

Converging on probabilistic grammatical patterning: Spanish subject pronoun expression in Mexican children's discourse

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The alternation between present and absent subject personal pronouns in Spanish (e.g. *yo bailo* ~ *bailo*) has been so widely studied that Bayley et al. (2012) have recently called it the 'showcase variable' of Spanish sociolinguistics. Nevertheless, very few studies have examined this feature in the developing grammars of Spanish-speaking children. The wealth of information available regarding adult patterns of Spanish subject pronoun use make this an ideal feature for examining when and how children's patterns of usage come to mirror those of adults.

A remarkable finding from variationist studies of Spanish-speaking adults' use of subject pronouns is that, even though rates of pronoun use vary, patterns of usage are similar across dialects and settings (e.g. Cameron 1992, 1993; Flores-Ferrán 2002, Otheguy & Zentella 2012, Ortiz López 2010, Torres-Cacoullós & Travis 2010). In general, pronouns are expressed more often a) when referring to singular subjects (e.g. *yo* 'I') than plural ones (e.g. *nosotros* 'we'), b) when the referent of two consecutive grammatical subjects is different (*switch-reference*) than when it is the same, c) with verbs in the imperfect tense than with verbs in the preterit, and d) with cognitive verbs like *creer* 'to think' than with other types of verbs. The patterns of adult pronoun use are probabilistic in nature, since either choice – the inclusion or the omission of the pronoun – is acceptable in the contexts studied.

The question that arises for researchers of language acquisition, then, is when and how children converge on this probabilistic component of language production. The current study investigates the variable use of subject pronouns in child Spanish by employing variationist sociolinguistic methodology, closely following Otheguy & Zentella (2012). Over 2,500 verbs were extracted from sociolinguistic interviews conducted with 24 monolingual Spanish-speaking children in Oaxaca, Mexico, ages six to eight years old (mean age 7;0). Comparisons of the children's patterns and those found in studies of adults (Otheguy & Zentella 2012) revealed both differences and similarities. On the one hand, the children used far fewer pronouns than adults typically do. The children's abundant subjectless verbs sometimes resulted in ambiguity in reference, corroborating findings in Shin & Cairns (2012). On the other hand, for the cases in which reference was unambiguous, children's patterns of pronoun usage were strikingly similar to those of adults. For these cases, a multivariate analysis was performed using present versus absent subject pronouns as the dependent variable and the following four independent predictor variables: 1) Person/number of the verb; 2) Switch-reference; 3) Tense, mood, and aspect of the verb; and 4) Lexical semantics of the verb. All four predictor variables significantly predicted the children's alternation between present and absent pronouns. Moreover, the predictor variables were ranked in exactly the same order for the children as they are for adults. In sum, the study shows that Spanish-speaking children use fewer subject pronouns than adults do, but when they do include pronouns, their patterns of usage resemble those of adults. Therefore, the findings in this study are suggestive of a conservative learning pattern, whereby children introduce new forms into their discourse in a constrained fashion (Boyd & Goldberg 2012, Tomasello 2003).

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