

# Natural Second Language Acquisition or Pidginization? Present Tense Verb Usage by Adult Chinese Speakers of Spanish in Guayaquil, Ecuador

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## 1. Introduction

In this study, I investigate adult natural second language acquisition and social acculturation resulting from Chinese immigrants coming into contact with the Spanish language and Ecuadorian culture after their arrival in Ecuador in very recent times. Special account is taken of social factors that influence their language acquisition. Most particularly, I compare natural second language acquisition by older speakers to more formal language learning and acquisition by younger adult speakers. The language output obtained from the older and younger participants in this study sheds light on the nature of their language acquisition processes, attitudes towards the language, and most importantly their linguistic systems. But what is language acquisition and how do people who come into contact acquire the second language? How may second language learning in certain contact situations be related to pidginization, the development of contact languages? Clancy Clements presented similar questions in several studies regarding Chinese immigrant Spanish in Spain. In his studies Clements used the data collected from two informants, Jenny and Luis, both older adults (Clements, 2003). In my study, I broaden the number of participants to 17, 8 older adults and 9 younger adults.

My data were collected over the summers of 2001-2003 and drawn from 17 recorded interviews. The speakers are divided into two distinct groups; one is older adults (older than 40) and the other younger adults (younger than 40). For each group of participants, the objective, in this case, has been to examine the acquisition of Spanish morpho-syntactic (or grammatical) features of the present verb tense; attention is also given to the type of subject used. The factors analyzed in correlation with subject-verb agreement are: (1) person of the verb form, (2) alternative form used, (3) type of subject, (4) age of speakers, and (5) household composition.

## 2. Theoretical preliminaries

Before presenting the results of this study and examining whether the process seen in the speech production of the older Chinese adults in Ecuador may be natural second language acquisition or pidginization, it is essential to define what pidginization and second language acquisition are.

According to John Holm (2000), a pidgin is a simplified language containing target language lexicon and including features of the speaker's first language,

*A pidgin* is a reduced language that results from extended contact between groups of people with no language in common; it evolves when they need some means of verbal communication, perhaps for trade, but no group learns the native language of any other group for social reasons that may include lack of trust or close contact. (Holm, 2000, p. 5)

This pidgin, as Holm explains, “is [...] stable and has certain norms of meaning, pronunciation and grammar, although there is still variation resulting from the transfer of features from speakers’ first languages” (p. 5).

Lipski’s definition of a pidgin is seen in his discussion of early evidence of Afro-Hispanic speech. He writes: “Some of the language attributed to Africans was a transparently exaggerated travesty, but in general the features of pidgin language emerge: elimination of verbal conjugation; lack of nominal and adjectival agreement; short, simple sentences; reduction of pronouns to a single set; and considerable phonological simplification tending toward open syllables” (Lipski, 1994, p. 97). Lipski also suggests that early Spanish pidgin may be attributed to first or second generations only.

Both Holm and Lipski agree that a pidgin is a language that contains aspects of both the target language and the first language, but Lipski emphasizes that a pidgin may not transfer to the second generation when local, fully formed variety of Spanish is readily available. In the present study, what will be described as pidginized Spanish does not transfer to the children because they all have formal schooling and have gone through a more complete language acquisition process.

Finally, Schumann’s definition of a pidgin is based on the functions that the pidginized language serves. A language serves three functions: communicative, integrative, and expressive.

Through the communicative function information is exchanged among persons. The integrative function serves to mark one’s identity within society and the expressive function is designed to allow the expression of certain psychological needs. Pidgin languages are generally restricted to the first function – communication. That is, their purpose is merely to convey information. Since pidgins are always second languages, the integrative and expressive functions are maintained by the speaker’s native languages. As a result of this functional restriction, pidginization produces an interlanguage, which is simplified in outer form and reduced in inner form (Schumann, 1974, p. 139-140).

Schumann also points out that pidginization occurs when a learner fails to pass the early stages of second language acquisition due to social and/or psychological distances. When acquisition ceases to continue, fossilization occurs, which means that the learner will keep certain grammatical mistakes regardless of any amount of explanation or of error correction. When this happens, the learner may employ primarily the communicative function of language and not the integrative or expressive ones. The integrative function of language can be achieved only if the learner does not fossilize in the early stages of acquisition and according to Schumann the expressive function can never be fully achieved by L2 learners.

According to Rod Ellis, “Second language acquisition refers to all aspects of language that the language learner needs to master. However, the focus has been on how L2 learners acquire grammatical sub-systems, such as negatives or interrogatives, or grammatical morphemes such as the plural {s} or the definite and indefinite articles. Research has tended to ignore other levels of language” (Ellis, 1986, p.5). Taking into account Ellis’ definition of language acquisition, the characteristics of a pidgin encompass all aspects of a language that the language learner needs to master. However, with respect to all aspects of the target language, the speaker of a pidginized language falls radically short. Nominal, verbal, sentential, and even phonological systems are simplified and fossilized and may be modified after the speakers’ first rather than the target language system. This means that if a L2 speaker does not master the plural marker {s} or shows a lack of verbal inflection, he or she has not successfully acquired the language.

Before accepting the above assumption, let us take a look at Stephen Krashen’s theory of second language acquisition. Krashen’s theory of second language acquisition is composed of five hypotheses: the Acquisition-Learning hypothesis, the Monitor hypothesis, the Natural Order hypothesis, the Input hypothesis, and the Affective Filter hypothesis. For the purposes of this study, I will take into account the Acquisition-Learning and the Natural Order hypotheses. According to Krashen, there are two distinct ways in which adults develop competence in a second language: first, the acquired way – where the learner subconsciously goes through a process similar to that of L1 acquisition and the language is used for real communication. Second, the learned way – where the learner goes through

formal instruction and a conscious process that results in knowing about the language (Krashen, 1988). The Natural Order hypothesis suggests that learners acquire the rules of language in a predictable order. For any target language, in this case Spanish, some grammatical rules tend to be acquired first while others later.

For both Ellis and Krashen, the end result is the acquisition of the rules of the target language. If the result falls short and takes the form of simplified, fossilized usage involving elements of the first language - the result may be pidginization; rather than second language acquisition. The differences outlined above suggest that the Spanish spoken by the Chinese older adults in this study might have been acquired in the form of a pidgin, while the Spanish spoken by the younger adults was both learned and acquired in the form of a second language.

### 3. The Chinese Community in Ecuador

Chinese emigration has been ongoing since the early 1840s with the Silk Road and later with the Coolie Trade. Many Chinese immigrants left their native country in search of a better life for their families. Upon arrival in new countries they found foreign language and culture a complex reality. This is the case of Chinese immigrants in Ecuador. As early as the 1900s Chinese people started entering Peru in order to work on the plantations. There, a small community was rapidly formed and over time it has grown and expanded to bordering countries, such as Ecuador.

The Chinese community in Guayaquil is a tight entity. The maintenance of their status, culture and language is very important. Newly arrived immigrants always have somewhere to stay and someone from the community to help them establish their business and find a home. Many older adults who first arrived in Ecuador over the age of 50 do not speak Spanish and it is not necessary to do so because the younger generations in the family serve as interpreters. The young children who immigrate to Ecuador frequently are not proficient in reading and writing Chinese. There is, however, a Chinese School in the community organized by the Taiwanese community to teach children how to read and write in Chinese on weekends. The school is open mostly only to people from Taiwan. Children attend the school every weekend and sometimes after ‘regular’<sup>1</sup> school. In recent years some parents have been sending their children back to their home country to formally study Chinese. The parents arrive in Ecuador, where the children attend primary school for two to three years, and then the children are sent back to their homeland for a year or more. After a year or more in their homeland, they return to Ecuador to continue their education and attend Chinese School. People from Taiwan, Hong Kong and China acknowledge each other and do business together but they rarely socialize at a personal level. This situation is similar to that of the Chinese community in Spain as described by Beltrán and García (2001). According to these authors the Chinese community in Spain values their culture and language more than the immediate adoption and adaptation of the new foreign language. In some cases, children are not allowed to study and learn Spanish in fear of losing their own language and some adults also refuse to learn the language. In other cases, young children study Spanish formally until they are about eight or nine years old and are sent back to China to study until they are adolescents. After a period in China they return to Spain to continue their Spanish education or help in their parents’ business.

### 4. The informants

The participants in this study come from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, all of which have their own language varieties. Although the Chinese population in Ecuador is closed as an entity at the same time it is divided based on nationalities. Chinese speakers from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan communicate with each other mostly in Mandarin, the official language, also known as *Pu tong hua*, meaning “common language”. In some cases, when the speakers cannot communicate with each other in Mandarin or their own dialect, the pidginized Spanish described here is used as the language of communication; it is also used for communicating with Spanish speakers. All participants are either

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese children attend either a Spanish-English bilingual private school or a German-Spanish-English trilingual private school.

business owners or children of business owners who immigrated to Ecuador in the late 70s in search of a better business opportunity. Their businesses range from restaurants to electronics stores, automobile parts, clothing and shoe stores, import and export companies, and more. When strolling through the center of Guayaquil one will almost surely pass through at least one Chinese owned *chifa* (a Chinese restaurant) or store.

As mentioned in the introduction, the informant sample consists of 17 participants, 8 older adults and 9 younger adults. The data is based on directed interviews with topics such as: memories they have of Taiwan, China or Hong Kong; the experience they had when they first arrived; the political and economic situation in Ecuador; the best and worst presidents; and robberies they have experienced.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Linguistic Conditioning

The results of this study indicate that the older adult participants have a great tendency to use the third person singular form whether there is agreement or not. When there is a lack of subject/verb agreement, the older adult participants used the third person singular form 82% (percentage calculated from Table 2) of the time, be it for first person singular, second person singular, first person plural or third person plural. They make correct use of the third person singular 90% of the time as shown in Table 1. Besides the third person singular forms, other incorrect uses are of non-conjugated forms, infinitives and gerunds, and specific cases of use of incorrect plurals.

**Table 1: Dependent variable – Person agreement for older adults group (results in percentages)**

<i>Group</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Total Tokens</i>
<b>First-person singular</b>	34%	66%	197
<b>Second-person singular</b>	78%	22%	9
<b>Third-person singular</b>	90%	10%	213
<b>First-person plural</b>	50%	50%	16
<b>Third-person plural</b>	29%	71%	21
			<b>456</b>

The results in Table 1 show that the speakers use correct or incorrect forms of the first and third person singular with great frequency; the total number of tokens for first person and third person singular forms is 197 and 213 tokens, respectively. However, when using the first person singular forms the speakers demonstrate agreement only 34% of the time. Most of these correct forms used are of a few specific verbs such as ‘creer’, ‘tener’ and ‘saber’, although sometimes they use the first person and third-person forms of these verbs interchangeably as ‘yo no sé / yo no sabe’.

The correct use of the third-person singular form, as mentioned earlier, is 90%, while the use of the third-person as an alternative is 82%<sup>2</sup> as shown in Table 2, below.

**Table 2: Alternative forms used for older adults group – Errors only (results in percents and numbers)**

<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Total Tokens</i>
<b>Third-person singular</b>	82%	145
<b>Infinitive</b>	7%	13
<b>Plural</b>	10%	17
<b>Gerund</b>	1%	1
		<b>176</b>

<sup>2</sup> Total number of alternative third person singular form used (145) divided by total number of errors (176).

The results in Table 2 show that when there is a lack of subject-verb agreement, the speakers are using alternatives such as: third person singular, infinitive, third person plural or gerund instead of the correct form. The majority of the third person plural forms (17 tokens) as in: ‘China son país grande’ (*China are big country*) and ‘idioma ma romántico son de español’ (*most romantic language are Spanish*) was made by one specific user, while the use of the infinitive form (13 tokens) was made by different speakers. Examples of the correct uses and of the alternative uses can be seen below.

Examples of incorrect (n) and correct (y) uses may be seen below,

Group 1: (y) yo creo que tiene mil, dos mil persona más.

*I think that (ref: Ecuador) has one thousand, two thousand person more.*

(n) yo viene a Ecuador la gente sí está bien.

*I come to Ecuador the people is ok.*

Group 2: (y) repite, por favor. (imperativo informal / 3sg)

*Repeat, please. (informal imperative / 3sg)*

(n) tú sabe<sup>3</sup> necesita habla español.

*You (2sg) know (3sg) need (3sg) speak (3sg) Spanish.*

Group 3: (y) cuando de niño pequeño ya aprende.

*When as a small child already learn (3sg).*

(n) China son país grande.

*China are big country.*

Group 4: (y) pero también hablamos chino-mandarín.

*but also we speak Mandarin-Chinese.*

(n) yo con mi marido no, todo está viviendo.

*I with my husband no, all is living.*

Group 6: (y) (los ecuatorianos) no entienden.

*(Ecuadorians) do not understand.*

(n) si los pequeños si quiere estudiar.

*if the little ones if want (3sg) to study.*

Table 2 has shown that out of 176 error tokens, 145 were of the unmarked third-person singular forms of the Spanish system. Besides simplification, the person agreement results clearly suggest the influence of the Chinese grammatical system on Spanish of these older speakers. Chinese is one of the few languages that does not have subject-verb agreement and inflectional markers of person and tense. This fact translates to forms such as: yo habla, tú habla, nosotros habla, etc.

Another way of looking at verb form use is in correlation with the type of subject. In the present tense in Spanish, expressed subjects, whether a noun or a personal pronoun, agree with the verb form as in ‘Ella va a la tienda’ (*She goes to the store*) o ‘La casa tiene dos habitaciones’ (*The house has two rooms*). In cases where the subject is non-expressed, there is traditionally one verb form per person for present tense verbs, as in examples 1 and 2 below; other less specific patterns are associated with the imperfective aspect (as in example 3), subjunctives, and other forms.

<sup>3</sup> In all the data, there are only two cases of the incorrect second person singular form. The speaker repeated the same sentence twice during the interview. There is not enough data to suggest that it is a case of /s/ deletion for the second person singular.

1. **Estudiamos** para el examen.

**1<sup>st</sup>.pers. pl.**

*We study for the exam.*

2. **Comes** el almuerzo a la una de la tarde.

**2<sup>nd</sup> pers. sing.**

*You (familiar) eat lunch at one o'clock in the afternoon.*

3. **Jugaba** con muñecas.

**1<sup>st</sup> pers.sing/3<sup>rd</sup> pers.sing**

*I /S/He played with dolls.*

The correlation between verb form use and type of subject shows, as seen in Table 3, that it has no influence on subject-verb agreement among the older Chinese speakers when the correlations are broken down for “non-third-person-singular uses” and “third person singular”. They are overwhelming incorrect in the first case and overwhelmingly correct in the second. As we already know, the results in Tables 1 and 2 show that there is a great tendency to use the third person singular form in either of these cases.

**Table 3: Agreement by Type of Subject for older adults group**

### 3.1 Non-third-person-singular uses:

<i>Group</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Total Tokens</i>
<b>Personal pronoun</b>	31%	69%	67
<b>Noun</b>	31%	69%	13
<b>Non-expressed</b>	38%	62%	163
			<b>243</b>

### 3.2 Third person singular:

<i>Group</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Total Tokens</i>
<b>Personal pronoun</b>	100%	0	10
<b>Noun</b>	82%	18%	68
<b>Non-expressed</b>	94%	6%	135
			<b>213</b>

The results in 3.2, above, show that the personal pronoun was present in only 10 out of 213 cases for the third person singular form. In the case of all other persons, the presence of a personal pronoun or of a noun did not influence significantly on the results for agreement. The results above for the older Chinese also show that subject expression is not necessary for the speakers, that is, the proportion of non-expressed subjects is very high in both 3.1 and 3.2. This also suggests, as I will explain in Section 6, that there is an influence of the speakers' first language, Chinese, on their output.

## 5.2 Social Conditioning

When analyzing the social factors, the results indicated that the most important factor that affects or relates to the participants' competence is that of age. The social factors of sex and years of residency did not indicate any significance. Both the older adults and younger adults groups included in the study have resided in Ecuador for a similar number of years. Table 4 shows the results for the first person singular, the third person singular, and third person plural forms, that is, the forms that were most

frequently used. When comparing the results of both age groups, the numbers are almost inverted, specifically for the third person plural form.

**Table 4: Older / Younger Groups – Subject-verb Agreement (results in percentages)**

**Table 4a Older Group**

<i>Group</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Total Tokens</i>
<b>First-person singular</b>	34%	66%	197
<b>Third-person singular</b>	90%	10%	213
<b>Third-person plural</b>	29%	71%	21
			<b>431</b>

**Table 4b Younger Group**

<i>Group</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Total Tokens</i>
<b>First-person singular</b>	80%	20%	87
<b>Third-person singular</b>	96%	4%	128
<b>Third-person plural</b>	71%	29%	72
			<b>287</b>

The comparison of the variable between both groups indicates that from the total number of tokens, correct and incorrect, the older adults made 39% of agreement errors while the younger adults made 15%, less than half. The percent of incorrect uses of non-third-person-singular forms for older adults is 67%; the percent of correct uses of these forms by the younger adults is 76%. Table 4 suggests that the younger adults are acquiring the agreement system and are learning Spanish as a second language, while this is not the case for the older adult group.

When dealing with second language acquisition, it is known that when one is immersed in the foreign language or surrounded by people who speak it fluently, it is easier to learn the target language. This is why the social factor of household composition may be significant in this type of analysis. When there are young children at home studying the language formally, the older adults can be influenced by the positive reinforcement. The results in Table 5 show the subject-verb agreement of older adults who have children living with them and those who do not.

**Table 5: Subject-Verb Agreement in Older Adults – Household composition (results in percentages)**

<i>Group</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Total Tokens</i>
<b>Children</b>	49%	51%	106
<b>Without Children</b>	65%	35%	350
			<b>456</b>

The results for the comparison of household composition as shown in Table 5, however, go against the idea of positive influence by having young people, or children, in the home. The results suggest that when there are small children who speak Spanish fluently at home, the older adults tend to use them as interpreters instead of learning from them. The older adult households with children show subject-verb agreement of 49% while those without children show 65%, a 16% difference.

## 6. The Chinese Grammatical System

In order to better understand the results presented, here, it is important to understand the grammatical structure of Chinese when dealing with subjects, verbs and subject pronouns. The results in Tables 1

and 3 have shown that besides viewing subject-verb agreement from the perspective of person, it is also possible to examine agreement in relation to type of subject, whether it is a pronoun, noun, or non-expressed. The examples below show the lack of subject-verb agreement in the Chinese grammatical system. The verbal inflection ‘shuō’ is the same for every subject pronoun, which clearly indicates that apart from context, the only aspect that shows any agreement is the presence of a subject pronoun.

### Lack of subject-verb agreement

wǒ <u>shuō</u> yo hablo I speak	wǒmen <u>shuō</u> nosotros/as hablamos we speak
nǐ <u>shuō</u> tú hablas / usted habla you speak	nǐmen <u>shuō</u> ustedes hablan you (all) speak
tā <u>shuō</u> él / ella habla he /she speaks	tāmen <u>shuō</u> ellos / ellas hablan they speak

The examples above show that person is marked in the subject but not the verb in Chinese. Nevertheless, because Chinese is a Pro-drop language, the presence of a subject or a subject pronoun is not always required.

1) In the response to a question, the subject pronoun of the sentence does not need to be expressed in Mandarin if the reference is understood.

a. *John kū le ma?*  
John cry CRS<sup>4</sup> Q<sup>5</sup>  
John llora CRS Q  
*Did John cry?*  
*¿Lloró John?*

*pro Kū le.*  
cry CRS  
llora CRS  
*Yes, he did.*  
*Sí, lloró.*

2) There is also a contrast between the use of pronouns and zero pronouns in question-answer sequences. Imagine that you and a friend are taking the train to Chinatown and you ask him / her about the train schedule:

a. *Xià yi ban huōche shenme shíhòu kai?*  
Next one # train what time leave?  
Próximo uno # tren cuándo tiempo sale?  
*When does the next train leave?*  
*¿Cuándo sale el próximo tren?*

<sup>4</sup> Currently Relevant State. *Le* is also a final particle. It usually appears at the end of a sentence after any word other than a verb. It differentiates from aspect marker –*le* in that it does not have perfective functions. A sentence can sometimes have both CRS and PFV –*le* because although phonologically the same they have different functions.

<sup>5</sup> Question



b. *Pro*    *bu*    *xiǎode*.  
           not    know.  
           no    sabe.  
*I don't know.*  
*Yo no sé.*

When the subject pronoun is not expressed as in *b*, the answer is simple and neutral.

c. *Wǒ*    *bu*    *xiǎode*.  
       I    not    know.  
       Yo no    sabe.  
*I don't know.*  
*Yo no sé.*

When the subject pronoun is expressed as in *c*, the answer means that your friend might not know the time of departure for the next train, but someone else might. So, you should go and ask someone else. The dropping of subject pronouns is fairly common in Chinese and can also be seen in interrogative sentences.

The elevated occurrence of non-expressed subjects in Table 3 for the older adult speakers is particularly interesting because as mentioned before, we can see the influence of Chinese in the results. The Chinese language is a topic-prominent language. What this means is that the topic of a sentence is what the sentence is about. It always comes first in the sentence, and it always refers to something about which the speaker assumes the person listening has some knowledge about. What distinguishes topic from subject is that the subject must always have a direct semantic relationship with the verb, but the topic does not. In Chinese, the concept of subject is less important. The subject is not marked by position, agreement or any case marker and in ordinary conversation the subject is frequently missing altogether (Li, 1989, 17-18).

#### Examples:

Mary	wǒ	yǐjīng	jiàn	guo	le
Topic	subject	already	see	EXP <sup>6</sup>	CRS <sup>7</sup>

Mary	yǐjīng	jiàn	guo	le
Topic	already	see	EXP	CRS

Mary, I have already seen her.

\* Topic is necessary / subject is not and can be omitted.

The results in Tables 1 and 2 show the great tendency to use the third person singular forms, which seems to be influenced by the lack of subject-verb agreement in Chinese. The results in Table 3 show that 65% (298/456) of the tokens were of non-expressed subjects; again, suggesting an influence of the Chinese grammatical system and its optional use of sentential subjects.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, Chinese and Spanish are two very different linguistic systems. Although studies show that First Language and Second Language do not have to be typologically related to be learned with relative success, older adult Second Language learners, here, have employed a simplified system

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<sup>6</sup> Experiential marker.

<sup>7</sup> Currently Relevant State. *Le* is also a final particle. It usually appears at the end of a sentence after any word other than a verb.

characterized by the use of simple unmarked third-person-singular verb forms that is also characterized by the reduced expression of subjects. In so doing, they have created a communication system paralleling First Language tendencies in combination with a Spanish-based lexicon in a process that bears many of the qualities of pidginization. According to Schumann (1978) if speakers can pass through the first stages of SLA without fossilizing, it is not pidginization. However, much of the data taken from the older participants in this study show many instances of fossilization, which along with the other characteristics described, here, may indicate that the contrary is true, that a process of pidginization characterizes the “Spanish” of the older adult speakers in the sample.

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