A syntactic approach to variable number marking in Afro-Bolivian Spanish

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This paper analyzes plural marking in the Afro-Bolivian Spanish (ABS) Determiner Phrase (DP) to establish the phi-feature valuation process regulating its variation.

Plural marking variation is analyzed following recent approaches to syntactic variation (Adger and Smith 2005, Adger and Trousdale 2007, Parrott 2007) whereby two different syntactic inputs yield semantically equivalent outputs.

Several works have focused on similar phenomena in other Spanish/Portuguese dialects (Cedergren 1973, Terrell 1976, Poplack 1979/1980, Braga 1977, Guy 1981, Sherre 2001). While in some of these studies phonological/stress factors played a major role, this paper illustrates that grammatical features are the actual locus of variation in ABS.

Building on current assumptions on phrase structure and agreement (Chomsky 2000, 2001; Bernstein 2001; Longobardi 2001; Béjar 2003; Pesetsky and Torrego 2004; Adger et al. 2008), this paper argues that the presence of valued number features in ABS is reduced in comparison to Standard Spanish. Uninterpretable agreement phi-features are redundant and their absence is grammatically costless. Such hypothesis is congruent with previous studies suggesting impoverished agreement in the DP of ABS (Lipski 2007).

2786 tokens were extracted from a corpus of 12 recorded interviews, for a total of almost 12 hours of conversation with Afro-Bolivian speakers. The interviews were conducted by letting the speaker talk about any topic of their liking including follow-up questions -in line with the principle of Tangential Shift (Labov 1984:37), thus reducing the Observer’s Paradox (Labov 1972). The speakers were selected to include different groups according to the external factor selected, namely: generation, gender, education, and mobility.

This study looks into ABS number marking combining current formal syntactic theory and empirical variationist methodology. It contributes to the knowledge of agreement systems in less studied varieties of Spanish and offers novel data and analyses in line with the recent lines of research linking sociolinguistics and syntax.