

Why are HE and SHE a problem for Spanish learners of English?

Carmen Muñoz
Universidad de Barcelona

English native speakers spending some time in Spain and having the opportunity to speak English with Spaniards are often struck by the frequency with which their Spanish interlocutors, otherwise fluent and communicatively able, confuse their «HE's» and their «SHE's». This is not, as one may be led to think, a common error among beginners that disappears when learning has taken place. On the contrary, this error is often found in the speech of quite proficient speakers of English, who do not, furthermore, present evidence of comprehension problems in the pronominal area, as attested by their ability to sustain communicative interaction, which implies correct assignment of the appropriate referent to the personal pronouns in speech addressed to them.

In this paper I shall present a first attempt towards providing an answer to the following question: is confusion between the singular masculine and feminine forms of personal pronouns a recurrent feature of the interlanguage of Spanish speakers of English? This implies, in turn, a series of questions. First, are errors found in this area more common than they would be if their occurrence were due to chance performance? Second, do these errors only appear in the production of beginner learners of English and in certain fossilized interlanguages, or are they also recurrent among more advanced speakers in spontaneous speech? That is to say, are they competence errors or errors due to faulty performance? Third, can we then provide a consistent hypothesis as to why these so common little words constitute a problem for Spanish learners of English?

The complex nature of personal pronouns

Pronouns are defined by a complex of semantic, syntactic and morphological distinctions, which explains why they are acquired over a long period and with individual differences in pace¹. Researchers in first language acquisition have often paid attention to the sequence in which the different members of the pronominal paradigm appear, and also to the problems children seem to encounter in the acquisition of the system. The first form to emerge in production is usually the first person singular, whereas the second person singular is the first form to be understood. The third person singular commonly follows the first and second, and the plural forms follow the singular ones².

This order of emergence of personal pronouns has traditionally been explained by means of a semantic feature model, according to which children acquire these words by successively adding features to a specification. An alternative hypothesis, more promising from a pragmatic perspective, relates the order of acquisition to the learning of the conversational roles of speaker and hearer. Evidently the acquisition of the speech role function of first and second person pronouns is of special psycholinguistic importance, since it requires shifting perspective. This deictic pair seems, however, to be simpler than other pairs with shifting reference but unstable boundaries, such as demonstratives and locatives. Moreover, the acquisition is facilitated by previous training in turn-taking in contexts of joint action with the adult (Muñoz & Vila 1985).

The anaphoric function of third person pronouns is a later development, and involves

the domain of intersentential relations as well as discursive or textual abilities (Karmiloff-Smith 1981).

Learners of English as a second language after childhood come to the task with the knowledge of personal pronouns in their mother tongue. Therefore it appears that they only have to map the new forms to the old concepts. However, the two systems, English and Spanish, are not identical. First of all the subject pronouns are optional, even redundant, in non-emphatic utterances in Spanish, while they are syntactically obligatory in English (see Table 1); «he» and «she» come then to be used much more frequently in English than the corresponding forms in Spanish. Possession is also expressed differently: while in Spanish the pronoun agrees in number (all persons, with determiner and pronominal function), and also in gender (first and second persons plural with determiner function, and all persons with pronominal function) with the possessed, in English it is the possessor which holds number and gender agreement with the pronoun. As for the third person pronouns, the most relevant difference (see Table 2) is the failure of semantic correspondence in the case of the third person singular: English possessives require gender distinction (his/her) while Spanish does not (su). Table 3, on the other hand, contrasts English and Catalan possessive pronouns (similar to the Spanish forms with pronominal function), given the bilingual condition of some of the subjects observed to make the error in question.

These differences suggest two possible hypotheses. First, that Spanish learners of English should drop subject pronouns in English. This, however, has not been frequently observed after the beginner level. On the contrary, subject pronouns appear, but —according to our initial observation— marked with the wrong gender feature. Second, that there should be more mistakes in pronouns marked for genitive case (possession) than in nominative and objective forms, and that there should be a significant tendency for mistakes to be due to the wrong agreement with the possessed (as in Spanish) instead of with the possessor (as in English).

Table 1

THIRD PERSON SINGULAR NOMINATIVE PRONOUNS

	Spanish		English	
	m.	f.	m.	f.
unmarked	PRO	PRO	he	she
emphatic	él	ella	hé ³	shé

Table 2

THIRD PERSON POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS

a) DETERMINER FUNCTION

possessor:	Spanish		English		
	m.sg/pl.	f.sg/pl.	m.sg.	f.sg.	m/f.pl.

possessed:					
m/f. sg.	su	su	his	her	their
m/f. pl.	sus	sus	his	her	their

b) PRONOMINAL FUNCTION

	Spanish	English		
possessor:	m/f.sg/pl.	m.sg.	f.sg.	m/f.pl.
possessed:				
m. sg.	suyo	his	hers	theirs
f. sg.	suya	his	hers	theirs
m. pl.	suyos	his	hers	theirs
f. pl.	suyas	his	hers	theirs

Table 3

THIRD PERSON POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS, DETERMINER AND PRONOMINAL FUNCTIONS

	Catalan	English		
possessor:	m/f.sg/pl. ⁴	m.sg	f.sg	m/f. pl.
possessed:				
m. sg.	seu	his/his	her/hers	their/theirs
f. sg.	seva	his/his	her/hers	their/theirs
m. pl.	seus	his/his	her/hers	their/theirs
f. pl.	seves	his/his	her/hers	their/theirs

METHOD

Subjects

The data for this analysis of the use of third person singular pronouns by Spanish learners of English were collected from ten students of English Philology at the University of Barcelona. They were intermediate to advanced learners of English. Half of them were bilingual Catalan-Castilian and their mother tongue was Catalan; the other half had Castilian as their mother tongue, and all but one spoke Catalan as well.

Procedure

The subjects were asked to produce four oral texts. The first one was intended to elicit pronominal forms with deictic reference. The experimenter showed them two dolls, one of a boy and one of a girl, first one then the other, and then both together. The experimenter asked the subjects to talk about them, and then to talk about what they were doing (the experimenter made them move into and out of a fictitious house). In

the second task the experimenter asked them to tell a story while looking at the pictures of a little book. In this story a girl was first depicted alone and later interacting with a boy, exchanging objects, and doing different things, which elicited the use of a wide range of third person pronouns. The reference of the pronouns in this second text was also deictic, since the subjects were referring to the characters drawn on the pages, although their continuity throughout the story illustrated permitted also of anaphoric or intratextual reference. Subjects were also asked to retell the story, this time without looking at the pictures, which elicited a narrative text with pronominal forms with anaphoric reference. The retelling allowed the subjects to plan their utterances, paying attention to cohesive organization. Finally, they were also asked to provide a brief continuation for the story («what do you think happens next?»), which consisted usually of not more than one episode, in which personal pronouns had also anaphoric reference.

In the analysis a distinction was made between nominative, objective, and genitive forms. As expected, errors were found in third person singular forms only, which excluded definitively all the other pronominal forms from the analysis, and were always of gender assignment: masculine forms instead of feminine and viceversa. The errors of the ten subjects were counted for each text and percentages were calculated with relation to the total number of obligatory contexts provided by each subject in each text. The number of errors produced per subject ranged from 0 to 18. The data from two subjects were discarded because they made no errors in the entire experiment.

Chi-squared tests of association were calculated in order to see if case (genitive vs. nominative and objective), and context (deictic reference vs. anaphoric reference) had a significant effect on the results. In addition, a comparison was also made between instances of errors due to the substitution of the masculine form for the feminine form, and viceversa.

RESULTS

From a total of 586 pronominal forms produced by the eight subjects, 61 were incorrect⁵, as shown in Table 4. A chi-squared test showed that the difference between the number of incorrect possessive pronouns and incorrect subject and object pronouns was significant ($\chi^2 = 23.1$, $df = 2$, $p < .005$).

Table 4

	Subjective	Objective	Possessive	
Correct	447	44	34	525
Incorrect	35	3	23	61
	482	47	57	586

As can be seen in Table 4, the majority of the pronouns produced, both correct and incorrect, were subject pronouns. A chi-squared test of association was calculated and the difference between the incorrect pronouns in subject position produced in deictic contexts, Text 1, and in anaphoric contexts, Text 3, (see Table 5) was found to be significant

($\chi^2 = 6.1$, $df = 1$, $p < .025$). The difference between Texts 1 and 2 was not significant, whereas the difference between Texts 1 and 4 was not subjected to statistical calculation due to the very low figures obtained in the latter.

Table 5

	Text 1/Subj.	Text 3/Subj.	
Correct	142	101	243
Incorrect	19	3	22
	161	104	265

Objective pronouns were scarce in the data, 47, and of those only 3 were incorrect (see Table 4). The comparison intertext was not, therefore, seen to be appropriate in this case.

Incorrect possessive pronouns were, as noted above, more frequent. A comparison between the errors in the different texts showed the highest percentage to be in Text 3 (the mean intersubjects = 0.529, as opposed to 0.23 in Text 1), and thus the direct opposite of the results in the subject pronouns. Furthermore, a chi-squared test of association between Texts 1 and 3 showed that the difference between the errors in those two texts ($\chi^2 = 1.63$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$) was not significant. Neither would the difference be significant between Text 1 (mean 0.23) and Text 2 (mean 0.5). No errors were observed in Text 4.

As far as the direction of the error is concerned, the use of the masculine form instead of the feminine form was more frequent than the use of the feminine form instead of the masculine form. Subject pronouns were biased towards the masculine gender in 74% of cases (26 errors out of 35). Objective pronouns were very scarce: only 3 out of 47; of those 2 were masculine instead of feminine. Possessive pronouns showed the same tendency: 91.3% (21 errors out of 23) were due to the use of the masculine form instead of the feminine one. The tendency was, however, independent of the gender the object possessed had in Spanish in each case (of the 21 above mentioned incorrect masculine forms, 12 corresponded to objects marked in Spanish (both Castilian and Catalan) as masculine (ex.: *his book), and 9 to objects marked as feminine (ex.: *his house).

DISCUSSION

As expected, intermediate to advanced learners of English did not drop the subject pronouns, but made errors of gender in the third person forms. The hypothesis concerning a higher level of difficulty of the genitive forms seems also to be confirmed by a significant difference in the number of errors found. However, the tendency in the direction of the error that a contrastive analysis would predict (agreement between the pronoun and the possessed object like in most forms in Spanish) was not found.

Although we were not concerned with the comparison of subjects, it is noteworthy that they performed very differently in their use of personal pronouns. Apart from the two subjects with no errors eliminated from the count, the remaining eight subjects' errors ranged from 1 to 18. Although a correlation of the subjects' performance in these texts with their competence in English was generally found, there were cases in which less competent but more careful speakers produced fewer errors than more fluent speakers, less concerned with grammatical accuracy. As far as mother tongue is concerned no correlation was found between speakers with Catalan as their mother tongue, and thus in principle more balanced bilinguals, and speakers with Castilian as

their mother tongue and less competent in Catalan.

The intertextual comparison was intended to show the possible effect of the deictic or anaphoric reference on the use of pronouns. Our results indicate a significantly lower number of errors in the third text —anaphoric reference— than in the first text —deictic reference— but only in the case of subject pronouns. On the contrary, there are more mistakes in the third text than in the first one in the case of possessive pronouns, but the difference is not significant. We have no clear explanation for this inconsistency, but the finding could be related not so much to the anaphoric reference of the pronouns in Text 3, both subjective and possessive, but to the textual role of subject pronouns. Because subject pronouns refer to the topic subject of the narration, their contribution to the cohesion of the text may be specially important (see Karmiloff-Smith 1981). Therefore, in Text 3 the requirement of intersentential cohesion may help subjects to direct their attention towards these little words and thus be more accurate.

Moreover, the fact that different results have been obtained in Text 1 and Text 3 seems to indicate that, although the order of presentation of these tasks was the same for all subjects, the results are not a function of task presentation. However, in the case of Text 3 there has been a previous rehearsal (Text 2), which may have freed subjects from the «cognitive» burden of structuring the narration for the first time, and therefore allowed them to use their monitoring skills towards improving their accuracy⁶.

Finally, as regards the tendency to use erroneously the masculine form instead of the corresponding feminine form, we can again only suggest the following considerations. First of all, the bias towards the use of the masculine pronoun has been observed, independently of other conditions such as pronominal case, or type of text, and even when the main character or topic subject of the story (Texts 2, 3 and 4) is a girl. Second, the use of the masculine pronoun as a generic pronoun is a feature common to both English and Spanish, but much more frequent in the former because subject pronouns are obligatory. The lack of functional correspondence between the subject pronouns in the two languages may have consequences in production: when accessing the third person singular pronoun, subjects may find it easier to select «he» because by virtue of its generic use it may constitute the default value for the third person singular pronoun, and thus have the highest activation level. Third, if the mental lexicon is organized according to phonological properties of words (as speech errors seem to indicate; Fay and Cutler 1977), «he» and «she» —similar sounding words— would be close to each other, as would «his» and «her». Since related words may also be activated when a word is accessed, this would explain the high frequency of errors in the selection and retrieval of the right pronominal form even in subjects for which «he» is not the default value of the third person singular pronoun, and for cases in which «she» is wrongly selected. On the other hand the fact that the two most advanced learners did not make any errors seems to indicate that their command of the language made the tasks cognitively undemanding, and they were able to use their monitoring skills towards retrieving the appropriate pronominal form. A preliminary hypothesis is, thus, suggested here which explains the frequency of errors in this area among Spanish learners of English by the proximity of the third person singular English pronouns in the mental lexicon, and the tendency to overuse the masculine form because it is the default value of the third person singular personal pronoun. According to this hypothesis errors would occur more frequently in spontaneous speech contexts in which cognitive demands do not allow proper monitoring.

This hypothesis would have to be confirmed by further research, with a larger number of subjects with different levels of English. It would also be desirable to

compare the results thus obtained with results from comprehension tasks. Moreover, the tasks should be presented in random order, so that the possible influence of order and practice could be controlled. The present study has, nevertheless, permitted us to confirm the existence of a particular problem in the use of English personal pronouns by Spanish speakers, and to identify two important factors: the directionality of the error (bias towards the «generic» use of the masculine pronoun), and the possible influence of the type of pronominal reference (deictic or anaphoric) and the type of text on monitoring and production.

Notes

1. Pronominal distinctions are not acquired since the first pronominal uses, even though the forms used by the children may contain the appropriate marks. In fact pronouns are usually detached from formulae, and may at first be assigned meanings that do not correspond to the adult's use, and only with time and experience in the appropriate contexts do children come to acquire the adult's distinctions. (Chiat 1983; Karmiloff-Smith 1979). On the other hand, there seem to be consistent individual differences in the kinds of distinctions that are difficult (Baron and Kaiser 1975), although in general gender seems, after person, the easiest, followed by case and number (Scholes 1981; Wilkins and Rogers 1987).

2. The English inanimate third person pronoun appears quite early, usually in object position and with active verbs where the action is more important than the object acted upon (Huxley 1970).

3. The orthographic accent in the English forms marks emphatic stress here.

4. When the possessor is third person plural the literary form «llur/s» may be more correct.

5. Although in 28 occasions (45.9% of the total number of errors) the incorrect form was immediately followed by the correct one, self-corrections were not taken into account, since they were not directly relevant to our aim in this study.

6. In fact, in studies with native speakers of English, rehearsal has been found to improve narrations only at the level of narrative coherence (intersentential cohesion measured as percentage of complete cohesive ties), and only in the case of complex narratives in which demanding cognitive operations may prevent the subjects from monitoring their cohesive organization in the first trial (see Coelho, Liles & Duffy 1990).

References

- Baron, J. & A. Kaiser (1975) «Semantic Components in Children's Errors with Pronouns», *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 4, 303-317
- Charney, R. (1980) «Speech roles and the development of personal pronouns», *Journal of Child Language* 7, 509-528
- Chiat, S. (1983) «Personal Pronouns», in P. Fletcher & M. Garman (eds.) *Language Acquisition*, Cambridge: University Press (2nd edition) 339-355
- Coelho, C., B. Liles & R. Duffy (1990) «Contextual Influences on Narrative Discourse in Normal Young Adults», *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 19, 405-419
- Fay, D. & A. Cutler (1977) «Malapropisms and the structure of the mental lexicon», *Linguistic*

Inquiry 8, 505-520

- Huxley, R. (1970) «The development of the correct use of subject personal pronouns in two children», in G. B. Flores d'Arcais & W. J. M. Levelt (eds.) *Advances in Psycholinguistics*, Amsterdam-London: North-Holland, 141-165
- Karmiloff-Smith, A. (1979) *A functional approach to child language: a study of determiners and reference*, Cambridge: University Press
- Karmiloff-Smith, A. (1981) «The Grammatical Marking of Thematic Structure in the Development of Language», in W. Deutsch (ed.) *The Child's Construction of Language*, New York: Academic Press
- Muñoz, C. & I. Vila (1985) «Emergence and use of first and second person reference in Spanish. Some observational data», in *Child Language Seminar Papers 1985*, University of Reading, 165-186
- Scholes, R. (1981) «Developmental Comprehension of Third Person Personal Pronouns in English», *Language and Speech* 24, 91-98
- Wilkins, S. J. & D. R. Rogers (1987) «Possessive Pronouns: Why Are Plurals Harder?», *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 16, 551-561