

Subject expression in grammaticalizing constructions: The case of *creo* and *acho* ‘I think’ in Spanish and Portuguese

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Abstract

Subject pronoun usage in Romance null-subject languages is often presented as a general, binary, language-wide phenomenon conditioned e.g. by sociolinguistic or information-structural factors. This paper argues that subject expression or omission should also be examined in specific local contexts where it may exhibit patterns of usage that diverge from the general tendencies. The study analyses the use of first person singular subject pronouns in high-frequency epistemic constructions containing the verbs *creer* ‘think’ in Peninsular Spanish and *achar* ‘think’ in European Portuguese spoken corpora. It is argued that the highly frequent expression of the first person singular subject pronoun in Spanish epistemic constructions is related to their higher degree of grammaticalization. In Portuguese the constructions appear to be less grammaticalized and do not exhibit a specific pattern of subject expression. The difference between the two languages is linked with the higher normalized frequency of the constructions in Spanish than in Portuguese which permits the entrenchment of a specific subject expression pattern. In addition, the fact that the original meaning of *achar* is ‘find’ and its use as a mental verb in Portuguese is a relatively recent development may explain that the verb does not exhibit subject expression patterns typical of other mental verbs in Spanish and Portuguese.

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1. Introduction and background

The variation between null and overt pronominal subjects is one of the most widely studied topics in Romance syntax. The choice between expressing and omitting the pronominal subject has been shown to be sensitive to such factors as grammatical person (e.g. [Enríquez, 1984](#); [Otheguy et al., 2007](#)), switch reference (e.g. [Enríquez, 1984](#); [Cameron, 1992, 1993](#)), verb type or semantic role of the subject ([Enríquez, 1984](#); [Hurtado, 2005](#); [Posio, 2011, 2012a, b, 2013](#)), and priming effects (e.g. [Cameron and Flores-Ferrán, 2004](#); [Travis, 2007](#)). Interestingly, verb type covaries with subject pronoun expression in both languages at least in the case of first person singular ([Cameron, 1992](#); [Posio, 2013](#)). In Spanish, mental or cognitive verbs such as the verb *creer* ‘think’ are associated with a significantly higher rate of expressed subject pronouns than other verbs (e.g. [Enríquez, 1984](#); [Hurtado, 2005](#)) while in Portuguese they do not differ from other verbs with regard to the frequency of expression vs. omission of subject pronouns ([Posio, 2013](#)).

While most of the previous research has focused on discovering factors that condition subject pronoun usage globally (i.e. independently of grammatical persons, verb lexemes or discourse genres), the current study examines variable subject expression in a specific local context: Peninsular Spanish and European Portuguese constructions consisting of a

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first person singular subject and the high-frequency mental predicates *creer* ‘think’ in Spanish and *achar* ‘think, find’ in Portuguese. The general rates of first person singular subjects are 35% expression in Peninsular Spanish and 49% expression in European Portuguese (Posio, 2013).² However, in the ‘I think’ constructions under survey, subject pronoun use is significantly more frequent in Spanish (66%) than in Portuguese (46%), thus showing a striking difference between general tendencies and local token based usage in Spanish.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 1 summarizes previous research on grammaticalizing complement-taking mental predicates, taking English *I think* as a well-studied example, and presents the mental predicates *creer* and *achar*. Section 2 presents the data under survey and the grammaticalization hypothesis. Section 3 discusses subject expression in the constructions, and Section 4 presents the general conclusions.

1.1. Grammaticalization of complement-taking mental predicates

A well-known property of complement-taking mental predicates (CTMPs) such as ‘think’ is that they are rarely used in their literal sense in first person singular, i.e. to inform the addressee of the fact that the speaker is thinking about something (Benveniste, 1966). Rather, they serve to introduce the utterance, traditionally analyzed as a clausal complement of the mental predicate, as presented from the perspective of the speaker. Functionally, then, they resemble epistemic adverbs modifying main clauses rather than main clauses taking clausal complements. The grammaticalization of CTMPs can be viewed as a process where certain frequently occurring collocations containing these verbs gradually lose their status as productive verbal predicates while becoming entrenched as epistemic constructions.

Previous research on the grammaticalization of CTMPs has been mostly focused on English (e.g. Thompson and Mulac, 1991; Aijmer, 1997; Fischer, 2007; Palander-Collin, 1999; van Bogaert, 2011). Thompson and Mulac (1991) argue that English *I think* has grammaticalized from a complement-taking mental predicate (CTMP) into an epistemic parenthetical. The stages of this process are exemplified by (1) below.

- (1) a. ***I think that we’re definitely moving towards being more technological.***
 b. ***I think exercise is really beneficial, to anybody.***
 c. ***It’s just your point of view you know what you like to do in your spare time I think.***
 (Thompson and Mulac, 1991:313)

While in (1a) the sequence *I think* can be analyzed as a main clause followed by a clausal complement, in (1b) it is to be considered instead as an epistemic/evidential/evaluative fragment modifying its host clause, functionally resembling an epistemic adverb. In (1c), *I think* has developed further into an epistemic parenthetical that can be inserted at different slots in the sentence, including medial and final position. According to Thompson and Mulac (1991), CTMPs comply with various parameters of grammaticalization proposed by Hopper (1991). The development also involves subjectification, a shift from a propositional meaning toward a subjective one (Traugott, 1989:35). Instead of literally depicting the speaker in the process of thinking about something, the grammaticalizing constructions convey the speaker’s epistemic or evidential stance.

The grammaticalization of CTMPs has also been discussed under the notion of **pragmaticalization**, given that these constructions have pragmatic rather than grammatical functions in discourse (e.g. Aijmer, 1997). Diewald (2011) nevertheless argues in favor of a unified approach to pragmaticalization and grammaticalization, claiming that the processes associated with both phenomena are essentially the same, the main difference being that grammaticalization is said to affect grammatical functions and pragmaticalization pragmatic functions. Whether there is a boundary between the two, and how much of the pragmatic functions are included under the notion of “grammar”, depends on the approach adopted. The expression of such functions as epistemic or evidential stance can be seen as either grammatical or pragmatic, depending on the language.

In the present paper, the term grammaticalization is understood as a broad notion, i.e. an umbrella term covering various subcategories. Rather than divergent phenomena, pragmaticalization, lexicalization and constructional grammaticalization are understood as different aspects of the more general grammaticalization processes, each highlighting different aspects of the phenomena under survey. Instead of trying to establish clear-cut boundaries between the different processes, it is more fruitful to consider them as overlapping categories within the broad notion of grammaticalization.

² For the sake of simplicity, “Portuguese” is used to refer to European Portuguese and “Spanish” to Peninsular Spanish in the remainder of the paper. The varieties of Spanish and Portuguese may differ considerably in terms of subject pronoun expression vs. omission (see Posio, 2012a,b, 2013) and the findings presented here represent only the European varieties of these languages.

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