Title: Do HSs have a simpler mood system? The answer is more complex

Abstract:

Despite recent decades of linguistic research dedicated to verbal mood variability among native (NS) and heritage speakers (HS) of Spanish the choice to use the subjunctive vs. indicative remains an unresolved and vexing phenomenon to model (Birnbaum 2019). The challenges arise from the multilayered syntactic and semantic contexts that condition mood choice. While many studies have documented HS’ subjunctive production they have focused on the apparent reduction or contact-induced "simplification" of the HS’ mood paradigm (Lynch 1999; Martinez Mira 2006; Silva-Corvalán 1994 2003). In contrast we argue that such simplification ignores the true underlying complexity of mood choice given that not all contexts are equally affected and NS have been shown to exhibit shifting preferences. Thus our study (1) examines how the frequency of predicates might impact mood selection and (2) explores whether HS are meaningfully different from NS in their use of mood for the cases under examination.

To achieve our first goal fourteen matrix triggers were selected including seven verbal predicates (necesitar que preferir que dudar que sorprender que lamentar que fascinar que emocionar que) and seven semantically-related adjectival predicates (es necesario que es preferible que es dudable que es sorprendente que es fascinante que and es emocionante que). All cases are prescriptively obligatory that is “lexically-triggered” (Quer 1998). By reducing the set of matrix clauses to those that lexically trigger the subjunctive participant mood choice was expected to be minimally dependent on bilingual interpretations of meaning thus reducing some of the complexity when interpreting the findings.

To gather data participants watched short videos depicting various scenarios with voiceovers providing additional context. At the end of each video a matrix trigger appeared and participants were asked to complete the sentence. After transcription and coding the frequency of subjunctive vs. indicative mood were calculated for each verbal and adjectival predicate.

To achieve our second goal we explored mood choice for the selected predicates using two corpora: (1) the Web/Dialects corpus from the Davies Corpus de Español (Davies 2016-) and (2) a newly-compiled (2019-2020) Twitter corpus of over 100000 predicate cases.

Results reveal a positive correlation between the frequency of predicate triggers in Spanish among all Spanish speakers and their production by HS. Where NS use the subjunctive more frequently for verbal predicate triggers HS also use it more frequently. However HS select the indicative mood far more often for less frequently occurring predicate triggers overall. For high-frequency adjectival matrix triggers HS tend to use the subjunctive less frequently than do NS. When adjectival triggers are less frequent in Spanish overall HS strongly select the indicative mood.
Our data suggest that mood choice is a complex linguistic phenomenon and heritage languages inherit that complexity in all its glory. While on average HS show lower rates of subjunctive they largely pattern with NS with respect to the role of predicate frequency. Our study supports the view that heritage languages manifest change by exploiting areas of variation and structural flexibility already present in the source language rather than by eliminating options.

References


