

# Subject Personal Pronouns and Impersonal Sentences in Adult Colombian Immigrants' Spanish

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## 1. Introduction

Language attrition is considered as one of the processes of change that take place among languages in situations of contact. After several decades of study, there is not yet a unanimous view of language changes as indication of attrition. It is believed that language attrition is an intragenerational phenomenon that takes place in individuals of a specific generation, whereas language shift is an intergenerational process where one generation fails to pass on their own language system to the next generation. At the individual level, permanent language contact may cause not only a complete shift, but also changes in the individuals' use and proficiency of one of their linguistic systems. In other situations, and depending on several sociolinguistic factors, it may lead to language attrition (Schmid et al., 2004). The first definitions of language attrition found in the literature have negative connotations, e.g. *decay*, *erosion* (Seliger, 1985), *loss* (Richards et al., 1985). In 2004, Kees de Bot describes language attrition from a very different perspective as he suggests that it should be seen as a normal part of language development and not as a lamentable loss of what once was. Later research on language attrition has given more attention to the idea that languages are in constant interaction and as a result, they experience changes depending on the level of use. Consistent with this view is Ben-Rafael's (2004) study of French-Hebrew bilinguals, in which she concluded that changes found in their bilingual discourse should be considered as different degrees of attrition as well as lexical and grammatical enrichment and innovations. While numerous studies have dealt with the contact situation between English and Spanish in the United States (Lipski, 1996; Torres, 1991; Klee and Ramos-García, 1991; Morales, 1995; Otheguy, 1993, 2005; Roca, 2000, among others), only a few have analyzed attrition of Spanish as a first language (Silva-Corvalán, 1991; Zentella, 1997; Toribio, 2000; Montrul, 2002), and more often the focus is on loss of language skills among Spanish-English bilinguals across generations.

The purpose of this study is to investigate intragenerational first language (L1) attrition in a second language (L2) environment. The aim is to determine to what extent and at what structural levels, language attrition has occurred among first generation Colombian immigrants in New York State. The twenty informants participating in the study are adults that completed their L1 acquisition process prior to their arrival in the U.S. Most of the studies on language attrition have been concerned with migrant communities, usually characterized by diminished use of the L1 and separation from the L1 speaking community. The situation of first generation Colombian immigrants in New York State is different in terms of L1 use. Many of them (35%) use only Spanish at home and 60% use both languages within their families. These immigrants continue to use their L1 on a regular basis along with their second language in which they have achieved different levels of proficiency depending on their level of education. (See Table 1 for distribution of language use).

Table 1  
Distribution of bilinguals according to language use.

	Only Spanish	Only English	Both
Language at Home	35%	5%	60%
Language at work	10%	35%	55%

Their native language is in permanent use not only with immigrants from other Spanish speaking countries in the U.S. and the newcomers, but also with monolinguals in their home country using the latest advancements in communication technology and during their regular family visits. All participants go back home for short visits; 35% of them go to Colombia once or twice a year and 65% travel less frequently, every four or five years. Despite the fact that they keep using their first language, 75% of these Colombian immigrants admit that their Spanish has changed during the time spent in the L2 environment but they locate the problem merely at the lexical level. Nevertheless, after analyzing the data, two changes at the morphosyntactic level were found in the Spanish spoken by these bilinguals when compared to their monolingual counterparts in Colombia.

## 2. Informants

The three areas of New York State chosen for this study were: Westchester County, the New York City area, and the Capital District area (Albany). The 20 bilingual informants that participated in this study are native speakers of Spanish who were born in Colombia and immigrated to the United States as adults. They have lived in this country for long periods of time (5 to 33 years). These participants (9 males and 11 females) immigrated to the U.S. between the ages of 18 - 45 and were between 23 and 54 years of age at the time of data collection (mean age 45). Their cultural and social context is relatively homogenous: secondary education or higher and middle socioeconomic class. The results have been compared to those obtained from a control group of Colombians living in their country. The corpus for this study is taken from 20 sociolinguistic interviews conducted in Spanish with duration of approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

Data was also collected from a control group of ten Colombians that have never lived in a foreign country, and that speak only Spanish. Their age ranged from 20 to 57 (mean age 42.9) and their level of education is similar to their bilingual counterparts. Informants in the control group are from three different areas in Colombia: Bogotá, the capital of the country, Armenia and Boyacá, located in the highlands of Colombia. All cities are situated in the central part of the country, and belong to the 'superdialecto central andino', one of the two supra dialects of Colombia presented by Montes (1996). Based on the main feature of the retention of postnuclear /s/ in the highlands contrasted with the weakened or deleted /s/ of the costal regions, Montes divided the Colombian Spanish into two dialects: superdialecto central andino and superdialecto costeño. Given that all of the Colombian immigrants participating in the study (except one) come from cities located in the highlands of Colombia, both bilinguals and monolinguals interviewed in the study use the same dialectal variation: super dialecto central andino.

## 3. Data analysis

Since the aim of the present research was to study the oral language of Spanish-English bilinguals, special attention was given to any kind of changes in their linguistic performance. All recorded interviews were transcribed in order to analyze traits that prove linguistic innovations or signs of attrition. Two morphosyntactic features were recurrent in the interviews with the bilingual group and were contrasted with the control group: Overt subject personal pronouns vs. null subject personal pronouns and different alternatives to express impersonal sentences in Spanish.

### 3.1. *Overt subject personal pronouns vs. null subject personal pronouns*

As it is very well known, Spanish is a null subject language that allows optional non-overt subject pronouns. This feature is usually tied to the rich verb morphology of Spanish, which identifies the grammatical subject with a high degree of accuracy, making overt subjects pronouns usually redundant (Lipski, 1996). A more frequent use of overt personal pronouns was found in the Spanish spoken by bilinguals in New York State when compared to the control group of monolinguals in Colombia. The Subject Personal Pronoun Rate (SPP rate) suggested by Lapidus & Otheguy (2005) was used as a measure in this study. The SPP rate is the proportion of all verbs that appears with overt pronouns among all eligible verbs.

Flores-Ferrán's (2004) envelope of variation was followed to analyze the data. The envelope of variation was defined as a tensed verb whose subject can be either a null or overt Subject Personal Pronoun. Those verbs where the alternation could not occur were excluded from the study. The following is an example from the corpus:

- (1) Entonces, ah... cuando llegué aquí y ya llegó el tiempo de que yo me iba y me dice: no, no te vayas. (Ella vivía) en Manhattan y ella trabajaba como 'babysitter'. Y ella se había venido por una relación que ella tuvo allá, y quería mucho a este muchacho y habían salido como por quince años y pelearon y (él vivía) cerca a la casa y (ella decía) que ella no podía verlo con nadie que ella mejor se iba y por eso se vino. Entonces cuando ella llegó aquí ella no tenía novio, eso fueron dos años después, y ella decía: María, me siento sola, este es un país muy difícil, es bueno pero es que uno solo, porque tú no te quedas viviendo. (B27:14)

Underlined italics: SPP is null

Underlined bold: SPP is overt

Then, ah... when (*I arrived*) here and then it was time for me to leave, (*she says*) to me: don't, don't leave. She used to live in Manhattan and she was working as a babysitter. She had come here because of a relationship she had there, (*she loved*) that guy a lot and (*they were going out*) for about fifteen years and (*they broke up*), and he lived near her house and she said that she couldn't see him with anybody, for her it would be better to leave and that's why (*she came*) here. So, when she arrived here she didn't have a boyfriend, two years later, and she said: María, (*I feel*) lonely, this is a very difficult country to live in, it's good but (I am) alone, why don't you stay and live here.

In example (1) above there are 17 eligible verbs (both **bold** and *italics*), of which 10 have an overt pronoun and 7 have a null pronoun. The SSP rate is  $10/17 = 0.58$ . The sentences in parenthesis in the Spanish version were not included in the envelope of variation because the speaker had to use the overt form obligatorily to preserve the meaning and mark the change of subject.

In the results of the present study, the bilingual group showed a higher SPP rate average when compared to those in the control group. An ANOVA test of the SPP rates revealed a significant difference between the two groups.

Table 2  
SPP rate by group

Informants	SPP rate
Bilinguals	0.39
Monolinguals	0.28

$p = 0.019$

Table 2 shows the mean SPP rate in both groups. The SPP rate average for the bilingual group is 0.39 while the monolinguals presented an average of 0.28. The SPP rate for the monolinguals in Colombia is similar to the figures in Otheguy's (2005) study of Spanish in New York City, in which Colombian newcomers showed an SPP rate of 0.24. To identify the factors behind these results, some variables in the bilingual group were crossed; age of arrival was one of the variables considered. For this purpose participants were organized in two groups: 18 – 25 and 26 – 45 years of age.

Table 3  
SPP rate and age upon arrival

Age upon arrival	SPP rate
18 – 25 years old	0.40
26 – 45 years old	0.36

$p = 0.48$

Table 3 shows a slight difference between the younger immigrants and those who arrived when they were older, however this difference is not statistically significant. These results were expected since bilinguals' age of arrival in the host country is well beyond puberty (mean age of arrival: 25.6), which means that the L1 was completely established before emigration. Studies that have comprised subjects who immigrated beyond puberty found no age effects on attrition (Köpke, 1999; Schmid, 2002), while other studies in which age of departure varied from 6 to 29 years have found age to be an important factor (Hakuta & d'Andrea 1992).

Level of education completed in Colombia was another variable analyzed in the experimental group. The group with a lower level of education completed in Colombia (high school) shows a higher SPP rate (0.42) than those participants who arrived after completing four years of college or some college (SPP rate 0.34). The difference in these two groups is not statistically significant either. Though it may suggest, as Zentella (1997) reported in her study, that Spanish speakers with fewer years of formal education express more condemnation of their Spanish. Consequently, they may be more open to changes when compared to those with higher levels of education who demonstrate a more formal knowledge of their native language.

Level of education achieved in the U.S. was also considered and revealed some variation. Those participants who finished their college education in the host country show a higher SPP rate when compared to those who did not enroll in formal education.

Table 4

SPP rate and education in the U.S.

Education in the US	SPP rate
Some College	0.41
None	0.35

$p=0.32$

This result may suggest that contact with English and with other Spanish dialects in New York State, which have proven high SPP rates (Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans), may stimulate the expansion of the contexts in which Subject Personal Pronouns appear. Level of education is one of the aspects that have been overlooked in language attrition research, partly because it is very difficult to define in a discrete way in bilingual contexts, thus resulting in a methodological challenge (Schmid et al. 2004). Furthermore, outcomes of studies that include level of education among their extralinguistic variables report diverse effects on attrition depending on the instruments used for data collection. Yağmur (1997), who measured education level as one of the independent variables, found that highly educated informants performed better than less educated subjects on a verbal fluency task. However, he detected a weak effect of education level on the attrition of that skill. The present study reveals that level of education prior to emigration and years of education in the U.S. have different effects on SPP rates. Education in the home country causes higher SPP rates in less educated informants, but lower SPP rates in the highly educated. However, education in the host country shows an opposite effect: higher SPP rates in those informants who enrolled in formal education and lower SPP rates in the subjects who did not continue their formal education. This tendency suggests that constant exposure to English in different contexts as well as to Spanish speakers of other countries may have an effect on language change.

### 3.2. *Impersonal sentences in Spanish*

The second morphosyntactic aspect is related to the alternatives to express impersonal sentences in Spanish. The pronominal forms *tú* 'you' and *uno* 'one'; and the impersonal particle *se* (with no similar form in English) are analyzed for this purpose. Gili Gaya (1994) describes different uses of the *se* pronoun, however, only the impersonal use of *se* contrasted with other alternatives of expressing impersonality will be analyzed in this paper. Quesada (1997) defines impersonal sentences as active actions prompted by a human initiator, which is hidden for pragmatic reasons. He calls them subjectless sentences. The following is an example from a monolingual using the particle *se*:

- (2) En Colombia a veces parece ser que no se valora como el estudio de las personas, la capacitación que se tiene. (M1: 1)

In Colombia, it seems like people's education, the training (you have) is not valued.

Both, the *se* construction and the indefinite pronoun *uno* (one) can be regarded as impersonal structures. However, according to Quesada, 1997, *uno* is used to 'mask' the agent instead of 'hiding' it. In other words, *uno* is a form used to avoid speaking in first person and in order to achieve a certain detachment from the situation. Examples of *uno* as a subject are:

- (3) Sin embargo **uno** nota como el inglés se impone. Una vez que los niños empiezan a coger el manejo del inglés, ellos de alguna manera como que ofrecen una resistencia. Entonces, cuando **uno** menos piensa, **uno** cae en las redes de ellos'. (B17: 11)

However, one notes that English dominates. Once the kids start mastering English, in a certain way, they show resistance. Then, one suddenly falls into their trap.

The use of the indefinite pronoun *uno* in non-specific references is significantly more frequent in bilingual Colombians in New York. Monolinguals in Colombia, on the other hand, tend to use *se* when constructing impersonal sentences. Table 5 reports the use of the three alternative ways to express impersonal sentences by Colombian bilinguals and their counterparts in their home country.

Table 5  
General distribution of impersonal forms in both groups.

	BILINGUALS		CONTROL GROUP	
	N	%	N	%
' <i>uno</i> '	150	64.7%	28	32.6%
' <i>se</i> '	71	30.6%	58	67.4%
' <i>tú</i> '	11	4.7%	0	0
Total impersonal sentences	232	100 %	86	100%

This tendency of favoring *uno* to the *se* construction among bilinguals was reported in Morales (1995). Bilinguals from Puerto Rico in her study tend to substitute the *se* form for other 'more personal' impersonal forms. The analysis of all impersonal forms in the bilingual group of the present study shows preference of *uno* as opposed to *se*. The use of *tú*, however, differs in frequency from Morales' group of bilinguals and it is not present in the control group of this study. This can be due to the specific linguistic traits of Caribbean Spanish in her study where the use of *tú* is more frequent than in Colombian Spanish.

The occurrence of impersonal *tú* in the bilingual group could be the result of the contact of Colombians with speakers of other Spanish dialects in the L2 environment as well as L2 exposure as a direct translation of 'you' used in impersonal sentences. The preference of *tú* used among bilinguals to address the interlocutor, which is not a distinctive feature of 'superdialecto andino', reveals some dialect convergence given that Colombian Spanish has other alternative personal pronouns; namely, *usted* and *vos*. No examples of *vos* were found in the corpus and only one example of *usted* used in impersonal sentences was found. Another possible explanation for the increased use of *tú* among Hispanics in the U.S. is the development of greater feelings of equality and comradeship among them (Zentella 1997).

The indefinite pronoun *uno* seems to be a useful tool to avoid the role of an individual actor so as to turn into a neutral force (Quesada 1997). Notice in the example below how the speaker goes back and forth using the *yo* (I) and the *uno* (one) forms when referring to himself.

- (4) ...y **yo** no quería que ella (su hija) como que pasara tanto trabajo como **uno** ha sufrido, ¿no? Entonces **yo** pensando eso dije no, hay que hacer cosas, decisiones para mejorar, pero pues teníamos nuestros trabajos bien, tengo mi apartamento allá, vivíamos bien, o sea, pero **uno** quiere un poquito más, **uno** aspira a más. (B8: 6)

... and **I** didn't want her (his daughter) to go through so many difficulties as **one** has suffered, right? So, **I** thought about it and said, it's necessary to make decisions to improve, but we used to have our jobs, I have my apartment there, we used to live well, but **one** wants a little bit more, **one** aspires to more.

In example (4) *uno* is used as a mechanism of the speaker to unleash his role as an actor to become an external participant. Consequently, the content is presented as a fact that may be shared by the speaker and the interlocutor rather than as a personal experience.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study examined oral Spanish of Colombian bilinguals in the U.S. who immigrated as adults and have lived in the L2 environment for extended periods of time. Although most of the bilingual informants admit that their Spanish has changed only at the lexical level, these results demonstrate two changes at the morphosyntactic level of the Spanish spoken by Colombian immigrants when compared to a control group of monolinguals. The first change discussed here was the SPP rate, in which bilinguals showed higher rates compared to their monolingual counterparts. The explanation to this change, however, is not clear, as we need to see language contact in New York State from two different ends: First, Spanish speakers in contact with English and second, Spanish speakers exposed to other Spanish dialects. These results parallel Otheguy's (2005) study of Spanish speakers from six different countries living in New York City, where Colombians were one of the two groups that showed the greater influence of English on Spanish usage. Some variables such as age of arrival and level of education were tested in order to identify specific factors behind the higher SPP rates among bilinguals. Although not statistically significant, level of education completed in the home country showed some difference among bilinguals. The group with a lower level of education completed in Colombia (high school) showed a higher SPP rate compared to those participants who arrived after completing four years of college or some college. Conversely, education in the host country revealed an opposite effect on SPP rates. Informants who enrolled in formal education showed higher SPP rates when compared to those who did not continue their formal education.

The second change shows a more recurrent use of the indefinite pronoun *uno* in bilinguals when constructing impersonal sentences. Monolinguals on the other hand, prefer to use the particle *se* for the same purposes. While the use of *uno* is also present in the control group, it is much less common. The results prove that bilinguals make use of more alternatives when referring to impersonal sentences. They use *uno*, the particle *se*, and the pronoun *tú*, in order of frequency, whereas monolinguals only use the particle *se* and *uno*. No examples of *tú* in impersonal sentences were found in the monolingual group. Since the particle *se* does not have an equivalent in English, exposure to L2 cannot be disregarded as an explanation to the preference of more personal ways to express impersonal sentences in Spanish. Given that these elements do not hinder communication but fall in line with features of Spanish spoken in the U.S., it is a sign of dialect convergence/variation of Spanish spoken in an L2 environment where it comes into contact with English as well as with other Spanish dialects. Since these two morphosyntactic features proved to have a different tendency in the Spanish of the control group, it can be concluded that the adult Colombian immigrants in this study are showing an early sign of language attrition. However, these changes should be seen as a sign of normal language development in individuals who are using two languages in permanent contact. These innovations are part of the grammatical enrichment that builds up in the Spanish-English bilingual discourse. Given that the two aspects described above were also present in the control group of monolinguals, the contact induced changes found in the bilingual group take the form of variations in the frequency of occurrence of linguistic forms, not in the form of radical morphosyntactic alterations. In conclusion, the present study proved that even though first generation Colombian immigrants in New York State maintain a certain degree of L1 use in the second language environment, some innovations at the morphosyntactic level were found in their spoken Spanish due not only to a reduction of L1 use but also to extensive exposure to English and to speakers of other Spanish speaking countries.

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