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Predictive conditionals as warnings in Isleño Spanish

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Abstract

Fluent speakers of the Isleño dialect of Spanish use predictive conditionals to indicate the future consequences of current actions concerning the fragile wetlands of southeastern Louisiana. The present tense is used almost exclusively, even in hypothetical cases, to indicate the speakers' belief in the likelihood of the unfortunate consequences coming true. The conditionals are structured as general warnings in order to conform to the politeness rules of the community, in which solidarity is foremost and blame must not be assigned to the addressees.

Keywords: Conditional; Prediction; Warning; Politeness; Solidarity; Isleño Spanish

1. Introduction

In making predictions about the future of the Isleño community or the southeastern Louisiana marshlands, fluent speakers of Isleño Spanish use the conditional grammatical structure to indicate a future consequence of a current or past action. Isleño Spanish is an obsolescing variety spoken fluently by fewer than 25 residents of St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, and ''morphological reduction'' (Campbell and Muntzel, 1989) has caused the verbal paradigm in the present and past subjunctives or the future and the conditional tenses to have gaps, as has been the case with other dialects of Spanish in the U.S. (Lipski, 2008). For example, the verbal instantiations in the predictive conditional are limited to the present tense, with rare occurrences of imperfect subjunctive and the imperfect verb forms in counterfactual conditionals.

This study will examine predictive conditional structures in Isleño Spanish and their corresponding verb forms to show that the linguistic strategies used by Isleño speakers display their belief in the likelihood of the future consequences coming true, couched in a non-threatening way so as to make the warnings general, not as specific threats to audience members. First, I will describe the current situation of the Isleño community with regard to their linguistic practices. Then I will examine the syntax and pragmatics of predictive conditionals to reveal the speakers' perspectives when talking about the future.

2. The Isleño community

2.1. Contemporary society

Isleño Spanish speakers live in small communities in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana: Delacroix Island, Poydras, Reggio, Shell Beach, Violet and Ycloskey. The total population of St. Bernard Parish is 34,875 (2010 Census Data Louisiana), and

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the group counts its membership at around 1500 residents. Although the census enumerates the Hispanic population at about 4% of the total, Isleños are reluctant to label themselves as Hispanic for the census. Warner (1991) reports that ''Islenos [sic] leaders caution that many descendants of Spanish settlers may have answered 'no' to census queries about Spanish or Hispanic origin.'' Their reluctance stems from the description of the term ''Hispanic'' in the census document: '''Hispanic' or 'Latino' refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race'' (Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin, 2010), which implies recent immigration or residence in the U.S. The Isleños do not consider themselves to be Latinos (Segura, 1986) because their heritage and language do not match the above description except at the broadest level. Therefore, the census data does not yield an accurate picture of the number of Isleños in the parish.

2.2. The Isleño dialect of Spanish

Isleño Spanish has been characterized by Lipski (1990) as an archaic, rural variety of Canary Island Spanish established in Louisiana in 1778 when recruits were brought to populate the newly acquired territory around New Orleans with Spanish speakers. After the Spanish government sold the territory in 1800, the abandoned settlers retreated to the southeastern Louisiana marshlands to live undisturbed for two or more centuries with their nearest neighbors, the Cajuns, and a few Native Americans of the Houma and Natchez tribes. Isleño Spanish remained the dominant language of the Delacroix Island enclave because the primary occupations of fishing and trapping kept the Isleños largely removed from contact with speakers of American English (MacCurdy, 1950). In the 20th century, military service, mandatory public education in English and job opportunities brought contact with people from New Orleans, and American English has since replaced Isleño Spanish as the first language of most residents. The community in St. Bernard is likewise endangered after Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill reduced the availability of jobs and housing in the area.

Structurally, Isleño Spanish is suffering from ''gradual death,'' as characterized by Campbell and Muntzel (1989:184). The dialect exhibits some morphological reduction, syntactic reduction and stylistic shrinkage. As expected in language obsolescence, bilingual speakers preserve lexical items which are marked as unique or important to the community (*jaiba* ''crab''), but nonfluent bilinguals cannot create derivationally related words or extensions of these items (*jaibita* ''little crab'') and understand little of the constituency of such derivational suffixes (*jaibero* ''crab fisherman''). For example, in nominal morphology, fluent speakers of Isleño Spanish use *-ito* not only semantically to indicate small size (*trolito* ''small trawl boat'') but also pragmatically (Pountain, 2003:53) to connote affection or sympathy (*pobrecitos* ''poor little things'') or entirety (*toíto* ''absolutely everything''). Nonfluent bilinguals may retain some lexical items (*Chelito* ''Little Joe'') but cannot segment them into constituents or translate them except in broad paraphrase. Lipski (2008) notes that many speakers of obsolescing Spanish dialects in the U.S. exhibit this same lack of intuition about morphological constituency in their language, with the resulting decrease in productivity of affective suffixes of this sort.

Another example comes from verbal morphology: the verbal paradigm of many verbs has been leveled so that the third person present tense singular marker is used for all persons and numbers, as in

[1] Sí, yo **entiende**. ''Yes, I understand'' (Lipski, 1990:53).

Another common phenomenon of Isleño Spanish is the replacement of the subjunctive with the indicative mood:

[2] Y cuando acaba de poner los huevos está ahí hasta que los huevos **sacan**. ''And when [the alligator] finishes laying eggs, she stays there until the eggs hatch.''

Syntactically, Lipski (1990:59) discovered that ''vestigial St. Bernard Spanish speakers produce [clausal] combinations not grammatically acceptable in other Spanish dialects'' through juxtaposition of verbs rather than subordination, and the substitution of infinitives:

[3] Hay muchas maneras los muchachos salir. ''There are many ways for the boys to go out.''

Stylistically, only two fluent speakers can create and sing the traditional folksong (the *décima*), and no nonfluent bilingual can tell riddles (*adivinanzas*) or proverbs (*dichetes*) with the traditional oral literary devices of the fluent speaker (Armistead, 1992).

Sociologically, Isleño Spanish falls in the ''nearly extinct'' category (Crystal, 2000:20) because it is spoken by a few elderly bilinguals whose children no longer use the language at home and whose identity is not dependent on dialect use. The Isleño community, which had been isolated both geographically and socially, has a strong internal organization, but the members do not need Isleño Spanish for jobs, marriage, education, religion or residence in Louisiana. The categorization is based on four overarching criteria (Tsunoda, 2005:9):