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Language Contact and Change:
 English's Impact on Subject Personal Pronouns in Spanish

Whether or not its users want to admit it, with any language, change is inevitable. Often, this change is the result of contact with another language and can be seen in many facets of both languages. This report will look at how English is affecting the Spanish language, specifically, I will look at if the subject personal pronoun in Spanish is being affected by contact with English. My research will try to answer the following question: Is English impacting the use of subject personal pronouns in Spanish?

Background

Analyzing English Grammar defines personal pronouns as “[a reference] to people or things that are physically present or that have been mentioned in the preceding text. The subject, or nominative case, is “the form of the personal pronoun used when the pronoun functions as a subject” (Klammer 118). In English and Spanish, the subject personal pronouns are shown in the table below.

	Singular		Plural	
1 st person	I	Yo	We	Nosotros Nosotras
2 nd person	You	Tú	You all/Y'all	Vosotros Vosotras
3 rd person	He/She It (not used)	Él/Ella (not used) Usted	They	Ellos Ellas Ustedes

As seen in the table, there are differences between the forms of subject personal pronouns (SPPs) in English and Spanish. First and second person singular forms have a similar equivalent, but the remainder of the forms show that Spanish SPPs are more gendered than English pronouns. The -o and -os endings found in all plural forms and the 3rd person singular SPP refer to the masculine gender. The -a and -as endings in the same forms refer to the feminine gender. Other differences are found in the 3rd person—“usted” and “ustedes” refer to a formal “you” reference that has no equivalent in English. Also, a SPP for “it” is not usually used in Spanish.

Because of these differences and also because of the differing prescriptive rules governing English and Spanish SPP use, these two languages are ideal to study. In English, the SPP is more or less obligatory. One will be well understood when saying “I went to the store,” but will

encounter problems when saying “Went to the store”. In the second sentence, it is not clear to the audience who went to the store. Spanish-speakers, on the other hand, can say “Yo fui a la tienda” just as easily as “Fui a la tienda,” and be understood either way. This is because “fui” is the first person singular conjugation of the verb “ser,” so the speaker reference is built in.

Some researchers, such as Dawn Harvie, have explored the possibility that English is not a true non-pro-drop language. It is true that there are certain instances where a null subject in English is possible, such as in informal speech or compound sentences in which the subject is stated in the first clause of the sentence. However, this is largely found in informal speech and Old and Middle English. (Harvie 15). While it should not be entirely discarded, I consider this atypical of Modern English as a whole and do not consider this to negatively affect my research.

My Hypothesis

Before starting my research, I hypothesized that English would, indeed, have an effect on the SPP in Spanish. English’s influence on Spanish can already be seen in a more obvious way, such as changes in vocabulary. According to a Spanish professor at Queen Mary, Spanish has adopted many English words into its language, such as “leader” (el líder), “jeans” (los jeans), and “train” (el tren) (Pountain 1). These concepts originated in English and were later adopted into Spanish. Sometimes, there is also the coexistence of an English-influenced word and a native Spanish word; for example, “driver” can be either “el chofer” or “el conductor” (2). This is just a sampling of a much broader English influence on Spanish vocabulary. However, while vocabulary changes occur quickly and frequently, grammar change occurs much more slowly.

Also supporting my hypothesis was the overall effect of language contact. With Mexico sharing a border with four U.S. states, there is direct contact between English and Spanish, especially with immigration into the United States. Even in non-border states, such as New York, there is a prominent Hispanic population. Although English and Spanish have not developed into a pidgin or creole, pidginization and creolizing can result from language contact (Fromkin 434). A pidgin is the vocabulary of one language combined with the grammar of another, used as an intermediary communication between languages. A pidgin can then turn into a more developed creole (Maylath). This is not unusual; there are already numerous English-based pidgins (Fromkin 435). Pidginization and creolizing show just how powerful language contact can be.

It is also important to understand the impact of English as a global language when discussing English’s impact on other languages, such as Spanish. In *English as a Global Language*, David Crystal notes that, historically, English became dominant because of “the expansion of British colonial power, which peaked toward the end of the nineteenth century, and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the twentieth century” (59). English continues to gain power, and in the early 2000s, Crystal estimates that nearly a quarter of the world speaks English (6). In 2012, this number could only have increased. Because of its global dominance and prestige, English has the potential to be highly influential on other languages.

Contact Studies

Despite these statistics, research on the subject is relatively split, more often than not asserting that English is not affecting the Spanish SPP. Research studies by Nydia Flores-Ferrán, Torres-Cacoullous and Travis, and Ricardo Otheguy, et al. seem to accurately sum up the main arguments of both sides.

In “Spanish Subject Personal Pronoun Use in New York City Puerto Ricans: Can We Rest the Case of English Contact?”, Flores-Ferrán outlines a study looking at how 41 Puerto Ricans in New York City used the SPP. To analyze her data, she compared the use of the SPP by native New York City residents to that of new arrivals and also compared her results to the rates of SPP usage in Puerto Rico (49). This is useful because native NYC residents are assumed to have more English impact because they have been immersed in an English-Spanish contact situation for their entire life, whereas new arrivals know more Spanish than English (52).

She found that native NYC residents did, in fact, use more overt SPPs than did new arrivals. This would seem to support an English contact hypothesis. However, she concluded that there were other factors in her data that did not support English influence (67). She uses previous research to explain some of the non-English influences on the use of Spanish SPP. Her summary includes: “a switch in reference, the distance to the previous mention of the verb’s subject, /-s/ deletion on 2nd person verbs, the verb’s person and number, verb semantics, contrast and emphasis, and morphological ambiguity influence speakers’ use of the null or overt form” (49). Not all of these applied to her study, but she found that linguistic features such as these were more influential in the use of the SPP. More importantly, her results were strikingly similar to those of studies of the SPP in Puerto Rico (69).

A study by Torres-Cacoullous and Travis, “Variable *Yo* Expression in New Mexico: English Influence?”¹, also asserts that there are other conditions that influence the Spanish expression of the SPP. In the first person singular, they note that the top four most influential factors of the SPP use were previous realization (whether or not the subject was expressed previously), subject continuity (whether or not the subject changed from a previous reference), semantic class of verb (psychological or not), and verb ambiguity (Torres-Cacoullous and Travis 6). Previous realization proved the most important, illustrating the concept of linguistic priming (7). For example, in the sentence “*Yo* quiero ir a la tienda y *yo* quiero comprar un vestido,” the second “*yo*” is more likely to occur because it was inputted in the first part of the sentence. The study does not, however, completely disregard English impact. Instead, they state that “rather than support for Spanish convergence with English in subject expression and for code-switching as a mechanism of contact-induced change, we have adduced evidence for the local process of priming, with English *I* favoring choice of Spanish *yo* more than unexpressed subjects but less than Spanish *yo* itself” (12).

On the other hand, favoring a contact hypothesis, Otheguy, et al. conducted a similar study as that of Flores-Ferrán in New York City in 2007, but with different conclusions. In his article “Spanish subject personal pronoun use in New York City Puerto Ricans: Can we rest the case of English contact?”, instead of looking at just Puerto Ricans, he looked at the six biggest groups of

¹ The copy of this article that I obtained is undated. However, citations within this article go as late as 2008, so I can deduce that it was published in 2008 or after.

Spanish-speakers in NYC: Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Colombians, Ecuadorians, and Mexicans, using 142 subjects (Otheguy 770). He found similar results as Flores-Ferrán, that the higher the exposure to NYC (English), the higher the use of the overt SPP; however, he used this as proof of English influence on Spanish. He also drew another conclusion—the older in age of the immigrant, the less likely the immigrant is to use the SPP. This was because, in general, his or her skills were stronger in Spanish than English, so the person was more reluctant to change (779). This illustrates the important finding that there appears to be a generational switch, with newcomers being more apt to use the SPP and perhaps predicting a change to come.

In my research, I found little support for Otheguy's argument, and most of what I did find was in other articles authored by him alongside other researchers. However, it is important to note that Otheguy's research is among the most recent studies I found. His article was published in 2007, tying with most recent research, and second to only Torres-Cacoulllos and Travis. In Otheguy's conclusion section, he also acknowledges that his findings are not in accordance with the majority of other articles on the topic. He asserts that differences between his study and others are most likely due to a small sample size (his pool of 142 subjects is much larger than any study he addresses, including Flores-Ferrán) and differences in coding (483).

My Research

Given the contradictory nature of previous findings, I conducted my own primary research in hopes that it would lead me to more conclusive findings.

Methods

Since I did not have access to large amounts of samples of Spanish speech, I focused my research on what was available to me online in written form. I looked at an online bilingual newspaper, *Extra*. *Extra* is based out of Chicago, Illinois and publishes the same stories in both English and Spanish. Chicago is an ideal setting for my research since, according to the U.S. Census, in 2010, about 64.5% of Chicago's residents reported speaking English at home (State & County QuickFacts). This shows a prominent English influence.

I analyzed 10 articles posted in November 2012. First, I looked simply at how many times the SPP was used in English. I then looked at the Spanish version of the article and counted how many time the SPP was used there. Second, when the SPP was used, I grouped its use into one of three categories. My first two categories were ambiguity and subject change (switch reference). In *A Handbook of Contemporary Spanish Grammar*, it is recommended that the SPP be used in cases of ambiguity, especially in the third person form, which, without the SPP, can refer to three different subjects. It is also recommended in cases of comparing and contrasting, such as when the subject changes (Chiquito 101). Aside from cases of ambiguity and subject change, the use of the SPP can be omitted and not cause confusion. Because of this, my third category included the use of the SPP where it was not necessary for clarification.

Results

The results of my initial tally varied greatly. In English, the use of the SPP ranged from 1 instance to 24 instances. In Spanish, the use of the SPP ranged from 0 instances to 5 instances. The percentage of times the Spanish SPP was used when the English SPP was present ranged from 0% to 75%. The average amount of times the Spanish SPP was used is 27%; the relatively

low percent of use of the SPP does not seem to favor an English-contact hypothesis. The results were as follows:

<u>Article Number</u>	<u>English SPP</u>	<u>Spanish SPP</u>	<u>Percent</u>
1	24	5	21%
2	4	3	75%
3	3	1	33%
4	4	0	0%
5	8	4	50%
6	2	0	0%
7	18	4	22%
8	14	4	29%
9	2	0	0%
10	1	0	0%
Total:	76	21	--
Average:	--	--	27%

The results of the second part of my analysis were less variable. The most common use for the Spanish SPP was to clear up ambiguity, the second most common use was an unnecessary insertion of the SPP, and the third most common use was to differentiate between a switch in subjects. Although the SPP was used few times, the amount of times it was unnecessarily used is telling. Thirty-eight percent of the time, the SPP was inserted where it was not necessary for clarification, meaning that there were other factors influencing its use. This is where English influence could come into play. The results were as follows:

<u>Article Number</u>	<u>Ambiguity</u>	<u>Different Subject</u>	<u>Unnecessary</u>
1	3	1	1
2	2	0	1
3	0	0	1
4	0	0	0
5	1	1	2
6	0	0	0
7	3	1	0
8	0	1	3
9	0	0	0
10	0	0	0
Total:	9	4	8
Percent:	42%	19%	38%

Limitations

Since this was such a small-scale research project, there are clear limitations to my research. First, my sample size was small, so my data may or may not be representative of the phenomenon as a whole, and pronouns in general occurred few times to begin with. Second, I analyzed written data, as compared to the speech analyzed by scholars in the articles I cited. As a whole, speech tends to be more unconscious/unrehearsed and indicative of change, whereas

written material involves more calculation. It is also worth noting that this is a professional publication, so there may be constraints on the style of writing imposed on the writers by the publication. Third, it was not always clear whether the articles were first written and then translated or if one bilingual writer wrote both articles separately. If it were written separately, audience would be more likely to have been taken into consideration and thus the content and structure could have changed. Finally, my classifications of the Spanish SPPs are subjective. Since I did not write the articles myself, it cannot be concretely proven what the intent of the SPP was.

Conclusion

At the very least, more research is necessary to come to a more uniform stance on English's impact on subject personal pronouns. English's close contact with Spanish and its stance as a global language would seem to support a contact hypothesis where English is affecting Spanish; however, much research does not reinforce this. As language continues to change, I propose that more diachronic studies need to be conducted and compared to the research of the past, as well as more detailed analysis of the research already conducted.

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