



Structural changes in Spanish in the United States: Differential object marking in Spanish heritage speakers across generations[☆]

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Abstract

This study investigated changes with Differential Object Marking (DOM)—the overt morphological marking of animate direct objects—observed in Spanish heritage speakers who are second generation immigrants in the United States. Previous studies of these speakers found that they omit the obligatory use of *a* with animate, specific direct objects in oral production (Montrul, 2004; Montrul and Bowles, 2009). The present study assessed the potential effects of quantity and quality of input on the degree of DOM erosion by controlling for age of onset of bilingualism and by establishing whether this phenomenon would also be subject to attrition in the first generation of immigrants. A total of 64 young adult heritage speakers, 23 adult immigrants from Mexico, and 40 native speakers from Mexico matched in age and SES were tested with a written/auditory comprehension and a written production task. Main findings indicated that native speakers from Mexico performed largely at ceiling in both tasks, whereas the three immigrant groups, including the first generation immigrants, omitted obligatory *a* in written production and made errors in comprehension. These findings suggest that structural changes with DOM in US Spanish occur at the representational level in some individuals are due to both insufficient input in middle childhood and different parental input in adolescence and early adulthood, in addition to potential transfer from English.

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1. Introduction

With approximately 50 million speakers of Spanish, about 16% of the nation's total population, the United States ranks today as the second Spanish-speaking nation in the world. Due to the fact that Spanish co-exists with English and is used and acquired in a language contact situation, the Spanish spoken by immigrants and their children in the United States

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exhibits structural changes in several grammatical areas when compared to the Spanish spoken by speakers who do not live in a language contact situation, as amply documented in the sociolinguistics literature (Lipski, 1993; Lynch, 1999; Otheguy and Zentella, 2012; Silva-Corvalán, 1994). The structural changes attested in the Spanish speaking population occur at the individual level, and are often related to the speakers' degree of bilingualism and proficiency in Spanish.

This study investigated structural changes with Differential Object Marking (DOM)—the overt morphological marking of animate, specific direct objects—observed in Spanish heritage speakers, especially second generation immigrants in the United States. Direct objects that are animate and definite (specific) are obligatorily marked with the preposition “a” in Spanish (*Juan vio a María* ‘Juan saw Mary’), while other objects are typically unmarked (*Juan vio la/una película* ‘Juan saw a/the movie/’). Previous studies have shown that heritage speakers of Spanish tend to omit the obligatory use of “a” with animate, specific direct objects in oral production (Montrul, 2004; Montrul and Bowles, 2009) and also accept ungrammatical sentences with DOM omission in judgment tasks (Montrul and Bowles, 2009; Montrul et al., in press). The present study addresses whether *quantity* and *quality* of input, estimated indirectly, may be related to specific structural changes with DOM attested in heritage speakers of Spanish in the United States.

Quantity of input is addressed by comparing two groups of young adult heritage speakers who differ on age of onset of bilingualism: simultaneous bilinguals, exposed to English and Spanish from birth, and sequential bilinguals, exposed to Spanish as first language and English as a second language after age 4 or 5. Sequential bilinguals experienced at least five years of monolingualism or dominance of Spanish in early childhood, while simultaneous bilinguals may have been dominant, balanced, or less dominant in Spanish than in English from an early age. If simultaneous bilinguals show significantly more omission of DOM than sequential bilinguals, this would suggest that the cumulative quantity of input in Spanish since early childhood affects structural changes with direct object expression. To address the potential effect of *quality of input* indirectly, young adult heritage speakers are compared with an older group of bilingual speakers, the parental generation (i.e., first generation adult immigrants), and with a group of monolingual adults in the country of origin. If the first generation adult immigrants are different from the native speakers in the country of origin and show some of the structural properties displayed by the heritage speakers, then attrition may be inferred from the adult immigrants, who are, in principle, the main source of input to the heritage speakers.

A distinctive strength of the present study is the investigation of grammatical knowledge through different experimental methodologies on the one hand, and the number of different groups included to tease apart these issues, on the other. This article presents the results of a comprehension and written production tasks administered to a total of five groups: two groups of Spanish heritage speakers, a group of first generation adult immigrants, and two groups of native speakers in Mexico age- and SES-matched to the US-groups. The present study is part of a large-scale project that included several measures to document changes in linguistic competence of the same participants: oral production, aural comprehension, written production, written comprehension, and grammaticality judgment tasks. The results of the oral production data are reported in Montrul and Sánchez-Walker (2013) and the results of the acceptability judgments are discussed in Montrul et al. (in press). The results of the tasks discussed in the present study confirm the trends documented with oral production and acceptability judgment for all the groups. When experimental results from different tasks and methods converge, they suggest that a certain finding is indeed robust and generalizable. I will conclude that the simplification of DOM with animate and specific direct objects observed in Spanish heritage speakers in the United States is a representational phenomenon and a feature of language change at the individual level. We will see that the native speakers in Mexico do not have difficulties interpreting the DOM marker in comprehension and do not omit it in written production.

Of enduring interest in linguistics is the way in which languages simplify over time. The findings of the present study raise the possibility that what looks like the result of incomplete acquisition in heritage speakers can also result from the combined effects of reduced input in childhood and exposure to different, attrited input in adolescence and young adulthood. In other words, there is intergenerational attrition. When structural changes of this sort occur independent of the proficiency level of the speakers and affect the first and the second generation of immigrants, we may be in a position to suggest that unmarked objects may already be a stabilized feature of the variety of Spanish spoken in the United States.

The next section presents how DOM, a widespread phenomenon in many languages of the world (Bossong, 1991), is manifested in Spanish, followed by a discussion of the psycholinguistic underpinnings of language change at the individual level.

2. Differential object marking in Spanish

Differential Object Marking (DOM) is the overt marking of arguments that are semantically or pragmatically more salient or prominent than their non-overtly marked counterparts. The objects that must be distinguished from subjects on semantic and pragmatic prominence scales are the ones that typically receive overt marking (Aissen, 2003; Laca, 2006; Pensado, 1995). DOM depends on factors such as animacy and specificity (or definiteness), properties of the direct

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