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# The optional Spanish subjunctive mood grammar of New York City heritage bilinguals

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## Abstract

Carried out within a variationist-sociolinguistic framework, this study seeks to gain a better understanding of the underlying mood grammar of second-generation heritage bilinguals in New York City (NYC). To that end, we compare optional subjunctive use in the speech of 26 second-generation heritage bilinguals to that of 26 of their first-generation counterparts. Based on usage patterns observed in both generations, a total of ten linguistic contexts are identified as subjunctive optional, i.e., where the subjunctive and the indicative alternate. Results stemming from quantitative analyses show that generation conditions optional subjunctive use, suggesting the presence of two distinct generational groups in our corpus. Furthermore, two internal variables are found to be statistically significant for both cohorts: linguistic context and rank order; whereas only one external variable is significant for the bilingual heritage speakers: level of English skill. Finally, we take a critical approach to challenge widely-accepted notions surrounding heritage languages, namely simplification, attrition and incomplete acquisition, concluding that all three lack the theoretical means to accurately describe the complex bilingual situation in NYC.

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## 1. Introduction

This variationist-sociolinguistic study centers on second-generation New York City (NYC) bilinguals' use of the Spanish subjunctive in optional contexts, i.e., syntactic and semantic linguistic environments wherein both grammatical moods manifest (the indicative mood, e.g. *tal vez ella canta* 'perhaps she sings', and the subjunctive mood, e.g. *tal vez ella cante* 'perhaps she would sing'). To this end, we compare mood choice in the speech of heritage Spanish–English bilinguals either born or raised from early childhood in NYC, to that of their first-generation counterparts. The data are from the Otheguy-Zentella corpus from which we use a total of 52 transcriptions for analysis, i.e., 26 participants in two generational cohorts, each representative of the six primary Spanish-speaking groups in NYC: Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, Mexican, Ecuadorian, and Colombian. Furthermore, the first generation's usage patterns serve as the reference model for a total of ten optional subjunctive contexts (OpSC), presented below in the Methodology section. The central purpose of this study is twofold:

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- Attempt to further our understanding of the underlying mood grammar of second-generation speakers.<sup>1</sup> We began to formulate an idea of this in Viner (2016) where we discovered generational differences in obligatory use of the subjunctive. We now expand this research to these ten optional contexts in order to advance an even deeper comprehension of this mood grammar.
- Challenge widely-accepted notions pertaining to generational Spanish situated in the U.S., namely simplification, attrition and incomplete acquisition.

Addressing these two problems contributes to the body of sociolinguistic work centered not only on Spanish in the U.S., but also with regard to language contact as a whole. That is, this study has the potential to shed new light on the linguistic constraints of the mood grammar of the second generation, which may allow for a type of redirection concerning the labels and ideas surrounding subsequent generations in language-contact situations. What's more, because our study includes six different varieties of Spanish in constant contact with one another in NYC, there are opportunities for further insight into phenomena associated with language-variety contact as well.

In order to frame a theory based on the two principal investigatory aims stated above, we attend to the following research questions:

1. Does second-generation optional mood use differ from that of the first-generation?
2. What internal and external independent variables condition optional subjunctive usage in the first and second generations?
3. Do second-generation bilinguals command mood choice, or are there signs of instability?

As we will see below in the review of literature, subsequent generations tend to use the subjunctive mood significantly less than the first generation, especially in contexts that allow either mood, thus the creation of labels like simplification, attrition, incomplete acquisition, etc. This investigation's research questions will tackle these ideas in order to test their validity. Yet the question remains: why study generational Spanish subjunctive use? The complete answer to this question is in the synthesis of the entire study; the shorter answer, however, rests in the complexity of the Spanish mood system wherein choice of mood determines the message communicated. That is, though the difference between *quizás vienen* (I)/*vengan* (S) 'perhaps they'll come' is a subtle one, viz., the indicative pragmatically expressing higher probability, the subjunctive less probability, the mental grammar required to differentiate the two, in both comprehension and production, is complex.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a close study of this linguistic feature is therefore insightful because it can reveal changes taking place in the mental grammars of the second generation by comparing their usage patterns to those of the first generation.

## 2. Literature review

Linguistic investigations centered on Spanish in the U.S. are an area of increasing attention, and for good reason: the U.S. has the second largest Spanish-speaking population, with over 44 million Spanish speakers, surpassed only by Mexico with over 100 million. Spanish in the U.S. is of particular interest to linguists for several reasons, namely its persistent social stigma as the less-dominant language, its contact with English and other varieties of Spanish, and less normative pressures typically present in Spanish monolingual countries. Furthermore, because Spanish is spoken throughout the U.S., linguists have realized city-specific studies on myriad linguistic features, the Spanish subjunctive one of the most prevalent. For instance, NYC studies include Viner (2016), Otheguy (2001, 2007, 2009), Otheguy and Zentella (2012), Otheguy and Lapidus (2005), Flores-Ferrán (2004), Torres (1989), Zentella (1990, 1997), Pousada and Poplack (1982), Milán (1982), and Lantolf (1978). Scholars investigating Spanish in California are Silva-Corvalán (1991, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2001), Gutiérrez (2003), Acevedo (2000), Salvi (1997), and Ocampo (1990). Lynch (2008, 1999) investigates

<sup>1</sup> Regarding our view on the theory of grammar, we conceive of our participants' mood grammar postulated on the basis of empirical usage data, i.e., a grammar based on their actual language performance as opposed to introspective competence (for a discussion of competence, see Chomsky, 1965). A grammar conceived of by way of performance consists of underlying principles that guide language use, which can be postulated by quantitative analyses. Grammar based on intuitions (i.e., relying on self-analysis and judgments) is a method we find inadequate for the purpose of this study given the circumstances of the Spanish spoken by the second-generation bilinguals who, for the most part, have little to no formal education in Spanish. The development of this particular grammatical feature, mood, is contingent on its use and function as per the communication within the family and/or community of which the second-generation speaker is a part. We are not proposing, however, that formal education is required for command of mood use in Spanish. Rather, because the second generation likely does not command reading and writing in Spanish, two skills generally necessary for competence based tasks, we center on the oral production of mood in order to describe their grammar. This reality, along with the cross-linguistic and cross-dialectal situation of our participants, composes our investigation forum.

<sup>2</sup> In contexts where both moods are used, the general consensus is that the subjunctive expresses less assertion or probability, whereas the indicative expresses more. See Lynch (1999) for a detailed exploration of the pragmatic/semantic constraints for mood use.

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