

How Specificity and Topic Persistence Affect First Person Plural Subject Pronoun Expression in Mexican Spanish

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Variable subject pronoun expression in Spanish is an extensively analyzed aspect of the language (Silva-Corvalán, 2001:154-169). Many studies, however, treat subject pronouns as a unitary category. Subject pronoun rates vary across grammatical persons (e.g. Otheguy & Zentella, 2012), thus motivating recent studies of pronoun expression primarily within first and third person singular (e.g. Travis & Torres Cacoullós, 2012). However, less work has been conducted examining first person plural (1pl) subject pronoun expression (but see Cameron 1995).

Spanish 1pl, *nosotros* 'we', is unique in that it includes the speaker plus an infinite number of possible other referents. Due to its wide range of possible referents, *nosotros* can convey a sense of inclusivity or of exclusion, carrying a social and pragmatic meaning beyond that of other grammatical persons. The current study examines the rates of *nosotros* expression in two speech corpora by focusing on the following questions: 1) Are the factors that most influence the expression of 1pl subject personal pronouns similar to those for other grammatical persons? 2) How do specificity and topic persistence, factors that have been less studied, affect 1pl subject pronoun expression? 3) Does socio-economic status affect the rate of subject pronoun expression?

Two corpora of Mexican Spanish (UNAM 1971, 1976), taken to approximate different levels of socio-economic status, were analyzed for the conditioning of 1pl subject pronoun expression (N=2258). A multivariate analysis found that priming, switch reference, tense-aspect-mood (TAM), specificity, and topic persistence were significant in influencing the rate of 1pl subject pronoun expression. The current results replicate previous general findings for priming and subject continuity, with *nosotros* favored when the preceding clause subject was realized as a pronoun and when it was non-coreferential. The TAM effect, however, is such that expression is most favored by the present.

Most novel are the results for topic persistence, a measure of a topic's importance in the discourse, as measured here by the presence of a subsequent mention of the 1pl referent within the following five clauses (cf. Givón, 1983). Subjects with referents displaying higher topic persistence exhibit a higher rate of expressed subject pronouns, suggesting that expressed subjects are an indicator of importance in the local discourse. Concerning specificity, we find that topics, genres, and styles of interview that are more prevalent in one socio-economic status influence the types and frequencies of 1pl use. We find that *habla culta* speakers are much more likely than *habla popular* speakers to employ 'inclusive' and 'generic' 1pl reference, while *habla popular* tokens consist almost entirely of 'exclusive' 1 pl references.

In conclusion, while several familiar constraints are replicated, the unique social and pragmatic meaning of 1pl allows additional factors such as specificity to influence the expression of 1pl. Finally, a preliminary measure of topic persistence and its effect on subject pronoun expression yields promising results, indicating that more important topics are likely to favor subject pronoun expression.

Selected References:

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