Non-Creole Features in the Verb System of Afro-Hispanic Languages: New Insights from SLA Studies

Sandro Sessarego (Corresponding author)

Department of Spanish and Portuguese, University of Wisconsin – Madison

956 Van Hise Hall, 1220 Linden Drive, Madison, WI 53706

Tel: 608-262-9671   E-mail: sessarego@wisc.edu

Abstract

The goal of this paper is to show how two commonly found linguistic features in Afro-Hispanic contact varieties can be explained as the result of advanced second language strategies and, for this reason, they do not necessary imply a previous creole stage for these languages. The features under inspection are lack of subject-verb agreement and the presence of non-emphatic, non-contrastive overt subjects. The current analysis recurs to recent findings in generative approaches to second language acquisition (SLA) to provide new insights into the nature of these syntactic structures.

Keywords: Afro-Hispanic languages, Creole genesis, Subject-verb agreement, Pro.

1. Introduction

In several regions of Latin America, people of Afro-Hispanic descent are the majority of the population. During the last decades, the dialects spoken by these Afro-Hispanic communities have received increasing attention. Many studies have been carried out to explore the nature of these linguistic systems and to speculate on their genesis and evolution (see Schwegler 2010 for a review). It has often been suggested that a number of the grammatical features currently found in some of these dialects may have been directly inherited from an Afro-Hispanic or Afro-Lusophone creole language, used by black slaves across Latin America in colonial time (cf. Granda 1970, 1988; Schwegler 1993, 1996, 1999; Otheguy 1973; Megenney1993; Perl 1998; etc.).

Similarly, Perl (1998:3) reports specific Spanish dialects that might have been derived from such a contact variety and are currently spoken in various regions of Latin America (e.g., Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, parts of Northern Colombia and Venezuela, the coastal regions of Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, the Pacific coastal regions of Colombia, Peru and Ecuador, as well as, some parts of Mexico, Belize, Trinidad and Tobago). Trying to understand whether all these Afro-Hispanic varieties passed through any creole stage would require an in-depth linguistic and sociodemographic analysis of the history and evolution of each Afro-Hispanic dialect. This has been partially carried out by some scholars and will not be presented here due to space limitations (cf. Lipski 1993; Díaz-Campos & Clements 2008, Sessarego 2011). Nevertheless, in the current article, I would like to focus on two common features, which have been repeatedly mentioned in relation to a potential creole origin, and appear to characterize these Spanish dialects transversely: (a) Use of non-emphatic, non-contrastive overt subjects; (b) lack of subject-verb agreement.

In the present study, I will show that such phenomena can be explained as the result of advanced second language strategies. For this reason, they do not imply any previous creole stage. In particular, I will show that recent theoretical and empirical findings in generative approaches to second language acquisition (SLA) can provide us with new insights into the nature of these syntactic structures. Section 2 lays out the theoretical framework adopted in this study. Section 3 provides a sample of some of the Afro-Hispanic dialects presenting these two features. Section 4 shows why these features may be better explained as the byproduct of advanced SLA processes, rather than creole-like traces. Section 5 summarizes and discusses the findings. Section 6 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework

The language architecture assumed in this study is the one provided by the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995, 2000, 2001). According to this model, the component of the human mind devoted to language, the language faculty, is optimal; it is defined by a small number of syntactic operations (*Merge*, *Move* and *Agree*) and it is common to all human beings. The cyclical application of *Merge* and *Move* builds constituent structure. The operation *Merge* selects two elements from the collection of lexical items (Numeration) and assembles them. The operation *Move* creates a copy of a certain element and merges it in a different part of the syntactic structure. The syntactic constituent must receive an overt form; this overt realization

occurs at Spell-Out, where computations split and derive two independent representations, Logic Form (LF) and Phonetic Form (PF).

Agree, on the other hand, does not create constituent structure. The operation *Agree* is a formal mechanism for valuation of certain features (unvalued) and deletion of others (uninterpretable) in the narrow syntax. In fact, in the most recent formulations of the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 2001, 2002), syntactic derivations are viewed as strictly dependent on feature valuation and checking. The distinction between interpretable and uninterpretable features has proven very useful. Several features have an interpretation at Logic Form (LF), thus they are semantically-interpretable features. Other features lack such semantic import and are present to trigger the necessary merger or agreement operations during the derivation. Said uninterpretable features have to be matched via *Agree* and are finally deleted before Spell-Out.

(1)   CS

Merge, Move, Agree   LF

Lexicon —————————▶ Spell Out

                                       PF
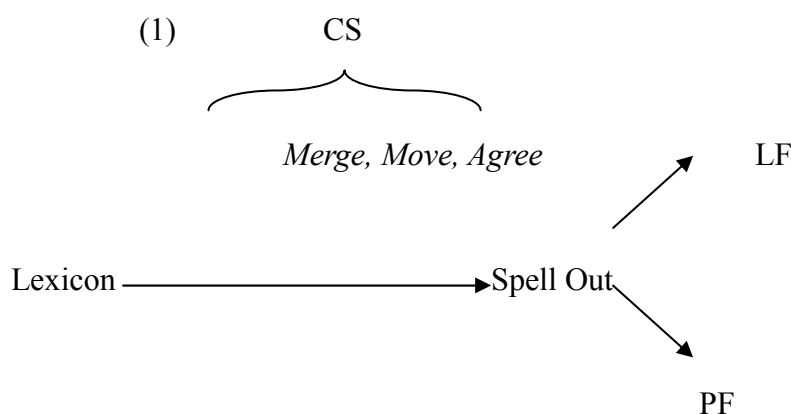
The SLA framework adopted here is the one pictured by the Minimalist Constructionism (Herschensohn 2000). This model of second language acquisition rests on the assumption that cross-linguistic variation is limited to the lexicon and to its formal features (Borer 1984), while syntax is universal and therefore invariable (Chomsky 1995). One advantage of this approach over previous generative attempts –such as the Principles & Parameters model– is that parameter resetting is no longer considered as the fundamental difference accounting for L1 vs. L2 development; rather, this distinction is now explained as an incomplete command over a language particular lexicon that interfaces with the syntax. Instead of a 'yes/no' parameter switch, the gradual acquisition of the lexical and morphological features naturally accounts for the variability encountered in all second languages. L2 acquisition happens gradually and the most complex morpholexical items will be the last ones to be mastered since the learner constructs the "grammar from the core to the periphery" (Herschensohn 2000:81).

Contemporary acquisition research has revealed that the areas of grammar that present the biggest obstacles to acquisition are often times located at the interface of different linguistic modules (e.g., syntax-semantics interface, syntax-pragmatics interface, etc.) (cf. Slabakova 2009; White 2009 for a review). Certain scholars look precisely at interfaces as the source of L2 non-convergence leading to fossilization (Sorace 2005; Valenzuela 2006), while others indicate that even though particularly hard to overcome, the barriers posed by interfaces are

indeed not insurmountable (Rothman 2009). Nevertheless, besides these theoretical discrepancies, the entire linguistic community agrees on the fact that interfaces represent particular problems to acquisition.

3. Feature Distribution across Afro-Hispanic Languages

The use of non-emphatic, non-contrastive overt subjects and the lack of subject-verb agreement are found, to different extents, in a variety of Afro-Hispanic contact varieties. Some examples are reported below (2):

(2)

a. *Yo tando muy pequeña conocí a una señora* 'When I was young I met a woman' (Barlovento Spanish, Megenney 1999:117).

b. *Ta bien nomás **uhtede tomó** [tomaron] sus cajuecito **nojotro** ya **tomó**[tomamos]*. 'Okay, you had your coffee, we already had some' (Afro-Bolivian Spanish, Lipski 2008:100).

c. *Yo sabe [sé]* 'I know';   *yo tiene [tengo]* 'I have';   *yo no pue [puedo]* 'I cannot' (Afro-Puertorican Álvarez Nazario 1974:194-195).

d. *Yo quiele [quiero] sé diputá* 'I want to be a deputy' (Afro-Peruvian Bozal Spanish, Lipski 2005:253)

e. *Cuando **yo** pienso no tené pa comer.* 'When I think (that) I have nothing to eat' (Afro-Mexican, Mayén 2007:126).

f. *Tú ta [te has] metrio probriema*. 'You're in trouble' (Afro-Panamanian Spanish, Lipski 1989:24)

g. *Tú jabla [hablas] y no conoce [conoces]* 'You speak and you do not know' (Afro-Cuban Spanish, Guirao 1938:3)

h. *Y **yo** ya me salí con eso porque **yo** taba onde mi mamá y **yo** me salí con él de la casa* 'and I left because I was where my mother was staying and I left the house with him' (Chocó Spanish, Ruíz-García 2001:88-89).

In some cases, these features have been analyzed as the remaining traces of a previous creole stage, elements showing a genetic link between these Afro-Hispanic dialects, Afro-Brazilian Portuguese, creole varieties, and certain Western African languages (Pearl 1998:7). For example, Pearl indicates that a key feature commonly encountered in these languages is "a remarkable increase in the use of non-emphatic subject pronouns" (1998:6) [my translation], probably related to the parallel impoverishment of inflectional verbal morphology. Megenney, who is of a similar opinion, suggests that the high rate of overt pronouns in Afro-Venezuelan Spanish may be linked to a previous creole phase, since "the constant presence of personal pronouns is one of the typical features found in creole languages, and in Colombian Palenquero these pronouns are used categorically" (1999:117) [my translation]. In the same way, Baxter (1992) suggests that the presence of lack of subject-verb agreement with the 1st

person singular pronoun in Helvecia Portuguese (e.g., *eu fala* vs. *eu falo* 'I speak') may be seen as a creole-like trace; he states that "the evidence […], albeit inconclusive, implicates creolization" (1992:284).

The rest of this article will try to show that while it is justifiable to consider certain grammatical features repeatedly found in Afro-Hispanic/Lusophone varieties as indicators of a potential link between these dialects and some creole languages; there may be another way of looking at them. In this study, I will suggest that they may be the results of advanced second language acquisition strategies, not necessarily related to a previous creole stage.

4. Towards a New Analysis

The analysis that I am proposing to account for the use of non-emphatic, non-contrastive overt subjects and for the lack of subject-verb agreement in these languages relies on recent studies on advanced second languages. The idea is therefore that these VP-related phenomena may be seen as the traces of advanced L2 strategies, rather than of a previous creolization stage. This, however, does not imply that the creole hypothesis should be automatically ruled out for all Afro-Hispanic varieties; it may well be the correct account for some of them. Nevertheless, to support such a claim, we need to provide clear sociohistorical and linguistic evidence, since the presence of these advanced SLA features do not suggest *per se* a previous creole stage for these dialects.

Recent SLA research has devoted much attention to the nature of linguistic interfaces, common points between different grammatical modules. It has been suggested that interfaces are vulnerable; in that they pose particular difficulties to adult L2 acquisition (cf. Sorace 2004; Sorace & Filiaci 2006; Montrul & Rodríguez-Louro 2006; Slabakova 2009; White 2009). In the present section, I would like to show how these two linguistic phenomena commonly found in Afro-Hispanic dialects can be accounted for by postulating interface vulnerability issues frequently encountered in advanced second language acquisition stages. In particular, I suggest that the lack of subject-verb agreement is due to the difficulties posed by the syntax/semantics interface, while the presence of overt non-emphatic non-contrastive subjects has to do with the vulnerability of the syntax/pragmatic domain.

As indicated in Section 2, current syntactic theory (Chomsky 1995) distinguishes between interpretable and uninterpretable features. Certain features have an interpretation at LF, thus they are semantically interpretable elements. Other features, on the contrary, lack such semantic import and are present in the system to trigger necessary syntactic operations during the derivation. One such operation is *Agree*. Chomsky (2000, 2001) argues that *Agree* consists of a relation between two elements within a syntactic domain: a probe and a goal. Chomsky suggests that agreement is the consequence of a situation in which an unvalued instance of a feature F c-commands another instance of F. The probe consists of an unvalued set of phi-features on a functional head, which is uninterpretable as such and must receive a value from some other syntactic constituent (Béjar 2008:133-134). According to this view, *Agree* serves the purpose of deleting uninterpretable features, which are unreadable at the syntax/semantic interface and –if not eliminated– would cause the derivation to crash. Deletion takes place in a cyclical fashion at the end of each phase. As uninterpretable

phi-features do not contribute to the semantic interpretation of phrases, the complete mastery of such elements occurs late in L2 acquisition and often times fails to be acquired (Franceshina 2002). As far as Spanish L2 grammars are concerned, the slow acquisition of phi-feature specifications results in Spanish interlanguages presenting varying degrees of morphological marking incompleteness across their nominal and verbal domains (Montrul 2004). The slow acquisition of inflectional morphology has also been reported for a variety of other languages, in both L1 and L2 development (e.g., Haznedar & Schwartz 1997; Haznedar 2001; Ionin & Wexler 2002; Lardiere 1998a,b; Slabakova 2009).

Current studies on agreement acquisition have supported the claim that a feature geometry based approach can help us better understand the evolution of agreement configurations in L2 grammars (cf. McCharthy 2008). The geometrical representation of morphological features relies on structured combinations of natural class nodes (cf. Harley & Ritter 2002; Cowper 2005). In line with this view, more complex features involve more nodes, which, in turn, will be more difficult to acquire and master. Slabakova (2009:59) provides a representation of person and number features (examples 3 and 4) based on Harley's and Ritter's proposal (2002). In this model, the default number is 'singular'. In a similar fashion, '3' is the default person, while '1' is more complex, since it involves the [Participant] node; finally, '2' is the most marked person, as it involves also the [Addressee] node.

(3) Number features:

sg   pl

\#   \#

             |

             >1

(4) Person features:

3   1   2

π   π   π

           | |

      [Participant] [Participant]

                     |

            [Addressee]

As Slabakova (2009:60) correctly points out, the feature geometry framework not only accounts for the typological distribution of language universals (Greenberg 1963), it also predicts language acquisition orders. In fact, she showed that, in line with the hierarchies outlined in (3) and (4), L2 learners of German first develop verbal agreement morphology with 1st person singular subjects, followed by the 2nd person singular and eventually the plural

persons, while presenting 3rd person singular morphology as the default value.

This account is of particular interest to the study of Afro-Hispanic/Lusophone contact varieties, since it provides a syntactic explanation for why these contact languages may show specific agreement configurations. The Afro-Hispanic dialects found in the Americas display variable levels of subject-verb (dis)agreement, which in turn reflect an aspect of their degree of restructuring. In some varieties, 3rd person singular default forms can be commonly encountered (e.g., Afro-Bolivian Spanish), while in others, they are very rare (e.g., Chota Valley Spanish) (cf. Lipski 1987, 2008). As far as Afro-Brazilian dialects are concerned, Baxter (1992) suggested a potential creole origin for Helvecia Portuguese, which presents variable verbal agreement also with the 1st person singular subject. While the lack of agreement in such a case implies a certain degree of restructuring, since 1st person singular should be the first to appear, its presence should not be seen as a quintessential indicator of creolization. In fact, subject-verb agreement has to do with the valuation of uninterpretable features, unreadable at the syntax/semantic interface (Béjar 2008). This is an aspect of grammar which is quite peripheral to the syntactic core, and therefore difficult to acquire and master, especially in cases of untutored L2 acquisition. For this reason, invariant verb forms for person and number are frequent among L2 varieties of Spanish and in child language (Bybee 1985). In these cases, the use of 3rd person singular as the default form is common.

Another aspect of natural languages which involves the interaction of two different linguistic dimensions (syntax and pragmatics) has to do with the acquisition of the use of non-emphatic, non-contrastive overt subjects. This linguistic phenomenon is related to the acquisition of the null-subject parameter. Subject expression in null-subject languages like Italian or Spanish requires the mastery of the syntactic/pragmatic interface, since both structural and discourse features are involved. In fact, the null subject (*pro*) is usually used in topic and non-contrastive focus contexts. An example of the use of *pro* in Spanish is provided by Montrul & Rodríguez-Louro (2006:404) in (5), where it expresses old information.

(5)   **Pepe** no vino hoy a trabajar. ***Pepe**/?**él**/*pro* estará enfermo.

'Pepe did not come today to work. He must be sick.'

Generative research on the acquisition of the null-subject parameter has come to conclude that deficits at the syntax-pragmatic interface are the reason for the non-target-like syntactic distribution of overt and null pronouns in L2 grammars. Certain studies have suggested that even advanced L2 learners tend to show a surplus of overt subject pronouns because they are less complex to acquire and therefore unmarked (Sorace 2000, 2003, 2004; Sorace & Filiaci 2006). In fact, according to Grimshaw & Samek-Lodovici (1998), the difference between an overt subject and *pro* in a pro-drop language is the presence of a [+topic shift] feature in the former which would be absent in the later. Such a distinction does not exist in non-pro-drop languages such as English, where all subject pronouns must be spelled out. More recent analyses refined such an account by showing that advanced L2 speakers not only overuse overt pronouns, they often times also employ *pro* in contexts that are pragmatically infelicitous, thus suggesting that pragmatic delays have even a stronger effect on the overall distribution of pronouns (cf. Montrul & Rodríguez-Louro 2006; Rothman 2009). These

studies suggest that in order to acquire a target-like use of subject pronouns in a pro-drop language, L2 speakers need to first master the person and number features responsible for the licensing of *pro* (Alexiadou & Agnostopoulou 1998) and then acquire the contextual rules responsible for the distribution of overt and null subjects (Rothman 2009:955).

From this it follows that the complete mastery of overt and null subjects in Spanish implies the simultaneous proficient knowledge of syntactic, morphological and pragmatic features. Consequently, the use of non-emphatic, non-contrastive overt subjects in Afro-Hispanic languages should not necessarily be linked to a previous creole origin; rather, it appears to be the trace of a common advanced L2 phenomenon.

5. Discussion

In summary, the use of non-emphatic, non-contrastive overt subjects and the lack of subject-verb agreement may be analyzed as advanced acquisition strategies related to interface vulnerability issues. In line with minimalist constructionist assumptions (Herschensohn 2000), the acquisition of the lexicon and of its formal features (Borer 1984) is supposed to build up gradually through a universal grammar-driven path, which develops from the "core to the periphery" (Herschensohn 2000:81). The two phenomena under inspection have been shown to be the result of linguistic constraints posed on interfaces, and thus quite peripheral from a strictly syntactic perspective. In particular, the lack of subject-verb agreement appears to be due to problems related to the acquisition of uninterpretable features at the syntax/semantic interface (Béjar 2008), while the over use of non-emphatic, non-contrastive overt subjects is ultimately related to the vulnerability of the syntactic/pragmatic domain (Sorace 2004).

6. Conclusion

The present article has shown that two aspects of Afro-Hispanic languages, often reported in relation to their potential creole origin (overuse of overt subjects; lack of subject-verb agreement), can be analyzed as the byproduct of advanced SLA strategies. While, on the one hand, only a detailed linguistic and sociohistorical investigation may be able to reveal the real genesis and evolution of the Afro-Hispanic dialects of the Americas, on the other hand, the presence of such features does not imply *per se* any previous creole stage.

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References

Sandro Sessarego is an assistant professor of Hispanic Linguistic at the University of Wisconsin- Madison. His research focuses on syntax, sociolinguistics, and contact linguistics.