

“AS SEEN ON TV”: SPANISH CONTRARY-TO-FACT CLAUSES IN TELEVISED SPEECH

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the usage of the Spanish subjunctive in televised media. Silva-Corvalán (1994) and Lavandera (1983) have researched the subjunctive extensively though without consideration of the language as used on television. The present study is based on a sample of forty hours of taped televised programs broadcast in Mexico City.

1. INTRODUCTION

The influence that the media's language exerts on the public has been widely discussed (Bell 1991; Lázaro Carreter 1977; Lope Blanch 1988; Parra 1999). Some authors accuse the media of degrading good usage (Jacoby, Hoey and Sheluga 1980; Lope Blanch 1988; Parra 1999). Other authors explain the forces that interact in the production of radio and television (Corner and Harvey 1996; Goffman 1981; Hartley 1989). Another group suggests how to approach that language in order to analyze it (Bell 1991; Elías-Olivares et al. 1985; Geraghty and Lusted 1998; Martínez Albertos 1989; Mata and Scarafia 1993).

The subjunctive mode in Spanish is also the subject of wide study: as a marker of subordination (Takagaki 1984); in the context of language acquisition (Floyd 1983) and of Spanish-English bilingualism (Kirschner 1992); as a marker of idiomatic continuity (Suñer-Padilla-Rivera 1987) or of shifting mood (Lavandera 1983; Silva-Corvalán 1994); and in pedagogy (Collentine 2002; Farley 2001, 2002), among other studies. The present study treats contrary-to-fact clauses with reference to the prescriptive grammar¹ of the language, as set forth by Campos (1993) and Seco (1980).

Fontanillo and Piesco cite the spontaneity that can be found in televised interviews, guest interview formats, and parliamentary debates (1990: 12). Further,

¹The grammatical approach is taken here due to the fact that many researchers have blamed the media for degrading the Spanish language. Lázaro Carreter (1981), for instance, asserts that media exerts more influence on the audience than does academic instruction.

television provides a heterogeneous representation of society: the language of media professional is juxtaposed with that of physicians, politicians, and housewives, among others. Bell affirms:

Media language offers linguistic advantages over face-to-face communication. The broadcaster has already done all the necessary monitoring in order to cater to the public, and the fact that someone is recording the broadcasting makes no change in the speaker's awareness of the way he or she speaks. (1991: 3)

The use of televised speech facilitates the task of collecting data to determine what viewers are exposed to on a regular basis.

2. METHODOLOGY

The corpus under study here consists of regular programs broadcasted in a complete week. A "regular week" refers to a week where there are no events that can alter the average content of the programs (Mata and Scarafia 1993). Forty hours of programs broadcasted in Mexico City were recorded in December 2001 and in the summer of 2002. Some programs were taped in Mexico City and others in the United States using satellite transmission from Mexico City on Galavisión (cable television): they are morning and afternoon programs. The taping of programs followed the methodologies of Bell (1991) and Hardin (2001). According to Bell, samples consisting of a week of consecutive days are inadequate; he suggests a frequent sampling pattern taken every number day of a given period. The taping of the present study was every four days, as in Hardin.

Three programs with a wide audience broadcasted in Mexico City were selected: *En Contraste*, *El Noticiero*, and *Hoy*, what Mata and Scarafia (1993) call "revistones" or "omnibus". Taping programs in the United States was avoided in order to eliminate the effects of bilingualism on the speech sample, effects such as code-switching, interference, or lexical loans (Amastae and Elías-Olivares 1982; Grosjean 1982; Silva-Corvalán 1996). The statements selected for analysis are contrary-to-fact subjunctive clauses uttered by a variety of speakers, such as professionals of television, artists, politicians, and audience members, in order to provide a picture of what viewers are generally exposed to (Fontanillo and Piesco 1990).

3. DATA SET

The total number of contrary-to-fact statements found in forty hours of televised programs was scarce:² ten. Interestingly, seven of these ten statements originated

²The low number of occurrences may derive from a low level of hypothetical discourse in news broadcasts.

with television guests rather than media professionals, that is, with physicians, engineers, teachers, politicians, lawyers, and housewives. Thus, these contrary-to-fact statements may reflect a sample of public speech. If only professionals of the media had uttered them, they might be representative of the linguistic output of a specific class of media speakers alone (Fontanillo and Piesco 1990).

All the statements uttered are non-standard according to prescriptive grammar. Prescriptive grammars advise that in contrary-to-fact statements, the pluperfect subjunctive should be used in the if-clause (*protasis*), with a main sentence (*apodosis*) in the conditional perfect (Campos 1993; Seco 1980). For example, "Si yo hubiera tenido dinero, habría ido a París" ('If I had had money, I would have gone to Paris'). Here, the only tense used to express unreal conditions was the pluperfect subjunctive in both the *protasis* and the *apodosis*, ten examples in all:

1. El esposo no se ve discapacitado que le impida trabajar para ganarse la vida, vaya que necesite la ayuda financiera de su esposa. *Si no hubiera sido* así, *se hubiera interpretado* de diferente manera.

'This woman's husband does not seem to have any physical handicap that prevents him from working to earn his living, in other words, that compels his wife's financial assistance. *If it hadn't been* so [the judge's decision] *[would] have been interpreted* in a different way.'

2. *Si él no hubiera promovido* el negocio, la empresa del Renabe, *no hubiera sido identificado* a nivel internacional.

'If he *hadn't promoted* the business, the company Renabe, he *[wouldn't] have been identified* internationally.'

3. Este es un problema de forma porque *si se hubiera platicado* primero con Wilson y luego con Lavolpe y después ya se da a conocer, *hubiera sido* otra historia, pero claro se siente afectado, siente separado del equipo.

'This is a problem of structure, because *if* someone *had* first talked to Wilson and then with Lavolpe and later it is publicized, it *[would] have been* another story, but [Wilson] of course feels affected. He feels separated from the team.'

4. *Si el presidente con lo que presentó ayer además hubiera estado* presente en la presentación anterior de los partidos, eso *hubiera sido* una cosa histórica.

'*If* the president with what he presented yesterday *had been* present in the earlier presentation of the political parties as well, it *[would] have been* a historical event.'

5. Yo *hubiera dado* [pues estaba dispuesta a dar] la vida *si se hubiera podido*, por tener a mi esposo junto a mí, yo *hubiera dado* todo.

'I *would have given* my life, I was willing to give my life, *if it had been possible* just to have my husband with me], I [*would*] *have given* my life.'

6. Si el gobierno mexicano *hubiera prohibido* el uso de las redes de arrastre, esas redes no *habrían depredado* el fondo del océano como lo han hecho.

'If the Mexican Government *had prohibited* the use of longliners, they [*would*] *not have plundered* the oceans.'

7. No sé que *hubiera hecho*, *si no hubiera vendido* productos de Avon casa por casa. Iba a vender cuando mis hijos estaban en la escuela.

'I don't know what I [*would*] *have done*, *if I hadn't sold* Avon cosmetics door to door. I used to go sell my products when my children were at school.'

8. Eso *no lo hubiera podido* hacer *si no hubiera vendido* casa por casa. Yo ponía mis horas de trabajo y podía estar en mi casa cuando mis hijos llegaban de la escuela.

'I [*would*] *not have been able* to do that *if I hadn't sold* [cosmetics] door to door. I set my work hours and I could be at home when my children were back from school.'

9. Yo no me imagino *si* mis padres *no hubieran sido* famosos, si mis padres no hubieran sido artistas, el trabajo que *hubiera costado* a mí llegar a donde estoy ahorita sin tener el apoyo y, y, y la fama de mis padres que me apoyan a mí porque la gente me conoce a mí porque conocen a mi papá.

'I can't imagine how, *if* my parents *hadn't been* famous, if my parents hadn't been artists, the work I *would've had* to go through to get the position that I have right now without my parents' support and, and, and fame that back me up because people know me because they know my father.'

10. Si el papazazi *no hubiera traspasado* mi propiedad privada, yo no lo *hubiera abojeteado*. Pero entró a mi casa sin mi consentimiento. ¡Así que yo tenía todo el derecho de echarlo de mi casa!

'If the reporter *hadn't trespassed* upon my private property, I [*would*] *not have slapped* his face. However, he did. I was in my right to throw him out of my house!'

Sentences 1, 2, and 3 are from *En Contraste*, a morning news program that is transmitted weekdays, lasting three hours. It presents national and international news, several sports and finance and entertainment segments, and traffic information on the morning rush. A female and a male anchor the program. Other anchors present finance, sports, and entertainment segments.

In sentence 1, the anchors are commenting on the case of a woman who has been forced by the judge to give child support to her ex-husband in spite of its being she who has the custody of their children; the anchor expresses his reaction. A director of a prison utters sentence 2 in an interview, quoting an Argentinean inmate who regretted being identified as one of the individuals accused of committing crimes against humanity in Argentina during the 1980s military dictatorship, and subsequently recognized by some of his alleged victims while he was promoting a company called Renabe. In sentence 3, a sports anchor gives his opinion on the controversial replacement of a sports figure by the owners of a team.

Sentences 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 are from *El Noticiero*, an afternoon news program which is transmitted weekdays, lasting an hour. National and international news are presented and commented by a female anchor. Two other anchors present sports and entertainment segments. A professor explains common errors in Spanish grammar and lexicon in a weekly segment.

In sentence 4, the anchor criticizes Mexican president Vicente Fox, who put forward his annual report to the congress without listening to the presentation that the representatives of the political parties had made earlier. Sentence 5 is part of an interview in a story to promote organ transplants among the population; a woman attests the need for organ donations in Mexico, where her husband died while awaiting a transplant. In sentence 6, the leader of a Mexican ecological association gives his opinion on the causes of the destruction of the oceans in an interview. In sentences 7 and 8, a woman boasts the benefits of self-employment in a segment of a report that explores the challenges and benefits of working women.

The last two examples, numbers 9 and 10, are from *Hoy*, a mid-morning program which offers several segments like health, exercise, cuisine, nutrition, shopping tips, and promotions of different cultural activities in Mexico. Sometimes invited guests discuss topics like machismo, alcoholism, or anorexia. In sentence 9, a singer and actor explained his choice of career. In another segment devoted to show business, a popular singer explains why she slapped a paparazzi in sentence 10.

4. ANALYSIS

Silva Corvalán (1994: 268) asserts that "the gradual loss of mood distinctions" is a common process in the evolution of language, "when compared to older stages of the language and with more conservative varieties." The sample here suggests an apparent loss of the conditional perfect in spoken Mexican Spanish when discussing unreal conditions. The pluperfect subjunctive replaces the conditional perfect in the result clause of hypothetical constructions. Lope Blanch affirms, "The pluperfect subjunctive substitutes the prescriptive conditional clause in the conditional sentences in the conversation" (1991: 150).

According to the same author, spoken language reflects the linguistic real-

ity of that language.³ These statements suggest that the process of simplification in the expression of unreal conditions in spoken Spanish has advanced. Here, simplification refers to "the process of expansion of a form to a larger number of contexts" (Si va-Corvalán 1994: 257). Lope Blanch (1991), Moreno de Alba (1985), and Serrano (1996) have documented the process of simplification of the tenses in Mexico.

The findings of the present study contrast with the description of unreal conditional sentences in Mexican Spanish by Moreno de Alba (1985). In the project "El Habla Culta de la Ciudad de México" ('Cultured Speech in Mexico City'), he analyzed 27 interviews, of which 24 lasted thirty minutes and three lasted one hour. Moreno de Alba listed all the verbal forms in taped conversation and classified them. His account documents verbal forms occurring in conversation with the objective of documenting the urban usage of this capital city. His findings on unreal propositions are based on 15 hours of interviews. Contrasting with my data on the same construction in televised speech, Moreno de Alba reports the use of the pluperfect subjunctive and imperfect subjunctive in the protasis of if-clauses: "out of 40 speakers, 75% use the pluperfect subjunctive and 25% the imperfect subjunctive." For the formation of the apodosis, he found "84% for the pluperfect subjunctive and 16% for the conditional perfect" (1985: 112).

The contrast between the findings of the two corpuses, which differ in date by nineteen years, suggests that the process of simplification has increased in the production of contrary-to-fact propositions.

5. CONCLUSION

This research treats one example of usage that is attested in televised speech of the mass media. The sample suggests a process of simplification in the formation of the apodosis of unreal conditional sentences. A further step would be to attempt to establish a relationship between the language in the media and its viewers. However, Chambers (1998) has questioned the possible link between these two, at least on the grammatical and syntactical levels.

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³Lope Blanch (1991: 145) asserts that to base the study of the language in the written speech will distort the linguistic reality of that language, especially in the case of Mexican Spanish where he finds a clear difference between oral and written language. Labov (1972) found the same.

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