

Mood alternations in Spanish: the diachronic expansion of subjunctive

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1. Introduction

In Spanish, the inconsistent relationship between mood (inflectional morphology) and modality (grammatical expression of truthfulness) leads to cases where the indicative and subjunctive moods alternate. This paper analyzes modal alternations with negated epistemic verbs in Spanish, from the Golden Age (from 1500 to 1700) to Contemporary Spanish. The corpus sample is formed by sentences that contain *no creo que* 'I don't think that', since they have sometimes been described as ungrammatical when followed by indicative. Our data indicate that this mood alternation results from a diachronic expansion in the use of subjunctive in Spanish.

2. Background

Epistemic verbs display the mood alternation in 1 and 2. The sentences in 1 show that the verb in the complement clause can display both subjunctive and indicative mood. Rivero 1977, among others, states that the use of indicative in the subordinate clause (1b) indicates a commitment to the truthfulness of the statement. By contrast, the subjunctive mood (1a) implies that the speaker does not want to assume any responsibility about the degree of certainty expressed by the complement clause. Based on this, Ridruejo 1999 explains that 2, where the main verb is in 1st person singular and the embedded verb is in indicative, is ungrammatical because it is not possible to diversify the commitment to truthfulness given that the main verb expresses the opinion of the speaker. However, corpus data obtained by Harrington & Pérez-Leroux 2016 found some examples of the construction *no creo que* 'I don't believe that' followed by indicative, which they relate to the occurrence of overt *yo* 'I' and negation scope.

3. Corpus Study

For the synchronic data, we extracted 400 sentences from CREA that contained *no creo que* 'I don't think that', out of which 13 had to be excluded for several reasons. For the diachronic data, we extracted all the sentences containing *no creo que* in the corpus CORDE (362 tokens total), out of which we were able to use 348. Table 1, in which future and conditional have also been excluded because they could be considered irrealis (akin to subjunctive), shows that in Golden Age Spanish indicative was used much more frequently than subjunctive in this construction. In Contemporary Spanish, however, the use of indicative with this verb has decreased to only 2.1%, and its use has become marginal. In contemporary Spanish, the related constructions *no pienso que* 'I don't think that' and *no digo que* 'I don't say that' also show a use of subjunctive which is almost categorical (89%) in the corpus sample obtained from CREA.

4. Conclusion

The results of this research show that Golden Age Spanish was in a process of change, but instead of evolving toward a simplification of the tense/mood system in favor of the indicative, like French for example, Spanish has favored the overt expression of mood as an indicator of modality with epistemic verbs, which is causing an expansion in the use of subjunctive.

- (1) a. *No cre-e que Pedro se-a inteligente.*
 not believe-3SG.PRES.IND that Pedro be-3SG.PRES.SBJV intelligent
 'I don't believe that Pedro is intelligent.'
- b. *No cree que Pedro es inteligente.*
 not believe-3SG.PRES.IND that Pedro be-3SG.PRES.SBJV intelligent
 'I don't believe that Pedro is intelligent.'
- (2) *Yo no cre-o que todo es plata.*
 I not believe-1SG.PRES.IND that Pedro is[3SG.PRES.SBJV] silver
 'I don't think that everything is money.'
 (CREA 2018)

Table 1: Mood by Century; Crosstabulation

		Golden Age SP	Contemp. SP	Total
Indicative	Count	182	8	190
	% within Century	70.3%	2.1%	29.7%
Subjunctive	Count	77	373	450
	% within Century	29.7%	97.9%	70.3%
Total	Count	259	381	640
	% within Century	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

	Value	df	p value
Pearson's Chi-Square	343.267	1	.000

References

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