

L1 Regression in Spanish-English Bilinguals

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1. Introduction

Since language is such a dynamic entity, language change will always be an interesting and vast area of study. Languages in contact create one of the best environments to study language change. It is well known that the United States is a country where Spanish, among other languages, is in permanent contact with English. This contact situation has originated numerous studies in different regions of the US, especially on the largest immigrant communities such as Mexicans (Silva-Corvalán, 1994), Cubans (Lipski, 1996), and Puerto Ricans (García & Cuevas, 1995). The purpose of this study is to analyze the oral Spanish used by bilingual Colombians residing in the Albany area, of New York State. Instead of concentrating on language proficiency in Spanish across different generations, this study focuses on the language spoken by first generation Colombians who have lived in the US for several years. The sample collected was analyzed looking for changes in the speakers' oral Spanish, especially at the morphological and lexical levels. The results may help to clarify if those changes are the sign of first language regression. Some extra linguistic aspects about the subjects are discussed with the purpose of finding possible factors that might explain why these changes are more significant in some speakers than in others. Some of the factors discussed are: contact with country of origin, contact with other Spanish speakers here, contexts where both languages are used, and speakers' professional activities.

2. Theoretical considerations

Language contact can be studied within two different contexts: at the speech community level, it concentrates on boundary areas between two countries with different languages. At the individual level, it focuses on the person who migrates to a country and has to learn and use a foreign language. The latter is the case with this study, which analyzes first generation Colombians who have been living in the US for several years and whose native language is in permanent contact with English.

Hyltenstam and Viberg (1993) define *regression* as the period when a language ceases to be a regular means of communication. Although the term regression can be applied either concerning the community or the individual, the interest in this case is the individual level. A person can experience first language regression when another language comes to replace it as a regular means of communication. This is a process that occurs little by little due to lack of language use. Bilinguals make use of the two languages in different contexts. If one of the languages presents more frequency of use, the individual may show some changes in the proficiency of the other language. I will be dealing with this process applied to the native language of Colombians who have been in contact with English for several years. Hyltenstam and Viberg (1993) use the term *attrition* to refer to a non-temporary regression. The authors describe *environmental attrition* as a slow and reversible process that can be explained by a lack of language use experienced by immigrants. The case of this study is presented as environmental attrition because it corresponds to a change of environment; in this case the speakers migrated to a foreign country.

According to Hyltenstam and Obler (1989) language loss has developed into a subfield of bilingualism in the last ten years. There are different approaches that range from psycho and neurolinguistic to sociolinguistic. The latter have been done both at the individual and at the speech community levels.

One example of a sociolinguistic approach at the individual level is a study done by Major (1993). He claims that L1 loss is usually related to L2 learning and integration into its culture. He considers it reasonable to assume that the better a person performs at L2 and culture, the more likely L1 loss will occur. Major (1993) studied five adult females, native speakers of English who immigrated to Brazil and had been living there from 12 to 35 years. The author focuses on

phonological aspects of the language, and considers factors such as: means of L2 learning, motivation, attitudes toward L1 and L2 culture, and other socio-affective considerations. He found that the greatest loss was present in subjects with native-like abilities in Portuguese who identified with Brazilian culture. He concluded that the greater the mastery of L2, the more likely it influences L1. This is especially common concerning colloquial style. Major's study is strictly at the phonological level, other levels of language are not discussed. The question is to what extent the idea of loss is applicable to a situation where only L1 accent has changed.

Sharwood Smith (1989) presents a different approach to language loss. Citing studies done with young native speakers of English, he claims that language loss is not simply related to lack of input, or to situations of low-prestige language. Analyzing the process from a psycholinguistic approach, he states that other more "learner-internal" aspects need to be considered. One of these aspects is crosslinguistic influence (CLI). CLI is a psycholinguistic term referring to the influence that one language system may have on another. The concept can be applicable at different levels, when L2 is at a mature level, is at a developmental stage or has fossilized before attaining maturity.

Both sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic approaches provide different insights into language loss. This study offers a combined approach in order to present a broader analysis of the processes involved. Weinreich (1966) states that purely linguistic studies of languages in contact must be coordinated with extra-linguistic studies of bilingualism and related phenomena. This study presents, first, a linguistic analysis of the changes found in the interviews; and second, an analysis of some factors that may explain the reasons for those changes.

3. Methodology

Structured interviews with seven informants were recorded. The interviews served a dual purpose. First, they were intended to collect sociolinguistic information about the subjects: level of education, contact with the country of origin, length of time in the United States, access to bilingual means of communication, and contexts where both languages were used. The second purpose was to analyze the language used and look for signs of language attrition.

The written version of the interview was used as a reference for the interviewer. The informant did not have to read or answer questions in a written way. The main purpose was to have an informal conversation, and make the informant feel comfortable using the language.

Five of the interviews were held in the interviewees' place of work, the other two subjects were visited in their homes. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. All the questions prepared were answered and there was also time for spontaneous conversation when the informants wanted to offer additional information about their own experiences.

4. Subjects

The seven subjects in this study are native Spanish speakers. All of them are Colombians that immigrated to the United States as adults, except one who arrived here when she was five years old. Their ages range between 27 and 47 years old. (See table 1 for details about subjects).

Table 1. Subject Profile

Subject	Sex	Age	Years in US	Age of arrival
S1	F	36	31	5
S2	F	34	14	20
S3	F	30	8	22
S4	M	44	11	33
S5	F	27	1	26
S6	M	47	21	26
S7	M	44	9	35

All the subjects live in the Albany area and are members of the fieldworker's social network. One methodological concern is that there is no record of the Spanish spoken when they arrived in this country to be able to compare it with the Spanish they are using now. However, considering their ages, it is assumed that their Spanish upon arrival was fully native. In fact, four of them completed their college education in Colombia. All the participants of the study are from the interior part of Colombia, which offers minimal dialectal variation.

Level of education was a controlled variable; all subjects have a college degree, except S6 who only spent a year in college. S3, S4, S5 and S7 obtained their degrees in Colombia. The other two went to college in this country. S1, S3 and S7 went to graduate school.

5. Results and analysis

There is a correlation between the time spent living in the United States and changes in the use of Spanish. The longer a subject has lived in this country, the greater the possibility they show language changes. If we draw a continuum to show the degree of language change, S5 will be at one end with no changes in the language at all, and S1 will be at the other end with the highest degree of language change. S5, as it was expected, didn't present any evidence of change in her Spanish, due to the fact that she has been in this country for only one year. The purpose of including her in the study was to be able to contrast the results with the other subjects. On the other hand, S1, who has been here for the longest time (31 years), presented the highest degree of language change, followed by S6, who has been here for 21 years. S2 and S4 showed fewer examples.

Table 2. Language change continuum.

0							30 years in US
S5	S3	S7	S4	S2	S6	S1	

Sharwood Smith (1983), proposes a list of twelve factors that can be used to analyze language loss. Two of them are particularly useful for this study: structural similarity and semantic enrichment.

5.1 Structural similarity

Certain forms have more tendency to suffer crosslinguistic influence because of their structural similarity. With this type of change, a word in the standard native speaker lexicon is assigned a different meaning on the basis of a matching with structurally similar L2 word. These are some examples:

1. "... En la casa siempre hablaba español, mi tía, mi tío, toda la familia. Así es todavía, *por excepto de mi prima.*" (S1)

The use of the preposition "por" is probably an interference with the expression: adverb plus preposition in English, though the order is not the same. The use of this adverb appeared again later in the conversation but it was used in a correct way:

2. "Me siento más cómoda usando inglés en todos los contextos *excepto con mi familia.*" (S1).

This situation reveals that there are some deviations in performance while competence stays stable.

3. "... domino un poquito mejor el inglés y quisiera tenerlos más igual... *por eso... es parte de la razón que...que decidí estudiar español.*" (S1)

Number 3 is another example of structural similarity but at a slightly different level. A possible influence is a mix of structures such as: "that's the reason why I decided to study Spanish" or "that's why I decided to study Spanish". The equivalent in Spanish would be: "Por eso decidí estudiar español" o "Esa es la razón por la cual decidí estudiar español". This may be just an example of a fragmented sentence in oral discourse occurring in order to introduce an alternate structure. But the reason for the interruption may be a deviation in L1 performance.

5.2 Semantic enrichment

Speakers sometimes borrow a term in L2 for which there is no exact equivalent in L1. These are some examples:

4. “Hablamos español en el trabajo, pero con los clientes ya en *el contador* es inglés” (S6)
5. “Por computador... cuando estoy *correspondiendo* con la profesora, casi siempre es en inglés.” (S1)
6. “Hablo inglés con mis clientes... con las personas con las cuales tengo *envueltos* mis trabajos.” (S4)
7. “Yo me siento de aquí, no me siento extranjero. Ahora... si fuera mi *escogencia*, me iría a vivir a un sitio más cálido.” (S6)
8. ..”Yo compré un cassette de Gloria Estefan porque eso les re...rein... como se dice? *reforza* el español.” (S2)

Example # 4 is probably due to the influence of ‘counter’ in English, referring to the surface where the money is counted. ‘Contador’ in Spanish has a different meaning, which is not applicable to this context. The equivalent in Spanish for that particular context is probably “mostrador”.

The use of ‘*correspondiendo*’ in number 5 is another example of semantic enrichment. The meaning of the word ‘to correspond’ (to communicate by letter) in English has been transferred to the word ‘*corresponder*’ in Spanish where it is not applicable. The existence of the noun ‘*correspondencia*’ (conjunto de cartas enviadas o recibidas) may create the need for a “new” verb in Spanish.

In example # 6, the expression ‘to be involved’ is very commonly used in English. The equivalent in Spanish would be ‘*involucrado*’, but the word “*envuelto*” may sound more similar to ‘involved’.

Example # 7 shows the ‘creation’ of a new noun in Spanish: ‘*escogencia*’ derived from the verb “escoger”, probably following the English pattern: ‘choice’ / ‘to choose’.

Example # 8 shows a speaker’s difficulty with certain verb forms. Silva-Corvalán (1991) states that there is no doubt that the Spanish verb system is permeable to change. First, for interference with English the informant used *‘*reforzar*’ instead of ‘*reforzar*’ which is the verb in Spanish. Secondly, she was not sure about the conjugation of the verb; she didn’t make the stem-change necessary for the third person singular: ‘*refuerza*’.

All these examples of change occurred at the lexical level. There were cases where the speaker added a different meaning to a word in Spanish due to the similarity with English. (See examples 4, 5 and 6). In other cases the speakers ‘created’ new words in Spanish following certain pattern in English. (See examples 7 and 8). The function words affected were nouns, verbs and adjectives in that order. These changes due to crosslinguistic influence may reflect first signs of L1 regression at the lexical level. Due to the unbalanced use of both languages, the bilinguals experience changes in L1 proficiency. Table 3 shows the use of both languages in different contexts.

Table 3. Language use in different contexts

Subject	Work	Home	W/ Friends
S1	L2	L2	both
S2	L2	L2	both
S3	both	both	both
S4	L2	L1	both
S5	both	L1	both
S6	L2	L2	both
S7	L2	L1	both

We can see that S1, S2, and S6 are the only ones who use English both at work and at home. The same three subjects appear at the right end of the language change continuum showing the highest degree of language change. The other subjects (S3, S4, S5, and S7) use L1 at home, and two of them use it at work. These subjects did not show many changes in their oral Spanish. It is evident that when L1 is used in different contexts signs of language regression are less likely to appear.

5.3 Other changes found

Other changes in the Spanish of these bilinguals may appear due to contact with speakers of other Spanish dialects. An example of this was found with the use of ‘vos’ as an alternate pronoun for ‘tú’ or ‘usted’. S3 is from a region in Colombia where ‘vos’ has a very generalized use in informal situations. She claims she is not using it anymore because she thinks it is so informal that it may show disrespect to the interlocutor. This is probably due to the contact with Spanish speakers from countries where ‘vos’ is not used or not considered appropriate. It is crucial to point out that Spanish speakers in the US are in contact not only with English, but also with other dialects of Spanish, spoken either in other countries, or within their country of origin. This contact results in a process of leveling among speakers of the same language.

Another factor that may cause a reduction in the use of pronouns is a speaker’s formal education in L1. S3 is doing her Master’s degree in Hispanic Studies and teaches Spanish. Therefore, she is very aware of the Spanish she uses. It can be said that due to her formal education in Spanish and her profession as a Spanish instructor, she has adapted her Spanish to a more standardized form. She also feels the need to monitor her language frequently. It is evident that these L1 changes due to contact with other Spanish speakers cannot be considered as a sign of regression in L1 competency.

L1 instruction is an important factor influencing language maintenance. S1 is completing her Master’s degree in Hispanic Studies. She reported that her father used to teach her how to read and write in Spanish when she was a little girl. She also had the opportunity to study in Spain for a semester as part of her course work in college. Even though S1 was the informant who showed the greatest level of regression, her Spanish proficiency is very satisfactory considering the fact that she arrived in this country when she was five years old and has visited her country of origin only three times in 30 years. It is obvious that formal and informal L1 instruction play an important role in L1 maintenance.

Out of the seven informants, S2 was the only one who presented several instances of code switching along with some lack of confidence using Spanish. During the interview she asked a few times about the correct form of a structure or a word. Some examples of code switching are:

9. “...empecé a buscar en el ... *newspaper*.”
10. “... Me voy de *housekeeper* o *nanny*.”
11. “...Pedían el *social*.”
12. “...la cuestión del *spell check* ayuda mucho.”

The informant’s background shows that before coming to Albany she lived in Miami for a couple of years where she was more exposed to Spanish than English. One of the reasons for moving to Albany was the desire to learn English and have the communicative need to use it. She knew that learning L2 was the key to success, so she worked hard to learn the foreign language. This attitude may have an influence on the lack of her use of Spanish. She married a monolingual English speaker eight years ago and English is the exclusive language used at home with their two children.

An interesting aspect found in common among some informants, was the maintenance of some very distinctive features of the Spanish spoken in Colombia. One is the use of diminutives by adding the endings ‘ito’ or ‘ita’ to nouns and adverbs (Lipski, 1994). S1 and S2, both females, showed several examples in their interviews: ‘librito’, ‘vinito’, ‘clasecita’, ‘cafecito’, ‘cerquitica’, and ‘poquito’.

Another characteristic of the Spanish in Colombia is the use of ‘ser focalizador’. Clauses with ‘ser focalizador’ are compared to cleft sentences in English. In both grammatical constructions, the communicative purpose is to focus the attention on the second part of the sentence. (Sedano, 1988). Unlike cleft sentences, clauses with ‘ser focalizador’ do not have the relative pronoun at the beginning.

From a structural point of view, cleft sentences are more complex to use. Therefore, they are reduced to clauses with a 'ser focalizador'. These are some examples:

13. "Cuando me gradué, encontré trabajo *fue* enseñando español, no en comunicación." (S3, f)
14. "Allí empecé *fue* a cambiar." (S3, f)
15. "Cuando hablo español, lo hablo ya *es* con mis amigos." (S4, m)

6. Conclusions

The results of this study show that there is an evident correlation between the years lived in a foreign country and the degree of L1 change. After analyzing the examples of changes, it was found that most of them fell into the category of semantic enrichment due to the crosslinguistic influence of English. In most of the cases the native speaker assigns a different meaning to a word on the basis of similarity with a word in L2. The intense use of L2 in most social contexts (home, work, friends, etc.) brings as a consequence changes in the performance of oral Spanish in informal situations. These changes may reflect first signs of L1 regression at the lexical level.

Permanent contact with people who speak the language is an important factor that seems to have an effect on the maintenance of L1. The use of L1 at home and with other Spanish speakers creates a great bond with the language and culture. However, it was found that this contact might also originate L1 changes due to dialect variation. Unlike the changes mentioned earlier, these changes are not considered a sign of regression. Another important aspect is the subject's professional activity. If L1 is used as a subject of instruction, for example, regression is less likely to occur.

Further research needs to be done with more informants organized in different groups and considering several sociolinguistic aspects, such as linguistic attitude and social networks. Analysis of more examples both qualitatively and quantitatively will be necessary to be able to answer more questions about L1 regression.

Note

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