Contact Induced Change?
Overt Nonspecific *Ellos* in Spanish in New York

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1. Introduction

The position that grammar is largely impermeable to external influences has been upheld by many scholars (e.g., Appel & Muysken, 1987; Meillet, 1921; Sapir, 1921; Silva-Corvalán, 1994, 1995, 2000; Weinreich, 1953). Consistent with this view is the idea that in situations of language contact, entirely foreign structural features are not incorporated into the syntax or morphology of the recipient linguistic system. Under situations of very extensive contact, however, radically incompatible foreign features can penetrate a recipient language, e.g., Turkish agglutinative patterns of noun and verb inflection in Asia Minor Greek (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988:219).

The effects of English on the Spanish spoken in the United States provide a current test case of external influence. In a well-known position, Carmen Silva-Corvalán distinguishes between *direct* and *indirect* transfer. Direct transfer involves the introduction of brand new structures into the contact variety; indirect transfer involves changes in a feature already present in the pre-contact variety (1994:4). Silva-Corvalán's general stance is that direct transfer is rare in contact situations, and for the most part not found in the Spanish spoken in the U.S. For direct transfer to occur, it would have to reach down to the level of syntax that does not interact with semantics, pragmatics, or discourse, that is, a 'level of abstract syntactic structure in which functions are empty slots; the words which could occupy the slots are not taken into consideration,' (Silva-Corvalán 2000:12, our translation). It is this level of grammar that Silva-Corvalán deems 'remarkably impermeable to foreign influence' (1994:166).

Both English and Spanish have subject personal pronouns (henceforth SPPs), but whereas in English SPPs are nearly always overt, in Spanish they are highly variable. In the bilingual Mexican community of Los Angeles, Spanish SPPs are undergoing a process of indirect transfer. Silva-Corvalán finds, with regard to SPPs, that contact with English has not introduced any new structures nor has it had an effect at the level of abstract syntax. However, she does find that contact with English may be stimulating the expansion of the contexts in which SPPs appear (1994:154-165). As a helpful point of comparison with the indirect transfer to which SPPs are being subjected in Los Angeles, Silva-Corvalán offers hypothetical cases like (1). In her view, utterances like (1) are not actually found in either pre-contact or contact Spanish, but if they did appear in contact dialects, they would represent the kind of usage that would provide evidence of direct transfer (1994:146).

(1) **Ellos me robaron el auto*   [said without knowing who stole the car]
       "They've stolen my car"

To describe the type of NP appearing as the subject in (1), we use the term 'nonspecific.'[1] The point, then, is that in pre-contact Spanish overt SPPs are categorically excluded from occurring as 3pl

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[1]The terms *specific* and *nonspecific* have often been used to describe two readings of indefinite expressions (see, for example, Fodor & Sag, 1982). Consider (i)

(i) <u>A student</u> in our class got a 100 on the exam.

nonspecific NPs. This categorical exclusion is in force at the level of abstract syntax. Moreover, and conforming to the ban on direct transfers, the exclusion, according to Silva-Corvalán, is as categorical in the contact dialect as it is in the pre-contact variety. According to her, instances of (1) fail to occur in both varieties.

Silva-Corvalán's observation that 3pl nonspecific NPs with overt SPPs are categorically absent from both pre-contact and contact Spanish is widely shared (see, for example, Cameron, 1997:35; Fernández Soriano, 1999:1218; Jaeggli, 1986:46; Luján, 1999:1293; Suñer, 1983). According to this view, when overt 3pl SPP *ellos* appears, the reference is necessarily specific. That is, the null 3pl SPP in (2a) can refer to an unidentified entity, e.g. 'people', but the overt 3pl *ellos* in (2b) can only refer to a designated group of people, e.g. 'my parents'.[2]

(2a) *Ø dicen   que fumar   no es sano.*
     Ø say-3pl. that smoke-inf. not is healthy.
     'They say that smoking is not healthy.'
     [nonspecific: people say that smoking is not healthy]

(2b) *Ellos dicen   que fumar   no es sano.*
     They say-3pl. that smoke-inf. not is healthy.
     'They say that smoking is unhealthy.'
     [specific: my parents say that smoking is unhealthy]

In English, on the other hand, in which very few contexts support the absence of an overt subject (see Napoli, 1982:85, for examples of subject omission in English), the overt SPP *they* in (3) can have either nonspecific or specific reference.

(3) They say that smoking is unhealthy.
    [specific: my parents say that smoking is unhealthy]
    or
    [nonspecific: smoking is said to be unhealthy]

Recall that Silva-Corvalán's generalization is that structural features that are not already present in the pre-contact variety are not incorporated into the contact variety. Therefore, if constructions like (2b) preclude nonspecific reference in general Spanish, they should not acquire the ability to make such reference upon contact with English.

However, as we will show presently, usages of overt nonspecific *ellos* do occur in contact Spanish in the U.S., specifically in the Spanish spoken in New York. Example (1) is thus not hypothetical, but

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a.   Her name is Ana.
b.   We all want to know who it was.

If (a) is the continuation of (i), the referent for *a student* is already determined at the time (i) is uttered. On the other hand, if the continuation is (b), the referent of *a student* is undetermined when the speaker utters (i). The term *specific* has been used to characterize the interpretation that coincides with (a) and *nonspecific* that which coincides with (b). However, as pointed out by Von Heusinger (2002:252-3), the property of specificity is not restricted to indefinite NPs, as demonstrated by the nonspecific definite NP in (ii).

(ii) They'll never find <u>the man</u> that will please them.

It is reasonable, then, to extend the notion of specificity beyond discussions of indefinite NPs.

[2] Various terms have been used to describe the type of construction in (2a). Jaeggli (1986:45) uses the term "arbitrary plural construction." Suñer (1983:191) calls it "the equivalent of the English indefinite *they*." Luján (1999:1293) includes this construction in a section called *las oraciones impersonales,* "impersonal sentences." In the variationist literature, the term 'nonspecific' has been used (e.g., Cameron, 1997:35).

represents real usage. This finding would appear to counter Silva-Corvalán's generalization, as it would represent the introduction of a completely new, non-Spanish structure into the contact variety. However, we have discovered that overt nonspecific *ellos*, as it turns out, are also found in Latin American Spanish.   Therefore, Silva-Corvalán's generalization still holds, not because the phenomenon does not occur in the contact variety, but because even though it does, it also occurs in the pre-contact system. That is, the Silva-Corvalán ban on direct transfer survives, not because a restriction at the level of abstract syntax imported from Latin America has remained in force in contact Spanish, but because there was no such restriction to begin with. What we have in pre-contact Spanish is not a syntactic restriction that categorically bans overt nonspecific *ellos*, but simply a pragmatic constraint that disfavors them.   The generalization remains in place because in this case, as in many others, the difference between the pre-contact and contact varieties rests, not on a qualitative syntactic alteration but on a quantitative pragmatic change.

2. The study
2.1 Informants

The corpus for this study is taken from 123 sociolinguistic interviews conducted with Spanish speakers in New York City (henceforth NYC). The interviews are part of the *City University of New York (CUNY) Project on the Spanish of New York*, led by the second author together with Ana Celia Zentella. The speakers come from the six Latin American countries with the highest representation in the Latino population of NYC: Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, and Puerto Rico.

For the purposes of this study, we have classified our informants into three groups that differ in their degree of exposure to English.[3] We label them *Latin Americans* (N = 34), *Established Immigrants* (N = 44), and *Native New Yorkers* (N = 45), defined as follows.

> Latin Americans (LAs) arrived at age 17 or older and have been in NYC for no more than five years.[4]
> Established immigrants (EIs) arrived at age 13 or older and have been in NYC for 11 years or more.
> Native New Yorkers (NNYs) were born in NYC or arrived at age 12 or younger.

In using age 12 as the cut-off point between immigrants and natives, we follow a common practice (see, for example, Silva-Corvalán 1994:15). Evidence suggests that discourse and pragmatic functions of referring expressions are acquired very late in childhood (Beliavsky, 1994; Cairns et al., 1995; Hickmann, 1987:167-170; Hickmann, 1995:205-208).   Therefore, compared to teenagers and adults, the child's underdeveloped linguistic system is more open to influence from a second language. As a result, informants who arrived at age 12 or younger, may very well resemble native New York bilinguals more than they do immigrants who arrived at a later age.

2.2 Coding the data

Only 3pl verbs occurring with non-lexical NPs were considered for this study. These 3pl verbs were coded for having an overt or null SPP and for whether the reference of the SPP was specific or nonspecific. We considered as nonspecific any overt or null SPP lacking an explicit antecedent in the linguistic context, or whose explicit antecedent was the word *alguien* 'someone'. We did not try to intuit whether or not the speaker had a specific referent in mind. Although the identifiability of a referent is often considered central to the definition of specificity (see, for example, Givon, 1978:293-

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[3] We presume that age of arrival and years spent in NYC reflect the degree of exposure to English.
[4] From the linguistic point of view, these recently arrived, mature informants are Latin Americans, and provide data from the pre-contact situation of Spanish in their respective countries of origin.

4), this criterion is not always reliable. For example, there are cases of reported speech in which the speaker need not know the referent of a specific NP. If John says, *George says he met with a certain student of his today*, then *a certain student* is a specific NP, but John need not know its referent (Higginbotham, 1987:64). By setting aside both speaker knowledge and our own intuitions, and relying instead on the simple criterion of existence of an overt antecedent, we reduce subjectivity in the coding and further the reliability of our study.

In some cases, the grammar of the hearer may impose a specific referent where one is absent. Consider the following example, from a NNY informant of Cuban origin (arrived in the U.S. at age six and has been in the U.S. for 18 years). In the English translation of this example, boldface **they** correspond to 3pl overt nonspecific SPPs (that is, overt *ellos*) in the Spanish original, whereas in-parenthesis (*they*) correspond to 3pl nonspecific null SPPs.

(4) *Disco, disco... ya está arde. A mí me gusta más rock, pero me gustan muchos diferentes estilos de música, pues... a mí me gusta mucho la música pero, no pienso que tengo, no sé si se dice así en español, un buen oído para la música. Entonces, después de un tiempo me suena todo igual, pero me gusta, ¿tú sabes? A mí me gusta mucho el rock, me gusta diferente tip.. típico de música americana, de que, no sé, **ellos**, **ellos** lo llamarían diferentes cosas, pero yo lo llamo todo rock ¿tú sabes? Como **ellos** tienen, like ballads, **ellos** tienen funky, **ellos** tienen rock, y tienen heavy metal, y tienen new wave, para mí esto es todo bien mezclado.* (013U)

Disco, disco is already dead. I like rock better. I like a lot of different styles of music. I like music a lot, but I don't think that I have, I don't know if you say it like this in Spanish, a good ear for music. So, after a while, everything sounds the same to me, but I like it, you know? I like rock a lot, I like different types of American music, of which, I don't know, **they, they** would call it different things, but I call it all rock. You know? Like **they** have ballads, **they** have funky, **they** have rock, (they) have heavy metal, and (they) have new wave. For me, this is all mixed.

Some readers of previous versions of this paper have suggested that the overt *ellos* here refer to *los americanos* (i.e., English-speaking people from the U.S.), and that this specific reference is implied by the mention of *música americana*, "American music". Other readers see no such reference, and regard these *ellos* as similar to the common type of bleached English *they* that is found in, for example, number (3) above. A careful reading points to the latter interpretation. The speaker distinguishes himself from people who can classify different types of music and use labels like "funky" and "ballads". Certainly, the set of people who make these distinctions is not restricted to *los americanos*. Furthermore, the inclusion of *baladas*, 'ballads' makes it unlikely that the speaker only has *los americanos* in mind when he says *ellos*, since this label is used more often in Latin America than in the U.S. Still, the possibility that some readers may misinterpret these examples as specific necessitates the kind of clear definition that we have worked with, which is based on the linguistic context and not on the coders' intuitions.

2.3 Overt nonspecific ellos in the corpus as a whole

The use of overt nonspecific *ellos* in our corpus is infrequent, but real. Table 1 shows that in our 123-speaker corpus, 33 percent of all verbs with 3pl non-lexical NPs make nonspecific reference. Of these, the majority appears with null SPPs, but some do show up with overts. As shown in Table 2, of all nonspecific 3pl non-lexical NPs appearing in construction with verbs, 96 percent appear with nulls, leaving a small but real four percent with overts.

Table 1
3pl Vbs with specific and nonspecific reference

	N	Pct
Specific	5170	67
Nonspecific	2490	33
All 3pl verbs	7660	100

Table 2
3pl nonspecific Vbs with null and overt SPPs

	N	Pct
Null	2397	96
Overt	93	4
All nonspecific 3pl verbs	2490	100

This very small incidence of 3pl nonspecific NPs with overt SPPs (and the likely need for very large corpora to register their presence) is probably the reason that such usages have escaped the attention of researchers.[5]   Or the belief that overt 3pl nonspecific SPPs do not exist may arise from methodological problems with data derived from grammaticality judgments. It may very well be that grammatical, occurring items such as these overt nonspecific *ellos* have such a low frequency that they cannot be retrieved by informants, or by linguists acting as informants, when requests are made for grammaticality judgments.

2.4 Overt nonspecific ellos in Spanish in Latin America and in NYC

Significantly, the 93 cases of overt SPPs found in nonspecific 3pl NPs in our corpus are not limited to Established Immigrants (EIs) or Native New Yorkers (NNYs), but are also found in the speech of Latin Americans (LAs). Examples appear in (5) and (6), in the next section. The analysis that such overt nonspecific *ellos* are forbidden by the syntax of general, non-contact Spanish is thus disconfirmed. These overt nonspecific *ellos* are not forbidden in the pre-contact dialects; they are simply disfavored. It is this disfavoring that then abates in the contact dialect, where overt nonspecific *ellos* become less rare. Table 3 shows the use of overt *ellos*, in increasing numbers, in the speech of LAs, EIs, and NNYs.

Table 3
Overt nonspecific *ellos* in three groups of speakers

	All nonspecific 3pl NPs	Overt nonspecific *ellos*	
	N	N	Pct.
LA	647	15	2
EI	1011	27	3
NNY	832	51	6
Totals	2490	93	4

F = 10.04, p = .000

Significance and post-hoc analyses show that the overall results of Table 3 are significant, as is the difference between NNYs and the other two groups. However, the post-hoc analysis does not grant significance to the difference between LAs and EIs. These results tell us that, starting from a baseline

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[5] Silva-Corvalán (1994:163) examined 30 hours of speech for her study of subject expression. In these 30 hours, she encountered 285 3pl verbs. Compare this to our 7,660 3pl verbs.

of real though scant use of overt SPPs in nonspecific 3pl NPs among LAs, there is an increase in overt SPPs among EIs and then again among NNYs. However, the most reliable difference in usage is between the more innovating NNYs on the one hand, and the more conservative LAs and EIs on the other.

2.5 Overt nonspecific ellos in the Spanish of Native New Yorkers

The study reveals that NNYs differ significantly from the other two groups. Their Spanish shows indirect transfer from English, i.e., contact with English results in an increased production of overt nonspecific *ellos*. The appearance of these forms does not represent the introduction of a foreign structure into Spanish, but rather the stimulation of a somewhat dormant phenomenon. The abundance of this phenomenon in English is most likely the reason for the impact of English on Spanish in this area of the grammar.

A possible explanation for Native New Yorkers' particular propensity to this influence is that the subtle knowledge needed to use pronouns in an adult-like way is acquired very late. Therefore, a Spanish-speaking child who arrives in New York and begins to learn English at, say, age 10, brings to the task a still incomplete set of discourse-pragmatic rules that may be highly susceptible to English influence. Similarly, for children who are born in NYC and acquire both languages natively, cross-linguistic interaction is predicted to occur at the interface between syntax and discourse-pragmatics (see Müller & Hulk, 2000; Hulk & Müller, 2001 for one of the most recent theories of bilingual first language acquisition).

3. Different degrees of nonspecificity in overt nonspecific ellos

Overt nonspecific *ellos* occur with varying degrees of nonspecificity. We have divided our sample into three types of overt nonspecific *ellos*.

> Nonreferential – These pronouns do not designate any referent. They are like the bleached pronoun *they* in English, as in (3) above.
> Semireferential – The set of possible referents is restricted (e.g., by a locative or the context).
> Corporate – These pronouns refer to some socially designated group of people, e.g., governments, bosses, criminals, doctors, postmen, people at the bank, school officials, etc.).[6]

Nonreferential pronouns are the most nonspecific of the three types. They are also the most noticeable and unusual. Consider the following example from a LA informant from Colombia (arrived in the U.S. at age 19 and has been in NYC for just five years).

(5) --*Es una ciudad que … que luce más como un pueblo y se llama xxx y nadie en la vida ha oído de esa ciudad, porque está perdida por allá en xxx.*
--¿Dónde queda?
*--En la … eh … queda en la parte norte, en el … **ellos** la llaman, la xxx. Está en la bahía de San Francisco alrededor de … está como a una hora de San Francisco.* (194C)

--It's a city that… that looks more like a town and it's called xxx and nobody in the world has heard of this city because it's lost out there in xxx.
--Where is it?
--In the… it's in the northern part, in the… **they** call it, the xxx. It's in the San Francisco bay area around… it's about an hour from San Francisco.

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[6] We follow Cabredo Hofherr (2003), Casielles-Suarez (1994), Pesetsky (1995) in our use of the term 'corporate'.

This overt nonspecific *ellos* found in *ellos la llaman*, 'they call it', has no referent. There is no antecedent in the linguistic context, nor is there any implication that there is a particular group that calls this city by its name. Here, *ellos la llaman* is very much like *se llama*, 'it's called'.

Semireferential pronouns are less nonspecific than nonreferentials because a set of possible referents is delineated. Consider the following excerpt from another LA informant, this one from Puerto Rico (arrived in NYC at the age of 20 and has been in NYC for three years).

(6) *Si yo voy a Santo Domingo o Venezuela, o Ecuador o cualquiera de estos países a buscar un trabajo, solamente por la simple razón de que estudié en Nueva York y sé inglés, **ellos** son capaz de quitarle el trabajo a un empleado de ellos para dármelo a mí simplemente porque yo soy un americano.* (198P)

   If I go to Santo Domingo or Venezuela, or Ecuador or any of these countries to look for work, only for the simple reason that I studied in New York or I know English, **they** are capable of taking away a job from an employee of theirs to give it to me simply because I'm an American.

In this example, *ellos* refers to employers in Latin America. The set of possible referents is restricted, but not specific; no particular group of employers is designated, nor does the speaker refer to a specific country in Latin America. This type of overt nonspecific *ellos* easily escapes notice because the hearer/reader may conjure up an image of a referent (e.g., an employer in Venezuela).

The third type is the least nonspecific of the three. Consider the following excerpt from a Colombian informant who arrived in the U.S. at age nine and has been here for 16 years.

(7) *Mandaron a hacer uno de esos labors a máquina de escribir, pero resulta que da la casualidad que me encontré con el presidente de la compañía en la oficina y él me preguntó que cómo me llamaba, cuántos años tenía, se sorprendió que yo le contesté y le hablé el inglés lo más de bien, y me dijo que qué yo hacía trabajando ahí teniendo yo un idio... que habí... que hablaba muy bien el idioma. Después como al mes me llamó y me dijo que **ellos** se iban a mudar y que necesitaban un... una persona en la oficina y me dijeron que iban a tener el puesto pendiente, cuan ... antes de mudarse la compañía para el piso en que estamos, **ellos** me llamaron a la oficina y me dijeron que si quería el trabajo...* (208C)

   (They) sent for someone to do one of those typewriting jobs, but it turns out that I coincidentally met the president of the company in the office and he asked me my name, how old I was, he was surprised that I answered him and that I spoke English so well and he said to me, what was I doing working there having a lang… that I spoke the language so well. After a month, he called me and told me that **they** were going to move and that (they) needed a… a person in the office and they told me that (they) were going to have the job pending, when… before the company moved to the floor that we're on, **they** called me to the office and (they) told me that if I wanted the job.

The set of possible referents for *ellos* above is far more restricted than the set for nonreferential and semireferential *ellos*; 'they' can only include people who work at the company. Even so, these 'corporate *ellos*' merit the status of overt nonspecific SPPs. Very often the referent of corporate *ellos* is a single individual. Consider the second boldface *ellos* above in *ellos me llamaron*, 'they called me'. Even though it is likely that only one person called the informant to the office, the 3pl SPP is used. The plural, as opposed to the 3rd person singular, reduces the importance of any one particular agent, demonstrating that the function of *ellos* here is to achieve nonspecificity. On the other hand, corporate *ellos* may create the illusion of specific reference because the group to which the individuals belong is explicitly mentioned. It is not surprising, then, that these corporate overt nonspecific *ellos* are especially difficult for researchers to detect.

Our data show that as nonspecificity decreases, the use of overt nonspecific *ellos* increases, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Frequencies of types of overt nonspecific *ellos*

	N	Pct.
Nonreferential	15	16
Semireferential	28	30
Corporate	50	54
Total	93	100

The nonreferential type is the most scarce; the 15 instances in our corpus represent 16 percent of the entire set of overt nonspecific *ellos*. Semireferentials are about twice as common, representing a third of the examples. Finally, more than half of all overt nonspecific *ellos* are corporates.

This generalization appears to hold true for all of our informants. Table 5 shows that the proportions of each type of overt nonspecific *ellos* are similar among the three groups. Nonreferentials make up from 15 to 20 percent of nonspecifics; semireferentials range from 27 to 37 percent; and corporates represent about half of nonspecifics for all three groups of informants.

Table 5
Types of overt nonspecific *ellos* among three groups of informants

	LA		EI		NNY	
Types of overt nonspecific *ellos*	N	Pct.	N	Pct.	N	Pct.
Nonreferential	3	20	4	15	8	16
Semireferential	4	27	10	37	14	27
Corporate	8	53	13	48	29	57
Totals for each informant group	15	100	27	100	51	100

As exposure to English increases, the frequency of all three types of overt nonspecific *ellos* increases. However, the general pattern remains: the less specific the referent, the less an overt nonspecific 3pl SPP *ellos* will be used.

4. Conclusion

In linguistic theory, categorical rules are used to describe many linguistic phenomena, as has been the case for specificity and overt *ellos*. Very often, however, organizing principles governing linguistic phenomena represent tendencies, not absolutes. The present study uncovers the inadequacy of a widely accepted categorical rule in Spanish. Overt nonspecific *ellos* occur in both pre-contact and contact varieties of Spanish. Both varieties point to a general tendency: the more nonspecific the referent, the less likely it is that the 3pl SPP will occur in its overt form. Starting from a scant but nevertheless firm base in general Spanish that includes all types of overt nonspecific *ellos* and that is especially strong on the corporate ones, contact with English then stimulates the use of these overt nonspecific 3pl SPPs, increasing their frequency in the contact variety. But since these over-abundant SPPs of NYC Spanish were already present in general Spanish, their occurrence in the contact dialect does not threaten the generalization by Silva-Corvalán and others. It remains true that, for the most part, contact-induced change tends to take the form of disturbances in the frequencies of occurrence of linguistic forms and in the strength of their governing pragmatic constraints, not in the form of radical syntactic alterations.

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