

Lexical frequency and syntactic variation: Evidence from U.S. and peninsular Spanish

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With the rise of exemplar theory (Bybee 2010), the role of lexical frequency in language variation and change has been a focus of considerable study, particularly in phonology (e.g. Bybee 2002; Jurafsky et al. 2001; Walker 2012). Results, however, have been mixed, with some studies showing strong frequency effects and others showing no such effects. Recently Erker and Guy (2012) extended the analysis of frequency effects to morphosyntactic variation. Based on data from 12 Dominican and Mexican speakers from Otheguy and Zentella's (2012) New York City Spanish corpus, they examined the role of frequency in variation between null and overt subject personal pronouns (SPP), one of the most widely studied variables in Spanish sociolinguistics (see Flores-Ferrán 2007 for a review). Erker and Guy's results suggest that frequency either activates or amplifies the effects of other constraints such as co-reference with the subject of the preceding tensed verb and person and number. This paper reports on two studies that explore frequency effects on SPP variation. Multi-variate analysis of approximately 11,000 tokens drawn from Mexican American Spanish in California and Texas and peninsular Spanish in Madrid shows that frequency has only a minimal effect on SPP variation. Rather, in both dialects, the traditional constraints of co-reference, person and number, and semantic class are the main influences on variation. The results presented in this study, as well as results presented in Bayley et al. (2013) and Martínez-Sanz and van Herk (2012), suggest that the role of frequency, at least in this area of the grammar, has been considerably exaggerated and that well-established linguistic factors provide a better explanation for SPP variation than frequency.