

Variation in the Use of the *-ra* and *-se* Forms of the Imperfect Subjunctive in Modern Spoken Peninsular Spanish

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In modern Spanish, two forms may be employed to express the imperfect subjunctive: the *-ra* form (*cantara*) and the *-se* form (*cantase*). Various scholars conclude that there exists no semantic difference between these two variants, and consequently, that they occur in free variation (e.g., Lenz, 1944; Ramsey, 1956; Gili Gaya, 1978; Rojo & Veiga, 1999). Many others claim that each form carries a distinct meaning, both semantically and pragmatically, contingent upon the motivations of the speaker, although they do not always agree on the differences (e.g., Bolinger, 1956; Lamíquiz, 1971; Pottier, 1975; Hernández Alonso, 1986; Seymour, 1988; Lunn 1989; Serrano, 1994; Goldberg, 1995). Studies conducted using oral speech to test these assertions concentrate solely on the relative frequency of the two variants among social groups (e.g., Lamíquiz, 1987; Carbonero Cano, 1990, DeMello, 1993; Blas Arroyo & Porcar Miralles, 1994; Pitloun, 2006). Other studies, such as those of Navarro (1990) and Asratíán (2007), focus on both social and linguistic factors that may affect the use of one form over the other, but these investigations are limited to Venezuelan speech. Also of interest is Hopper's (1979, 1982) examination of discourse focalization and the possibility that one form holds a higher degree of informative relevance.

The goal of the present study is to test the various hypotheses that have been proposed using a statistical approach, thereby offering a variationist account of the imperfect subjunctive in Peninsular Spanish. The claim is that several linguistic variables condition the use of each form. The independent variables examined were verb type, verb form, mood within context, clause and sentence type, grammatical person, topic, focalization, and realization of the verbal action.

1708 occurrences of the imperfect subjunctive were extracted from the Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual (CREA) between the years 1990 and 1995. All of the tokens were coded according to the variables previously indicated and statistically analyzed using the program Goldvarb X (Sankoff et al., 2005).

Statistical analysis reveals three significant factor groups that condition the use of *-ra* or *-se*. First, there is a correlation with grammatical person. First-person singular and second-person singular and plural favor the use of the *-ra* form, while third-person singular and plural, as well as first-person plural, favor the *-se* form. This suggests that proximity/relevance to the speaker favors use of the *-ra* form. Second, there is a correlation between *-ra* forms and simple, as opposed to compound, verb forms. Finally, it is shown that to denote foreground information, the *-ra* form is favored, while the *-se* form is favored for background information. It can therefore be assumed, based on Hopper's study, that the *-ra* form is employed to express ideas that are more salient in the discourse.

Examples

- (1) El señor Corcuera me invitó a que me *fuera* a casa a llorar como los demás padres.
'Mr. Corcuera told me to go home and cry like the other fathers.'
- (2) Quería decir que en este caso, pues podría ser una casualidad que se *hubiese curado*.
'I meant that in this case, well, it could be a coincidence that she was cured.'