

Usage of the Spanish Preposition *en* in Monolingual and Contact Varieties

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1. Introduction

Prepositions are a valuable medium to test the permeability of grammar. They are free forms and are therefore more easily influenced by language contact than bound morphemes, yet they do not have direct counterparts in other languages. Furthermore, prepositions are a closed-class word group and highly grammaticized. Therefore, they are less likely to be borrowed in a contact situation compared to open-class items such as nouns and verbs (Trask, 1996, Thomason, 2001) and require a level of “more intense contact” to become borrowed (Thomason, 2001). The present study compares the use of the preposition *en* in a contact area (New Mexico and Colorado, USA) with its use in a monolingual setting (Cali, Colombia). The preposition *en* does not have a direct correspondence to any one preposition in English (i.e. English *in*, *at*, *on*) and is also a highly frequently occurring preposition, second in frequency only to the preposition *de* (i.e. English *of*) (cf Davies, 2003). Specifically, this study makes a comparison of the usage of *en* between the two dialects, considering possible differences which arise and the motivation for these differences. Variation in the contact area could be motivated by various reasons such as the inherent difficulty in achieving a more “standard” or monolingual usage, the fact that there is no direct correspondence to the same preposition in English, or potential incomplete learning in the contact area. Furthermore, *en* can be used in a variety of fixed phrases and carries several meanings. Variation is also analyzed pertaining to the prepositional phrase *en veces* ‘at times’ as it was commonly found in the speech of the Southwest, used frequently as an equivalent for *a veces*. Variation in the constructions *hablar (en)+language* is also investigated.

Studies on language acquisition have shown that the standard use of prepositions in languages such as English and Spanish is difficult to achieve. As Romaine (1995) states, prepositions are a difficult grammatical category to acquire and understand for native speakers of a given language, and yet more difficult for second language speakers. The latter point is especially true if no frame of reference exists in the speaker’s first language. For speakers of English-as-a-second-language, a speaker’s proficiency, based on the results of proficiency exams, is largely determined by one’s ability to use prepositions in a standard fashion (Romaine, 1995).

Although the complexity of preposition usage has been argued and documented by various scholars, very few studies have been done on the use of prepositions, let alone in language contact situations. Attesting to the difficulty of acquiring prepositions in monolingual speech, Kvaal et al. (1988) found that of ten Spanish morphemes studied, the preposition *en* was of the latest to be acquired by monolingual Spanish speaking children ages 2:0 to 4:8 (only second to the irregular preterit indicative). Kvaal et al.’s (1988) study found that their subjects did not “achieve consistent production of *en* until they reached an MLU of 4.0” and that they used the preposition mainly in the locative sense to mean *in* and only rarely to mean *on* (p. 390). These researchers also note that the senses *in* and *on* are both lexicalized as *en* in Spanish although the former sense seems to be acquired earlier, perhaps due to contextual situations in the children’s environment.

In language contact situations, a grammatical category like prepositions may experience transfer from the other language at hand. Thomason and Kaufman (1988) argue that transference of linguistic features at any level (i.e. phonological, morpho-syntactic, etc.) is possible between languages in contact. Silva-Corvalán (1994), on the other hand, claims that while languages seem to be more permeable at a discourse-pragmatic level, they are strikingly impermeable to foreign influence at the syntactic level. Specifically regarding prepositions, Romaine (1995) states that prepositions in contact

situations are rarely borrowed (cf Weinreich, 1968) although the language contact situation may motivate the simplification of the existing prepositions in a given language.

In a study of a language contact situation involving Spanish and Guaraní in Paraguay, Choi (2001) concludes that the presence of a construction such as *Voy en el mercado* (*Voy al mercado – I'm going to the market*) in which the standard 'state-of-rest' preposition *en* has taken on the motion sense of the preposition *a* can not be explained by language contact with Guaraní alone as speakers of other contact varieties demonstrate some use of this construction as well. Choi (2001) argues for a trend toward simplification of linguistic systems, in this case the prepositions *a* and *en* possibly on the way to simplification to only *en*, at least in certain contexts. Interestingly, Choi (2001) further notes that investigators such as Granda (1991a, 1991b) claim that this type of construction no longer appears in American or European Spanish (with the only exception being in the Chilean island of Chiloé) although others, such as García (1995), have found evidence of this construction in the Americas as well. The present study, however, shows no occurrence of this form.

Finally, in another contact study, García (1995) analyzed the preposition *en* in a corpus of Spanish in San Antonio, Texas. She found that *en* used in locative senses was the most frequently occurring usage, followed by usage in temporal constructions. García (1995) claims that English contact may motivate some of the variation seen in her San Antonio corpus although it may not be the only cause. She notes that system internal influence, such as generalization or a tendency toward simplification, may also motivate variation.

Turning now to the present study, the use of *en* in New Mexico and Colorado will be compared to its use in the monolingual Spanish setting of Cali, Colombia.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data sample

The electronic text files from two corpora, the Cali Corpus (cf Travis, forthcoming) and the NMCROSS (New Mexico-Colorado Spanish Survey) (Bills and Vigil, 1999) were separately loaded into Monoconc, a concordance program, from which 500 tokens of *en* from each corpus were extracted. From the Cali Corpus, sixteen spontaneous conversations, totaling 52,000 words were examined. These conversations were between 15 speakers, both male and female, who were friends and family members between the ages of 21 and 55. Nine of the participants were pursuing university degrees and the other participants were involved in a wide variety of other professions (Travis, forthcoming). Socio-economically the speakers in this corpus are mainly of the middle-class.

From the NMCROSS, 16 informal, guided interviews totaling 120,000 words were analyzed, of which only interviewee contributions were examined. The interview topics consist in great part of narratives on schooling, language use at home, and family history. Some of the participants practiced rural professions such as ranching, woodworking, and truck driving; others were pastors or housekeepers. These participants, all proficient, native speakers of Spanish, were men and women who ranged from 45 to 88 years old. In addition, they were mainly natives of the New Mexico-Colorado area. About half of the speakers were bilingual and all show English influence in their Spanish, if even only at the lexical level.

2.2 Categories for *en*:

To be able to code the use of *en* in the two corpora involved, it was necessary to define categories for the usage of this preposition. The categories proposed by García (1995) were followed as they capture the meaning and use of the preposition in the data analyzed. The following functions of *en* were identified: locative, temporal, verbal, pertaining to a group, manner/means, to preface a language, and use in fixed phrases. Examples of each category, including a discussion of their usage in the present corpora, are offered in the discussion section below. Tokens of truncated or repeated utterances involving *en* are given in Table 1 to show their distribution across the 500 random tokens of *en* in the sample but are not discussed further.

3. Results

Table 1 below gives the results from each of the two corpora analyzed, with the token counts and frequency statistics for occurrence by corpus for each category coded. The difference between the percentages of the New Mexico-Colorado data compared to the Cali data is given in the final column.

Table 1: Token and frequency counts of *en* by category

Category	Cali Corpus		NMCOSSE Corpus		Total	Diff % NM
	Tokens	Freq %	Tokens	Freq %		
Locative	295	59.0	259	51.8	554	-7.2
Temporal	42	8.4	68	13.6	110	5.2
Verbal <i>en</i>	2	0.4	0	0.0	2	-0.4
Group membership	8	1.6	19	3.8	27	2.2
Fixed phrase	67	13.4	19	3.8	86	-9.6
Modality/Means	27	5.4	15	3.0	42	-2.4
<i>En</i> +language	12	2.4	86	17.2	98	14.8
truncated/repetition	47	9.4	34	6.8	81	-2.6
Total	500	100.0	500	100.0	1000	

4. Discussion

4.1 Locatives

The results from Table 1 show that the use of *en* in locative constructions is by far the most frequent, with more than half of all tokens occurring in these types of phrases by corpus (59.0 and 51.8% respectively). In this initial analysis, all constructions with a locative sense are included in one category. Examples of locatives are shown in numbers one and two below.

- (1) Esta niña, no le gusta que lo pongan **en el suelo** [Cali: comida 374]
This girl, she doesn't like for it to be put **on the floor**
- (2) No, **en casa** hacían mal porque mi papá siempre los tenía **en la escuela** [NMCOSSE: Entrevista 142 25]
No, **at home** they did badly because my dad always had them **at school**

As the locative sense is so frequent, it was interesting to examine the differing ways in which meaning is portrayed. That is, in some phrases the preposition prefaces a concrete, physical location (i.e. *en Albuquerque* – ‘in Albuquerque’). At other times, the sense could be much more general (i.e. *en los estudios* – ‘in the studies’). Therefore, we can further analyze the locative constructions by determining if *en* marks a physical location, a locative with an associated concept or a quasi-locative with an associated concept (following the analysis by García, 1995). Examples of each are presented below.

Category 1: Physical location (referential; a specific place is named):

- (3) Nos vimos **en la universidad** y todo [Cali: bibliot 231]
We saw each other **at the university** and all
- (4) Yo nací **en Chamita**. [NMCOSSE: 219 17]
I was born **in Chamita**

Category 2: Locative/Associated Concept (a generic, non-referential place is named):

- (5) Más difícil conseguir trabajo, **en la universidad**, [Cali: colombo 16]
It's more difficult to get work **at the university**
- (6) Oh, con mi familia, cuando ya puse a mi familia **en la escuela**. [NMCOS: Entrevista 219 214]
Oh, with my family, when I already put my family **in school**

Category 3: Quasi-locative/Associated Concept (a more abstract semantic extension of the locative to, for example, a social group or a personal experience):

- (7) Podía ser ya **en el vicio, en algún vicio** [Cali: almuerzo 1735]
It could already be **in a vice, in some vice**
- (8) Porque no había explicación ni en -- **en ellos**. [NMCOS: 219 172]
Because there was no explanation even in -- **in them**

Table 2 below shows this further analysis of the locative constructions for the Cali and NMCOS corpora.

Table 2: Semantic extension of *en*

Category	Cali Corpus		NMCOS Corpus		
	Tokens	Freq %	Tokens	Freq %	Total
Physical location	157	53.2	190	73.4	347
Locative/Associated Concept	33	11.2	54	20.8	87
Quasi-locative/Associated Concept	105	35.6	15	5.8	120
Total	295	100.0	259	100.0	554

The use of *en* to mark a physical location (the most concrete sense) is, not surprisingly, the most frequently occurring. The locative/associated concept category is more prevalent in the NMCOS corpus while the quasi-locative/associated concept category is almost entirely represented by the Cali corpus. Of course, topics of conversation may dictate the use of *en* in these different categories. Further analysis of these categories by investigating their use in a wide variety of discourse situations will be necessary to get a clearer picture of their distribution in different contexts.

4.2 Temporal

Although relatively few tokens of the temporal use are found compared to the locative category, their overall use in each corpus (8.4% and 13.6%, respectively) makes temporals one of the more frequent categories. Examples are given below.

- (9) Ella, a lo mejor se va **en Enero**. [Cali: headache 358]
She might go **in January**
- (10) Nací **en novecientos** uh novecientos once [NMCOS: Entrevista 20]
I was born **in nine hundred** uh nine hundred eleven

The fairly frequent use of this form is not surprising as there are a great deal of temporal phrases in which *en* can appear.

4.3 Verbal en

This construction is of much lesser usage in both corpora and appears only with certain verbs. Likely verbal candidates for this construction are ones such as *pensar en* or *creer en* although only uses with *pensar* are found in the present data.

- (11) Es que yo estaba **pensando, en hacer** la vuelta del banco [Cali: almuerzo 367]
It's that I was **thinking to go** to the bank
- (12) el padre que piensa, y **piensa en** su familia ..., [Cali: almuerzo 1671]
the father that thinks, and **thinks about** his family...

This category constitutes the least frequently occurring usage of *en*. It is only found two times in the Cali corpus, and not at all in NMCOS.

4.4 Group membership

Tokens for group membership are also infrequent and seem to follow standard usage of the preposition.

- (13) Ya está **en edad** de corregirla [Cali: calima1 186]
She's already **at the age** where you have to correct her
- (14) y luego uno que me perdí **en el army** [NMCOS: Entrevista 219 49]
and later one that I lost **in the army**

Few occurrences of this category are found in both corpora. The occurrences are found to have similar usage.

4.5 Means

This category relates to the way in which something can be done. See the following two examples.

- (15) Se van **en avión**, [Cali: comida 616]
They are going **by plane**
- (16) Ya andábamos **en la troca**, pero no pude nunca aprender [NMCOS: Entrevista 10 298]
We were already going **in the truck** but I could never learn

For this category, almost twice as many uses were found in the Cali corpus, but with a similar function to those uses in the NMCOS.

4.6 En+language

En + language, for example *en español* or *en inglés*, occurred much more frequently in the NMCOS corpus. The great use of *en+language* in the NMCOS is likely due to the fact that some of the interview questions were specifically about the use of language at home or at school. Therefore, the topics of conversation inherently created more opportunity for these occurrences to be found.

- (17) Eso se pronuncia distinto **en inglés**, pero bueno. [Cali: almuerzo 2374]
That's pronounced differently **in English**, but anyway
- (18) Pa'llá todos mis hijos hablan **en español** [NMCOS: Entrevista 20]
Over there all of my children speak **in Spanish**

Interestingly, variation in the use of *hablar* + language vs. *hablar en* + language is found between the two corpora, a point which will be discussed later.

4.7 Fixed phrases

The very nature of fixed phrases should make them more impermeable to variation. For the present study I consider fixed phrases as those with strings of words which commonly occur together (i.e. *en mi vida*) or as those who have listed dictionary entries demonstrating a fixed expression (i.e. *en cambio*, *en vez de*, *en cuanto*). The results show that the speakers in the Cali Corpus use *en* in conjunction with a fixed phrase nearly three times as frequently as speakers in the NMCROSS corpus (14.2% and 4.8%, respectively).

- (19) Yo **en cambo** no puedo irla a ver [Cali: almuerzo 1361]
I **on the other hand** can't go see her
- (20) Pues, no descansaba, **en otras palabras** [NMCROSS: Entrevista 219 531]
Well, he didn't rest, **in other words**

Although usage of these types of constructions were much more frequent in the Cali data analyzed, it is not clear why (or if in fact) the speakers of this corpus would be more likely to use these kinds of constructions. Certainly fixed phrases are likely to appear in any dialect. However one construction which I have coded as a fixed phrase enjoys a certain predominance in the NMCROSS corpus while no such occurrences are found in the Cali Corpus. This expression is *en veces*, an expression also found in the study of García (1995) but to a much lesser degree. A discussion of *en veces* appears below.

5. *en veces*

García (1995) noted two occurrences of this fixed phrase in her corpus. In the NMCROSS corpus, I found 35 occurrences, 5 times more than the use of the semantically equal *a veces* (7 tokens). Table 3 compares the usage of *a veces* and *en veces* by corpus.

Table 3: Token and frequency counts of *a veces* vs. *en veces* by corpus

Category	Cali Corpus		NMCROSS		Total
	Tokens	Freq. %	Tokens	Freq. %	
<i>a veces</i>	21	100.0	7	16.7	28
<i>en veces</i>	0	0.0	35	83.3	35
Total	21	100.0	42	100.0	63

As noted earlier, this construction does not appear in the Cali corpus, supporting the idea that this construction is more predominant in the Southwest region of the United States or possibly in contact varieties, suggesting that this may be a contact feature. Two examples of *en veces* follow.

- (21) ... porque el marido **en veces** estaba trabajando ... [NMCROSS: Entrevista 10, 1457]
... because the husband **at times** was working
- (22) Pues si hablaban en español **en veces** les pellizcaban [NMCROSS: Entrevista 102, 4]
Well if they spoke in Spanish **at times** they would pinch them

Compare to *a veces*:

- (23) ... ellos supieran qué estábamos hablando **a veces** te hablábamos inglés. [NMCROSS: 117, 71]
... they knew that we were speaking **at times** we would speak English

- (24) Y **a veces** andan en las en las luces. [NMCOS: Entrevista 20, 396]
And **at times** they are up in the up in the lights

Examples 21-24 show that speakers are using *a veces* and *en veces* in the same way and there does not seem to be any semantic difference between the two constructions, indicating that these two phrases are co-existing as simply varying ways of saying the same thing.

Although this construction seems to have found a place in the speech of people in contact areas, it is questionable if this innovation is due to language contact. García (1995) argues that “English influence alone cannot account for community usage in the spoken data I have examined” and that “the English adverbial expression ‘at times’ would seem to reinforce maintenance of *a veces* rather than *en veces*” (p. 210). It may be true that *at* is more similar to *a* than *en* both orthographically and phonologically which could help reinforce the maintenance of *a veces* over *en veces*. Yet it is understandable how *en* could be utilized in these constructions considering that it has the *at* sense in many other cases, such as *Estoy en la escuela* (*I’m at school*). Therefore, it is plausible that there may be a generalizing of *en* to convey both locative and temporal meanings, just as *at* is used in English to do so (i.e. *I’ll see you at 2:00* and *I’ll be at school*). A form of indirect interference from English, then, could help account for the change in this construction.

Another source for *en veces* may also be seen through the history of the Spanish language in the Americas. This construction appears historically before the 16th century in various Spanish-speaking regions. The online corpus *Corpus del Español* (cf Davies, 2003) shows that, although infrequent (only 41 tokens out of the 100 million word corpus), this construction did appear in the 1500s and 1600s (24 and 11 tokens, respectively) as well as 6 occurrences in the 1800s. *A veces*, on the other hand, had extremely high frequency of usage in all centuries analyzed.

Interestingly, the earlier occurrences of this phrase coincide with the first appearance of Spanish in New Mexico. Spanish was first introduced in the area of New Mexico in the early 1500s and gained a strong footing in 1598 (Bills and Vigil, 1999). Therefore it is possible that this phrase has roots historically and, while it seems to have lost footing in most standard Spanish dialects in the Americas and Europe, the relatively isolated situation of New Mexican and Colorado Spanish may have preserved this expression to the present time. Table 4 below examines this variation.

Table 4: Comparison of *a veces* vs. *en veces* by speaker in NMCOS corpus

Speaker	Sex/Age	Tokens <i>en veces</i> / speaker	<i>a veces</i> %/speaker	<i>en veces</i> %/speaker
Entrevista 4	F/80	4	0.0	100.0
Entrevista 10	F/88	15	6.7	93.3
Entrevista 20	F/82	2	0.0	100.0
Entrevista 47	F/54	3	0.0	100.0
Entrevista 76	F/74	0	0.0	0.0
Entrevista 88	M/45	0	0.0	0.0
Entrevista 102	M/48	5	0.0	100.0
Entrevista 117	M/62	6	50.0	50.0
Entrevista 142	F/80	1	100.0	0.0
Entrevista 144	M/83	0	0.0	0.0
Entrevista 190	M/71	1	100.0	0.0
Entrevista 214	M/76	2	0.0	100.0
Entrevista 219	F/96	0	0.0	0.0
Entrevista 270	M/87	2	0.0	100.0
Entrevista 311	M/90	1	100.0	0.0
Entrevista 318	F/72	0	0.0	0.0
Total		42		

As seen above, the speakers in the bolded interviews used *en veces* at least 50% of the time. Note that six speakers used *en veces* exclusively and that, overall, half of the speakers used this construction while only about a third of all speakers use *a veces*. Furthermore, the speakers with high rates of usage of *en veces* are both male and female of varying ages, suggesting that this form is not isolated to a particular group of speakers.

6. hablar (en) + language

As mentioned earlier, variation was found among the usage of the construction *hablar (en)+language*, although the topics of conversation (i.e. focus on language use at home) in the NMCOS skew the data to a higher usage of *hablar en+language*. In the NMCOS, *hablar en + language* is used more frequently and in contexts where it is not used in the Cali Corpus.

6.1 hablar + language

- (25) Oh, sí, él me **habla español** todo el tiempo. [NMCOS: Entrevista 20, 1199]
Oh, yes, he **speaks Spanish** to me all the time
- (26) El trabajo, y entre la gente que **habla inglés**, porque no toda la gente le gusta ... [NMCOS: Entrevista 102, 28]
The job, and between the people that **speak English**, because not everybody likes...

6.2 hablar en + language:

- (27) So los míos siempre han habla'o las dos idiomas, **han habla'o en inglés y en mexicano**. [Entrevista 117, 71]
So mine have always spoken both languages, they **have spoken in English and in Mexicano**.
- (28) Frank les **habla a sus hijos en español** todo el tiempo. [Entrevista 20, 261]
Frank **speaks to his children in Spanish** all the time.

Examples 25-28 show that the speakers in NMCOS used these two constructions interchangeably, a phenomenon that is not observed in the monolingual Cali corpus.

Table 5 shows the distribution of *hablar + language* vs. *hablar en + language*.

Table 5: *hablar (en) + language*

Category	Cali Corpus		NMCOS Corpus		Total
	Tokens	Freq. %	Tokens	Freq. %	
<i>hablar + lang.</i>	5	83.3	126	47.9	131
<i>hablar en + lang.</i>	1	16.7	137	52.1	138
Total	6	100.0	263	100.0	269

Notice that there is only 1 example of *hablar en* in the Cali corpus (out of a total of 6 tokens) while just over 50% of the tokens in NMCOS occur with this construction. The one example from the Cali corpus is shown below. In this case the use of *en* helps to highlight the distinction between if the bilingual speaker in question speaks ‘in English’ or ‘in Spanish’ while in Colombia rather than clarifying which of the two languages the person speaks.

- (29) J: Y ella cómo habla? .. Habla **en inglés, español**?
A: Español. [Cali: pizza 370]

J: And how does she speak? .. Does she speak **in English, Spanish?**

A: Spanish.

7. Conclusion

Little variation in the usage of *en* is noted between the two corpora, suggesting that there has been little transfer of English to the contact variety in the use of *en*. The frequency data shows that the locative category is the most frequently used in both corpora, while the other categories are less frequent but quite similar in amount and manner of usage. Certainly the topics of the conversations here had an effect on the distribution of the data to some extent.

Variation is seen in the construction *en veces* which could predict a certain generalization (cf Silva-Corvalán, 2001) through which the English senses of *in*, *on*, *at* generalize to Spanish *en*. In the present case, the Spanish prepositions *a/en* may generalize to *en*. Aside from language contact, historic usage of *en veces* could help account for the variation seen in this construction. Finally, the construction *hablar (en) + language* also shows a certain degree of variation between the corpora, a case in which the speakers of the NMCOSSE seem to use both constructions interchangeably, a phenomenon not observed in the Cali data. Yet, as the amount of variation observed here is small, this data supports Silva-Corvalán's (1994) theory of the impermeability of grammar to language contact as we see little variation in the NMCOSSE data which could be said to be of English influence.

Notes

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