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Title: Assessing English influence in HL grammars: The case of Spanish SE

Abstract:

The Spanish particle SE fulfills many functions: it can serve as an indirect object pronoun denote reflexive interpretations in some verbs and also mark numerous non-reflexive uses lending passive impersonal unaccusative and unergative interpretations to the event structure depending on its use in context. Despite the seemingly ubiquitous nature of SE some of these functions are more common than others particularly in colloquial speech. In the US context studies looking at comprehension of SE found that while early bilinguals evidence an ability to discern between several types of non-reflexive usage (Bruhn de Garavito 2011; Montrul 2006) they also vary in their ability to accurately interpret several of these uses diverging in their frequencies of use and acceptance of canonically ungrammatical sentences with SE (Montrul 2002; 2004; 2010; Silva-Corvalán 1994). In terms of production research has typically focused on the decreased use of SE attributing it to extended exposure to an English setting (Martínez-Gibson 2016) or to cross-linguistic priming from English (Torres & Travis 2011). To the degree that English plays a role in SE usage among heritage speakers (HS) the present study investigates how its influence might manifest differently across various SE constructions.

We administered a picture description task to a group of HS living in California (N=34). Items included reflexive and non-reflexive functions of SE and participants were asked to select their preferred interpretation. Our results show that HS have a strong command of SE overall choosing SE over 75% of the time. Crucially we detected a difference in their tendency to include or omit SE depending on the function: we found that (1) SE was overwhelmingly preferred in sentences involving physical and emotional change-of-state constructions involving human subjects (e.g. el joven se sentó ‘the man sat’) and (2) SE was disfavored in sentences depicting inanimate subjects and scenes (e.g. el mensaje se comunicó ‘the message was communicated’) over a more clearly-transitive alternative (e.g. comunicaron el mensaje) and in constructions with attested in-language variants (e.g. (se) despertó). It is worth noting that SE omissions were less frequent among HS who had a later exposure to English as well as in those who had taken AP-level Spanish classes.

Our results show that despite being immersed in an English setting SE is not categorically lost in HS. Highly frequent change-of-state uses typically associated with colloquial registers show little variation from normative standards. Where we do see differences is in uses characteristic of academic language such as passive/impersonal constructions. Here it is not so much English influence but rather lack of exposure to formal/literary registers that drives HS to seek a non-SE alternative. Where English influence is more straightforward is in HS’ preference for non-SE variants in optional uses. Our study supports the view that heritage languages manifest change via convergence (Toribio 2004) by exploiting areas of variation and structural flexibility already present in the source language rather than by categorically eliminating options not present in the majority language.
References


