Gauging cross-linguistic functional equivalence: Spanish-English subject realization

Catherine Travis
The Australian National University

Rena Torres Cacoullos
The Pennsylvania State University

The topic of subject expression and ellipsis has been explored extensively, and several factors have been proposed to operate widely across languages. These include referent accessibility, as measured by subject continuity; structural priming or perseveration; and functions of contrast. These constraints have been explored much more widely for languages with variable subject expression (so called “pro-drop languages”), than for languages where expression is near obligatory and there are few empirical studies that test cross-linguistic generalizations about subject realization. In this study, we address this through a comparison of patterns of subject realization across two languages representing each of these extremes, Spanish and English respectively.

We work on the basis of the premise that, in discourse, inter-linguistic functional equivalence is observable in parallel favoring effects of contextual factors operationalizing putative constraints on the selection of a given variant form (cf. Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001). We compare patterns of first person singular subject realization across English and Spanish, focusing, for Spanish, on patterns of expression (based on approximately 1,000 tokens from the Corpus of Conversational Colombian Spanish; Travis 2005), and for English, on both patterns of expression and patterns of stress (based on 1,800 tokens from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English; Du Bois et al. 2000, 2003, 2004, 2005).

Our findings indicate that while some constraints do apply across the three variables, and are thus candidate cross-linguistic tendencies, others do not. A priming effect is found for all three variables; subject continuity is also evident across all three, but there are major differences in the way in which it is configured for each; functions of contrast, on the other hand, are found to be evident only for stressed I. We also observe a prosodic effect only for unexpressed I in English, such that, outside of coreferential and-coordinated constructions, variability only exists in prosodic-initial position. Finally, particular constructions specific to each variable are identified. Systematic quantitative analysis of variation thus enables us to discern both shared and language-specific patterns; more such studies are called for to enable us to characterize cross-linguistic generalizations on subject realization.

References

