Variable agreement with Spanish binominal constructions

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This paper analyzes a subcase of the phenomenon known as *ad sensum* agreement in Spanish binominal constructions, typically schematized as NP1 *de* NP2 (see Traugott 2008a/b; Gili Gaya 1993). In these cases, a verb whose subject is a binominal construction agrees either with the NP1 (*un montón* 'a heap'), shown in example (1a), or with the NP2 (*paraguas* 'umbrellas'), as in example (1b). It has been argued that this pattern reflects a shift in the syntactic head in these constructions, particularly with high frequency NP1 tokens undergoing semantic change (see, e.g., Brucart 1997, Berg 1998). Verveckken and Cornillie discuss different factors that have been claimed to favor *ad sensum* agreement in Spanish, arguing that a proper account of these patterns must be understood as "a reflection of the conceptual intentions of the speaker" (2012:249, translation mine). The current analysis revisits this phenomenon focusing on a wider selection of binominal constructions and demonstrates that agreement is sensitive not only to degree of semantic/structural change but also to the different frequencies associated with each of the nominal elements in the construction.

(1)   a.   Mira, estaba la gallina, pone los huevos pon-pon-pon, <u>sale</u> [NP1-SG un montón] de huevecitos (*CREA*, oral)

         b.   llueve a las once y media de la mañana y coge a la gente en la calle sin el paraguas y entonces <u>se compran</u> un montón de [NP2-PL paraguas] (*CREA*, oral)

In this study, tokens of binominal constructions were extracted from both the written and oral portions of the *Corpus del Español* (*CdE*) and the *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual* (*CREA*). In addition to the more grammaticalized quantifier expressions with *montón, pila* 'pile', others, there were two other groups of NP1 elements that were extracted: (i) NP1 tokens denoting quantity or collectivity, like *cantidad* 'quantity', and (ii) NP1 tokens that make indefinite reference, as in *tipo* 'type'. A total of 923 tokens occurring as verbal subjects were coded for agreement type (i.e. NP1 or NP2) and for a list of different independent factors predicted to influence agreement. Regarding the independent factors, this group included those that were observed by Verveckken and Cornillie (e.g., verb type, presence of articles) and, crucially, a list of factors related to the frequency of occurrence of both the NP1 and NP2 elements. The tokens were then subjected to multi-variate analysis using *Rbrul*.

The results confirm that the group of quantifier expressions including *montón* displays the highest overall frequency of NP2 agreement (i.e. *ad sensum* agreement), followed by the indefinite nouns. This result is consistent with the argument that these expressions are likely more grammaticalized than basic quantity expressions (like *cantidad*). The statistical analysis, while confirming Verveckken and Cornillie's claim that *ad sensum* agreement is the result of several different factors, reveals a strong effect for frequency, particularly in high frequency collocates such as *montón de personas* 'lots of people' and *tipo de cosas* 'type of things'. In sum, this study makes two important observations: first, language change is a highly gradient phenomenon (see also Traugott and Trousdale 2010, among others); and second, gradience in grammar is best examined by looking at the *interaction* of multiple factors associated with the structural variability.