
Variation in Costa Rican Spanish –the case of the definite article

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When met with the challenge of explaining linguistic phenomena in one's own language, it is the task of the linguist to take a step back and consider the wider communicative situation. The present work is an attempt to understand the motivations behind certain linguistic choices in the Spanish of Costa Rica. Since the variety of Spanish analysed is not the one this linguist was born into, nor the one this event is held in, additional effort is needed to try and reach explanations. With no intention to make this a definite account of the phenomenon, we make use of the tools at hand to provide a qualitative analysis of the case of variation in the minimal pair "presence vs absence of definite article."

Rooted in the Ethnopragmatics understanding of discourse, this paper looks at the bilingual situation in Limón for answers when comparing variation in newspaper headlines. Hence, we understand that the syntactic combinations and their evident consistency are motivated by general cognitive principles the speaker will make use of to achieve communicative relevance and coherence. It is of particular interest to show how the relative frequency of use of the forms constitutes a symptom of the cognitive perspective of the speaker, reflecting their cultural background (Martinez, 2009, p. 260). Here, we attempt to establish connections between Lemonese Creole (LC from now onwards)/ Spanish bilingualism in Limón and the general Spanish monolingual situation in Costa Rica as a whole. The former will be exemplified by examples extracted from "Limón Hoy" (from now onwards, LH), a regional online paper, and the latter, from "La Nación" (LN from now onwards), a national paper, in its online edition (used as control).

"Limón Hoy" is a regional paper of the Limón province. Located in the Caribbean lowlands, the region is one of the most culturally diverse in the

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country, home to a large afro Caribbean population, many of whom speak LC. This language is presented as a linguistic entity developed from Jamaican creole, the language of the migrants who arrived at Limón, by the end of the nineteenth century (Herzfeld, 2007, p. 129). It presents features of its African substratum languages, and of their European superstratum languages: Spanish and English (Herzfeld, 2002, p. 356). In turn, LC –as it is the case of every creole – happens in a linguistic continuum going from basilect (of African grammar and English vocabulary) to acrolect (of both grammar and vocabulary corresponding to Standard Lemonese English), with a mesolect in between, whose features correspond to both (Herzfeld, 2007, p. 129). Thus, speakers move through the continuum according to context, and their own linguistic ability to adapt to them. In terms of García & Otheguy (2019) in their translanguaging theory, they move using their linguistic repertoire freely. That is, applying their one and only linguistic system (with its phonological, lexical, and grammatical elements) making up structures according to the different established social interactions; whose understanding will depend on the use of a certain named language or other (García & Otheguy, 2019, p. 25). With this in mind, we refrain from using such terms as loans or borrowings, since we understand that, within the speakers' minds, there is no frontier dividing their linguistic repertoire.

Studying variation in terms of García (1997), means to analyse the communicative equivalence of different linguistic units and a partially or totally superposed distribution of forms (Martínez, 2009, p. 267). To this end, the selection of subject matter in the articles chosen was led by the apparent increase of linguistic variation perceived in news related to weather phenomena. We observed a marked variation throughout LH as a whole, with a salient tendency towards omitting definite articles in news referring to atmospheric phenomena. Consequently, we chose the same subject matter in LN, with the aim of assessing whether correspondences could be drawn between subject matter and the studied phenomenon.

Hypothesis and meaning postulation of the forms in variation

Since we are merely trying to illustrate the qualitative nature of this analysis, we chose two examples of the control paper, LN, which –to the native Spanish speaker – seem, at least, bizarre:

- a. "Temporada de huracanes será ligeramente más intensa que el promedio"
- b. "Lluvias abundantes se registraron este jueves en varias regiones de Australia..."

In a. we consider that the Spanish norm would argue there is a lack of article at the beginning of the sentence. Whereas in b. the construction is mainly perceived as strange, beginning with a direct object whose noun + adjective order is not what we expect to find in general terms in Spanish. As expected, these constructions are found amid others following the rules of the Real Academia Española (RAE from now onwards), conducive with the fact that this is a nation-

wide newspaper, with enough funds to pay RAE's-following editing/revising teams.

In the case of LH, we find a consistent lack of absence of articles, as noted:

- a. "Lluvias se mantendrán en la región del Caribe"
- b. "Mezcla de fenómenos meteorológicos provocan aguaceros..."
- c. "Se mantiene alerta verde..."

In a. and b. we observe the absence of articles at the beginning of the sentences. Whereas in c. there is a lack of article before "*alerta*". All of these examples are outside the norm of RAE.

According to Cambridge Dictionary, the use of the definite article "the" refers to entities known by the speaker, but not in all cases. The article is considered to specify which noun is being referred to in particular, and it is not used when speaking in general terms, nor when referring to abstract, or uncountable entities. Consequently, we may hypothesize that the higher incidence of absence of definite article in the examples above may correspond to the assumption that atmospheric phenomena (in particular, rain) are perceived as uncountable and general. Besides, Cambridge establishes plural countable general nouns shall not be accompanied by articles, unless referring to a noun which will receive additional modification. This might be the case in the examples seen... if the constructions belonged to the named language "English".

However, Spanish grammar establishes that the definite article determines the identification of noun construction referents, thus decisively contributing to discourse cohesion (Bosque Muñoz & Demonte Barreto, 1999, p. 791). The definition of the meaning of the definite article is considered to be dependent on two central notions: known information, and unicity (Bosque Muñoz & Demonet Barreto, 1999, pp. 791-792). To our understanding, the notion of unicity will be determinant to the establishment of our hypothesis. The notion establishes that defined noun phrases refer to the maximum collection of objects they may apply its descriptive content to, and that collection is unique/exclusive to the context of use. The effect of maximum collection has occasionally led to the dealing of the definite article as a kind of universal quantifier (Bosque Muñoz & Demonte Barreto, 1999, p. 792). This notion of unicity deeply contrasts with the use of the definite article in Standard English (superstratum language of LC), which only acknowledges the use of the definite article in cases of known information and other conditions, as seen above. We understand that this distinction may be the basis of the absence of the article in the constructions in Spanish, where its presence is expected, according to RAE grammar and norm.

What we have observed above does not seem surprising if considering the linguistic contact between Spanish (Costa Rica's official language) and LC (non-official, still widely spoken language in Limón). We attribute the absence of definite articles (whose incidence is larger in the newspaper LH) to the bilingualism of part of the Lemonese population, and to the local linguistic contact. The reason responds to the fact that, in LC, determiners are used in the

same way as in the superstratum language. For example, the definite determiner, LC /de/, Standard English (SE from now onwards) "the", Spanish (S from now onwards) "el, la" is employed in noun phrases of specific assumptions; the indefinite LC /a/, SE "a", S "un, uno, una" in noun phrases of specific statements; and no determiner (zero determiner) in non-specific noun phrases –that is, when accompanying a generic noun or when referring to a general category (Herzfeld, 2002, p. 172).

In the examples from LN we observe a clear tendency to placing articles in sentences where the nominal nucleus presents a relative clause, both with explanatory or specifying character. We consider the distinction between:

- a. Las altas temperaturas, que el miércoles superaron los 41 grados Celsius en el cerro Huacalito de Carrillo, Guanacaste, y de 29, 4 grados en San José, darán paso a un fin de semana frío, muy ventoso y con lloviznas en las partes altas.
- b. Temporada de huracanes será ligeramente más intensa que el promedio.

In this case, in the context of the same paper, with the same subject matter, we find the presence of the article in "las altas temperaturas", but an absence of the article in "temporada de huracanes". We posit that the presence of an explanation might be the cause of this presence, whereas the absence of further explanation (an absence of further modifiers to the nominal nucleus, apart from the modifier "de huracanes") might be the cause of the absence of the definite article in b. It is thus conducive to the explanation of the use of articles posited by Herzfeld (2002), above, for LC. That is to say, sentence a. is considered a sentence with a noun phrase which has specific information, which in turn carries additional information. Whereas b. is considered a noun phrase whose generic noun does not require further explanation or specification.

We have thus considered that linguistic contact present in the Puerto Limón area may have given way to a more systemic variation in the Spanish of Costa Rica as a whole. Needless to say, though, it is perceived on a higher level in the local newspaper LH, where there is a higher percentage of cases of article omission, in situations where the Spanish norm would indicate otherwise.

Considering that alternation corresponds with certain contexts, saying different things about the same referent (Martínez, 2009, p. 267), we understand that, in terms of context, it is also the subject matter that influences the presence or absence of the definite article. The fact that meteorological phenomena are depicted using largely the form without the article can be explained by the tendency of LC – which, in turn, takes from its superstratum language, SE – of not adding articles before uncountable, abstract nouns. Thus, the frequency of appearance of the form without article is higher in the pieces of news referring to meteorology, and less in others, where human entities are involved.

Concluding remarks

The present work was based on the analysis of certain examples of news headlines and subtitles of two newspapers of different areas of influence and size, both in Costa Rica. It was our intention to focus on the variation phenomenon

observed in the forms “presence versus absence of the definite article”. Within a linguistic variation framework, we aimed at finding answers that may explain the “true” meaning of the forms in variation. However, this, being a merely qualitative work, did not attempt to go further than to present hypothesis to be confirmed, or rebutted in a larger, quantitative work, including a larger corpus.

In spite of the limited reach of the present work, we managed to establish a hypothesis that, we understand, resisted the grammatical assessment of languages in contact. The meaning of the definite article in Standard English differs from the one in Standard Spanish, in pragmatic terms. This leads to a linguistic variation phenomenon in a (at least to some extent) bilingual population, in a situation of languages in contact. This is the reason behind the difference in the frequency of use according to context – the presence of either human entities or abstract, uncountable entities in constructions, we reckon, might be the rationale behind the preference of one form, or the other.

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