

The impact of language contact on focus realization in Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish

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Abstract

This study investigates focus-induced word-order variation in two groups of informants from Bulgaria: bilingual speakers of Bulgarian (BG) and the critically endangered minority language Judeo-Spanish (BJS), and monolingual speakers of BG. Based on semi-spontaneous data collected as part of an elicited production task, it is shown that the two languages largely pattern together in preferring the signalling of focus *in situ* via prosodic means, although syntactic strategies such as *p*-movement,

focus fronting, and dislocations are used to a minor extent. Clefting only occurs in the BJS data. Furthermore, the syntax of BJS shows linear orderings of constituents that are ungrammatical in Mainstream Spanish and strongly point to cross-linguistic influence from BG. The study thus presents further evidence for the instability of interface phenomena such as the realization of information structure in language contact and hence supports the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace 2011, Chamorro & Sorace 2019).

Keywords: language contact, cross-linguistic influence, information structure, interfaces, Judeo-Spanish.

1. Introduction

Judeo-Spanish, also known as Ladino or Judezmo, refers to the language spoken by the Sephardic Jews after their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 as a consequence of the completion of the Christian reconquest movement (Sp. *reconquista*). The Sephardim settled primarily in the former Ottoman Empire, where their language developed independently of other Spanish varieties and in close contact with various local languages, including Greek, Turkish, and Bulgarian (see, e.g., Minervini 2023).

In Bulgaria, there were approximately 50,000 Jews by the beginning of the Second World War. However, after the war, most of the Jewish population in Bulgaria, who had largely been spared from deportation to the extermination camps (Hoppe 2009), left for Israel. Fewer than 2,500 Sephardic Jews still live in Bulgaria today, and it is estimated that no more than 25 of them can be considered native speakers of Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish (BJS).¹ All remaining speakers are at least bilingual and clearly dominant in Bulgarian (BG). Most of them qualify as semi-speakers or terminal speakers in the sense of Grinevald & Bert (2012). Typically, they indicated that the default language of their discourse with their parents had already been BG and that they had acquired BJS from their grandparents or other relatives, or by overhearing it when their parents used it between themselves. Most therefore had never experienced a shift in language dominance and many had stopped speaking Judeo-Spanish when the relatives they had used it with passed away. However, besides this time lapse of several decades in which they hardly used the language, there had been some revitalization of the language in Sofia in the early 2000s through regular meetings of the community in the so-called *Klub ladino*, brought to halt by the COVID pandemic. BJS is thus a critically endangered linguistic variety, one that is on the verge of extinction.

The language is known to show both many archaic structures resembling Old Spanish and many contact-induced innovations (Fischer & Vega Vilanova 2018, Gabriel & Grünke 2022, Fischer 2024). Especially in the phonetic and phonological domains, strong convergence towards Bulgarian has been observed in recent studies,

¹ In the Bulgarian census of 2021, only 194 people named еврейски *evrejski* ‘Jewish’ as their first language, with no distinction being made between different “Jewish” languages such as modern Hebrew, Yiddish, and Judeo-Spanish (request to the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute, April 2024).

e.g., regarding unstressed vowel reduction and intonation (Andreeva 2019, 2021, Grünke et al. 2023a, 2023b). While this is in line with the more general observation that phonetics and phonology, and especially prosody, are particularly vulnerable and prone to be affected in situations of intense language contact (see, e.g., Matras 2009: 232–233), less is known so far about the stability or instability of BJS morphosyntax. According to Fischer et al. (2014, 2024) and Fischer & Vega Vilanova (2018), word order, clitic placement, and clitic climbing seem to be overall fairly stable and show only little influence from BG, i.e., developments in these areas rather tend to follow natural patterns of internal language change. However, the variation found with regard to possessive structures, adjective placement, and frontings of non-focused XPs (see Gabriel & Grünke 2022; Fischer et al. 2024) is rather reminiscent of BG patterns, suggesting at least some extent of cross-linguistic influence (CLI). As proposed by Sorace’s Interface Hypothesis (IH; see Section 2.2), a key factor for CLI and instability in the morphosyntactic domain seems to be the involvement of external interfaces such as those of core-grammatical modules with information structure or pragmatics.

To further test if the CLI observed in BJS can be accounted for by referring to the IH, the present contribution addresses one of the most typical interface phenomena, i.e. focus realization. More particularly, to uncover possible instances of CLI, and hence the impact of (intense) language contact in this linguistic area, we investigate focus-induced word-order variation in two groups of informants from Bulgaria: bilingual speakers of Bulgarian (BG) and Judeo-Spanish (BJS), and monolingual speakers of BG. The study thus not only completes the picture of BJS morphosyntax at the interface with prosody and contributes to our knowledge of CLI and language contact, but crucially also adds new empirical perspectives on focus-marking strategies and preferences in the contact language Bulgarian. Furthermore, comparisons with different Mainstream Spanish (MS)² varieties will help analyse the type and degree of CLI and determine if the data conforms with the IH. Concretely, our research questions (RQ) are the following:

- RQ1 Which syntactic and prosodic means are used to mark focus in monolingual and bilingual BG?
- RQ2 How is focus realized in BJS and how does this variety compare to MS and BG?

Since the expression of information structure, as an interface phenomenon (cf. Sorace 2011, White 2011), is vulnerable in language-contact settings, some impact can be expected in this domain. Taking into consideration that most BJS speakers can no

² In accordance with Hualde & Şaul (2011) and Bradley & Adams (2018), we use the term Mainstream Spanish as a generic term to refer to contemporary Peninsular and American non-contact varieties of Spanish taken together in opposition to Judeo-Spanish. Although Old Spanish might seem a more obvious comparison, it is hardly suitable for our purposes. Too little is known so far about information packaging in Old Ibero-Romance (cf. Section 2.1, though), and prosody is crucial for analysing focus marking, especially contrastivity. Moreover, most available studies focus on earlier stages (12th–13th c.), whereas for our aims, data from Early Modern Spanish from the end of the 15th c. would be relevant. In any case, comparisons with Modern Spanish are frequently used as a point of departure for discussing historical developments in studies of Old Spanish (e.g., Sitaridou 2011, Eide & Sitaridou 2014).

longer be considered balanced bilinguals, but rather resemble heritage speakers, it is possible that they might not have correctly acquired focus realization in BJS or that relevant features have been eroded by the constant use of the contact language BG over various decades, resulting in some degree of indeterminacy at the syntax-discourse interface. At least two scenarios are thus conceivable. First, they could transfer the BG patterns of focus realization to BJS, i.e. BJS would prefer the same focus-marking strategies or there should be some clear instances of CLI from BG (as observed in many other domains, see above). Second, it is conceivable that, in the light of processing overload, BJS speakers resort to a default strategy to compensate for poorly automatized syntactic knowledge (cf. Sorace & Filiaci 2006). More particularly, it can be expected that they could opt for the most economical, i.e. unmarked structure and overextend its use. In terms of Roberts & Roussou (2003), this would be a structure without syntactic movement (i.e. Merge over Move), which means that focus would be realized *in situ* and marked post-syntactically through intonation. However, it is worth pointing out that the latter option occurs not only in language-contact settings but is also characteristic of natural language change in monolingual communities. Our hypotheses are thus the following:

- H1 BJS patterns with BG regarding the expression of focus.
H2 BJS shows a preference for focus marking *in situ*.

The paper is structured as follows: in Section 2.1, we provide some background on information structure and address the expression of focus in the contact language BG and in MS. Section 2.2 is devoted to language contact and cross-linguistic influence. In Section 3.1, we describe the data and methodology of our study and in Section 3.2, we present the study's results. Section 3.3 offers a discussion of the outcomes and their theoretical implications, and Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. Background

2.1. Focus marking in Bulgarian and Mainstream Spanish

Apart from the well-known dichotomies of theme–rheme and topic–comment (see, e.g., Casielles-Suárez 2004, Krifka 2008, López 2009, Dufter & Gabriel 2016), much of the literature uses the so-called focus-background articulation to capture the information-structural aspect of an utterance. According to this perspective, the background (or presupposition), which refers to the shared assumptions between the speaker and hearer, contrasts with the focus, which is the collection of non-presupposed information and “indicates the presence of alternatives that are relevant for the interpretation” of a linguistic expression (Krifka 2008: 247; see also von Stechow 1991; for an overview of different subtypes of focus see Krifka 2008: 247–261).

It is well known that languages differ with respect to the linguistic means they use to signal focus. While morphological focus marking, as, e.g., in Wolof (Rialland & Robert 2001, Bourdeau 2024), is rather rare among the languages of the world (at least in declaratives), most languages mark focal prominence primarily through prosodic and syntactic means. This is also the case of BG, where – like in MS – “both

prosody, i.e. manipulating intonational structure (intonation contour), and word order, i.e. reordering of sentential constituents, are relevant means of realisation of information packaging” (Avgustinova 1997: 111). More specifically, “one and the same string may be assigned different intonational phrasings in order to realise different informational interpretations” (see 1a and b). At the same time, constituent orderings that diverge from the canonical SVO sequence³ may be used, as word order is relatively free in BG and MS (see Siewierska and Uhlířová 1998, Datcheva 2004, Leafgren 2010, Tisheva 2013, Makartsev 2020 for BG; see Olarrea 2012, Gupton 2018, Dufter & Gabriel 2016: 425–434 for MS).

- (1) Bulgarian (Avgustinova 1997: 112)
- a. Context: What about Andrej? What did he eat?
 Андрей изяде [F БОба].
 Andrej izjade boba.
 ‘Andrej ate THE BEANS.’
- b. Context: I know who cooked the beans. But then, who ate them?
 [F АНдрей] изяде боба.
 Andrej izjade boba.
 ‘ANDREJ ate the beans.’

However, beside the general tendency of the theme to precede the rheme, relatively little is known so far about the preferred strategies for focus expression in BG. Following Penchev (1980), the ordering of theme and rheme can be reversed in modal-emotional sentences, particularly in heavily contrastive sentences (see also Dyer 1992: 17). Similarly, Yovkova-Shii (2022: 198–190) contends, regarding subjects, that those representing informational focus are more frequently placed in postverbal positions, whereas those under contrastive focus appear in the left periphery (see also Arnaudova 2003, Tisheva 2013 and, for a general Slavic perspective, Junghans & Zybatow 2009 and Jasinskaja 2016).

The situation seems to be roughly identical to the one of MS, for which many syntactically oriented studies have suggested a clear distinction between narrow informational or presentational focus, on the one hand, and contrastive or corrective focus, on the other (Zubizarreta 1998, 1999; see also Olarrea 2012). While informational focus must obligatorily be realized in clause-final position, i.e., if necessary, through syntactic movement operations (so-called prosodic or *p*-movement of the non-focused material to a non-final position, as in 2), *in situ* marking of the focus constituent, i.e. in its canonical position, is only available with contrastive focus (3a). Alternatively, contrastive focus may be conveyed through other constructions, such as cleft sentences (3b) or focus fronting (i.e. the movement of the focused constituent to a verb-adjacent position and subject–verb inversion; 4).⁴ Dislocations,

³ SVO is to be understood as referring to the canonical order of subject, verb, direct object (dO), indirect object (iO), and adjoined prepositional phrases (PP).

⁴ Note that in Old Spanish object fronting (with obligatory subject-verb inversion) was possible not only with contrastive focus on the object but crucially also with information focus (see Sitaridou 2011, Eide & Sitaridou 2014, Batllori & Sitaridou 2020). Otherwise, the existing literature suggests that focus-marking strategies were similar to MS, especially with contrastive focus. However, a further difference seems to be a stronger association of preverbal

i.e. placement of non-focal material outside the core sentence (which often contains a resumptive element), represent a further strategy that can enable clause-final placement of a focus constituent (5). Note also that dislocations may also be combined with other strategies.⁵

- (2) Context: Who bought the newspaper?
Compró el periódico [_F MaRÍA].
'MARY bought the newspaper'
- (3) Context: Pedro bought the newspaper, right?
a. No. [_{CF} MaRÍA] compró el periódico.
'No. MARY bought the newspaper.'
b. No. Es [_{CF} MaRÍA] quien compró el periódico.
'No. It's María who bought the newspaper.'
- (4) Context: María bought the newspaper, right?
No. [_{CF} El peRIÓdico] compró María.
'No. María bought THE NEWSPAPER.'
- (5) Context: What did María buy at the kiosk?
En el quiosco, María compró [_F el peRIÓdico].
'María bought THE NEWSPAPER at the kiosk.'

However, recent empirical studies focusing on prosody have shown that the nuclear stress tends to be the strongest reflex of focus in many Spanish varieties and that this distinction is not clear-cut in all dialects.⁶ For example, Gabriel (2010) showed that speakers from Buenos Aires and Neuquén (Argentina) realized neutrally focused subjects *in situ* (i.e. [_F S]VO) in 75% to 95% of the cases. Only a very small number of utterances showed word order variation due to *p*-movement (< 5% in Gabriel 2010, mainly with clitic objects). Similarly, Muntendam (2009) demonstrated that Andean Spanish speakers fully accept [_F S]VO order with neutrally focused subjects.

For Central Peninsular Spanish, however, the abovementioned distinction seems to be borne out at least partially: as shown by Feldhausen & Vanrell (2014, 2015) on the basis of semi-spontaneous data from Madrid (see Table 1), clefts are a popular strategy across conditions in this variety, but otherwise, *p*-movement occurs primarily with subjects and objects under information focus, whereas frontings are an alternative strategy for contrastive focusing. Crucially, *in situ* marking was used

subjects with topicality, yielding relatively more post-verbal subjects with a contrastive focus reading (i.e. *p*-movement).

⁵ Here and in the following examples, we use subscripted [_F ...] to indicate the focus domain. The subscripted index [_{CF} ...] stands for contrastive focus.

⁶ See Gabriel (2010) and Gabriel & Heidinger (2025) for Argentinean Spanish, Muntendam (2013) for Andean Spanish, Hoot (2017) and Uth (2014, 2018) for Mexican Spanish, and Face (2001, 2002), Cabrera Abreu & García Lecumberri (2003), Heidinger (2013), Vanrell & Fernández Soriano (2013), Feldhausen & Vanrell (2014) for Peninsular Spanish, among others.

merely with indirect objects and adjuncts in their study, i.e. with constituents that are canonically phrase-final.

Table 1. Frequency of different syntactic strategies for marking informational and contrastive focus in Madrid Spanish (following Feldhausen & Vanrell 2014: 123).

in %		informational	contrastive
subject	cleft	71	61
	<i>p</i> -movement fronting	15	15
direct object	cleft	23	62
	<i>p</i> -movement fronting	48	16 24
indirect object/ adjunct	cleft	21	41
	<i>p</i> -movement fronting		24
	neutral (<i>in situ</i>)	44	14

For Judeo-Spanish, virtually nothing is known so far about the interaction of information structure and word order besides that it often uses topicalization (García Moreno 2023) and presents unmarked use of preverbal non-subject constituents, i.e. the fronting of verbal complements, predicates, and adjuncts (Gabriel & Grünke 2022, see also Fischer et al. 2014).

What seems to be essential in all these varieties is that the focused constituent needs to bear sentential or nuclear stress, i.e. the highlighted portion always receives prominence in the utterance (Focus Prominence Rule, Jackendoff 1972; see also Gabriel & Heidinger 2022 for Spanish), typically with focus-induced changes in F0 and intensity (Cooper et al. 1985), whereas background constituents may be deaccented, especially if they are in a post-focal position (for BG see also Andreeva & Dimitrova 2021).

2.2. Cross-linguistic influence and information structure in language contact

What can be adopted by one language from another? Thomason (2001: 63), very succinctly, contends: “The short answer is, anything”. However, it has long been known that some elements are more likely to be borrowed than others and many so-called borrowing scales have been proposed as discussed by Appel & Muysken (1989), Thomason & Kaufman (1988), Thomason (2001), Kühl & Braunmüller (2014), and Matras (2009). Typically, it is assumed that borrowing begins at the lexical level, i.e. with words and their meanings (Thomason & Kaufmann 1988, Odlin 1989, Van Coetsem 2000). Borrowing of patterns or structures, on the other hand, is less common and tends to occur only under specific conditions such as bilingualism of the borrowers (Hickey 2013, Weinreich 1953) and structural equivalence relations between the donor and the receiving language (Weinreich 1953, Heine & Kuteva 2003). Less change is therefore expected in the realm of morphosyntax than in the lexicon. When it comes to phonology, however, the question arises of whether sounds should be better considered as matter (like words or morphemes) or as structures. According to Odlin (1989) and many others, segments have no meaning and prosodic units carry at best a

pragmatic meaning, which distinguishes them from morphemes. Generally, new sounds can easily be adopted through loan words, and especially prosody is considered highly volatile, ranking high on the borrowing scales that include it (Matras 2009).

Regarding complex phenomena, where different linguistic domains are involved, research on heritage speakers, foreign-language learners, and other contact varieties indicates significant CLI, primarily in the realization of information structure (Domínguez 2013, Muntendam 2013, Hoot 2017, Leal et al. 2018, Kim 2019). We are not aware of any studies involving Bulgarian or Judeo-Spanish, but the work done on Spanish in this area is quite substantial (see Gabriel & Grünke to appear for an overview). Most of the relevant studies address the focus-driven SV/VS alternation with unaccusative and unergative verbs in Spanish–English bilinguals. For example, Gupton (2017) shows that English L2 learners of Spanish are able to acquire this alternation in a native-like manner in some cases but often show optionality, accepting both SV and VS orders (see also Domínguez & Arche, 2014, Hertel 2003, Lozano 2006). This means that L2 learners often struggle to eliminate the less preferred, non-target option entirely if it doesn't result in ungrammaticality but rather in a pragmatic anomaly (Sorace 2000).

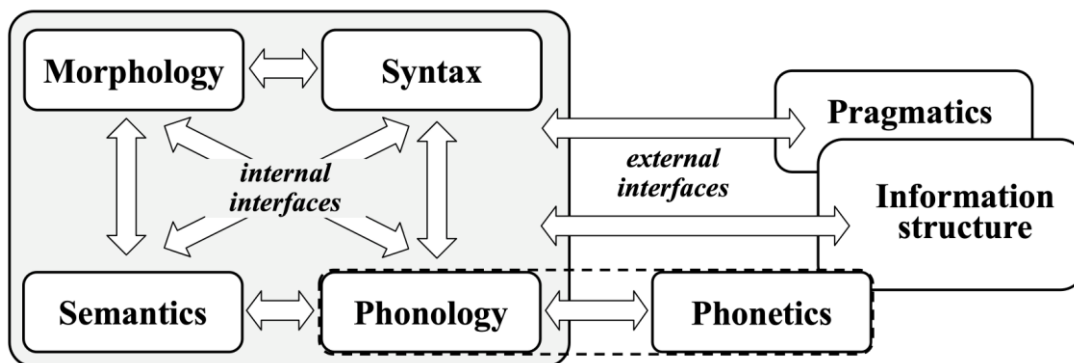
Such optionality was also observed in Spanish heritage speakers: for instance, Zapata et al. (2005) showed that intermediate-level heritage speakers of Spanish fail to reproduce the monolingual preference for VS in narrow-focus sentences and in broad-focus unaccusative constructions, which the author interprets as suggestive of convergence with English. In López Ortero (2022), too, *in situ* marking, i.e. [_F S]V, was more prevalent among English-dominant heritage speakers of Spanish than among Spanish-dominant bilinguals who also lived in the US. In a similar vein, Hoot (2017) found that although both Mexican Spanish monolinguals and heritage speakers preferred [_F S]VO order when the context required narrow subject focus, heritage speakers gave higher acceptance ratings to VO[_F S] constructions as compared to monolinguals. Kim (2019) observed differences in how various groups of Spanish speakers handle focus marking in sentences involving a clitic object: while Mexican monolinguals predominantly used syntactic strategies, English L2 learners of Spanish tended to rely more on prosodic strategies, similar to those used in English, and Spanish heritage speakers living in the US used a combination of both syntactic and prosodic strategies, relying on strategies from both languages. However, other studies like Leal et al. (2018), who worked on sentences including full objects and adjuncts, had not found any such clear-cut group differences between these speaker groups. Gupton (2017) compared Spanish heritage speakers with advanced L2 learners as well as with Spanish-English sequential adult bilinguals and Catalan-Spanish and Galician-Spanish bilinguals. The author showed that advanced learners are close to native-like in their judgements of different word-order variations with transitive predicates. Interestingly, the Catalan-Spanish bilinguals stood out in accepting both [_F S]V and V[_F S] to a similar extent, whereas the other participants preferred the latter ordering, which suggests differing competencies among native speakers with regard to optionality (for subjects in Catalan-contact Spanish see also De Prada Pérez 2010). The realization of narrow informational and contrastive focus by heritage speakers of Peninsular Spanish in Germany was addressed by Feldhausen & Vanrell (2024). The authors found that these speakers most frequently recur to stress shift for both focus types, whereas this is a less common option among Peninsular Spanish monolinguals (see Section 2.1). Gabriel & Grünke (2018), finally, studied focused subjects in

German L3 learners of Spanish and compared monolingual learners and multilinguals speaking Italian or European Portuguese as a heritage language along with the environmental language. In their data, all learner groups largely abstained from producing V_[F S] with transitive verbs irrespective of their language background. However, German-Italian learners accepted post-verbal [F S] in constructions with clitic objects, such as *Lo compra* [F *María*] in a slightly more target-like manner than the German monolinguals did, but they erroneously rejected VO_[F S] in some cases.

Regarding CLI in Spanish contact varieties, Muntendam (2009, 2013) showed that Andean Spanish uses preverbal objects more frequently and in more discourse contexts than non-Andean varieties, where there is a strong correlation between preverbal objects and focus (for similar results regarding Spanish in contact with Basque see Urrutia Cárdenas 1995, Gómez Seibane 2012, Irurtzun 2019).

All these studies show that information structure is vulnerable to CLI in language contact, be it in foreign-language learners, heritage speakers, or contact varieties spoken by bilinguals. A theoretical approach that tries to account for CLI with regard to such complex phenomena and which has gained popularity in recent years but has also been controversially discussed is the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace & Filiaci 2006, Sorace 2011, Chamorro & Sorace 2019). It suggests that structures involving an interface between grammatical domains, such as syntax, and other contextually driven cognitive domains, such as pragmatics and information structure (external interfaces), are more challenging to acquire and more susceptible to CLI in language contact (see Figure 1) than internal interfaces.

Figure 1. External and internal interfaces.



In addition to theories referring to CLI in situations of language contact, general theories on natural language change should also be considered when analysing contact settings. Since all generative theories associate language change with language acquisition, i.e. they claim that syntactic change occurs in the transition of grammars from one generation to the next, one should not ignore this line of argumentation. A further advantage is that these theories not only seek to predict in what domain a change might take place or what domain is vulnerable to CLI (like the IH), but also seek to explain what can be expected in the transition from one generation to the next (e.g. Roberts & Roussou 2003, Vega Vilanova & Figura to appear). Generative theories on language change all include some kind of economical principle within their approach, e.g. Lightfoot's (1981) 'transparency principle', Kroch's (2002) 'syntactic diglossia', Van Gelderen's (2004) 'head-preference principle', and Roberts & Roussou's (2003) 'Merge over Move', just to mention a few.

Applied to focus marking, Roberts & Roussou's (2003) approach would predict that speakers should choose a less marked structure, i.e. one without movement, if the evidence is not clear-cut. This occurs as soon as a feature is not unambiguously expressed. In the case of focus marking, languages present a wide array of resources to express focus. The IH just predicts residual optionality⁷ in bilinguals for interface phenomena. Considering the perspective on natural language change, e.g. as adopted by Roberts & Roussou (2003), we can expect a preference for simpler structures – if the language-acquiring child has a choice, he or she will choose the simpler structure, i.e. *in situ* focus.

3. Empirical study

As outlined in Section 1, the aim of the present study is to uncover possible instances of CLI in focus-induced word-order variation in BJS. In particular, the following hypotheses, repeated here for convenience, will be tested using data from an elicited production task:

- H1 Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish patterns with BG regarding the expression of focus.
- H2 Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish shows a preference for focus marking *in situ*.

In Section 3.1, we present our data, speakers and the methodological approach of the study. Section 3.2 is devoted to the presentation of the results, which will be discussed in Section 3.3.

3.1. Speakers, data, and analysis

The semi-spontaneous data used for the present study were elicited from 16 BJS–BG bilinguals and 20 BG monolinguals part of a larger data collection involving extensive narrative interviews and different further tasks.⁸ The bilinguals were recorded in both BJS and BG. Two of them, however, passed away before the recording in BG could be made. In addition, one of the speakers did not wish to be recorded in BG. The recordings took place in a quiet room in the participants' homes or in the Jewish community centres in Sofia, Plovdiv, or Burgas between November 2022 and September 2023. Instructions were given in the target language of the recording session (i.e. either BJS or BG), but at the beginning of the BJS recording sessions the interviewers or respondents occasionally resorted to BG when necessary to clarify the

⁷ Sorace's (1999: 666) term "residual optionality" describes a more restricted optionality: "In the typical L2 endstate characterized by optionality, optional variants are not in free variation: a steady state is reached in which the target option is strongly but not categorically preferred, and the non-target option surfaces in some circumstances".

⁸ The full data collection involved a total of 21 bilingual speakers of BJS and BG, i.e. all that could be located and probably the majority of those still alive at that time. However, five of them, who were in their nineties or above, were unable to complete the task analysed in this study due to their advanced age.

task procedure.⁹ Table 2 gives an overview of the participants. Most of them had spent the majority of their lives at the place of the recording (i.e. Sofia, Plovdiv, Burgas, Varna, Tutrakan, Ruse, and Lovech), but some were born in other places in Bulgaria (Kyustendil, Pazardzhik, Pozharevo). As mentioned above, all speakers are dominant in Bulgarian, and many have used BJS only sporadically for decades.¹⁰

Table 2. Speaker overview.

data set	speakers	gender	year of birth	Ages
BJS	16	7 f, 9 m	1923–1951	71–99
bilingual BG	13	4 f, 9 m	1929–1951	71–94
monolingual BG	20	11 f, 9 m	1925–1961	62–97

The method used for the study was an elicited production task along the lines of Gabriel (2010), which has been successfully applied in many previous studies (e.g. Destruel 2012; Gabriel & Grünke 2022). In a first step, speakers were presented with a short picture story on a sheet of paper or on a computer screen and they were told what happens in that story. The respective oral stimuli are given in (5) and (6).

- (5) BJS *Simona merka limones en el mercado.*
 BG *СИМОНА КУПУВА ЛИМОНИ НА ПАЗАРА.*
Simona kupuva limoni na pazara.
 ‘Simona buy lemons at the market.’
- (6) BJS *Despues los da a su madre.*
 BG *СЛЕД ТОВА ГИ ДАВА НА МАЙКА СИ.*
Sled tova gi dava na majka si.
 ‘Then she gives them to her mother.’

Subsequently, the participants were asked 21 questions about the picture story targeting different information-structural readings. Of these, the 12 questions that targeted informational and contrastive focus on the subject, direct object, indirect object or PP adjunct were considered for the present study (see Appendix). Two BJS example questions targeting different types of focus on the subject are provided in (7).

- (7) Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish
- a. *Ken merka limones en el mercado?*
 ‘Who buys lemons at the market?’
 - b. *Es Kalina la ke merka limones en el mercado, no?*
 ‘Kalina buys lemons at the market, right?’

⁹ The recording sessions in BG were conducted by native speaker of BG from Sofia, the sessions in BJS by a German and a Spanish-Catalan native speaker with a sufficient level of BJS proficiency.

¹⁰ The participants were provided with all necessary information to make an informed decision about participating in the recordings. They signed consent forms (in BG) and were remunerated for their participation.

Whereas in (7a) information focus is set on the subject, the subject focus is contrastive in (7b), since the participants had to correct the erroneous information suggested by the interviewer. They were told to avoid answers consisting of only one word, but to otherwise feel free regarding the phrasing of their answers. The answers could thus contain different linear orderings (e.g. Cl+V_[F S], [_{CF S}]VdOPP, or [_{CF S}]Cl+V as in (8a–c), respectively) and different construction types (e.g. cleft sentences as in (8d)).

- (8) Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish
- a. (No.) Los merka [_{F/CF SiMOna}].
 - b. [_{F/CF SiMOna}] merka limones en el mercado.
 - c. [_{F/CF SiMOna}] los merka.
 - d. Es [_{F/CF SiMOna}] la ke merka limones.

In a first step, all responses were checked for felicitousness in the respective context. Responses in which the target focus constituent and nuclear stress were not aligned were removed from the sample, leaving 556 items. The same holds for responses containing strong hesitations and single-word utterances without a verb ($n = 69$, 12%). The responses were then classified according to their syntactic structure and assigned to different focus-marking strategies. Clear prosodic boundaries (e.g. pauses or tonal movements such as continuation rises) were also noted where present. In the examples below, these prosodic breaks are indicated by commas.

3.2. Results

A wide range of different focus-marking strategies were used in the 487 responses that could be eventually retained in the analysis (BJS: 157, bilingual BG: 134, monolingual BG 206). Table 3 provides an overview. The percentages refer to the total numbers of items produced for each focus constituent (subject, direct object and indirect object or adjunct) per variety and focus type (neutral, contrastive). Total numbers of items are given in brackets.

Table 3. Use of different focus marking strategies in BJS, bilingual, and monolingual BG in % (rounded; total numbers in brackets).

focus constituent	strategy	BJS		bilingual BG		monolingual BG	
		neutral	contrastive	neutral	contrastive	neutral	contrastive
subject	<i>in situ</i> (non-final)	91 (21)	57 (13)	86 (19)	96 (22)	97 (29)	97 (37)
	<i>p</i> -movement	9 (2)		14 (3)	4 (1)	3 (1)	3 (1)
	cleft sentence		43 (10)				
direct object	final	39 (11)	50 (15)	8 (2)	19 (6)	8 (3)	17 (8)
	<i>in situ</i> (non-final)	29 (8)	40 (12)	54 (13)	71 (22)	54 (21)	61 (28)
	<i>p</i> -movement	29 (8)	10 (3)	29 (7)	10 (3)	21 (8)	13 (6)
	dislocation			4 (1)		10 (4)	7 (3)
	fronting	4 (1)		4 (1)		8 (3)	2 (1)
	cleft sentence						
indirect object or adjunct	final = <i>in situ</i>	93 (27)	92 (22)	85 (23)	85 (6)	80 (33)	100 (12)
	dislocation				14 (1)		
	fronting	7 (2)	8 (2)	15 (4)		20 (8)	
	cleft sentence						

As can be seen, focus marking *in situ* is possible in all conditions and is usually the preferred option across varieties. Some examples are provided in (9) and (10).

- (9) Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish
- a. [F SiMONa] merka limones en el mercado. (SP1_m_Sof)
'SIMONA buys lemons at the market.'
 - b. Simona merka [F liMONes] en el mercado. (SP3_f_Sof)
'Simona buys LEMONS at the market.'
 - c. Eya las da los limones [F a su MADre]. (SP3_f_Sof)
'She gives the lemons TO HER MOTHER.'
- (10) Bulgarian¹¹
- [CF СиМОНа]купува лимони на пазара. (SP2_bi_m_Sof)
Simona kupuva limoni na pazara.
'SIMONA buys lemons at the market.'

With focused subjects, this strategy attains shares of 86 to 97% (except for contrastively focused subjects in BJS). With focused objects and adjuncts, similar shares were observed. However, it is worth pointing out that these latter constituents often appeared last in the sentence, i.e. no relocation of the nuclear stress was necessary to mark them as focused in their canonical sentence position. Taking together the cases with utterance-final *in situ* marking and non-final *in situ* marking (i.e. the cases involving a shift of the nuclear stress to a non-final constituent), the respective rates of focus marking *in situ* range from 62 to 90% with direct objects and from 80 to 100% with indirect objects and adjuncts. As opposed to MS (see Section

¹¹ Whether the BG examples come from bilingual or monolingual participants is indicated through "bi" and "mono" in the speaker IDs.

2.3), no marked differences were observed between neutral and contrastive focus conditions.

The second most common strategy was *p-movement*, i.e. the movement of non-focused material to a non-final position. Some examples with focused subjects and direct objects are given in (11) and (12).

(11) Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish

- a. Limones en el merkado merka [_F SiMO_{Na}]. (SP2_m_Sof)
 ‘SIMONA buys lemons at the market.’
- b. Simona da a su madre [_F los liMO_{Ne}s]. (SP2_m_Plo)
 ‘Simona gives THE LEMONS to her mother.’

(12) Bulgarian

- a. Лимони на пазара купува [_{CF} СиМО_{На}]. (SP2_bi_m_Sof)
 Limoni na pazara kupuva Simona.
 ‘SIMONA buys lemons at the market.’
- b. СИМОНА дава на майка си [_F ЛИМОНИТЕ]. (SP3_mono_f_Sof)
 Simona dava na majka si limonite.
 ‘Simona gives THE LEMONS to her mother.’

With focused subjects, this strategy was clearly possible but overall little frequent, the few instances attaining shares of 3 to 14%. With focused direct objects, on the other hand, it was a relatively common alternative to *in situ* marking, especially with neutrally focused direct objects (21–29% vs 10–13% with contrastive focus). With indirect objects or adjuncts, the *p*-movement was not possible, since these constituents are not followed by any others in canonical sentences.

Furthermore, it seems worth pointing out that examples like (11a) would be ungrammatical or at least rather odd in MS unless the direct object *limones* and the adjunct *en el merkado* were dislocated. However, this was clearly not the case in the BJS example, given that the sentence was uttered without any cues of prosodic breaks and the direct object was not resumed by a clitic pronoun. In MS, the moved non-focused material usually keeps the canonical order VdOiOPP such that (13) would be used instead of (11).

(13) Compra limones en el mercado [_F SiMO_{Na}].
 ‘SIMONA buy lemons at the market.’

A second BJS example of *p*-movement with a focused subject equally presented an order that would be odd in MS, i.e. iOdOV[_F S]. However, both of these orders were also found in BG (see 12a for an example), alongside PPVdO[_F S]. As opposed to MS, BJS thus seems to reflect the variability of possible word orders of BG, pointing to CLI from this language.

Cleft sentences were observed only in one single context in the present study, i.e. with contrastively focused subjects in BJS, where, however, they attained a share of 43%. Two examples are shown in (14).

(14) Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish

- a. Es [CF SiMO_{na}] ke da los limones a su madre. (SP2_f_Sof)
 ‘It’s Simona who gives the lemons to her mother.’
- b. [CF SiMO_{na}] es ke sta merkando limones en el merkado. (Itsk_m_Ark)
 ‘It’s Simona who buys lemons.’

It is interesting to note that this use of clefts does not only mirror typical Spanish patterns (see Section 2.2), but also that a literal translation of (14a) to the surrounding language BG would be impossible due to the enclitic nature of the copula *съм* *săm* ‘be’ in the present tense. An equivalent BG construction would thus necessarily show the order of (15a), constructed in parallel to (15b). However, in spite of these examples, clefts are rare in BG (as they generally are in Slavic languages) and did not occur in the data set analysed here.

(15) Bulgarian

- a. [CF СиМО_{на}] е, която дава лимоните на майка си
 Simona е kojato dava limonite na majka si
 Simona is who gives lemons to her mother
- b. защото кръвта, тя е, която осквернява земята. (Bible, Num. 35:33)
 zaštoto krāvta, tja e, kojato oskvernjava zemjata.
 because the blood she is who pollutes the land
 ‘for blood pollutes the land.’

Notably, though, the BG structures in (15) correspond exactly to the two BJS instances of reversed pseudo-clefts found in the corpus, one of which was shown in (14b), above. Seeing that literal translations into MS would be odd,¹² these structures thus once again point towards the possibility of CLI from BG to BJS.

A further strategy observed some few times in the BG data was the use of **dislocations**, i.e. the displacement of non-focused material to a position outside the core sentence.¹³ Dislocations occurred with both focus types, the non-focused material could be dislocated both to the left (6 items; see 16a) and to the right (3 items; see 16b), and they attained a share of 4–14% with focused direct objects and adjuncts.

(16) a. Bulgarian (DM_mono_f_Sof)

- Симона, на пазара, купува [CF ЛИМОНИ].
 Simona, na pazara, kupuva limoni.
 Simona at the market buys lemons.
 ‘Simona buys LEMONS on the market.’

¹² Even if the relative pronoun is slightly adapted (i.e. *Simona es la que compra limones*), *Simona* would rather be a topic, not focus (Moreno Cabrera 1999: 4298; but see Feldhausen & Vanrell 2015 for some marginal cases inversed pseudo-clefts marking CF).

¹³ In BJS, no dislocations were used in the sentences with focus on the subject, object, or PP adjunct discussed in this study. However, the full data set contained four instances of dislocations in sentences with informational focus on the verb and the object.

- b. Bulgarian (Dzh_bi_m_Bur)
 Купува ги [F_c на паЗАра], лимоните.
 Kupuva gi na pazara, limonite.
 Buys them at the market the lemons
 ‘The lemons, she buys them AT THE MARKET.’

The remaining focus marking strategies found in the data were subsumed under the term **fronting** as they all involved a movement of a focused constituent to a position before its canonical position in the sentence. This strategy occurred with neutrally and contrastively focused objects and adjuncts in both BJS and BG, although rather infrequently (2–20%). At least four different types of such frontings can be distinguished (see 17–20).

- (17) a. Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish (Sp7_f_Sof)
 [F LiMOnes] da Simona a su madre.
 ‘Simona gives LEMONS to her mother.’
- b. Bulgarian (SP2_mono_m_Sof)
 [F ЛИМОни] купува СИМОНА на пазара.
 Limoni kupuva Simona na pazara.
 Lemons buy Simona on the market
 ‘Simona buys LEMONS on the market.’
- (18) Bulgarian (VP_mono_f_Shu)
 [F На МАЙка си] дава лимоните СИМОНА.
 Na majka si dava limonite Simona.
 To her mother gives the lemons Simona
 ‘Simona gives the lemons TO HER MOTHER.’
- (19) a. Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish (SP7_f_Sof)
 [F En el merKAdo] Simona merka los limones.
 ‘Simona buy lemons AT THE MARKET.’
- b. Bulgarian (SP1_mono_f_Sof)
 [F На МАЙка си] СИМОНА дава лимоните.
 Na majka si Simona dava limonite.
 To her mother Simona gives the lemons
 ‘Simona gives the lemons TO HER MOTHER.’
- (20) Bulgarian (SP5_mono_f_Sof)
 СИМОНА дава [F на МАЙка си] лимоните.
 Simona dava na majka si limonite.
 Simona gives to her mother the lemons
 ‘Simona gives the lemons TO HER MOTHER.’

The examples in (17) show “classical” focus fronting as known from MS (see Section 2.2), i.e. raising of the focused constituent to a verb-adjacent clause-initial

position and subject-verb inversion. There were 2 BJS and 4 BG examples of this classical type of focus fronting, half of which involved information focus. This is different to Peninsular Spanish, where fronting is generally assumed to entail a contrastive-focus reading, but in line with Old Spanish (see Section 2.1). Furthermore, in three other BG responses, the focused constituent was equally preverbal and adjacent to the verb, but the subject appeared at the end of the utterance (see the example in 18).

Next, the structures in (19) are once again very similar, but lack subject-verb inversion, i.e. the subject appears in its canonical position before the verb and hence separates the fronted constituent from it. Such frontings without inversion occurred twice in BG and once in BJS. In MS, but also in Old Spanish, they would be ungrammatical. Note, in this context, that there were no cues of prosodic breaks in these sentences. Furthermore, 3 BG and 2 BJS sentences with fronted focus constituents did not have an explicit subject. It can be assumed that they underlyingly correspond to one of the types mentioned previously.

Finally, the cases in (20) are quite different in that they present a movement of a focused indirect object or adjunct to a position before the direct object, i.e. the focus constituent is placed after the verb but in a non-final position. Again, there are no pauses or prosodic breaks between the focus and the final constituent. Albeit ungrammatical in MS, such constructions occurred five times in the BG data set (for similar examples in BJS see Discussion).

3.3. Discussion

The analysis of focus-induced word-order variation in BJS and BG has shown that both languages have variegated prosodic and syntactic strategies to signal informational and contrastive focus at their disposal. Overall, prosodic marking of the focus constituent *in situ* was clearly the preferred strategy across varieties and conditions. However, *p*-movement and frontings as well as dislocations (in BG) and cleft sentences (in BJS), i.e. different syntactic strategies, were also observed to a minor extent. Among these, especially *p*-movement occurred with some regularity with focused direct objects (21–29% with information focus and 10–13% with contrastive focus; see Table 3). Little surprisingly, the use of the different strategies was virtually identical in BG as spoken by monolingual and bilingual speakers. Given that the bilinguals were all dominant in this language, this is an expected result.

As to BJS, H1, which hypothesizes that this variety patterns with BG regarding the expression of focus is largely confirmed by the data. Not only is the use and distribution of the different prosodic and syntactic strategies very similar in the two languages (except for clefts, see below), but also, in the implementations of the syntactic strategies, there are many linear orderings that strongly point towards CLI from the surrounding language BG. This becomes especially blatant when comparing the BJS data to MS.

First, the strong preference for *in situ* marking with both analysed focus types clearly sets BJS apart from Peninsular Spanish, where the relocation of the nuclear stress is limited to contrastive focus readings and was not observed in empirical studies using the same methodology as this study (see Section 2.1). Also, for Old Spanish, it seems that *in situ* focus marking was not a frequent option. However, it is worth pointing out that other Modern Spanish varieties like, e.g., Argentinean or Andean

Spanish, which have equally been in intense contact with other languages like Italian or Quechua, resemble BJS more closely in this regard. Be that as it may, BJS, as opposed to (Central Peninsular) Spanish, is visibly a “plastic” language (Vallduví 1991) like, e.g., English or German, and – as the study shows – like BG, i.e. one that shows great flexibility regarding nuclear stress placement (see also Zubizarreta & Nava 2011, Hualde & Prieto 2015).

Second, among the comparably few items showing syntactic strategies of focus marking in BJS (approx. 12%), many presented linear orderings that would be ungrammatical or at best marginally acceptable in MS but instead are fully grammatical and inconspicuous in BG. As shown in Section 3.2, such orderings include, e.g., non-canonical sequences of background constituents in sentences with *p*-movement and frontings of the focus constituent to a preverbal position without subject-verb inversion. Even the rather peculiar type of fronting observed five times in BG, which involves raising of the focus constituent to a postverbal but non-final position as shown in (20), above, seems to be possible in BJS: two very similar frontings were found in responses to a question eliciting contrastive focus on the possessive of the indirect object, which was not part of this study. They are shown in (21). Note that there are no pauses or prosodic breaks between the indirect and the direct object.

(21) Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish

a. Simona da a la [_{CF} SUya] madre los limones. (SP2_m_Sof)

b. Simona da a [_{CF} SU] madre los limones. (Dzh_m_Bur)
‘Simona gives the lemons to HER mother.’

In MS, on the opposite, such constructions are categorically ruled out according to Zubizarreta (1999).

(22) a. Spanish (Zubizarreta 1999: 4237)

*Los alumnos colgaron en el AULA la bandera francesa (no en el salón de actos).

‘The pupils hung the French flag in the CLASSROOM, not in the assembly hall.’

b. Spanish (Zubizarreta 1999: 4236)

*Ayer colgaron la bandera FRANCESA en el mástil los alumnos (no la inglesa).

‘Yesterday the pupils hung the FRENCH flag on the flagpole, not the English flag.’

Also, in the case of cleft sentences, the use of inverted pseudo-clefts, i.e. with the copula following the clefted focus constituent, is reminiscent of BG, where the enclitic copula cannot appear in sentence-initial position. In MS, on the other hand, inverted clefts are largely limited to topicalization (see Moreno Cabrera 1999: 4298 and above).

Third, the fact that BJS prefers the same strategies to mark both informational and contrastive focus equally patterns with BG. In general, all strategies were used to

very similar extents with informational and contrastive focus in both languages. Only *p*-movement seems to be somewhat more common with direct objects under informational focus and clefts with contrastively focused subjects (see below for a discussion of these cases). MS varieties, in contrast, tend to show different preferences depending on the focus type, although there is of course some overlap.¹⁴

In sum, the analysis shows that the overall distribution of the focus-marking strategies in BJS is strongly reminiscent of BG and that there are many hints pointing to CLI from this language with most strategies. One major difference, however, is the high proportion of cleft sentences with contrastively focused subjects in BJS (43%), whereas in BG no clefts were observed. In (Peninsular) Spanish, clefting represents the preferred strategy in this condition (61%; see Feldhausen & Vanrell 2014, 2015). This finding thus speaks against CLI from BG and might be a counterargument to the vulnerability of information-structurally induced word-order variations in language contact. A little caveat of this study must be mentioned, though, in this context: of the two BJS questions eliciting responses with contrastive focus on the subject, the first one was formulated with a cleft: *Es Kalina la ke merka limones, no?* 'It is Kalina who buys lemons, right?'. The use of clefts was thus primed in this context, such that the result could be a mere task effect. However, only 3 out of 15 responses to this question presented clefts, whereas the remaining 7 instances of clefts were produced as responses to a question without such a prime and with 9 other questions being asked in between. The difference thus seems to be a real one, not barely a task effect. Another conceivable reason why just clefting structures are maintained and less affected by transfer could be that they are somehow more salient or transparent and thus easier to be acquired. However, this would have to be empirically verified.

Let us now turn to the second hypothesis, which suggested that BJS should show a preference for focus marking *in situ* (H2). As shown above, the data unmistakably confirm this hypothesis. Yet, it is unclear why this is the case. The original rationale behind H2 was that *in situ* derivations, i.e. post-syntactical marking of the focus constituent through intonation, should be preferred by the BJS speakers over more complex constructions involving Merge and Move. The reason for this is that *in situ* constructions are more economical given that they do not require movement (Roberts & Roussou 2003). This is to say, the focus feature would not trigger movement anymore and, instead, the unmarked canonical order could be retained. In our speakers, for whom BJS is a non-dominant language, this would represent a simplification in the sense of Roberts & Roussou (2003). However, seeing that BG shows very similar rates of *in situ* constructions as BJS, it cannot be decided whether their high occurrence in BJS is due to language-internal simplification or rather due to CLI from BG. Another explanation could be that elderly speakers generally tend to use simpler constructions due to cognitive reasons such as processing overload, i.e. that they more often mark focus *in situ* than younger speakers would. Future studies should therefore also analyse the preferences for focus marking in younger speakers of BG.¹⁵ If it were to turn out that younger speakers use *in situ* structures less frequently and instead more often employ strategies involving movement, this would

¹⁴ Interestingly, the literature suggests that in Old Spanish this distinction of focus types was less clear at least with some strategies as, e.g., fronted objects, which could represent both informational and contrastive focus (see Sitaridou 2011, Batllori & Sitaridou 2020).

¹⁵ Note that differences between young and elderly speakers of BG were observed, e.g., regarding the use of pitch accents (Dimitrova et al. 2018).

suggest that the patterns we observed among the elderly speakers in this study reflect economy effects and a resort to *in situ* as a default strategy. However, all things considered, the many parallels with BG discussed above rather suggest that the bilinguals establish equivalence relations between their two languages which entails the use of the same focus-marking constructions.

Crucially, under both approaches the results of this study present further evidence in support of the Interface Hypothesis (Sorace & Filiaci 2006, Sorace 2011, Chamorro & Sorace 2019), since it shows that the rendering of information structure, i.e. a classical interface phenomenon, is vulnerable to attrition in language contact, independently of whether the attrition leads to simplification or to the copying of structures from a dominant language (i.e. CLI). For BJS, a dying Romance minority variety, the results thus strengthen previous analyses suggesting that its morphosyntax is unstable in areas involving external interfaces (viz. possessive structures, adjective placement and – as shown here – focus-induced word-order variation) and stable with regard to core-syntactic phenomena like clitic placement and climbing (see Fischer & Vega Vilanova 2018, Fischer et al. 2022, 2024). In spite of the (necessarily) limited data set and the low case numbers in some conditions, the present study thus has a clear outcome that contributes to our knowledge about the (in)stability of morphosyntax in language contact.

4. Conclusion

On the basis of an analysis of semi-spontaneous data, the present study has shown that BJS and BG largely pattern together with regard to their preferred focus-marking strategies. Both languages clearly prefer focus-marking *in situ* across the board, i.e. they classify as “plastic” languages, which can easily relocate nuclear stress. Other, syntactic strategies only occur to a low (though not negligible) extent. They include prosodic movement, different types of focus fronting, dislocations, and clefts. Noticeably, the observed preferences are independent of the focus type. BJS thus not only differs strongly from MS and resembles BG with regard to its preferences for focus marking but, what is more, it even presents many word-order variations that would be ungrammatical or at least odd in MS and have direct parallels in BG. The only (partial) exception are clefts, which only occurred in BJS and were absent from the BG data sets. Still, the analysis suggests that focus-marking in BJS is nowadays strongly influenced by the surrounding language BG.¹⁶ Since the realization of focus is an interface phenomenon that involves internal (syntax and phonology) and external (pragmatics) linguistic modules (see Figure 1, above), the observed CLI is not only in line with earlier work on other interface phenomena in BJS (Fischer et al. 2024), but equally represents further evidence in favour of the Interface Hypothesis.

Acknowledgments

¹⁶ To further evaluate the extent of CLI from BG, but also of areality effects or dialect level differences, comparisons with other Judeo-Spanish varieties, such as those of Greece or Turkey, would be valuable, as pointed out by an anonymous reviewer. However, this would require additional data collection and may not be feasible due to the scarcity of speakers.

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