
absence follow from the licensing requirements of FinP, which is a phase. Subject-verb inversion is
analyzed as involving verb-raising to the left periphery with the subject staying in [Spec, TP] and the
wh-word targeting the [Spec, FinP]. When subject-verb inversion does not happen, it is because the
lexical subject in [Spec, TP] has been attracted by dislocation to the lower portion of left periphery,
again, to the [Spec, FinP].

Consider first the cases where subject inversion is obligatory. The asymmetry
argument/adjunct related to inversion vanishes if the displaced constituent is inherently nonspecific
or can hardly be taken as specific. This is illustrated by wh-adjuncts which force inversion -(2)a and
(2)b and by aggressively non D-linked wh-words -(2)c-(2)d. This obligatory inversion pattern is
consistent with focus fronting which requires strict adjacency between the fronted DP and the verb -
(3). Even more revealing cases are found when wh-fronting of an argument is expected to trigger
inversion but this does not occur. Thus, preverbal lexical subjects can cooccur if the wh- is specific or
D-linked -(4)a-(4)b, and interestingly, if an assertion marker is present (Inclán Nichol 1997) -(4)c.

The data discussed in this paper challenges the existence of a lower TopP position between
FocP and FinP in Rizzi (1997). If focus fronting of a DP and wh-fronting with obligatory inversion are
analyzed as movement to the [Spec, FocP], the same explanation fails to account for the patterns
of absence of inversion. This is because the crucial property in non-inversion cases is the obligatory
specificity of both the wh-word and the lexical subject. Thus, although multiple dislocations are
possible (5)a, Rizzi’s system predicts no contrast with non-inversion environments, which is not the
case -cfr. (4)c with (5)b.

This puzzle can be solved if FinP is taken as a phase as in López (2009), which I assume to
encode 0-features and edge features. Movement can be triggered by Agree (Chomsky 2001) but also
movement can be caused by the uninterpretable features of the goal (Bošković 2007). At the point
where the Fin 0 phase is constructed, the lexical subject in [Spec, TP] as well as any CLLD
constituent or wh- in [Spec, vP] (i.e. the edge of the previous phase) are active and contain
uninterpretable features. This triggers massive displacement to the [Spec, FinP]. Obligatory inversion
as observed in (1)a and (2) and in focus fronting constructions -(3) obtains after the wh-word moves
to the [Spec, FinP] and the verb moves to Fin 0 to check the uninterpretable 0-features, licensing
indirectly the lexical subject in [Spec, TP] (see (6)a). When subject-verb inversion apparently fails to
occur, however, it is the lexical subject which moves to [Spec, FinP] to delete Fin’s 0-features and
receive Case (see (6)b). The specificity effect of (5)b is derived precisely as a consequence of this
mechanism: non D-linked/nonspecific require Agree to be attracted, but this operation is not active
anymore if the lexical subject has been already attracted. In contrast, D-linked and specific wh-
phrases when not triggering subject-inversion are not moved to the left periphery by Agree but they
just make an intermediate stop at the edge of the Fin phase before finally checking their
uninterpretable edge feature in the higher [Spec, TopP].