FRONTED NUCLEI: NARROW FOCUS IN SPANISH AND ENGLISH

Brian Mott

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to show that fronted nuclei, if not as abundant as in English, do nevertheless, along with other means of highlighting, play a significant role in Spanish intonation. Although the overriding tendency in Spanish is for right-edged tonicity, it would appear that nucleus fronting is common in Spanish in cases of strong contrast and anaphora, in highly emotional contexts (amazement, incredulity, impatience, exasperation, etc.), when there are interjections in final position (*por favor* 'please', *gracias* 'thank you), when there are nominal proforms after the verb whose identity is taken for granted, and in the case of words whose meaning is implicitly emphatic, rendering them likely to attract the focus (*odiar* 'to hate', *todo* 'all', *mismo* '-self', *también* 'also', *tampoco* 'neither', *único* 'only', *es igual* 'it's all the same', and deictics, like the demonstrative pronouns, *éste*, *ésa* 'this, that, etc.').

Keywords: prosody, tonicity, nucleus placement, Spanish and English sentence stress, fronted sentence stress.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, Spanish has been regarded as a prototype of right-edged tonicity. This received wisdom has generally been accepted as passively as the likely misconception that Eskimo has more words for snow than other languages, black children are verbally deprived, Italian and Spanish are beautiful but German is ugly, some languages are spoken more quickly than others, Americans speak English badly, and so many other language myths. Textbooks which mention sentence stress in Spanish invariably describe early nucleus placement as virtually inexistent (e.g. Cruttenden 1986: 150; Hualde 2005: 257; Sosa 1999: 58). A prototypical example of Spanish nucleus placement, then, is generally taken to be an utterance like the following:

(1) Pues yo no lo hago.
Well, I'm not doing it.

where, although the English equivalent shows fronted sentence stress on the pronoun *I*, the Spanish version manifests no such change.

Admittedly, it does often seem that there is a conspiracy in favour of right-edged tonicity in Spanish. Witness the manipulation of word order to place at the end of an utterance an accentable element that would constitute a fronted nucleus in English:

(2) Viene tu primo.
Your cousin's coming.

In longer utterances, this may mean that Spanish uses two or more intonation units where English uses only one:

(3) Mañana, podemos ir a ver a tu tía.
We can go and see you aunt tomorrow.

BDD-A9824 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:56:57 UTC)

Nevertheless, fronted nuclei, if not as abundant as in English, do play a significant role in Spanish intonation, and despite the end-focussing strategies that have just been mentioned, there are factors that may bring about early nucleus in Spanish, notably:

- contexts where strong contrast or anaphora influence the speaker's choice of placement of the nucleus
- the degree of emotional arousal elicited by the context (amazement, incredulity, impatience, exasperation, etc.)
- the use of interjections (like *por favor* 'please', *gracias* 'thank you') and other words of a parenthetical nature in final position
- the use of nominal proforms after the verb whose identity is taken for granted and which are therefore unstressed
- the semantic force of particular words in the utterance

With reference to this last category, note in particular words whose meaning is implicitly emphatic: verbs expressing like or dislike (e.g. *encantar* 'to love', *odiar* 'to hate'); other parts of speech, like *todo* 'all', *mismo* '-self', *también* 'also', *tampoco* 'neither', *único* 'only', expressions like *es igual* 'it's all the same', which express a reply in the form of strong opposition to a prior criticism, and deictics, like the demonstrative pronouns, *éste*, *ésa*, etc. 'this, that, etc.'.

2. Methodology

To test the validity of my hypothesis that early nuclei are commoner in Spanish than is generally believed, assisted by the exemplification in chapter 3 of Wells 2006, I drew up a list of 94 English sentences and obtained equivalent oral Spanish versions from 13 Spanish colleagues working at my institution. All these subjects had Castilian as their habitual and preferred means of communication; 11 were university lecturers, and 2 were secretarial staff. During the recording sessions, the informants were prompted to provide a Spanish version which they deemed to be pragmatically equivalent to the English version. They were encouraged to discuss the possible implicatures of the English utterances and suggest how the same illocutionary force would be conveyed in Spanish, and also to offer more than one version if they thought there were alternatives.

In the analysis of the recorded data, apart from Spanish versions that ran almost syntactically parallel to the English versions, there were indeed readings that illustrated the strategies mentioned above, which were employed to ensure a right-edged nucleus. These were examined first. Then I isolated those utterances in which the Spanish version manifested a fronted nucleus and tried to ascertain when Spanish was likely to allow displacement of this accent away from the end-position.

3. Results

It was found that in a number of simplex sentences, such as *Quisiera abrir una cuenta* (*I want to open an account*), *Lo ha hecho* (*He's done it*), and *Cuéntamelo* (*Tell me about it*), the nucleus in Spanish was invariably on the last lexical item, as in English. In other cases, when the utterance was long or when it contained more than one word that was a potential candidate

BDD-A9824 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:56:57 UTC)

for focus, Spanish divided the utterance into additional intonation units to produce more than one nucleus where English had only one and this was not on the last lexical item, but fronted:

(4) ¿Y tú de qué te quejas?
I don't know what you're complaining about.

(5) Hizo mejor examen de lo que esperaba.
He did better in the exam than I thought he would.

(6) El champán lo ha traído Dick.
Dick brought the champagne.

(7) El domingo vamos a Greenwich.
We're going to Greenwich on Sunday.

(8) Para comer tenemos cerdo.
We're having pork for lunch.

Notice that, as in the last three examples, the last nucleus of the utterance may be on the same lexical item in English and Spanish, but the syntactic order of the elements may be different. This is also true of the following examples, which have only one nucleus in both Spanish and English:

(9) un amigo abogado
a lawyer friend

(10) ¿para qué es esto?
What's this for?

(11) ¡Qué día más precioso!
What a lovely day!

(12) Lo ha traído Dick
Dick brought it

(13) ¡Hazlo tú!
You do it!

(14) ¿Cuándo como yo?
When do I get something to eat?

(15) ¿Qué piensas tú?
What do you think?

The right-edge tendency of Spanish sentence and phrasal stress, which has been manifested in all the previous examples, shows itself also in the equivalents of English compound nouns. The English *Compound Stress Rule* destresses the last element of a compound noun and assigns stress to the word whose equivalent in Spanish comes in final

BDD-A9824 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:56:57 UTC)

position: *campo de concentración* (*concentration camp*); *regalo de cumpleaños* (*birthday present*). Spanish utterances with weak possessives will also stress the noun in final position and not the preposed possesssive, which in contrastive focus in English can become the nucleus: *Vamos a mi casa* (*Let's go to my place*); *En mi opinión...* (*In my opinion...*). However, strong possessives may constitute the nucleus in Spanish and characteristically occur in final position: *un amigo mío* (*a friend of mine*); *una carta suya* (*a letter from her*).

Catenative verbs like *begin* and *try*, which may be accented in English, do not receive the sentence or phrasal stress in Spanish:

(16) Veo que has empezado a arreglar el coche, pero...
I can see you've started mending the car, but...

(17) Intentaba perder peso, pero...
She was trying to lose weight, but...

Subject pronouns which are ostensibly deictic may be the nucleus in Spanish (*¿Cuándo como yo?* See example 14 above), but not necessarily if used as the object of a preposition. Compare:

(18) Me alegro por él.
Good for him.

(19) ¡Habla con él!
Speak to him!/Speak to the guy!

(20) No estaba dentro de la bolsa, sino colgando de ella/No estaba dentro de la bolsa, sino colgando de ella.
It wasn't inside the bag, but actually hanging out of it.

It is noticeable that Spanish speakers do not normally de-accent draws in reading football results, whereas English does: *Betis dos, Madrid dos* (*Arsenal two, Fulham two*). Finally, note that Spanish tonicity is sometimes right-edged when compared to English simply because certain unstressed elements of English that occur after the nucleus may not be expressed in Spanish. Compare:

(21) Cuando llegamos...
When we got there...

(22) ¡No vayas a hacer el ridículo!
Don't go and make a fool of yourself!

(23) Hay un hombre.
There's a man at the door.

(24) ¡Yo!
I do!

(25) ¡Teléfono!
The phone's ringing!

BDD-A9824 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:56:57 UTC)

(26) ¡La puerta!
The door's open!

(27) Los comerciantes venden.
Traders sell things.

In the following case, the adverb of place *ahí* comes before *en la mesa* in Spanish, and is usually given its own tonicity:

(28) Ponlo ahí (ahí) sobre la mesa.
Put it on the table there.

In the following cases, Spanish fronts the nucleus, as in English, at least as an option. First of all, when emphatic contrast is implied:

(29) —¿Quieres un Bacardí con Coca Cola?
—Casi mejor vodka con Coca Cola.
"How about a Bacardi and Coke?"
"I'd prefer a vodka and Coke."

Also in cases of anaphora where the anaphoric expression is long and identical to its antecedent:

(30) —¿Alguien ha traído champán?
—Dick ha traído champán.
"Has anyone brought champagne?"
"Dick's brought champagne."

Compare the latter with single-word anaphora, where Spanish does not de-stress the repeated item unless the speaker is very angry, as in the second of the following examples:

(31) —¿Cuántas veces?
—Tres veces.
"How many times?"
"Three times."

(32) He dicho que me pongas un kilo de patatas, no dos.
I asked for one kilo of potatoes, not two.

For a similar example in situations which the author calls "insistent", see Solé Sabater 1989: 187. Consider also cases like the following, in which the anaphor is a synonymous noun phrase and, likewise, does not usually de-stress in Spanish:

(33) Martín trabaja en una farmacia. Lleva cinco años trabajando en ese sitio.
Martin works in a pharmacy. He has worked at that place for five years.

Emphatic *sí* always constitutes a nucleus:

BDD-A9824 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:56:57 UTC)

(34) Sí que lo sé.
I certainly do know.

Spanish also fronts the nucleus in highly emotional situations, for example, when expressing extreme surprise, as in the following case, in which a dishwasher appears to have been stolen:

(35) ¿Donde está el lavaplatos?
Where's the dishwasher?

An alternative version for this utterance would place the nucleus on *lavaplatos* with a high head preceding it. The answer in the following example illustrates expression of impatience or exasperation (what Wells [2006: 183] calls "counter-presupposition"):

(36) —¿Por qué vamos a Mallorca otra vez?
—No vamos a Mallorca.
"Why are we going to Majorca again?"
"We're not going to Majorca."

The commonest preference in Spanish among my subjects was as shown: nucleus on *vez* in the question and *vamos* in the answer. However, some speakers chose to focus *Mallorca* in the question instead of *vez*. Exasperation in a reply can also be shown by de-stressing forms of address and names. Note the following example of the henpecked husband:

(37) —¿Has cerrado todas las puertas y ventanas?
—Sí, querida.
"Have you locked all the doors and windows?"
"Yes, dear."

The nucleus may also be fronted in Spanish in an impatient or exasperated reaction to a series of interruptions like

(38) ¿Qué quieres ahora?/¿Ahora qué quieres?
Now what do you want?

Spanish sometimes destresses interjections like *por favor* and *gracias* when they are used in final position, as they are words of a parenthetical nature:

(39) Quisiera abrir una cuenta, por favor.
I'd like to open an account, please.

(40) Bien, gracias.
Fine, thanks.

Stress on the tonic syllable of *favor* in *por favor* attaches more importance to this expression; likewise, stress on *gracias* sounds more genuinely grateful.

Nominal phrases acting as pro-forms are de-stressed in Spanish, implying the givenness of the semantic content of the phrase involved:

BDD-A9824 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:56:57 UTC)

(41) ¿Ahora qué ha hecho el idiota?
Now what's the idiot done? (= 'We know he's an idiot, don't we?')

However, indefinite pronouns in object position and reciprocal pronouns have stress in Spanish and can therefore constitute the nucleus, though not in English:

(42) Creo que he oído alguien.
I thought I heard someone.

(43) Nos tendríamos que ayudar unos a otros.
People should help one another.

Finally, there are certain lexical types that attract the nucleus in Spanish because they are intrinsically emphatic. Among these are, firstly, verbs expressing strong feelings, like *querer* 'to like, love' and *odiar* 'to hate', which often receive the nuclear stress if their object is anaphoric:

(44) —Toma un poco más de té.
—No quiero más té.
"Have some more tea."
"I don't want any more tea."

(45) —¿Pongo la lavadora?
—Sí, hazlo tú. Yo odio ponerla.
"Shall I wash the clothes."
"Yes, you do it. I hate doing the laundry."

(46) —¿Te gustan los animales?
—Me encantan los animales.
"Do you like animals?"
"I love animals."

(47) —La mayorá de mis estudiantes son chicas.
—Vale, me gustan las chicas.
"Most of my students are females."
"Good, I like girls."

These last examples and some others in my paper also show that Spanish can front stress just like English in answers in which words from the question are redundantly repeated. Compare the following example from García Lecumberri 2003: 38:

(48) —¿Quién vino anoche?
—Juan vino anoche.

Other Spanish forms which may constitute the nucleus, like their counterparts in English, are *todo*, *mismo*, *también*, *tampoco*, *único*, *solo*, *igual* in the expression *es igual*, and demonstratives. Note the following examples:

BDD-A9824 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:56:57 UTC)

(49) —¿Te gustan los perros?
—Me gustan todos los animales
"Do you like dogs?"
"I like all animals."

(50) Yo mismo le escribiré/Le escribiré yo mismo.
I'll write to him myself.

(51) Yo también canto.
I sing, too.

(52) Yo tampoco canto.
I don't sing, either.

(53) Es la única persona en quien confío (note the additional nucleus on confío).
She's the only person I confide in.

(54) Él solo lo hará.
He'll do it by himself.

(55) —¡Venga! ¡Vamos! ¡Llegamos tarde!
—Es igual si llegamos tarde.
"Come on! We're already late!"
"I don't care if we are late."

(56) Ésa sería la formula.
That would be the way to do it.

If recent trends on Spanish television are anything to go by, fronting of sentence stress may be on the increase in Spanish. There seems to be a growing fashion of placing the nucleus on a lexical item earlier in the utterance rather than on the last one, at least in news bulletins and documentaries, and in dubbed versions of films and serials, even in cases where there would not necessarily, or not normally, be fronting in English. The following examples were heard on Spanish television over the past few years, and English equivalents have been provided:

(57) Es la única posibilidad que tenemos.
It's the only chance we have/It's the only chance we have.

(58) Llevo el mismo uniforme que tú.
I'm wearing the same uniform as you.

(59) El miércoles estarán de vuelta en España.
There'll be back in Spain on Wednesday.

(60) Crecen las protestas.
Protest is on the increase.

BDD-A9824 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:56:57 UTC)

(61) Nuestro hijo tiene derecho a algo más que un mendrugo de pan.
Our son has a right to more than just a crust of bread.

(62) Esto está llegando a presentar un serio problema.
This is becoming a serious problem (…serious problem).

(63) Cada persona puede pasar una determinada cantidad de mercancía.
Each person is allowed to bring in a determinate amount of goods. (…determinate…).

(64) No consigo dormir bien.
I can't get to sleep.

(65) No hace falta levantar la voz.
There's no need to raise you voice.

4. Conclusions

Although the overriding tendency in Spanish utterances is to put the nucleus on the stressed syllable of the last lexical word, it is clear that a fronted nucleus is not uncommon, either (even if just as an alternative to the more usual late nucleus). Whether this focussing strategy is resorted to or not is constrained by the syntactic possibilities of Spanish and intimately related to the semantics of the lexical or semi-lexical items that are singled out for narrow focus.

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya
Facultat de Filologia
Universitat de Barcelona
Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes, 585
08007 Barcelona
e-mail: mott@ub.edu

References

Cruttenden, A. 1986. *Intonation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

García Lecumberri, M. L. 2003. Análisis por configuraciones: la escuela británica. In P. Prieto (coord.), *Teorías de la entonación*, 35-61. Barcelona: Ariel.

Hualde, J. I. 2005. *The Sounds of Spanish*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Solé Sabater, M. J. 1989. Translating intonation. In J. C. Santoyo (ed.), *Translation across Cultures. La traducción entre el mundo hispánico y anglosajón: Relaciones lingüísticas, culturales y literarias. Actas XI Congreso AEDEAN Léon (1987)*, 181-194. León: Universidad de León.

Sosa, J. M. 1999. *La entonación del español*. Madrid: Cátedra.

Wells, J. C. 2006. *English Intonation: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BDD-A9824 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:56:57 UTC)

BDD-A9824 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:56:57 UTC)