

# Native Speakers' Judgments of Irritation with Spanish Speakers' English Interlanguage

John S. Chappell  
*Applied English Center*  
*University of Kansas*  
*Lawrence, KS 66045-2650*

Michael M. T. Henderson  
*Department of Linguistics*  
*University of Kansas*  
*Lawrence, KS 66045-2140*  
*Email: mmth@ku.edu*

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Language teachers may legitimately wonder whether their judgments of their students' utterances are on the one hand too accepting and on the other too critical. We may, because we can understand interlanguage which is incomprehensible to lay people, accept for communicative purposes something which no one else can understand; at the same time, we may be enraged by a student's failure to invert verb and auxiliary in a question—a sin which a lay person might not even notice but which we have *told* our students about repeatedly.

Over the years, several studies have appeared of intelligibility and irritation (e.g., Chastain (1, 2); Ludwig (5); Gynan (6); Fayer & Krasinski (3) and references cited therein). Many studies have used taped samples of oral production, with pronunciation apparently the major independent variable; many have found that speakers of the subjects' native language were less tolerant than native speakers of the target language (4). Guntermann (5) studied artificially constructed sentences in Spanish with interference patterns typical of English speakers. She discovered that multiple errors in a sentence were more highly stigmatized than single errors, and that miscomprehension always resulted from sentences containing both a person error and a tense error. She also found that agreement errors were the most highly stigmatized, 43% of them provoking spontaneous laughter.

Politzer (9) looked into English interference patterns in German; his results ranked vocabulary errors first and case ending errors last in irritation. Chastain's study (1) investigated English interference patterns in Spanish. He found that comprehension was most severely limited by the use of an incorrect word, but that the errors that caused the most irritation were putting a verb form

other than the infinitive after a preposition, and failing to use *estar* in continuous tenses. In general, article errors and gender/number errors in noun-adjective agreement were not highly stigmatized; nor were preterite/imperfect errors. Piazza (8) investigated French speakers' tolerance of errors made by English speakers; the results, like Chastain's, showed that the most irritating errors were not necessarily those that most impeded comprehension. Piazza tested both written and spoken errors, finding that written errors were better tolerated than spoken errors, and that errors which could also be made by native speakers were better tolerated than "foreign" ones. Galloway (4) showed videotapes of authentic discourse to Spanish speakers, and found that the irritation produced by an error depends very much on the listener. Listeners with experience in studying foreign languages were much more tolerant than those without such experience.

We report here on a study designed to isolate certain grammatical patterns typical of the production of Spanish speakers learning English, and to determine a hierarchy of error types found more or less irritating by native speakers of English. To avoid judgments based on pronunciation, tone of voice, and other individual characteristics, only written samples were presented to the evaluators. To avoid problems of content, the sentences in question were made up to highlight the errors we were interested in.

The six error types tested were obtained by asking ESL teachers at the University of Kansas ESL program for a list of those errors they judged most typical of Spanish speakers learning English. Eight types were listed by more than one teacher. The error types identified are shown in (1) in ranked order of

frequency of mention.

(1)

Error	Rank	Example
Comma Splice/run-on sentence	1	This is a problem, we must solve it.
Noun before adjective (N+ADJ)	2	I have a car fast.
Plural adjective + noun (PL ADJ)	2	We saw tall buildings
Omission of expletive pron. (EXPL DROP)	3	Is snowing?
Misuse of prepositions	3	I say it on English.
Pronoun insertion (PRO INS)	3	He is the man who he arrived today.
Indirect object with "to" before direct obj (IO+DO)	4	Can you explain to me this word?
Definite art. Before non-count noun	4	She is interested in the health.

Six of the above were selected for testing. The comma splice/run-on sentence pattern was eliminated as being (a) more properly a punctuation problem than a linguistic one and (b) all too typical of native English speakers. Misuse of prepositions was eliminated as being too general to be tested.

Fifteen sample sentences containing each pattern were constructed for a total of 90 sentences. The sentences were constructed by means of selecting sentences containing target-like use of the structure in question from an intermediate-level ESL reading textbook, and then changing the target-like structure to a structure with the error whose effect we were examining. Three samples of each pattern were paired with three samples of each other pattern, for a total of 45 sentence pairings and 15 pattern pairings.

A questionnaire containing the 45 sentence pairings was given to 39 12th-grade students at a suburban Kansas City high school. Native and proficient speakers of Spanish were excluded. The students were asked to choose the one sentence from each pair that "grated most on their nerves" and was "worse English."

The test of each pairing appeared every fifteen items. N+ADJ vs. PL ADJ, e.g., appeared as 1, 16, and 31. This spacing was done to make each pairing as fresh as possible to the subjects. The scores for each pairing were quite consistent (see Appendix 1), so they were averaged to obtain a Pairing Irritation Ratio which we feel is valid. Only pair 11 showed any inconsistency with its counterpart pairs 26 and 40, but its results were below significance.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Rounding makes some ratios add up to 99 or 101 .

(3)

Pattern	Pairing Irritation Ratio
N+ADJ	.78
PL ADJ	.22
PL ADJ	.24
EXPL DROP	.76
EXPL DROP	.53
PRO INS	.46
PRO INS	.90
IO+DO	.11
IO+DO	.24
DA+MN	.76
N+ADJ	.41
EXPL DROP	.58
PL ADJ	.13
PRO INS	.86
EXPL DROP	.90
IO+DO	.09
PRO INS	.90
DA+MN	.09
N+ADJ	.31
PRO INS	.68
PL ADJ	.72
IO+DO	.27
EXPL DROP	.94
DA+MN	.06
N+ADJ	.88
IO+DO	.11
PL ADJ	.70
DA+MN	.29

N+ADJ	.90
DA+MN	.09

In descending order of PIR, the averaged error patterns are listed in (4):

(4)	
PRO INS	.76
EXPL DROP	.74
N+ADJ	.65
PL ADJ	.40
DA+MN	.25
IO+DO	.16

These results demonstrate that pronoun insertion into relative clauses and omission of expletive pronouns were relatively the most irritating error patterns, in the opinion of our subjects. It is safe to say that the difference between PRO INS and EXPL DROP is insignificant; in fact, in their direct pairing, EXPL DROP had a PIR of .53, insignificantly ahead of .46 for PRO INS. The N+ADJ pattern was considerably more irritating to our subjects than the remaining errors, all of which ranked below the .54 required for significance at  $p < .05$  using a binomial test.

A possible explanation for the high ranking of PRO INS and EXPL DROP is their interference with the subject of a sentence or a clause. English speakers apparently place considerable importance on the grammatical subject of a sentence, even if it is a semantically empty expletive. N+ADJ, since it involves word order, is presumably more irritating for that reason than the last three errors, which involve the insertion of extraneous, easily-overlooked morphemes.

From a Universal Grammar perspective, it could be said that the Null Subject parameter is apparently an important one. Both EXPL DROP, by incorrectly retaining the Spanish setting, and PRO INS, by incorrectly overgeneralizing the English setting, irritated our English speakers considerably. Teachers might want to work harder on those patterns with Spanish-speaking ESL students than on the less irritating ones. An interesting topic for future research would be a comparative study of violations of the Null Subject parameter by English-speaking students of Spanish to see if these errors are as irritating to Spanish

speakers as they apparently are to English speakers.

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## Appendix 1. Irritation Markers and Paired Ratios

Error	Sentence	Score	Sentence	Score	DA+MN	Score	14b	11	29b	7	44b	
					N+ADJ DA+MN		15a 15b	38 1	30a 30b	37 2	45a 45b	31 8
N+ADJ	1a	36	16a	29	31a	26						
PL ADJ	1b	3	16b	10	31b	13						
PL ADJ	2a	15	17a	7	32a	7						
EXPL DROP	2b	24	17b	32	32b	32						
EXPL DROP	3a	19	18a	21	33a	23						
PR INS	3b	20	18b	18	33b	16						
PRO INS	4a	35	19a	38	34a	33						
IO+DO	4b	4	19b	1	34b	6						
IO+DO	5a	11	20a	13	35a	5						
DA+MN	5b	28	20b	26	35b	34						
N+ADJ	6a	19	21a	15	36a	15						
EXPL DROP	6b	20	21b	24	36b	24						
PL ADJ	7a	5	22a	6	37a	5						
PRO INS	7b	34	22b	33	37b	34						
EXPL DROP	8a	39	23a	33	38a	34						
IO+DO	8b	0	23b	6	38b	5						
PRO INS	9a	36	24a	35	39a	35						
DA+MN	9b	3	24b	4	39b	4						
N+ADJ	10a	11	25a	15	40a	11						
PRO INS	10b	28	25b	24	40b	28						
PL ADJ	11a	18	26a	35	41a	32						
IO+DO	11b	21	26b	4	41b	7						
EXPL DROP	12a	39	27a	37	42a	34						
DA+MN	12b	0	27b	2	42b	5						
N+ADJ	13a	30	28a	39	43a	34						
IO+DO	13b	9	28b	0	43b	5						
PL ADJ	14a	28	29a	32	44a	22						
						17						

## Appendix 2. Sentences used in survey.

1. a. (N+ADJ) The students and teachers noticed a smell strong.  
b. (PL ADJ) Any good actor has to study humans emotions.
2. a. (PL ADJ) People like to talk about their favorites books.  
b. (EXPL DROP) Is good to live in another country for a long time.
3. a. (EXPL DROP) Is a variety of lifestyles in every culture.  
b. (PRO INS) The first people who they lived in America were the Indians.
4. a. (PRO INS) The customs of the people who they live in an area reflect that area 's geography.  
b. (IO+DO) The doctor gave to the woman the medicine.
5. a. (IO+DO) The villagers expressed to the priest their feelings.  
b. (DA+MN) The geography influences many areas of the economics.
6. a. (N+ADJ) There was air unsafe in the building.  
b. (EXPL DROP) Is interesting to go sightseeing in historic places.
7. a. (PL ADJ) Murders mysteries are a popular kind of film.  
b. (PRO INS) He was sitting with a beautiful woman who she looked upset.
8. a. (EXPL DROP) Are some people who actually enjoy work.  
b. (IO+DO) Edison showed to an audience his first motion picture.
9. a. (PRO INS) The detective found the man who he took the necklace.  
b. (DA+MN) Indians' houses were made of the wood.
10. a. (N+ADJ) The scientists discovered a solution simple to the problem.  
b. (PRO INS) He 's a thief who he just got out of prison last month.
11. a. (PL ADJ) Film directors make use of miniatures figures.  
b. (IO+DO) The actor asked to the director a question.
12. a. (EXPL DROP) Are many advantages to working hard.  
b. (DA+MN) Art objects are not created simply for the beauty.
13. a. (N+ADJ) He dreams of moving to a city quiet.  
b. (IO+DO) Modern medicine allows to many people a longer life.
14. a. (PL ADJ) Michael was in two traffics accidents last year.  
b. (DA+MN) This festival celebrates the birth of the agriculture.
15. a. (N+ADJ) Art reflects the values political of the artist.  
b. (DA+MN) Only royalty could wear certain types of the cloth.
16. a. (N+ADJ) Information objective about the history of the country is presented.  
b. (PL ADJ) Your deposits will appear on your banks statements.
17. a. (PL ADJ) I learned to form my owns ideas.  
b. (EXPL DROP) Is even a special psychology of bargain hunting.
18. a. (EXPL DROP) Is not only scientists who understand psychology.  
b. (PRO INS) He is a person who he has stolen things before.
19. a. (PRO INS) People who they live in Canada have different lifestyles than Americans.  
b. (IO+DO) Our money habits show to others our beliefs and values.
20. a. (IO+DO) Teachers give to students homework assignments.  
b. (DA+MN) That coat is made of the fur.
21. a. (N+ADJ) In cultures traditional, art is not only created for beauty.  
b. (EXPL DROP) Is difficult to house all the people who need apartments.
22. a. (PL ADJ) Privates schools are usually expensive.  
b. (PRO INS) Everyone who they live here spends a lot of money.
23. a. (EXPL DROP) Are many reasons for population growth.  
b. (IO+DO) He mailed to the bank his check.
24. a. (PRO INS) People who they believe in stereotypes do so because of ignorance.  
b. (DA+MN) Experts in the psychology believe that money is an important symbol.
25. a. (N+ADJ) We looked at the pyramid huge in Egypt.  
b. (PRO INS) Craig and Lisa are a

- couple who they live downtown.
26. a. (PL ADJ) College students today often major in practicals subjects.  
 b. (IO+DO) The IRS will send to you a letter.
27. a. (EXPL DROP) Are not many jobs in the countryside.  
 b. (DA+MN) Many people are addicted to the alcohol.
28. a. (N+ADJ) Many peoples ancient had knowledge of astronomy.  
 b. (IO+DO) He bought for his wife a new dress.
29. a. (PL ADJ) There were sixty-one identicals cats in the room.  
 b. (DA+MN) There is a nationwide interest in the health.
30. a. (N+ADJ) Microbiology presents many mysteries fascinating.  
 b. (DA+MN) In the '60s many people worked for changes in the society.
31. a. (N+ADJ) Bacteria are things small that we can't see with the naked eye.  
 b. (PL ADJ) In Asians societies all the people have the same culture.
32. a. (PL ADJ) American society values creatives ideas.  
 b. (EXPL DROP) Is not enough good farmland in rural areas.
33. a. (EXPL DROP) Is difficult to pass the entrance exams.  
 b. (PRO INS) Some fascinating mysteries are those that they have to do with ancient peoples.
34. a. (PRO INS) An example of prehistoric astronomy is sun symbols that they are found in the Rocky Mountains.  
 b. (IO+DO) They paid to the plumber a hundred dollars.
35. a. (IO+DO) The hosts offered to their guests a drink.  
 b. (N+ADJ) You are a girl pretty.