Retraction of accusative object marking in Caribbean Spanish

Gabriela G. Alfaraz (Michigan State University)

The marking of accusative animate objects in Spanish with the preposition ‘a’ has been examined in theoretical syntax (Torrego, 1998), functional typology (Aissen, 2003), and semantics (von Heusinger & Kaiser, 2003). While most research has been from a synchronic perspective, diachronic studies (von Heusinger, 2008; Melis, 1995) have shown significant variation in Old and Modern Spanish, with a significantly higher rate of object marking in Modern Spanish, and a trajectory of change constrained by the definiteness and specificity of the object. Despite evidence of diachronic change, whether object marking has continued to spread to new contexts in Modern Spanish appears to have gone largely uninvestigated. It is not surprising, then, that the opposite scenario, the retraction of object marking, has not been noted.

The study reported on here used data from Cuban Spanish to investigate observations in Lunn (2002) that varieties of Caribbean Spanish are undergoing retraction of object marking. The distribution of object marking is examined in two generations of native speakers with a real time analysis based on voice recordings from the 1960s and 1990s. The findings confirmed that object marking is variable in contexts in which it is expected to be categorical. A Goldvarb analysis showed significant generational differences, with absence of accusative object marking favored by younger (.79) and disfavored by older generations (.34). In this variety the grammatical distribution of object marking is similar to Old Spanish, which had optional marking with animate definite objects, obligatory marking with personal pronouns and proper names, and no marking with indefinites (von Heusinger, 2008). It was found that absence of the marker was strongly disfavored with personal pronouns (.06) and proper names (.08), moderately favored with definite NPs (.69), and strongly favored with indefinite specific NPs (.86) and indefinite nonspecific NPs (.98).

References