Spanish in the United States and the role of English: Is there a case for contact-induced change?

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Summary. A topic of great interest for both researchers and the general public is the influence of English structures on the Spanish spoken in the United States by first generation immigrants and heritage speakers. Much of what has been written, as well as the popular term 'Spanglish,' highlight the presence of English, which is considered to encompass more than mere lexical borrowing. For example, there has been an important body of work addressing diachronic changes in the frequency of optional features in oral corpora (e.g., the expression of subject pronouns), and the presence of structures considered innovative (non-canonical) in experimental studies (e.g., absence of the direct object marker *a*). However, little attention has been paid to measuring the *likelihood* of occurrence of optional and innovative Spanish structures, and capturing the extent to which these might be induced by English. This paper will discuss an experimental paradigm that can be used to assess whether frequency changes and innovations in one of the bilingual's languages are in fact encouraged by the other language, and a theoretical framework that can inform our understanding of the way that languages interact in situations of contact.

Background. It has been argued that bilinguals strive towards convergence, or greater structural similarity between the languages, therefore exhibiting a preference for constructions that are shared between the two languages (Bullock & Toribio, 2004). For instance, Spanish admits both expressed and null subject pronouns, whereas English only allows the former. Thus, Spanish speakers in the US have been shown to prefer expressed subject pronouns, the option that is common to both languages, at a higher rate than speakers in their reference (monolingual) variety. However, even when the constructions are not shared, bilinguals might still assume a correspondence and produce patterns in one language that resemble the configuration of the other language (Heine & Kuteva, 2005), typically the dominant societal language, resulting in innovations, non-canonical constructions relative to their reference (monolingual) variety. For example, Spanish requires the presence of the direct object marker *a* with certain nouns (typically animate/specific), while English does not have that feature. Thus, Spanish speakers in the US tend to omit the marker on the model of English.

A relevant cognitive phenomenon that might explain this process is that of structural priming (Bock, 1986), which refers to the tendency to repeat previously processed structures. In the face of structural optionality (two alternatives for a given utterance; e.g., English dative alternation: prepositional object and double object constructions) in the same language, speakers are likely to produce the alternative that they have most recently (or most frequently) heard or produced, as each processing event increases the activation level of that alternative, raising the probability that it will be retrieved in subsequent utterances. Cross-linguistically, structural priming has been shown to increase the use of constructions that are shared between the languages (Hartsuiker et al., 2004; Schoonbaert et al. 2007; Loebell & Bock, 2003). This investigation tests the applicability of the mechanism of priming as a model for language contact, addressing the following concerns:

First, does English play a role in the way that structural optionality is resolved in Spanish? In the case of shared structures, we would expect English primes to drive the production of Spanish targets, resulting in their higher frequency of use relative to the baseline. If so, this would suggest that the contact language is influencing language change, in that it skews the distribution of alternatives in the receiving language.

Second, can English induce innovations in Spanish? In the case of non-shared structures, we would expect English primes to drive the production of non-canonical configurations in Spanish, replicating the English configuration, and resulting in more innovations relative to the baseline. If so, this would suggest that the contact language is influencing language change by introducing innovative structures in the receiving language.

Present study. Three experiments examined the voice, reciprocal, and dative alternations in Spanish speakers who were born or raised in the United States (N=24).

1. Voice alternation: This alternation is shared between English and Spanish in that both alternatives are available to speakers. The only structural difference between the languages is the presence of the direct object marker (DOM) *a* in Spanish (underlined), which is absent in English.
   Active: El pirata empujó a la científica/The pirate pushed the scientist
   Passive: La científica fue empujada por el pirata/The scientist was pushed by the pirate
2. Reciprocal alternation: This alternation is shared between English and Spanish in that both alternatives are available to speakers. The only structural difference between the languages is the presence of the reciprocal pronoun *se* in Spanish (underlined), which is absent in English.
   Simple NP: El policía se casó con la bailarina/The policeman married the dancer
   Conjoined NP: El policía y la bailarina se casaron/The policeman and the dancer married
3. Dative alternation: This alternation is not shared between English and Spanish, in that the Spanish double object results in an inverted version of the prepositional object. In addition, there is a structural difference between the languages, that is, the presence of the dative marker *a* in Spanish (underlined), which is absent in English.
   PO: El turista dio una carta a la cocinera/The tourist gave a letter to the chef
   Inverted PO: El turista dio a la cocinera una carta/The tourist gave the chef a letter

The experiment consisted of picture descriptions in both languages (baseline), English primes followed by picture descriptions in Spanish (priming experiment), and Spanish primes followed by picture descriptions in Spanish (control). Participants read the prime (one of the two variants for each alternation), completed a distractor task (deciding whether the following picture matched the sentence they just read), and then were asked to describe a picture in Spanish using the verb provided (the translation equivalent of the verb in the prime).

Example for the Reciprocal Alternation (2 above)
Prime: The policeman married the dancer (Simple NP)
Target: CASAR, shown underneath a picture of a nurse and a thief
   Participant is expected to say: "La enfermera (se) casó con el ladrón" (Simple NP) rather than "La enfermera y el ladrón (se) casaron" (Conjoined NP). The participant is also expected to omit the reciprocal pronoun *se* on the model of English.

Results. The baseline showed that the voice and reciprocal alternations were productive in both English and Spanish, and resulted in significant priming effects, suggesting that the contact language is influencing language change, in that it skews the distribution of alternatives in the receiving language (first question). However, this was not the case for the dative alternation, which is only productive in English, suggesting that certain structures are more prone to change than others.

Our results also show that English increases innovation rates relative to the baseline only in shared constructions (absence of DOM *a* and reciprocal pronoun *se*, but not dative *a*). Crucially, English primes do not introduce a completely novel structure in Spanish; rather, they create the opportunity for an existing configuration to be used in a new context, modeled on English (i.e., Spanish does allow verbs without reciprocal *se* and direct objects without *a*). In sum, the data support the view that structural priming could be a driver of change in bilingual communities, promoting shared constructions and accelerating specific innovations.

References

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