

Los Mexicanos in New Jersey: Pronominal Expression and Ethnolinguistic Aspects

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this sociolinguistic study is to investigate the problem of the variable use of subject personal pronouns (SPPs) in a speech community of Mexicanos in New Brunswick (NB), New Jersey. Following Godina (2004), *Mexicanos* refers to people of Mexican background that have recently immigrated to the U.S. This study is unique in that it examines this feature using conversation and narrative discourse and it combines sociolinguistic interviews with ethnography as a means of identifying several aspects of language use among its speakers. As noted by Zentella (1997), by blending the methodologies one can also reduce the field-method constraints that arise when the researcher is not part of the community. One of the purposes of examining the variable use of SPPs in this new community is to document tendencies and draw comparisons with other empirical studies such as Cameron (1992, 1996); Cameron & Flores-Ferrán, (2004); Flores-Ferrán (2002, 2004, 2005); Flores & Toro (2000); and Otheguy & Zentella (2005, 2006). In turn, the ethnography serves two purposes: it contributes to explanations about a group of people who are considered a cultural unit. Moreover, it enables us to draw comparisons at a future date with studies that examine language use in social networks such as Raschka, Wei, & Lee (2002). This study is divided in three phases. The first phase is described in this article: pronominal expression among Mexicano adults. It also reports on several aspects of Spanish language use. The second phase expands on the preliminary findings of the ethnography reported here. And finally, the third phase will examine Spanish language use of Mexicano children in schools and at home.

Although SPP variation has been empirically investigated throughout the U.S. in urban and rural settings that have a strong presence of Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, and Mexicanos such as Bayley & Pease-Álvarez (1997) and Silva-Corvalán (1982, 1994), a gap still remains: This speech community situated between New York City (NYC) and Philadelphia remains to date relatively understudied. This chapter provides only an introduction to the ethnographic aspects of the study and focuses mainly on the findings regarding the variable use of SPPs.

2. Ethnolinguistic vitality of Mexicanos in the United States: its importance in this study

Family language transmission and language maintenance among Mexicanos have been widely investigated by Bayley, et al. (1996); Benjamin (1996); Evans (1996); Farr & Guerra (1995); Reese & Gallimore (2000); Rodríguez-Brown & Mulhern (1993), among others. These studies report on differences in the use of Spanish and literacy practices in the homes. To date, however, limited sociolinguistic research has been conducted among Mexicanos in the northeast although a growing number of Mexicanos have become part of the cultural-linguistic mosaic. For instance, the U.S. Census data for New Jersey show that the Mexican population trippled between 1990 and 2000 from 28,759 to 102,929 (Luire et al. p.517). The importance of investigating linguistic features at this particular time is that these residents come from similar points in Mexico, Oaxaca and Puebla, they are recent settlers to NB, most have a limited literacy in their first language, and most have not yet been exposed to English and other varieties of Spanish as is the case of many Mexican residents in NYC, for instance.

3. Research on the variable use of subject personal pronouns of Mexicanos

Research on SPPs has been conducted in Mexican-American communities in California, Texas, and Mexico (Bayley & Pease-Álvarez, 1997; Dumeyakor, 1994; Silva-Corvalán, 1994, Solomon, 1998) etc., but for the East, only two studies which use different approaches investigate this problem among speakers of the Mexican variety: De Fina (1999) and Otheguy & Zentella (2005; 2006).

De Fina's (1999) seminal study of Mexicanos examines SPP expression using discourse analysis. The study discusses, among other problems, speaker orientation and social conceptions of self, and the use of 'nosotros' [us] in a collectivist society. De Fina shows how shifts from singular to plural SPPs are not necessarily conditioned by a switch in subject reference as noted by Cameron (1992) and Flores-Ferrán (2002). Rather, she points out that the speakers tend to use 'nosotros' interchangeably with 'yo' [I] in representing a group. De Fina (1999) also maintains that switches to 'nosotros' indicate the role of the individual narrator positioning himself/herself as non-prominent in the story (p. 119).

Otheguy & Zentella (2005, 2006) examine the expression of SPPs in various NYC Spanish varieties. They posit that intense contact between Spanish varieties has a leveling effect with regard to this feature. They also posit that contact with English has produced an increased use of pronouns among NYC speakers of Spanish. Among other pieces of evidence, they observe a positive correlation between higher pronoun rates, on the one hand, and on the other, more years spent in the City, younger age of arrival, less Spanish skills and less use of Spanish with certain interlocutors.

4. New Brunswick: What does it look like?

New Jersey's population was estimated at 8,698,879 in the 2004 Census. NB's population however is only 49,803. Although NB's population is small, Hispanics are growing in numbers. While only 13% percent of the population of New Jersey is Hispanic, NB has a 48% Hispanic population and, of this 48%, nearly half (22%) are Mexicanos.

This speech community's residents live in the center of the town and surrounding streets where most of their businesses and socializing takes place. In the early morning hours one witnesses *jornaleros* or day workers awaiting employment, mothers walking children to school, etc. while in the evening, one can see the busy laundromats, taquerías, grocery stores, churches, etc. that cater to this community. The community is representative of many small Mexicano communities in the U.S. in that most Mexicanos remain largely isolated from other communities, work together in the same places, transport themselves in vans to work in non-urban settings around the state, and communicate daily with other Mexicanos in their homes and neighborhoods. It is said that one can live in NB without speaking English all day.

5. Methodology and Participants

Sociolinguistic interviews were conducted following Labov (1984) with the purpose of obtaining conversations and narratives. A convergence of methods was partnered with the Labovian interview. Namely, a triangulation method was used that consisted of interviews, questionnaires, observations, and the collection of documents.

For this preliminary phase, the corpus was collected from 21 women and the 14 men. Their ages ranged from 18 to 50+, but most of the participants, were between 21-39 years old (85.7%). Sixty-five percent indicated they had lived in NB less than seven years. Only one reported that he lived in NB over 15 years. Regarding education, only one participant reported not having attended school. Forty percent of the 35 reported that they completed only elementary school while a few completed high school or vocational school, and only two attended university. Eighteen participants reported that they had children in NB with ages ranging from the infant category to age 14.

6. Research questions

Several questions regarding the variable use of SPPs are addressed herein:

1. What are the patterns of subject and SPP expression among this group?
2. Do patterns of SPP expression differ from those documented by other scholars?
3. With regard to discourse type, are differences found in the expression of subjects?
4. Is there a positive correlation between the semantic type of verb and SPP expression?

7. Several initial ethnographic findings

To approach this study, it was necessary to draw on ethnography since one of the goals of the study was to examine language use within a social matrix (Hymes, 1972) and also examine several linguistic features. As such, there was a need to collect initial data about a community that has never been linguistically investigated and to decrease the distance between the researcher and assistants (who are not of the same Spanish variety) and the participants of the study. Through observations it was noted that most adults have limited literacy in Spanish (L1) which suggests that they may not shift to English as rapidly as their children. That is, their Spanish may be maintained due to the intense contact with their own variety and also the absence of formal literacy skills that can assist in the acquisition of English. Finally, the children are currently undergoing a rapid shift to English as evidenced in school visits. These conditions make it plausible to identify several tendencies in the parents and to also draw comparisons with the children's use of the same linguistic features in the second phase of the study.

In this dense community of Mexicanos, and with exception to the two university students, adults were found to have limited or no knowledge of English. Most men indicated that they knew random vocabulary or lexical phrases. They worked in fish markets, flower shops, lawn-related services, construction, etc. where knowledge of English was not required. Field observations were made in their workplaces which confirmed their responses. The women conducted most of their transactions in Spanish. Field observations were also made to confirm these responses and all the conclusions reached were supported by the Mexican American Community Organization, a newly formed community-based organization in NB. Finally, Spanish was reported as the main or only language used in the home.

School-age children were reported to mainly address parents in Spanish but address siblings in English. Observations made in the elementary school classrooms, confirmed that Spanish was predominantly used in first and second grades, but by third grade, children favored English in spite of k-3 bilingual program support. Of the 18 parents interviewed, the women were considered the transmitters of L1 although they did not conduct reading activities with their children. Men, on the other hand, although they work outside the house, did not consistently respond to favoring Spanish or English with their children. All 18 respondents indicated they did not read to their children in either language. For this initial phase of the study, children were not interviewed.

8. Linguistic findings: Patterns of pronominal expression

As noted earlier, the variable use of SPPs has been widely examined in the Mexican Spanish variety both in Mexico and in the U.S. Conclusions drawn from these studies suggests that speakers of Mexican Spanish variety use overt SPPs in lower frequencies than speakers of other Spanish varieties. Table 1 shows the frequencies of subject expression, including verbs whose subjects were nominal or lexical subjects (LSs).

Table 1 Lexical Subject (LS) and SPP expression and position in narratives and conversations entire corpus (n=5076)

Variable	# of verbs	Percent
Null subject	3304	65%
SPP V	1117	22%
V SPP	111	2.2%
LS V	414	8.2%
V LS	130	2.6%
Total	5076	100%

(p>.000)

In Table 1, we find that speakers have a tendency to favor the null form (65%), a finding documented with speakers of other Spanish varieties. Pre- and post posed overt SPPs were expressed in 24.2% of the verbs. This frequency is below the 33% reported for Group 1 in Silva-Corvalán's (1994) study, a group defined as having immigrated to the USA after the age of 11 (p. 15) as is the case of the participants of this study. Otheguy & Zentella (2006) reported that the participants expressed 19% of the verbs with overt SPPs in a corpus produced by six newcomers. The newcomers were defined as having arrived in NYC after the age of 17, resembling participants in this current study also, but having lived less than five years in NYC. Table 2 illustrates this comparison.

Table 2 SPP expression: A comparison of several studies

	This study	Otheguy & Zentella (2005)	Silva-Corvalán, (1994)
Total No. of speakers	35	6	16
Total No. of Verbs	5,076	2,569	360
Expressed SPPs	24%	19%	33%

In Table 2, we find a comparison made of the frequencies of pronominal expression among Mexicanos in three distinct studies. While these studies were designed differently, the dependent variable, the expression of the null or overt SPP, remains a constant. We find here that the expression of SPPs for the NB Mexicanos does not diverge from patterns previously documented.

With regard to the independent factor of discourse type, this study was constructed with an independent variable that investigated whether there were differences in the use of SPPs in conversational interviews as opposed to narratives. This factor was designed building on Flores-Ferrán (2002) which suggested that the discourse type conditioned the use of verb tenses and SPPs. To that effect, if the verb appeared in a narrative as defined by Labov & Waletzky (1967), the verb was coded in that context. Otherwise, the verb was coded for controlled-elicited responses produced during an interview. Table 3 illustrates the distribution of subjects within the discourse type.

Table 3 Subject expression and position in relation to discourse type (n=5076)

Variable	Discourse type		Total
	Conversation	Narrative	
Null	28.8%	71.2%	100%
SPP V	29.4%	70.6%	100%
V SPP	41.4%	58.6%	100%
LS V	25.8%	74.2%	100%
V LS	21.5%	78.5%	100%

(p>.007)

If we examine this table by looking at the pairs of dependent variables one can find some interesting patterns. For instance, the use of null and the preposed SPP are said to represent ways of saying the same thing. In conversations, these two variables appear with similar frequencies, the null with 28.8% and the SPP V with 29.4%. That is, speakers have a tendency to use both these variables with no distinction. The same pattern appears in the case of the null and SPP V with regard to narrative. Speakers produced verbs in 71.2% and 70.6% respectively.

If we look at LSs, one can find a similar tendency although there are subtle changes in the percentage point differences of the frequencies. For example, in conversation speakers preposed subjects in 25.8% of their verbs and post posed in 21.5%, a -4.3 percentage-point difference that favors the preposed position. In narratives, speakers produced preposed LSs in 74.2% of their verbs and post posed in 78.5%. This difference shows an increased favoring toward the post posed position by +4.3 percentage points.

A similar observation can be made for post posing of SPPs although a more marked difference is evidenced. That is, in conversation speakers produced only 41.4% of the verbs with preposed SPPs but in narratives, SPP post posing increased to 58.6%, a +17.2 percentage-point difference.

In summarizing these observations then, we can say that with regard to narratives, there appears to be a stronger tendency to favor SPP post posing and a mild tendency to post pose LSs. To that effect, another analysis follows that examines the independent variable of semantic verb type.

Table 4. Subject expression & Semantic Verb Type (n=5076)

	Mental	Estimative	State	External	No Categ	Total
Null	9.4%	1.3%	17.3%	71.3%	.6%	100%
SPP V	16.5%	3.1%	23.4%	56.8%	.3%	100%
V SPP	7.2%	.9%	20.7%	71.2%	0%	100%
LS V	8.0%	.7%	28.0%	62.8%	.5%	100%
V LS	3.1%	.8%	32.3%	63.8%	0%	100%

($p > .000$)

At a glance in Table 4 one finds that the majority of verbs were expressed as verbs of external activity. Consequently, the highest frequency of post posed SPPs appears with verbs of external activity. Note the increase in the production of post posed SPPs from 56.8% to 71.2%, a +14.4 percentage-point difference. Also note that with respect to all other semantic verb categories, SPP post posing decreases when compared to SPP preposing.

Silva-Corvalán (1977 cited in 1997) has noted that VS order is the strategy selected to introduce new subject referents (p.141). Although this is probably the case, an immediate explanation cannot contribute to an understanding of why there are not more instances of post posed SPPs in other semantic verb types. Moreover, an explanation cannot be afforded at this juncture either for a secondary and less statistically significant observation that can address why speakers have a stronger tendency to post pose SPPs and not LSs. Also note that LS post posing occurs with more frequency only in the category of state verbs (from 28.9% to 32.3%). Therefore, although one may suggest that perhaps new subject referents are being introduced, further data need to be gathered to further explain these tendencies.

9. Conclusion

This preliminary study set out to investigate the variable use of SPPs in Spanish oral narratives and conversations among 35 Mexicanos in NB. It also aimed at obtaining ethnographic data regarding the use of Spanish in the speech community since this community has not been linguistically investigated. The next comments will be restricted to the findings regarding the variable use of SPPs.

A number of initial claims can be made from these preliminary findings that respond to the questions. First, the 35 Mexicanos in NB produce SPPs in frequencies that do not diverge from previously documented studies.

Second, a positive effect was found with regard to the position of the SPP expressed in narratives versus conversations. It was noted that speakers tend to post pose SPPs in narratives more than in controlled-elicited responses. It is suggested here that perhaps in controlled-elicited responses, speakers tend to

respond to questions following the syntax in which the questions were produced, a pattern that may emerge as a result of priming (Cameron & Flores-Ferrán, 2004; Dell, 1986). Or as Givón (1990) has argued, in human communication the message boils down to coherence (p.895). Referential coherence contributes to maximizing the hearer's mental accessibility of a referent. Therefore, in questions and answers speakers may tend to not only follow similar syntactic structures, but also repeat the same subject referent in the same position because in doing so it maximizes the hearer's referent accessibility. Conversely, in narratives speakers may tend to post pose SPPs more often with the purpose of adding prominence, topicality, or pragmatic weight (Davidson, 1996) to the entity being spoken about in the narrative. But further analyses need to be conducted since as Sterling (1993) maintains, switches in subject referent may also play a role in V SPP use.

In response to another research question, a positive correlation was found with regard to verbs of external activity and the post posing of SPPs. Speakers tended to post pose SPPs providing the semantic content of the verb was one of external activity. The same consistent pattern was not evident in post posing LSs, however.

The next phase of this research will further examine other linguistic features such as switch in subject reference building on De Fina (1999), Cameron (1992), Flores-Ferrán (2002) and will also investigate SPP use among the children in this speech community.

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