On the choice of grammatical person as cognitive perspective:
Spanish *yo* vs. *nosotros*

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1. Theoretical frame and research questions

This investigation is part of a research project on the cognitive bases of morphosyntactic variation in Spanish and their projection on the development of communicative styles. The meaningful view of grammatical constructions promoted by cognitive approaches (cf. Langacker 2009, García 2009) makes it possible for the study of linguistic variation to evolve into a study of how meaning and style are constructed in context (Lavandera 1984, Aijón Oliva & Serrano 2010).

The variable choice of grammatical persons as clause subjects can strongly condition the cognitive orientation of discourse and its interpretation. It is our purpose to analyze how texts and interactions are stylistically shaped by the dominant choice of singular vs. plural first-person clauses in Spanish. The singular form *yo* 'I' is used to iconically represent the speaker, thus associating the textual content with his/her own personal circumstances. On the other hand, *nosotros* 'we' is a referentially diffuse pronoun expanding the speaker's notional sphere and offering a wide range of communicative possibilities, often resulting in the objectivization of discourse as against the intrinsic subjectivity of *yo*.

2. Corpora and analytic methods

Two corpora of Spanish, the *Corpus Conversacional del Español de las Islas Canarias* (CCEC) and the *Corpus de Lenguaje de los Medios de Comunicación de Salamanca* (MEDIASA) will be analyzed. The CCEC corpus comprises a subsection of spontaneous face-to-face conversations (79,544 words) as well as another one of regional media—radio and TV—discourse (171,258 words). The MEDIASA corpus is divided into written-press and transcribed radio texts, amounting to a total 302,577 words.

We shall investigate the frequencies of first-person singular and plural clauses within each corpus and textual genre. The unequal word size of the different genres will make it necessary to normalize frequencies by calculating the overall occurrence of each grammatical person per 10,000 words. Therefore these linguistic choices will be approached as *absolute variables* and not as mere alternatives.

3. Preliminary results and interpretation

The statistical patterning of person choice reveals the existence of semiotic differences among genres. In informational and expository discourse it is relatively usual for singular forms to be used, whereas in more interactional and argumentative genres some tendency can be detected of speakers/writers to choose the plural *nosotros* as a persuasive move—iconically suggesting that the content of discourse is shared with the audience—or just to 'hide' behind an uncompromising notional plurality. Such distributional patterns reflect different ways of speaker self-presentation adopted in order to accomplish certain communicative goals. Whereas it is common for journalists to appear as representatives of the companies they work for, other types of participants in media discourse can feel freer—or more compelled—to construct discourse from a first-person singular perspective. The detailed examination of particular excerpts from both corpora will help us better ascertain how singular vs. plural first persons contribute to the construction of communicative styles across the interactional spectrum.

References

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