

Variable Pronouns in Spanish and the role of the syntax-pragmatics interface

Aria Adli (*University of Cologne*)

This talk deals with variable subject pronoun use in Spanish. I will show that a detailed analysis of the syntax-pragmatics interface allows us to understand hitherto unexplained variance regarding the variation between sentences with realized subject pronouns (e.g. *yo leí este libro* ‘I read this book’) and their counterparts with zero subjects (e.g. \emptyset *leí este libro* ‘I read this book’).

Numerous studies exist on various Spanish dialects on switch reference or subject continuity (e.g. Silva-Corvalán, 1982; Bentivoglio, 1987; Cameron, 1992; Shin-Lapidus & Otheguy, 2009). The present paper proposes a more fine-grained analysis of subject continuity in terms of information structure. Building on Frascarelli (2007), we assume that the analysis of subject continuity should be restricted to subject *topics*, which means that utterances in which a non-subject is the topic of the sentence or topicless sentences have to be excluded from the envelope of variation.

The data consisted of spontaneous speech from 54 European Spanish speakers taken from the *sgs* corpus. All sentences have been annotated with regard to topicality and theticity (Sasse, 2006; Brunetti, 2009). The envelope of variation has been circumscribed following Otheguy et al. (2007). We have counted 3504 pronominal subject topics and 1041 topicless sentences. In a next step, we have annotated two separate *topic chains*, namely one chain for deictic or local persons, i.e. those involved in the interview, and one for nondeictic or nonlocal persons. We have then analyzed in an ANOVA (i) whether the subject pronoun belongs to the deictic or the nondeictic topic chain, (ii) whether there is topic continuity or topic shift, and (iii) whether there is a chain switch from the deictic to the nondeictic one or vice-versa.

The results show that these three variables are highly significant, both in terms of main effects and interactions: As expected, topic continuity/shift has an important overall effect. However, the effect size is much larger for the nondeictic chain. In addition, chain switching shows opposite effects for familiar topics, where it results in a higher pronoun rate, and for shift topics, where it results in a lower pronoun rate.

These effects could not have been unveiled without the integration of an information structural layer into the annotation. Thus, the results of this study demonstrate that a promising avenue for future research is a closer combination between variationist methodology and theoretical insights from the syntax-pragmatics interface.

References

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