# The Role of Frequency in Phonological and Morphosyntactic Variation

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For decades, studies have shown remarkably consistent constraint effects on a wide range of sociolinguistic variables including Spanish subject personal pronoun (SPP) variation and English consonant cluster reduction (CCR). For example, Spanish pronouns are always more likely to be realized as overt when there is a switch in reference from the subject of the preceding tensed verb than in cases of subject continuity and English CCR is always more frequent in pre-consonantal than in pre-vocalic environments. These consistent and replicable results give us confidence in the basic premises of variation theory. In contrast, despite the predictions of exemplar theory concerning the role of frequency in language variation and change (Bybee 2002, 2010), studies of English CCR have produced inconsistent results, with some studies showing strong frequency effects (e.g. Bybee 2002; Jurafsky et al. 2001) and others showing no such effects (e.g. Walker 2012). Similarly, studies of SPP variation that included frequency as a factor have also produced mixed results. Erker and Guy (2012), for example, based on data from six Dominicans and six Mexicans drawn from Otheguy and Zentella's (2012) New York City Spanish corpus, present results that suggest that frequency either activates or amplifies the effects of other well-established constraints such as co-reference with the subject of the preceding tensed verb and person and number. Other studies, however, based on Mexican immigrant, Mexican American, and Dominican Spanish, do not replicate Erker and Guy's results (Bayley et al. 2013; Martínez-Sanz & van Herk 2013). In this presentation, I examine the possible role of frequency in CCR in English and SPP variation in Spanish, using data from Chicano English in San Antonio and "North Town", Texas for English CCR and Mexican American and peninsular Spanish for Spanish SPP variation. The results of these studies show that frequency has at most a minimal effect in these cases of stable variation. In the case of CCR, frequency has a small effect on monomorphemes in the San Antonio data and no effect in the "North Town" data. In the case of SPP variation, frequent verbs slightly disfavor the use of an overt pronoun in the U.S. data and have no significant effect in the peninsular data. The absence of consistent effects for frequency in the variables examined here and elsewhere (see e.g. Abramowicz 2007; Labov 2010; Tamminga in press), indicates that the role of frequency language variation and change has been considerably overestimated. It also suggests reasonable doubt about exemplar theory. While it may be reasonable to test for frequency effects along with other possible influences on variation, the results of the studies presented here and elsewhere suggest that claims regarding frequency as a main constraint on linguistic variation lack firm empirical support.

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