



# Contact and coherence: Dialectal leveling and structural convergence in NYC Spanish

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## Abstract

The sustained and intense interaction of massive groups of English and Spanish speakers in the U.S. has the potential to deepen our understanding of continuity and innovation in linguistic systems under heavy contact. The current study focuses on Spanish as it is spoken in the largest urban center of the United States: New York City. It examines a range of variable phenomena in the most extensive collection of Spanish in New York to date: the *Otheguy Zentella Corpus of Spanish in NYC* (OZC). The data represent original research by the first author as well as the efforts of several other scholars who have examined aspects of the OZC in detail. When synthesized, results reveal two broad patterns in the Spanish of long-time NYC residents: diminished regional differentiation and structural convergence with English. These trends emerge across numerous levels of linguistic structure, manifesting in patterns of syntactic, morphological, and phonological variation.

The coherence of these phenomena is consistent with the view that contact-induced change is tightly constrained, both socially and structurally, and that it is unlikely to manifest as haphazard bricolage. This is because, while the intensity of linguistic innovations and the time required for their onset and implementation may vary from feature to feature, such changes derive ultimately from a single source; namely, the set of linguistic and social factors that characterize the contact situation. As such, we can expect contact-induced changes to be restricted and of a kind, imbued with the character of the whole to which they belong.

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## 1. Introduction

The current study examines patterns of apparent time language change in several features of Spanish as it is spoken in New York City (NYC). Data come from the largest existing corpus of spoken Spanish in NYC, the *Otheguy Zentella Corpus of Spanish in New York City* (henceforth OZC). Collected between 2000 and 2004, the OZC consists of 140 sociolinguistic interviews with speakers whose origins are in one of six Latin American countries. In addition to variability in regional and national origin, speakers in the corpus vary across a range of other parameters, including age, sex, and socioeconomic status, as well as age of arrival to and time spent living in NYC. The OZC was originally created for a study of the variable use of subject pronouns, results of which are reported in [Otheguy and Zentella \(2012\)](#). It has since been used to investigate a variety of other features, several of which are discussed here.

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The current paper takes as its starting point the widest generalization to emerge from the study of pronouns in the OZC: while in most respects Spanish in NYC bears a strong resemblance to that of Latin America, there is evidence of developing discontinuity, such that Spanish speakers born and raised in NYC use subject pronouns differently than their recently arrived Latin American counterparts (Otheguy and Zentella, 2012:216–18). Native New Yorkers and the recently arrived differ not only with respect to their overall rates of pronoun use, but also in terms of their sensitivity to a range of linguistic factors that guide pronominal behavior.

The central claim of the present paper is that the trends studied in Otheguy and Zentella (2012) are not particular to subject pronouns. Instead shifts in pronoun use are a specific case of a more general pattern. A series of recent studies leaves little doubt that intergenerational differences are abundant in the OZC data: Bookhammer (2013) illustrates generational reduction in the use of Spanish subjunctive verbal morphology; both Raña Risso (2013) and Barrera-Tobón (2013) highlight reductions in word order variability in the Spanish of the second generation; and Erker (2012) observes significantly attenuated regional differentiation in the variable production of coda /s/. We propose that these results are connected by two forces shaping Spanish in NYC as a whole, namely dialectal leveling and linguistic convergence. Furthermore, we suggest that the influence of these two forces is modulated by principles of cognitive economy as well as variation in the relative social salience of different linguistic features: Spanish variable features that are low in social salience are more likely to undergo structural convergence with English, potentially reducing bilinguals' cognitive load at little social cost. Features that are higher in social salience are less predictable intergenerationally, as their social signaling potential may require renegotiation in the contact environment.

### 1.1. The terms leveling and convergence

In this paper, *dialectal leveling* is understood as the intergenerational reduction of regionally differentiated linguistic behavior, and *linguistic convergence* refers to 'the enhancement of inherent structural similarities found between two linguistic systems' (Bullock and Toribio, 2004:91). Latinos in NYC have experience with a wide range of linguistic behaviors and settings. These include: (1) the use of Spanish by Latinos whose origins are in some cases different and in other cases similar to their own, (2) the use of English by the general populace of NYC, and (3) the use of English in their own bilingual speech and that of their own bilingual communities in NYC. The pressures that thus lead to leveling and convergence have the potential to interact, to either amplifying or diminishing effect. Still, it is helpful for the sake of rhetorical clarity to distinguish between these pressures. In the discussion below, *dialectal leveling* and *dialectal contact* will be used in reference to changes taking place in the Spanish of Latinos in New York due to the influence of other Latinos' Spanish, while *linguistic convergence* and *linguistic contact* will be reserved for changes due to the influence of their own and other people's English.

### 1.2. Spanish in New York City

According to the American Community Survey (US Census Bureau, 2010), the 1.9 million speakers of Spanish in NYC are more than double the number of speakers of the next four largest NYC languages other than English combined (Chinese, Haitian, Italian, and Russian). Certainly, the massive numbers of Spanish speakers in NYC is related to the fact that NYC has had a large Hispanic population for over a hundred years (Remeseira, 2010). Relevant to our work here is the fact that this population has undergone two important changes in recent decades, namely notable growth in size and remarkable increase in regional diversity. Details are in Tables 1a and 1b.

Table 1a  
NYC population by mutually exclusive race and Hispanic origin.

Total population of New York City	1990		2000		2010	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
	7,322,564	100	8,008,278	100	8,175,133	100
White non-Hispanic	3,163,125	43.2	2,801,267	35	2,722,904	33.3
African American	1,847,049	25.2	1,962,154	24.5	1,861,295	22.8
Asian/Pacific Islander	489,851	6.7	783,058	9.8	1,030,914	12.6
American Indian	17,871	.2	17,321	.2	17,427	.2
Some other race	21,157	.3	58,775	.7	57,841	.7
Two or more races	No data	–	225,149	2.8	148,676	1.8
Hispanic origin	1,783,511	24.4	2,160,554	27	2,336,076	28.6

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