
Reviewed by RICARDO OTHEGUy, Graduate Center, City University of New York

Linguists have long asked whether one finds in bilinguals, in addition to lexical transfer, crosslinguistic influences in morphosyntax. The familiar answer given in most places is: yes (see e.g. Thomason & Kaufman 1988). But in this book the answer, in a revealing dissent, is pursued by Rena Torres Cacoullos and Catherine E. Travis (TC&T) with such seriousness and rigor as to make this substantial volume indispensable. Their answer to the question is that there is no morphosyntactic convergence in bilinguals. Not, at least, in this painstakingly carried out case study of the use of subject personal pronouns by fluent English-Spanish bilinguals in the state of New Mexico in the United States.

Subject personal pronouns in Spanish (yo, tú, ella, él, etc. ‘I, you, she, he’, etc.) and especially the difference between expressed versus unexpressed pronominal subjects in finite clauses (ella camina ~ camina, both ‘she walks’) represent a mature research topic (Carvalho et al. 2015). Most studies, like the authors’, have been conducted on the basis of speech data under the quantitative variationist paradigm first established by William Labov (1966). Also comprising a large variationist literature is the related matter of the possible influence of English on the use of these pronouns in the Spanish of bilinguals. But scholars plowing this field have mostly concentrated on the presumed target of contact influence, Spanish, and not enough on the presumed source, English. This is because while the expression of subjects is obviously variable in Spanish, it is typically assumed to be essentially categorical in English. Yet TC&T make a point that is no less crucial for its being obvious: unexpressed subjects are also found in English (e.g. *He .. took off for .. Big Bear: // You’re kidding. // 0 Had no idea where he was going* (112); the ‘0’ indicates an unexpressed pronoun).

There are other important differences between this book and most work on English-Spanish bilingualism in the US. First, the speakers here are almost all US-born and belong to a 150-year-old bilingual community, thus differing from those of the relatively recent immigrant settings studied in most US bilingual research. This speaker profile facilitates conclusions about long-term linguistic change that are harder to reach when a time depth of only two or three generations is considered. Second, the very frequent code-switching that marks the normal speech mode of many bilingual settings is especially noticeable in the corpus utilized here. This allows TC&T to analyze pronominal use in stretches of both languages produced by the same speakers. In this way the authors take into account more directly than other investigators the familiar dictum that the true locus of crosslinguistic influence is the bilingual individual. And since, more than in
other studies, English here thrives in the mind of a single speaker as much as does Spanish, the authors can expose their central claim of no contact effects to the highest risk of falsification, increasing the value of their conclusions. Moreover, the authors can dismiss the claim that the incidence of crosslinguistic influence of English on Spanish is greater in stretches of Spanish located in the vicinity of English stretches. And of special interest to the wider field of bilingual studies, the characteristics of the corpus lead TC&T to note that our confidence is misplaced in such notions as ‘the native language’, ‘the matrix language’, ‘the second language’, or more generally in what they correctly discount as the belief in ‘the regime of ordered first and second language acquisition’ (66).

A third distinctive trait of the study is that the corpus comes with a prosodic transcription, crucially incorporating into the analysis intonational units, or IUs, that are not always found in this literature. A fourth and final differentiating feature is that the English and Spanish stretches of the bilingual corpus are contrasted with two different English and Spanish monolingual benchmark corpora, and with a chronologically antecedent bilingual corpus, again a feature not always found in research covering similar terrain.

The book deals with those English and Spanish linguistic environments where, in each language, the pronoun is sometimes expressed and sometimes unexpressed. Relying on regression analysis, the study focuses on the conditioning linguistic factors that favor or disfavor pronoun expression, and on their relative strength. Stating this in paradigm-internal terms, the book deals with variable pronominal expression and mainly with the weights and relative rankings of the constraints that statistically predict it.

Looking at pronominal variability in both English and Spanish, the authors set aside areas of crosslinguistic similarity, which naturally lead to no expectation of contact effects (the languages are already the same), and concentrate on variable elements where the languages diverge and where consequently one can potentially influence the other, leading to convergence. In their respective variable environments, the authors find the languages to be the same in the following: (a) Pronominal expression is disfavored with finite verb tokens whose subjects are semantically and prosodically linked with the subject of the preceding verb (same subject, same or connected IU). The fact of the disfavoring, which is shared by both languages, is to be distinguished from its magnitude, which we will see below is different in English and Spanish, and thus of interest. (b) A priming-induced tendency exists in both languages for tokens of expressed subjects to be followed by other tokens of expressed ones, and for tokens of unexpressed subjects to be followed by other tokens of unexpressed ones. (c) Similar lexical constraints exist in both languages, such that, in the variable environments, dynamic verbs (e.g. put, do, give, go, say) favor expressed pronouns more than stative verbs (e.g. be, have, want), especially in temporally related clauses.

As to differences between the languages, they are found ‘in language-specific restrictions to the variable context, relative magnitude of probabilistic constraints, and lexically particular constructions’ (134). More specifically, these are the relevant differences: (i) The envelope of variation is thick in Spanish but thin in English. Variability is found in most Spanish environments, but is restricted in English to coordinate clauses and IU-initial position. (ii) The shared disfavoring of pronoun expression in semantically and prosodically linked clauses is, however, much stronger in the English variable environments than in the Spanish ones. (iii) Lexically particular constraints differ by language. They are found in English in the relative disfavoring of pronoun expression in constructions of the type [motion verb and 0 verb] and [verb and 0 verb-of-speech], whereas in Spanish they are found in the favoring of pronoun expression in [(yo) + cognition verb].

The results in a nutshell: in none of the three ways that the languages differ do TC&T find convergence. In the Spanish stretches of the corpus, the bilinguals have not reduced the range of variant choice—have not, for example, added restrictions on variability to only or mostly coordinates or IU-initial position; they have not increased the strength of the linked-clauses constraint to match the very strong one of English; and they have not introduced unexpressed pronouns in greater strength in constructions with verbs of motion or verbs of speech in the manner of English. TC&T show that the Spanish stretches of the bilingual corpus resemble the Spanish monolingual benchmark more than they resemble the English stretches of the same corpus. Similarly,
the English stretches of the bilingual corpus resemble the English monolingual benchmark more than the Spanish stretches of the same corpus. In the use of subject personal pronouns, the Spanish of northern New Mexico bilinguals resembles the Spanish of monolinguals, not their own English. And their English resembles the English of monolinguals, not their own Spanish. The authors conclude that there is no evidence of convergence, even though they have tried hard to find it in the Spanish (and the English) of the same individuals, heirs to six generations of sustained bilingualism and relentless code-switching.

One reads this book with enthusiastic admiration for what has been accomplished, but with certain reservations about some of the necessarily theory-dependent conclusions. As befits a variationist project, the no-convergence conclusion is limited to the variable contexts for expressed or unexpressed pronouns in each language. These encompass most if not all tokens of finite verbs in Spanish but only half of those in English. The no-contact conclusion is thus based on comparisons between elements of very different scope in each language.

The matter of scope is related to the theoretical conviction that crosslinguistic effects are only of this form: elements of the variable contexts of language A potentially influencing elements of the variable contexts of language B. Consider the following, for example: *He doesn't know that he's gay // Hm-mm // 0 has no idea* (120). Here *He knows* and *0 has* are IU-initial and therefore within the English envelope of variation, but *he's* is neither IU-initial nor in a coordinate clause, and is therefore outside the envelope. The surmise is that in all English types of the general form *he knows that they drink*, the authors would rule in as sites of variation many tokens of *knows* with expressed or unexpressed pronoun, but would rule out all tokens of *drink*. The reason is that one finds tokens of expressed and unexpressed pronouns with *knows* but only of expressed pronouns with *drink* (he ~ 0 knows that they drink). Yet in a Spanish equivalent type TC&T would certainly rule both in (since one finds: él ~ 0 sabe que ellos ~ 0 beben). But now the theory makes it difficult to register that the bilingual, more than the monolingual, may tend to prefer *ellos beben* over *0 beben* under the influence of categorical *they drink*—may tend to prefer, that is, an expressed Spanish pronoun over an unexpressed one under the influence of an always-expressed English pronoun. The problem is that in the environment of this categorical *they*, as in all categorical environments, there are, necessarily, neither constraints nor magnitudes of constraints on the basis of which to initiate a crosslinguistic comparison. In other words, there is no theoretically sanctioned way to ask whether the categorical *they* may be influencing the variable *ellos*. An increased use of *ellos* modeled on an English categorical *they* might thus represent a form of bilingual convergence remaining somewhat obscured by the tenets of variationist theory, since the potentially influencing factor falls outside the English envelope of variation. Now even if categorical-to-variable influences were to be permitted in the analysis, the researcher would run up against a second theoretical hurdle. For the change in *ellos* would be a change in rates of occurrence. And rates of occurrence in this version of variationist theory are firmly to be excluded when assessing possible language change (Poplack & Levey 2010). Rates are eloquently described by TC&T as ‘fickle’. They swing up and down depending on confounds such as topic, genre, informant, moment of interview, or the fortuitous abundance, or dearth, of favoring environments.

Readers in broad agreement with TC&T would have welcomed from these well-established scholars greater elaboration on these two related matters. On the fickleness of rates, one would want to know about possible statistical solutions that would allow rates back into the analysis. For undoubted, increased rates in many mental and physical activities are often indicators of (impending) change in human structure and behavior, even in the face of unchanged governing constraints. On the matter of exclusive attention to variable contexts, one keeps returning to one simple fact of human activity: categoricity in an influencing element can exert a strong force over variability in an influenced one.

More discussion too would have been welcome on the question of what exactly it is that has not changed in Spanish in northern New Mexico. The authors say it is the grammar, that the bilinguals are ‘maintaining distinct grammars’ (168). In keeping with variationist theory, TC&T find grammatical structure in the probabilistic constraints, their strength, and their ranking (although on p. 114 the constraints are not so much the structure but rather the factors that shape structure).
And behind the constraints are tendencies found crosslinguistically ‘following from general cognitive mechanisms’ (110). One does not have to believe that grammar is unrelated to usage, or to assume that it must be an account of intuitive introspection, or to think of it as a reflex of universal innateness, to still wonder whether the constraints and their rankings are best conceived of as the grammar. Perhaps the constraints are instead the best and most useful and genuinely scientific description of linguistic usage we have ever had, usage that is driven by a domain-specific linguistic grammar that is, however, distinct from the constraints, and driven too by domain-general cognitive mechanisms.

These foundational matters aside, we are presented in this first-class volume with an innovative and meticulous treatment of an issue of capital importance, a solid accomplishment by two of the leading masters of the craft. If you want to know about Spanish in the US, or bilingualism, or about language variation and change, or indeed about what language is like when studied in its natural habitat as it changes or remains the same, this book is not to be missed.

REFERENCES

Carvalho, Ana M.; Rafael Orozco; and Naomi Lapidus Shin (eds.) 2015. Subject pronoun expression in Spanish: A cross-dialectal perspective. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.


[rotheguy@gc.cuny.edu]