How do children develop bilingual competence? Do bilingual children develop language in the same way as monolinguals? Set in the context of findings on language development, this book examines the acquisition of English and Spanish by two brothers in the first six years of their lives. Based on in-depth and meticulous analyses of naturalistic data, it explores how the systems of both languages affect each other as the children develop, and how different levels of exposure to each language influence the nature of acquisition. The author demonstrates that the children’s grammars and lexicons follow a developmental path similar to that of monolinguals, but that cross-linguistic interactions affecting lexical, semantic and discourse-pragmatic aspects arise in Spanish when exposure to it diminishes around the age of four. The first of its kind, this original study is a must-read for students and researchers of bilingualism, child development, language acquisition, and language contact.

CARMEN SILVA-CORVALÁN is Professor of Spanish in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Southern California.
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Bilingual Language Acquisition

*Spanish and English in the First Six Years*

Carmen Silva-Corvalán

*University of Southern California*
For Nicolas and Brennan,
   porque no tomaron el camino más fácil.

And for all bilingual children.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of figures</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of tables</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series editor’s foreword</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of abbreviations</td>
<td>xxiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Bilingual language acquisition</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Theoretical preliminaries</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Models and issues in bilingual first language acquisition</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Dominance, proficiency, and the language input</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Conclusion and research questions</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Overview of the book</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Methodology</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 A longitudinal case study</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 The children and their social context: grandmother’s language</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in a two-language home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 The language data</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Determining language dominance and bilingual proficiency</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 Summary</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Bilingual development: a linguistic profile of the first six years</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Introduction</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 From words to sentences: an overview</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Separate development and crosslinguistic interaction</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Being bilingual</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 From sentences to discourse: narrating in Spanish and English</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Later developments</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 Conclusion</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Subjects in English and Spanish</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Introduction</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Subjects in English and Spanish: the adult systems</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Contents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Subjects in bilingual acquisition 130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>The siblings’ acquisition of subjects from 1;6 to 1;11.30 135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Subjects from 2;0 to 2;11.30 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Subjects from 3;0 to 5;11 152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Spanish subjects in discourse 155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Summary and conclusions 164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The order of constituents: subject position in English and Spanish 170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Introduction 170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Factors conditioning subject position in Spanish 172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Subject position in child language 185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Subject position in the speech of English-Spanish bilinguals 189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Summary and conclusions 215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The acquisition of <em>ser</em>, <em>estar</em>, and <em>be</em> 219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Why study copulas? 219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Distribution of <em>ser</em>, <em>estar</em>, and <em>be</em> 222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Copulas in the speech of bilingual children: questions raised 225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>The siblings’ acquisition of English and Spanish copulas from 1;6 to 2;11.30 226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Copulas from 3;0 to 5;11 237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>Tense and person marking of copulas: from 1;6 to 5;11 239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>Selection of <em>ser</em> or <em>estar</em> in various syntactic contexts: from 1;6 to 5;11 244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>Comparison with monolinguals 253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>Crosslinguistic interaction 255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>The extension of <em>estar</em> 260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>Summary and conclusions 261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The development of verb morphology: learning how to mark tense, aspect, and mood 265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Introduction 265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Tense, mood, and aspect in English and Spanish: complexity in the adult systems 266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Issues in the acquisition of verb morphology 277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Methodological preliminaries 280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>The first verbs in English and Spanish 281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>Tense, mood, and aspect development in English: from 2;0 to 2;11.30 303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>Tense, mood, and aspect development in English: from 3;0 to 5;11 312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>Tense, mood, and aspect development in Spanish: from 2;0 to 2;11.30 318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>Tense, mood, and aspect development in Spanish: from 3;0 to 5;11 326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>The preterite–imperfect aspectual opposition 337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.11</td>
<td>Summary and conclusions 343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Discussion and conclusions 348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Introduction 348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Effect of differential amounts of exposure on the siblings’ bilingual development 350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Input complexity and frequency 352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Crosslinguistic interaction 354</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Contents

- 8.5 Linking developing bilinguals and heritage speakers 357
- 8.6 Brief conclusion 361

### Appendices

1. Transcription instructions 362
2. Calculation of MLUW 364
3. Spanish adjectives used with copulas up to age 6;0 366
4. The siblings’ early verb lexicon in English and Spanish 371
5. Excerpt from an adapted Goldilocks story 379

### References 380

### Index of authors 399

### General index 403
Figures

2.1  Nico’s and Brennan’s English MLUw  page 49
2.2  Nico’s and Brennan’s Spanish MLUw  50
2.3  Brennan’s MLUw in English and Spanish  50
2.4  Nico’s MLUw in English and Spanish  51
### Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Approximate percentages of exposure to English and Spanish (to 6 years)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Number of utterances containing a verb produced by Nico in each language by month of age</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Number of utterances containing a verb produced by Nico in each language by month of age when audio recordings were made by month of age</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Number of utterances containing a verb produced by Brennan in each language by month of age, and number of different days when audio recordings were made by month of age</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Nico’s and Brennan’s mean MLUw values in English and Spanish (1;5–3;7)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Developmental order for English <em>wh</em>-words in bilingual and monolingual children. Age of first appearance for bilinguals; average age of acquisition for monolinguals</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Developmental order of Spanish <em>Q</em>-words. Age of first appearance in Nico’s and Brennan’s data</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Information on the recordings of the frog story</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Temporal perspective, verb types, and longest sentence in the frog stories at two times (Nico and Brennan)</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Percentages of overt subject pronouns in adult speech in Los Angeles, Madrid, Caracas, and Santiago de Chile</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Percentage of overt versus null subject pronouns (bilingual twins and monolinguals)</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Overall percentage of use of overt subject pronouns by Manuela and three monolingual children</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Overt versus null subject use in Spanish and English (to 1;11.28)</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Percentage of overt subject pronouns by language and age (1;7–1;11)</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.6 Overt versus null subjects in Spanish and English (2;0–2;11.30) 145
4.7 Overt versus null subjects in the adult input 146
4.8 Percentage of overt subjects by language and age (2;0–2;11) 147
4.9 Percentage of overt subject pronouns by person of the subject (adults) 149
4.10 Percentage of overt subject pronouns by person of the subject: Nico and Brennan (2;0–2;11), and their adult input 150
4.11 Percentage of overt subject pronouns with querer ‘to want’ and creer ‘to believe’ (Nico, Brennan, and their adult input) 151
4.12 Subject realization in Spanish (3;0–3;11 and 4;0–5;11) 153
4.13 Percentage of overt subject pronouns by person of the subject (3;0–3;11 and 4;0–5;11) – Spanish 153
4.14 Percentage of overt subject pronouns with querer ‘to want’ and creer ‘to believe’ (3;0–3;11 and 4;0–5;11) 155
4.15 Subject pronoun realization by coreferentiality (4;0–5;11) 157
4.16 Native speakers’ judgments on the appropriateness of overt subject pronouns 160
5.1 Subject position in spoken Caracas Spanish 180
5.2 Subject position in written Spanish 180
5.3 Subject position in spoken adult Spanish 181
5.4 Subject position by type of verb in the adult input to the siblings 182
5.5 Subject position by animacy and transitivity of the subject in the adult input to the siblings 183
5.6 Position of subject pronouns in spoken and written Spanish 184
5.7 Preverbal pronominal subjects. Siblings (3;0–5;11), adult input, and monolingual children 194
5.8 Overall rates of preverbal nominal subjects in adult and child Spanish 196
5.9 Subject position by type of verb. Siblings (1;7–1;11.30) 200
5.10 Subject position by animacy of the subject. Siblings (1;7–1;11.30) 200
5.11 Overall rates of preverbal and postverbal subjects. Siblings (2;0–2;11.30) 201
5.12 Subject position by type of verb. Siblings (2;0–2;11.30) 201
5.13 Subject position by animacy of the subject. Siblings (2;0–2;11.30) 202
5.14 Overall rates of preverbal and postverbal subjects. Siblings (3;0–5;11) 206
5.15 Subject position. Monolinguals and bilinguals compared 206
5.16 Subject position by child and type of verb (3;0–5;11) 207
List of tables

5.17 Subject position by type of verb. Siblings (3;0–5;11) and Chilean monolinguals (4;6–4;11)...

6.1 Frequency of be, ser, and estar in the structural frames studied (1;6–2;11)...

6.2 Frequent conceptual frames in which ser and estar occur...

6.3 Frequent conceptual frames in which be occurs...

6.4 Appearance of various functions of Spanish copular constructions with expressed copula by month of age...

6.5 Frequency of zero-copula in three types of structures...

6.6 Frequency of be, ser, and estar by tense (1;6–2;11)...

6.7 Development of person marking of copulas with various tenses...

6.8 Frequency of copula selection errors with predicate adjectives (1;6–2;11)...

6.9 Percentage of copula encroachment (1;6–2;11)...

6.10 Proportion of copula selection errors in predicate adjectives, predicate nominals, and progressives (1;6–2;11)...

6.11 Frequency of copula selection errors (3;0–5;11)...

7.1 Relative hierarchy of tense complexity in Latin American Spanish and American English...

7.2 English verb tenses...

7.3 Spanish verb tenses...

7.4 Nico’s first English verbs and age of first appearance in the data...

7.5 Brennan’s first English verbs and age of first appearance in the data...

7.6 Nico’s first Spanish verbs and age of first appearance in the data...

7.7 Brennan’s first Spanish verbs and age of first appearance in the data...

7.8 Early tense forms used by Nico (English and Spanish to 1;11.30) and Brennan (English to 2;1.11, Spanish to 1;11.30)...

7.9 English tenses added (2;5–2;11.30)...

7.10 English auxiliaries appearing (2;0–2;11.30)...

7.11 English tenses, modals, and auxiliaries used (3;0–5;11)...

7.12 Spanish tenses used (2;0–2;11.30)...

7.13 Tense substitutions in Spanish and age of last occurrence (1;7–2;11.30)...

7.14 Spanish tense-mood-aspect forms used (3;0–5;11)...

7.15 Tense substitutions in Spanish and age of last occurrence (3;0–5;11)...

7.16 Spanish tense-mood-aspect usage compared across bilinguals and (near-)monolingual children (5;0–5;11), and two bilingual adults...
The series *Cambridge Approaches to Language Contact* (CALC) was set up to publish outstanding monographs on language contact, especially by authors who approach their specific subject matter from a diachronic or developmental perspective. Our goal is to integrate the ever-growing scholarship on language diversification (including the development of creoles, pidgins, and indigenized varieties of colonial European languages), bilingual language development, code-switching, and language endangerment. We hope to provide a select forum to scholars who contribute insightfully to understanding language evolution from an interdisciplinary perspective. We favor approaches that highlight the role of ecology and draw inspiration both from the authors’ own fields of specialization and from related research areas in linguistics or other disciplines. Eclecticism is one of our mottoes, as we endeavor to comprehend the complexity of evolutionary processes associated with contact.

We are very proud to add to our list Carmen Silva-Corvalán’s *Bilingual Language Acquisition: Spanish and English in the First Six Years*. The author provides detailed analyses of language development data collected over several years from two siblings who happen to be her own grandchildren. She compares the data and her findings with those of other English-Spanish bilingual children reported in the literature, and with other interesting cases involving other languages, such as the Cantonese-English bilingual children that were the focus of a previous publication in the CALC series: *The Bilingual Child* by Virginia Yip and Stephen Matthews (2007). Thus the book provides findings that facilitate informed comparisons that raise questions about universals of bilingual language development and the role of the social environments provided by the home and the extended family in determining ecology-specific peculiarities. Other interesting questions include whether there are learning differences between her child subjects and how to interpret them. Are there differences that reflect interindividual variation in learning skills and contribute partly to shaping the singularity of speakers’ idiolects? Or can one also go as far as to claim that such differences, if they obtain, may also reflect the likelihood that humans may not be equally gifted in “social learning?” The question also applies to other cultural domains, assuming that language is a cultural phenomenon, although one may still invoke some
Universal Grammar or “language organ” to account for some of its ontogenetic and architectural properties. On the other hand, are there differences that have to do with one child having benefited, at the same age, from more interactions with the older population, including the other sibling, than the other? When it comes to language dominance, are personality differences a factor that should not be ignored? How does one define the ecology of bilingual child language development?

There are also some traditional questions, such as whether children are really perfect language learners. What happens in settings in which some of the speakers do not speak at least one of the languages in an “uncontaminated” way—that is, unaffected by the influence of the ethnographically dominant language, either Spanish or English in the present case? What factors determine language dominance in the bilingual child? Other than frequency of use, are there structural reflexes of language dominance? Is there evidence of language dominance in all aspects of language structure? Bilingual Language Acquisition covers many different aspects of the grammars of English and Spanish. There are a number of similarities, but there are also quite interesting differences between the two languages, some of them more obvious than others. The reader will undoubtedly be interested in whether there is consistency system-wise and interindividually in the kinds of confusions that the children experience. Are there any similarities between the experiences of the bilingual child and those reported about adult L2 learners or bilinguals?

There is a great deal to be learned from this book about the mind of a child as an arena of competition not just between the languages in contact, from an ethnographic point of view, but also between their structures, from the point of view of the emergence of the grammars associated with the different languages. Although different readers will certainly be interested in different aspects of the subject matter, I am also sure that many will share my experience in “witnessing” the linguistic development of these children through Carmen Silva-Corvalán’s informative narratives that provide the contexts for the production of several constructions. The data are also presented so adequately that not knowing Spanish is not a factor that should prevent the reader from learning comparatively about developing native competence in two languages. The book also conjures up the question of whether all first-language competences are equal, regardless of whether a speaker is mono- or bilingual.

**Salikoko S. Mufwene, University of Chicago**
Preface

This book is written with the joy of a grandmother who feels that the study of her grandchildren, the focus of this book, can make a contribution to the understanding of early bilingual development and the human capacity for language. English and Spanish have always been present in our home. I spoke both with my children, switching smoothly from one language to the other depending on their appropriateness in a given communicative situation. Naturally, when the grandsons were born, their parents and I made the decision to expose the children to both languages from birth to facilitate their becoming bilinguals. I, the grandmother, was determined to use only Spanish with the children to counteract the strong presence of English in the family and the larger community. Being a linguist, I also decided to follow closely and record the children’s language development in a systematic way. How children acquire language so quickly has interested scholars for thousands of years. Less well investigated is how children learn two languages concurrently. This was the interesting and challenging question I presented to myself and now address in this book, where I examine the bilingual development of two of my grandsons, Nico and Brennan, to about age six.

In many cultures and countries around the world (e.g., Wales, Spain, Indonesia, India, Kenya, South Africa), bilingualism is a part of ordinary daily life and represents the norm as far as language acquisition and use are concerned. In these regions, the acquisition of two or more languages is considered neither a cognitive feat nor a hindrance; it is simply a matter of course. But the children in the present study did not have an easy journey into bilingualism. There were bumps along the way, especially when the vehicle used was Spanish, an unofficial, minority language in the children’s environment. Yet they succeeded, each one to a different level of bilingual proficiency, and, thanks to dual-language elementary education, they became literate bilinguals in Spanish and English. As was to be expected, the community and official language of California, English, developed into the siblings’ dominant language and evidenced only a few features characteristic of a language being acquired alongside another one: in particular, the use of Spanish words in English utterances. Spanish, however, soon showed some
more obvious effects of the strong presence of English, as the ensuing chapters will show.

Clearly, Nico and Brennan’s two languages were equally activated during these early years, but from early on the two language systems were differentiated, both structurally and pragmatically. The typical ecology of the bilingual mode frequently led to mixed language interactions which the siblings handled with great dexterity, switching languages to fit that of the interlocutor. Indeed, even though the children knew that all their family members also spoke English, in their earlier years they chose Spanish to communicate with those who used this language to communicate with them, and English with the rest of the family. Nico and Brennan were the ideal research subjects, talkative, always ready to play with Grandma, eager to be told or read stories and to make up stories, and accepting of the tape recorder (at least during their toddler years).

An undeniable characteristic of language acquisition is individual variation. Although Nico and Brennan’s bilingual environment and development is typical of many children around the world, the reader may question how representative their specific language development may be. Would it be possible to generalize from a case study? I argue that it is possible, if the study is set in the context of other findings on bilingual language development, which this study is. Furthermore, the present study connects the siblings’ development with some aspects of the language of second- and third-generation adult Spanish-English bilinguals (heritage speakers), who show similar language contact features and thus support the validity of the observations made on the basis of the siblings’ data.

This has been a long but thoroughly enjoyable research journey. Reviewing over and over the many hours of diary notes and audio recordings that form the rich database for the studies reported in this book, collected over many years, has given me the opportunity to relive the early years of the siblings’ life: their first words, their realization that they speak differently with different people, their remarkable capacity to develop two language systems, their rich imagination, their stories, their dreams, and their ability to create new words and sentences by blending two languages. While writing this book I have relived the wonder of bilingual development. I hope the reader will share this joy.
Acknowledgments

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xx
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Abbreviations

2L1 two first languages
Adj adjective
AdvP adverbal phrase
Aux auxiliary
BFLA bilingual first language acquisition
CL clitic pronoun
Cond conditional
CondPerf conditional perfect
Cop copula
Fem feminine gender
Fut future
Ident identification
ILP individual-level predicate
Imp imperfect
ImprPol polite imperative
ImpProg imperfect progressive
Impr imperative
ImpSub imperfect subjunctive
Ind indicative
Inf infinitive
L1 first language
L2 second language
LINF low informativeness
LOLI lone other-language item
Masc masculine gender
MLU mean length of utterance
MLUm mean length of utterance in morphemes
MLUw mean length of utterance in words
Neg negation
Noms nominal subjects
NP noun phrase
NS null or non-overt subject
List of abbreviations

OSV  object subject verb
OVS  object verb subject
Part  participle
PastPerFut  past periphrastic future
PastProg  past progressive
PER  person
PerFut  periphrastic future
PL  plural
Pluperf  pluperfect
PluSub  pluperfect subjunctive
PP  prepositional phrase
PPL  person plural
Pres  present
PresPart  present participle
PresPerf  present perfect
PresProg  present progressive
PresSub  present subjunctive
Pret  preterite
PretProg  preterite progressive
Pros  pronominal subjects
PSG  person singular
Q-word  Spanish interrogative word
S  subject
SDM  separate development model
SG  singular
SLP  stage-level predicate
SOV  subject object verb
Sub  subjunctive
SV  subject verb
SVO  subject verb object
SVX  subject verb any constituent
TMA  tense, mood, and aspect
TNS  tense
Trans  transitive
UG  Universal Grammar
ULS  unitary language system
Unerg  unergative
VOS  verb object subject
VS  verb subject
VSO  verb subject object