

## Frequency and the spreading of sociolinguistic variation: A usage-based study of the pluralization of *haber* in Spanish.

The pluralization of *haber* 'there is/are' in Spanish (e.g. *habían casas* instead of *había casas* 'there were houses') is a well-attested phenomenon throughout the Spanish-speaking world (Díaz-Campos 2003, De Mello 1991, Bentivoglio & Sedano 1989, Bello 1972, Kany 1945). The most traditional works (Bello 1972, Kany 1945) have presented a prescriptive perspective of the problem pointing out that *haber* is impersonal and the noun phrase that follows it has the role of direct object, so that agreement in number with the verb is a non-standard use. The second line of research has described the factors contributing to the pattern of regularization found in impersonal *haber*. Bentivoglio and Sedano (1989) have found that when a noun phrase codifies a [+human] referent pluralization of *haber* is more likely to happen. Furthermore, Díaz-Campos (2003) showed that factors such as verb tense and social class are good predictors of pluralization. Specifically, pluralization tends to occur more often in the imperfect tense as well as by speakers of lower socioeconomic classes. The pattern according to which pluralization is not spreading at the same pace in all tense paradigms can be puzzling for traditional approaches to the study of linguistic variation. The present investigation adopts a usage-based model according to which cognitive representation and categorization of grammar are affected by language experience as reflected by frequency (Bybee and Hooper 2001). In particular, this paper examines the role of frequency in the spreading of pluralization in Spanish.

Ninety-six speakers were selected from the corpus *Estudio Sociolingüístico del Habla de Caracas* (1987) with equal representation of: socioeconomic levels (upper class, middle class, and working class), ages (14-29, 30-45, 46-60, and 61 and older), and sex (male and female). In order to explore the role of frequency and to explain the uneven pattern of development of pluralization in different tense paradigms, we have examined the frequency of the personal compound tense paradigm (e.g. *yo había comido* 'I have eaten'). We hypothesize that the frequency of use of the personal compound tenses with *haber* as an auxiliary verb has an influence on impersonal *haber*, since both paradigms share the same forms. Usage-based models seems to predict that both paradigms are related and form a complex network, so that patterns of memory storage and the ease with which they are accessed would be influenced by the most frequent paradigm (i.e. the personal compound tenses).

The findings of this investigation are based on 2,300 cases of *haber* + *past participle* and 1,495 cases of *haber* + *noun phrase*. The tendencies found that in the *haber* + past participle paradigm reveal that imperfect and present perfect are the most frequent tenses. This result is consistent with the *haber* + *noun phrase* paradigm since the imperfect is also the most frequent tense for impersonal *haber*. These empirical findings have implications for supporting the analysis according to which both the impersonal and personal paradigms of *haber* form a complex network and that the frequency of imperfect forms in the personal paradigm may be useful for explaining why the pluralization of *haber* is advancing most steadily in the imperfect tense.

### References

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