

Personal subject pronouns: Testing the Theory of Perseveration

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Spanish is well known as being a pro-drop language, having the option of expressing subject personal pronouns (SPP) in an overt or a null form (*Él va a la tienda* vs. *Ø Va a la tienda*). While the null form is generally considered the norm, in some Caribbean dialects the use of overt SPPs is extremely high (Alba 2000, Morales 1997, Toribio 1996) and in some cases has become almost obligatory (Alba 1982, Sábater 1978).

The variationist line of research looks to describe the elevated use of overt SPPs using linguistic factors, such as change of subject and verbal morphology (Flores-Ferrán 2002, Hochberg 1986) and sociolinguistic factors, such as educational level and English influence (Flores-Ferrán 2002). However, the linguistic factors do not adequately predict overt SPP usage (Morales 1997), and many of the sociolinguistic factors have not been shown to correlate (Flores-Ferrán 2002, 2004).

A more recent attempt at describing the distribution of overt SPPs is the Theory of Perseveration (Cameron & Flores-Ferrán 2004). This theory, based on Spreading Activation Theory (Dell 1986), states that using an overt SPP makes a speaker more likely to use another, so overt SPPs occur in clusters (perseverations). The same holds true for null SPPs. However, this was only shown for Puerto Rican and Madrileno Spanish and so has not been confirmed across all dialects. Moreover, these perseverations have only been studied in narrational speech.

More support can be gained for perseveration if it is shown to occur across dialects and across speech situations. The present study aims to identify perseveration in two dialects of Spanish: Dominican (known for high overt SPP usage) and Mexican (known for low overt SPP usage). Ten speakers (five from each dialect) were recorded in conversational situations. The speakers were a mix of males and females and were of various ages. It was expected that the Dominican speech would involve a higher use of overt SPPs and that these overt SPPs would occur in clusters, much like the results of Cameron & Flores-Ferrán (2004). It was also expected that Mexican overt SPPs would occur in clusters, although overall usage rates would be low.

Overt SPP use was identified and analyzed according to the preceding context. When the preceding verb (trigger) had an overt SPP subject, the context was known as overt, while a trigger with a null subject was a null context. The trigger and target verbs were categorized as indicating a change of subject or having the same subject.

As predicted, Dominican Spanish involved a higher rate of overt SPP usage than Mexican Spanish (21.5% to 13.3%). In addition, Dominican overt SPPs were more likely to occur in overt contexts than null contexts (showing clustering), while null SPPs were more likely to occur in null contexts than overt ones, and these differences were significant for both change of subject ($p \leq 0.01$) and same subject triggers ($p \leq 0.001$). Mexican Spanish also showed these perseverations, although the effect was only significant when the trigger had the same subject as the target ($p \leq 0.001$).

These data support the ability of the Theory of Perseveration to be applied across dialects, showing clustering of overt SPPs in both Dominican and Mexican Spanish. In addition, they indicate that perseveration occurs not only in narrational contexts, as had been previously examined, but in conversational situations, as well.

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