Syntax, information structure and social variation: The case of Spanish subject personal pronouns

Aria Adli (University of Hamburg)

This paper presents an analysis of internal and external factors that have an effect on the choice between null and overt subject pronouns in the Spanish spoken in Catalonia.

A gender- and age-balanced sample of 54 Spanish speakers from Barcelona performed a gametask designed to elicit both declaratives and interrogatives. The transcriptions were syntactically tree-annotated. Subjects also responded to a sociocultural questionnaire based on the lifestyle operationalisation of Bourdieu (1979). The envelope of variation only includes clauses in which null as well as overt pronouns could occur which amounts to 8815 non-elliptical finite clauses. The dependent variable is the overt pronoun rate.

I. Grammar-internal factors: 6 two-way ANOVAs were calculated with both the position of the overt pronoun (pre- vs. postverbal) and one of the following factors: root modality (declarative, polar, wh), verb class (transitive, unaccusatives, ditransitives...), polarity (affirmative, negative), object clitization (clitic vs. full DP), TopP (with or without topicalization/dislocation), person and number of the verb. The results show (i) factors that have a significant main effect that is independent of the subject pronoun position (person & number, polarity), and (ii) factors that only show an effect in interaction with the pronoun position (verb class, root modality).

II: Social factors: In a new serie of ANOVAs the effect of gender, age group, occupational category (according to ISCO 2008), income, and lifestyle was tested. 3 lifestyle clusters were obtained after (i) reducing 217 questions on preferred leisure activities, media, clothing, and social attitudes to 26 factors in a principal component analysis, which then (ii) constituted the input for a two-step cluster analysis. The results show no effects of gender, age and occupation, but significant effects of lifestyle and income. These findings contradict Silva-Corvalán (2001: 133) and Otheguy et al. (2007: 778) according to whom "independent variables involving personal characteristics tend have no impact on the variability of morphosyntactic features like subject pronouns".

In conclusion I want to argue that the main element here behind the grammar-internal factors is information structure. However, information structural differences build on tendencies rather than categorical rules, creating a flexible space in which social variation can become manifest.

References

