

TITLE: Changes in Null Subjects in Latin American Spanish: a diachronic corpus study¹

ABSTRACT: The phenomenon of partial null subject languages that increasingly allow both overt and null subject pronouns in the same contexts has been observed in varieties such as Dominican Spanish (Toribio 2000). Given Latin American Spanish's rich history of language contact over the last five centuries, the observed reduction in use of null subjects is likely a result of contact-induced simplification. Following Trudgill's (2011) sociolinguistic typology, this contact would be characterized as short-term adult second-language acquisition which is consistent with the scenario for the African slaves brought over to the Americas by the Spanish from the 16th century onward. Indeed, there are numerous non-standard varieties of Spanish spoken by Afro-Hispanic communities throughout Latin America. These Afro-Hispanic Languages of the Americas (AHLAs) have been described as the result of "conventionalized advanced second languages," much in line with Trudgill's proposal (Sessarego 2013, 2017). The L2-difficulty of the rules surrounding null subject use would have led adult learners to overproduce overt subject pronouns. Their errors would have then become nativized in the speech of the next generation. What is needed then is a robust diachronic analysis of null subjects. According to the literature we also expect a correlation between inversion and null subjects. The present study has constructed a corpus of 57 texts from eight countries over four centuries to evaluate the diachronic rate of null subjects and inversion in Latin American Spanish. The aim is to determine whether the corpus supports the hypothesis that the rate of overt subject pronouns (as well as SV order) has risen significantly since contact with African L2-speakers. The corpus is supplemented by transcriptions of previous fieldwork in current AHLA varieties as well as historical texts written in AHLA vernacular. Figures 1-2² show the distribution of referential null/overt subjects and SV/VS word orders from the Dominican Republic and Bolivia. The Bolivian data demonstrates a slight diachronic increase in both overt pronouns and SV order, whereas the Dominican data is less straightforward. The results from the rest of the corpus (including a Peninsular Spanish control) will help to contextualize these patterns. This preliminary data has also shown an unexpected and very intriguing correlation between inversion rates and genre type: SV order is much more likely in non-literary documents (particularly legal court documents that summarize specific cases and witness testimony). Broadly, we expect to see the highest variation in the form of more overt subject pronouns and pre-verbal subjects in varieties with the highest Afro-Hispanic populations. This should form a spectrum from Caribbean to South American to Peninsular Spanish.

KEYWORDS: partial null subject languages; post-verbal subjects; corpus linguistics; Latin American Spanish; sociolinguistic typology; genre

¹ For consideration as a talk or poster.

² The docID corresponds to the country, century, and title of a text (e.g. dr16ent = Dominican Republic, 16th century, Entremés). The document genre is bolded, and the golden bolded text is a transcript from Afro-Bolivian vernacular.

Figure 1: Null vs. Overt Subject Pronouns in Dominican and Bolivian Spanish

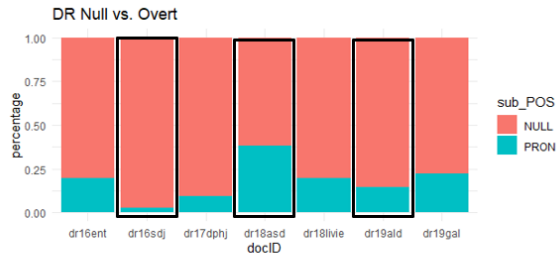
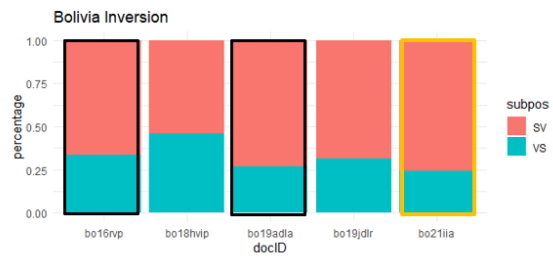
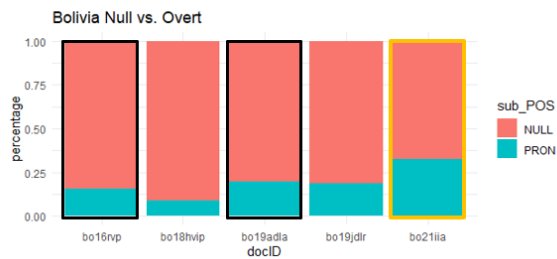
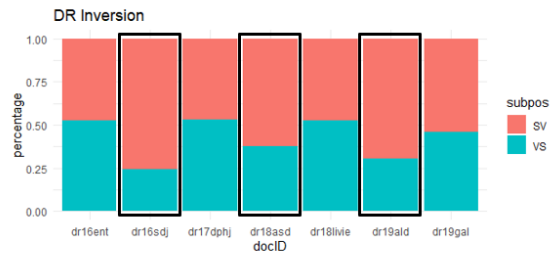


Figure 2: Inversion Rates in Dominican and Bolivian Spanish



References:

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