Translation effects as evidence in language contact studies: 
The case of variable subject pronouns in NYC Spanish

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Where language change occurs in bilingual communities, researchers often disagree whether specific changes can be attributed to language contact or not. Variation in Spanish subject pronouns is a case in point: Studies of Spanish spoken in the United States have identified a higher rate of overt pronoun use than is found in Spanish spoken elsewhere, but there is no consensus as to whether this apparent language change can be attributed to contact with English (Silva-Corvalán 1994, Bayley and Pease-Alvarez 1997, Flores-Ferrán 2004, Otheguy et al. 2007).

This study addresses this question by exploring a particular kind of data in which language contact is an inherent factor, namely data from interpreters who translate from English into Spanish. Interpreters are often observed to produce target language forms that are influenced by source language structures, and such translation effects can be viewed as parallel to language contact phenomena produced by bilingual speakers outside of translation contexts. It is thus proposed that data from translation contexts may be used to test hypotheses of contact-induced language change.

Drawing on data from informal court proceedings in New York City, this study investigates subject pronoun use in the speech of seven interpreters, all native speakers of Spanish from different countries of origin (Caribbean and Mainland Latin America), as are the court users for whom they translate. Preliminary results of overall frequency and internal factors indicate that interpreters use subject pronouns at relatively high rates compared to other Spanish speakers in the sample and compared to what has been observed for NYC Spanish speakers of the same backgrounds (cf. Otheguy et al 2007). Furthermore, interpreters are found to use more subject pronouns when translating an English sentence with a corresponding subject pronoun than when producing utterances in Spanish that do not correspond to a structurally parallel English source.

References
Flores-Ferrán, Nydia. 2004. Spanish Subject Personal Pronoun Use in New York City Puerto Ricans: Can We Rest the Case of English Contact? Language Variation and Change 16:49-73.