

Book Review

Miguel A. Aijón Oliva & María José Serrano. 2013. *Style in syntax: Investigating variation in Spanish pronoun subjects*. Bern: Peter Lang. pp. 243, ISBN 9783034312448

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Style in Syntax: Investigating variation in Spanish pronoun subjects is a book that examines the cognitive and discursive implications of syntactic variation in Spanish subject pronouns. Spanish subject pronouns have been studied in several varieties of Latin American Spanish (e.g., Argentina, México, Puerto Rico and Venezuela) as well as in Peninsular Spanish (see Erker and Guy 2012), with a focus on linguistic and/or extralinguistic constraints, on contact issues in the US, on Spanish Second Language Acquisition, and on frequency-driven cognitive effects. Readers of this volume, which is targeted to specialists in discourse analysis, language variation and change, and, most specifically, morphosyntactic variation, as well as graduate students in Hispanic linguistics, will find here an excellent source for the study of discourse analysis and its application to syntactic variation in Spanish.

The book is organized into five chapters comprising a theoretical introduction to the topic, a description of the corpora and the methodology, the analysis of subject pronouns in Spanish, the development of socio-communicative styles in discourse, and style and interpersonal relationships. In the first chapter, the authors provide a general account of their theoretical approach, according to which linguistic variation is portrayed as a communicative choice. They adopt a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates findings concerning the study of variation in the last decade, including quantitative sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis and ethnographic and interactional approaches. The authors' main claim is that grammatical constructions reflect stylistic choices that create meaning in context. The meaning of syntactic constructions is thus a complex issue involving pragmatics, discourse analysis, socio-situational and cognitive values.

Chapter 2 describes the corpora (*Corpus Conversacional del Español de Canarias* and *Corpus de Lenguaje de los Medios de Comunicación de Salamanca*) as well as the variables taken into account, including textual genre and social factors. This chapter also justifies why a qualitative analysis is needed. It lays out the more descriptive and qualitative nature of the investigation, which intentionally differs

from other multivariate quantitative analyses of subject pronouns found in the relevant literature.

In Chapter 3, the authors first consider the syntactic expression and the placement of subject pronouns. The descriptive results indicate that in conversation the most frequent form is first person singular *yo*, which accounts for more than half of the tokens. The second form most commonly found in the corpora is second person singular *tú*. *Usted* and *ustedes* only represent a small fraction (4 percent) of the cases. The syntactic expression preferred overall is the lack of an overt form, that is, the omission of the pronoun, which amounts to 60 percent of the data. Regarding placement, explicit subject expressions tend to occur preverbally in 31 percent of the instances. The authors explain that the expression (vs. omission) of the subject pronoun in the clause and its position reflect not only the effect of features such as animacy and agentivity but also the impact of cognitive effects related to, for example, the degree of activation or newness in the discursive context.

This chapter furthermore provides a descriptive qualitative analysis of singular *yo*, plural *nosotros*, second person *tú* and second person *usted* and *ustedes*. The personal pronoun *yo* is argued to signal a speaker-centered perspective, which allows the speaker to establish his/her viewpoint of different events. In general, explicit subject expression in the oral corpus from the Canarias was found in 79.2 percent of the instances, while in the Salamanca media corpus it is attested in 68.7 percent of the data. As far as its pragmatic meaning is concerned, *yo* is explicitly used more consistently in argumentative discourse than in epistemic discourse. The authors also show that *nosotros* is a form that is rarely explicitly expressed in the oral and the media corpora. The authors justify this by alluding to the vague referential nature of this pronominal form. *Nosotros* stresses the expression of personal stance, thus distinguishing speakers from hearers – the results show that referents other than the hearers represent 43.6 percent of the data. Omission of *tú* is attested in 62.9 percent of the oral examples, and in 69.2 percent of the media instances. Omission of *tú* is taken by the authors to indicate a higher degree of salience of referents in discourse. By contrast, overt *tú* reflects the “informativeness” of the referent. Concerning *usted* and *ustedes*, the analysis reveals that these forms are statistically less frequent in the corpora, more common in the oral corpus and rare in the media corpus. The authors also claim that the expression of *usted* and *ustedes* avoids ambiguity with third-person referents. A valuable conclusion is that “the iconic value of pronoun expression helps put the focus on their referents and results in an intensification of their perception at the discursive and cognitive levels” (p. 118).

In Chapters 4 and 5, variation is approached as a socio-communicative style strategy in discourse. The authors maintain that sociolinguistic factors

are dynamic and should not be conceptualized as discrete and unidimensional. Language choices are seen as socially indexical functions of style directly connected to linguistic meaning. This idea is reminiscent of Romaine's (1984: 430) proposal that "[i]f we follow through with an approach to language which is equally responsive to both internal structural and external social pressures on grammar, then a pragmatic account on meaning, i.e., meaning relative to function, should form an important part of an integrative sociolinguistic theory". In keeping with their contention that style in language emerges from the contextual uses of syntactic structures, the authors identify a number of features such as gender, communicative stance and social/professional affiliation, and undertake a qualitative analysis of variation based on discourse and pragmatic methodologies. In particular, Chapter 5 incorporates the perspective of interpersonal communication by taking politeness as the point of departure.

In sum, this book utilizes a multidisciplinary approach which emphasizes the discursive and pragmatic dimensions of the use of subject pronouns in corpora. It offers a detailed analysis of subject pronouns in Spanish which also combines a qualitative methodology, discourse analysis and cognition. This monograph is innovative in that it merges discourse analysis and the conceptualization of variation as a stylistic choice that speakers make in context. This challenging qualitative approach differs from variationist analyses where subject expression and omission are claimed to be constrained by exclusively linguistic factors such as the morphological regularity of the verb, person, number, and tense-mood-aspect features, semantic content or lexical frequency. The fact that this study is based on corpus data increases its spectrum of applicability to other qualitative analyses based on different datasets.

References

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