The Verb as a Predictor of Variable Pronominal Use in Spanish

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This study explores the effects of verb-related constraints as predictors of variable subject pronoun expression (SPE) in Spanish. Verb semantics and verbal tense-mood-aspect have been found to be robust predictors of the alternation between express and null subjects throughout the Hispanic World including Colombia (Hurtado 2005, Travis 2005), New York City (Otheguy & Zentella 2012), Spain (Enríquez 1984, Posio 2011), Puerto Rico (Abreu 2009), and Uruguay (Carvalho & Child 2011). Interestingly, verb semantics has been explored using several different predictor and factor configurations. This study addresses questions that either emerged as a result of increased research on the variable use of subject personal pronouns (SPPs) in Spanish over the last decade, or remain open in spite of it. We explore the effects of verb-related constraints on SPE using 8,250 tokens culled from conversations with individuals from four speaker groups: (a) Barranquilla, Colombia, (b) Puerto Rico, (c) New York City Colombians, and (d) Southern Louisiana Puerto Ricans.

The results for Lexical Content and Verb Type concur with those of previous studies, confirming that verb semantics significantly conditions SPE. Nevertheless, these results do not considerably augment our collective knowledge. By dividing verbs into the categories traditionally used by *pronombristas* to explore Lexical Content, we continue to employ a classification that has been considered somewhat problematic (Posio 2011: 780) while neglecting Orozco & Guy's (2008:77) call for more definite information as to the effects of verb semantics on SPE. Concurrently, the results for Verb Type do not provide a much better alternative. For instance, Copulative Verbs favoring overt pronouns and "Other" Verbs, favoring null subjects, would both fall within the Stative category of the Lexical Content configuration. Consequently, lexical frequency has recently been proposed as an alternative to study verb semantics (Erker & Guy 2012; Posio 2011, under review). However, it has also been found to have a "relatively small effect on SPP use" (Bayley, Ware & Holland 2013). In view of this, we analyze the effects of verb semantics on SPE using a lexical frequency approach different from those employed by Erker & Guy (2012) and Posio (2011). Results uncover divergences between one or more verbs and the remaining verbs within each Lexical Content category, i.e., Stative, Mental and External activity. These results provide a more detailed account of how verbs condition SPE. That is, grouping verbs according to their semantic commonalities in exploring how they condition SPE, and perhaps, other linguistic variables, may leave important differences uncovered. Our results, taken together with those of Travis (2005b, 2007), Posio (2011) and Erker & Guy (2012) strongly suggest that we need to increase our understanding of verb semantics by further exploring its effects on SPE employing a multipronged approach that takes into account the configuration of the corpus at hand, the syntactic characteristics of different verbs, and lexical frequency. Concurrently, as proposed by Tagliamonte (2014), we can only benefit from expanding our analytical scope by employing recently developed and more versatile statistical tools as we improve the accountability of our findings.