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# LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

Conducted by TRACY TERRELL\*

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## ON THE USE OF THE INDEFINITE ARTICLE

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Of all the problems of native-language transfer and interference during language learning, perhaps one of the most persistent and frustrating occurs when the target language apparently permits a choice or optional variation of a construction which is obligatory in the learners' native language. Such a type-form of structural interface has been placed high on the hierarchy of difficulty by Stockwell, Bowen and Martin,<sup>1</sup> and the relative accuracy of this placement may be attested by any language teacher. Within this category, the greatest number of specific difficulties seems to arise with the "little words," articles, prepositions and particles, which are often taken for granted or ignored, and yet which form the structural mortar insuring a well-formed syntactic foundation. Within the Spanish language, the matter of usage of articles, both definite and indefinite, often proves highly troublesome to learners coming from an English-language background, since while English shares a syntactically similar set of articles, usage in the two languages often varies widely.

Of special interest to the language teacher and the observer of language usage is the behavior of the indefinite article in predicate constructions, leading to the contrast exemplified by *es médico/es un médico*. Since use of the indefinite article is obligatory in the corresponding English constructions ("He is a doctor."), students often overgeneralize and employ the article in all such examples in Spanish, thus defeating the inherent contrast facilitated by the presence or absence of the article. Moreover, in English, a plural predicate nominative may not appear with an indefinite article ("They are doctors."), whereas

Spanish in certain cases permits a contrast: *son mentirosos/son unos mentirosos*. The student who questions the basis for such varying structures in Spanish is frequently presented with a series of vague and impressionistic notions, often based more on connotational values than on semantic fact. While the proper manipulation of pragmatic restrictions is the ultimate goal of any language learner, a firm grasp of the underlying semantic structures is essential as a preliminary to more detailed considerations of affective value.

The preceding facts are well-known, as, perhaps, are the various explanations which have been adduced to account for the variability of the Spanish indefinite article. The present note in no way purports to replace, nor, in most cases, to reject, the currently available discussions; instead, various key data will be summarized, and some observations will be added which are not commonly encountered in accounts of language usage.

Let us first consider the most common cases involving a predicate noun. It is commonly stated, in distributional terms, that the Spanish article is generally omitted "antes de los nombres no modificados que, en el predicado, indican profesión, ocupación, nacionalidad, clase social, raza, religión y afiliación política."<sup>2</sup> This description readily covers such cases as *es católico, médico, pobre, negro, republicano, argentino*, etc., but does not really seem to fit examples like *es vegetariano* (unless this be considered a religious persuasion!), *holgazán, cobarde, hombre*, etc.

It is also generally conceded that if the predicate noun is modified by an adjective, the indefinite article must occur: *es un buen médico*. Occasionally it is noted that even in the presence of adjective modifiers the indefinite article may be omitted, if the sequence has become fused into a single meaning, e.g. *es buen católico*,<sup>3</sup> or to

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effect "mere identification."<sup>4</sup> Broader uses of modified predicate nominatives without accompanying articles are only infrequently mentioned.<sup>5</sup>

Turning now to expressions making use of the indefinite article, it is apparent that virtually every appropriate noun may occur as a predicate nominative accompanied by the article. Thus, the point which must be clarified concerns the conditions which permit deletion of the article. The key issue seems to be one of mere *identification* versus *individualization*. Stockwell, Bowen and Martin (op. cit., pp. 68-69) attempt to contrast Spanish *es médico/es un médico* with English "he's a doctor/he's a doctor," with contrastive stress or written emphasis in the latter sentence. DeMello<sup>6</sup> notes that "since the indefinite article . . . and the number "one" are the same word in Spanish . . . there is a strong tendency to suppress it when the feeling of individuality or 'oneness' is not present." Sallés and de la Vega (op. cit., p. 28) comment that "en las oraciones sustantivas o copulativas el nombre que funciona como atributo no lleva artículo . . . en cambio, si se modifica al atributo dándole un carácter específico, conviene usar el artículo indeterminante antecediendo a dicho atributo." Such attempts at explanation, while possibly expressing the intuitions of native speakers of Spanish often leave the English-speaking student somewhat baffled, since he only perceives the external contrast, between the article and its omission, without "feeling" any inherent difference in identification, corresponding to the single means of identification in English. At times it may help to contrast the usages in answers to questions: thus, to a question of the type *¿Qué es aquel hombre?* an appropriate response would be *es abogado*, while the question *¿Quién es aquel hombre?* would more naturally call forth *es un abogado*. In the first instance one is speaking *about* the man in question, in the second, of his profession, which in effect replaces a proper name or other specific description.

Also pointed out from time to time is the fact that the presence of the article indicates a more fundamental characteristic or attribute. Thus Ramsey (op. cit.,

p. 59) states that "the predicate noun takes an article when it is emphatic and its quality is considered as a leading characteristic. Thus, to say that a person *es cobarde*, merely charges him with cowardice, but to say *es un cobarde*, conveys the idea that cowardice is a dominant fault." Bello<sup>7</sup> notes that "decir que alguien *es holgazán* no es más que atribuirle este vicio; pero decir que *es un holgazán* es atribuírselo como cualidad principal y característica."

This is a point worth elaborating, since it hints at a possible semantic generalization. To say that someone *es cobarde*, for example, describes an externally observable fact, and includes the charge of cowardice in a description of the person's overall behavior. In effect, it is equivalent to saying "he acts like a coward," judging by outward appearances. On the other hand, the qualification *es un cobarde* claims that the individual concerned is *by definition* a coward, inwardly as well as outwardly. Thus, it is possible to affirm, for example, *es un cobarde, aunque no lo parezca*, since a person may outwardly overcome an inner tendency; the corresponding sentence without the article, however, is semantically self-contradictory: *\*es cobarde, aunque no lo parezca*. Referring these observations back to the qualification of the indefinite article as individualizing the predicate nominative, it seems that this feature of individuality is in fact a special case of the more general semantic distinction *inherent/outwardly manifest*. More specifically, to describe someone by the sentence *es abogado* refers only to a profession, practiced and evidence at points distant in space and time from the site of the speech event. However, the contrasting *es un abogado*, more appropriate in the presence of the individual so described, in effect links the outward appearance with the profession, as though the two had some intrinsic connection. Possibly for this reason it is most common to delete the article in imperatives with *ser*, e.g. *no seas tonto, cobarde, payaso*, etc., since one is merely requesting that the addressee not *act* like a fool, coward and so forth. Strictly speaking, it is impossible to put a stative verb like *ser* into the imperative; thus, as in

English ("Don't be a fool."), *ser* loses its stative character in this construction. At times this usage may be purely figurative, as in the example cited by DeMello (loc. cit.) *ella es una maestra*, which he attempts to render into English as "she is (what I call) a teacher."

Refining our observations further, it appears that even more fundamental, in many cases, is the distinction between inherent, involuntary traits, and the results of conscious volition. The indefinite article seems more appropriate in the former cases, whereas the omission of the article characterizes the latter instances. For example, one normally says *es un genio* rather than *\*es genio*, since the quality of genius is generally considered to be beyond the grasp of willful effort. Similarly, the statements *es un profeta*, *es un vidente*, etc. describe spiritual gifts not normally obtainable through conscious striving; on the other hand, phrases such as *es profeta*, *es vidente* have an almost banal air about them, as though degrading the powers in question to the status of a consciously chosen occupation ("He's the local guru."). This same distinction appears to account for such examples as *es un monstruo*, *fenómeno*, *holgazán*, and so forth, in addition to the so-called "figurative" expressions like *es un ángel*, *un lobo*, etc., where inherent characteristics are being described. Therefore, the difference between *es embustero*/*es un embustero* is seen to be a reflection on the origin of the trait in question: in the first case comes the more charitable connotation of an acquired habit, while the latter instance clearly brands the individual as a born liar. Similarly, *es vegetariano* indicates an act of choice, while *es un vegetariano* might connote, inasmuch as this is possible, an inherent inability or unwillingness to eat meat. To say of someone *es poeta* merely reflects his activities, whereas to say *es un poeta* adds a further note about his inner inspiration: he is poetically inclined. On the other hand, to say of someone *es hombre* is not to refer to his manhood as an acquired trait, but only serves to contrast sex rather than species, being most appropriately used, for example, in response to the question *¿es*

*hombre o mujer?* For further examples of this contrast, consider the following passage, from the novel *Ese que llaman pueblo* (San José: Editorial Trejos, 1964), by the Costa Rican Fabián Dobles: "Es una mujerzuela; mas le ha contado tantas cosas. Merece que la traten como a una mujer a secas. El es hombre. Ella ha sufrido. . . !" The expression *es una mujerzuela* offers a rather damning characterization of the woman, whereas *es hombre* merely describes the other character as male, and consequently subject to the former's attractions. Consider also the following example from the novel *Curundú* (Panamá: Imp. Nacional, 1961) by the Panamanian Joaquín Beleño:

—Usted es un perfecto ignorante. Si usted no sabe de huecos no sabe de nada.

—Yo no soy ignorante, yo soy un estudiante del Instituto Nacional—replica con orgullo Rubén.

In his first statement, Rubén is in effect denying the inherent nature of his ignorance, which is implied by the ditch-digger's use of the article. On the other hand, by stating "yo soy un estudiante," Rubén is affirming the more fundamental trait of studenthood, as if saying "I am by nature a student."

The use of the indefinite article with modified predicate nominatives follows correspondingly: *es un buen médico* more aptly describes a person's inherent ability, whereas *es buen médico* would more readily offer a reflection of one's diligence in following the program in medical school. The same may be said for the pair *es buen católico*/*es un buen católico*, where the first expression refers to the person's outward acts of devotion (he knows all the correct responses), while the second offers a more fundamental characterization.

In partial summary, it has been suggested that the notion of the indefinite article as serving an individualizing function be augmented by, or perhaps refined to, a definition involving the semantic features of inherent trait versus consciously acquired characteristics. Viewed in this light, the indefinite article is seen to engender a *marked* configuration, involving an additional semantic specification, that of a de-

fining characteristic not found in phrases in which the article has been omitted. This notion of markedness is at least partially compatible with the statement by DeMello (loc. cit.) to the effect that the indefinite article indicates "an outstanding member of a group or category, or when the noun by its very nature indicates someone outstanding (for example, 'genius')."

As a final note, we consider cases involving predicate adjectives, involving pairs such as *es viejo/es un viejo*. There is an obvious problem here, since only a restricted set of adjectives may be nominalized by the indefinite article, a set including *viejo, pobre, negro, sabio, enfermo, americano*, etc., but excluding *inteligente, alto, grande, famoso*, and so forth. All such adjectives refer to people; Bello (op. cit., p. 286) notes that "cuando se sustantiva *uno*, reproduciendo un sustantivo precedente, no debe usarse la forma apocopada *un . . . un rico* es siempre *un hombre rico*. . . ." Within the framework of transformational grammar, Hadlich<sup>8</sup> considers two possible solutions. First, one may consider members of the class of adjectives which may appear nominalized with the article as true nouns in the latter case, with the lexical specification [+N] in frames such as *es un viejo*. On the other hand, when carrying the specification [+adj], the corresponding derivations would yield *uno viejo*. This solution is similar to that offered by Cárdenas (loc. cit.), who affirms that after *ser*, all predicate adjectives are in fact nouns, since *es pobre* may be replaced by *es hombre pobre*, etc. Lenz<sup>9</sup> notes the difficulty of deciding, in many cases, whether the predicate is in fact an adjective or an adjectival noun, adding that in Latin, words such as *iuvenis* were already used as both noun and adjective. However, by considering predicate adjectives to be true nouns without further qualification, it is impossible to account for the ready pronominalization of *es rico* to *es un rico*, and the corresponding lack of nominalization of *es inteligente* to *\*es un inteligente*. If, on the other hand, one accepts some variant of Hadlich's second solution, to consider adjectives like *viejo* as specially marked for nominalization by the indefinite article, the difficulty

disappears, since the differential behavior occasioned by the presence or absence of the article is now covered in the lexical specification of the adjectives in question. However, Hadlich proposes to merely offer a special lexical diacritic, without inquiring into the nature of the constraints which permit *es un viejo* but disallow *\*es un inteligente*. While lexical list-learning may be the only feasible method of instructing such contrasts, short of native-level exposure to the living language, it is overly pessimistic to assume that the distinction involved is purely arbitrary. Further examination suggests that the distinction may be a reflection of a more basic cultural level of specification. Within the culture represented by the Spanish language, certain adjectives have emerged as universally applicable qualifiers of human attributes. Adjectives such as *viejo, pobre, negro*, and adjectives of nationality may be used to identify individuals as well as merely to describe them. Thus, to say *ahí vienen dos jóvenes* is an acceptable Spanish sentence since the class of young people is commonly used as a tag or label (cf. as a form of direct address, *mire joven*). On the other hand, *\*es un inteligente* is unacceptable not through any inherent semantic characteristic of the adjective (note the acceptability of *es un estúpido*) but rather in that the Spanish-speaking cultures do not consider the possession of a high degree of intelligence as a convenient and relevant label. One can, without unduly stretching the imagination, conceive of a society where intelligence, rather than lack thereof, is considered relevant enough to warrant usage as a name-substitute, as for example the labels *Alpha, Beta* and *Gamma* in Huxley's *Brave New World*. Another basic characteristic involved in determining whether certain adjectives can occur with an article seems to be the external manifestability of the trait involved: thus, one hears *es un joven, manco, tuerto, cojo, ciego, sordomudo, pobre, patizambo*, etc., while adjectives denoting less noticeable traits, such as *inteligente, célebre, bueno*, etc. seldom occur with an article. Nonetheless, exceptions do occur, since one does not normally say *\*es un grande* or *un*

*alto*, although the more negatively characterized *un gordo*, *un flaco*, etc. are acceptable, thus pointing to the possibility of predominantly negative traits. Once again, these discrepancies suggest that each culture selects a particular set of linguistic configurations to reflect its own individualizing characteristics.

The last word has yet to be uttered with regard to the usage of indefinite articles in Spanish, and indeed, given the highly fluid and constantly evolving nature of the living language, it is unlikely that trained observation will ever completely catch up with spoken usage. Nonetheless, a search for semantic and cultural features, rather than merely superficial syntactic configurations, may ultimately lead to a more fundamental grasp of language behavior, with obvious benefits both for linguistic theory and for language pedagogy.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Robert P. Stockwell, J. Donald Bowen, John

W. Martin, *The Grammatical Structures of English and Spanish* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 283.

<sup>2</sup>Nicholas F. Sallèse and Oscar Fernández de la Vega, *Repaso: Gramática moderna* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1968), p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Marathon R. Ramsey, *A Textbook of Modern Spanish*, revised Robert K. Spaulding (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1956), p. 59.

<sup>4</sup>Stockwell, Bowen and Martin, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>5</sup>For example, Daniel Cárdenas, *Applied Linguistics, Spanish: a Guide for Teachers* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1961), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>George DeMello, *Español contemporáneo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 318-19.

<sup>7</sup>Andrés Bello, Rufino J. Cuervo, *Gramática de la lengua castellana*, with commentary by Niceto Alcalá-Zamora y Torre (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sopena Argentina, 1973, 9th ed.), p. 235.

<sup>8</sup>R. Hadlich, *A Transformational Grammar of Spanish* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 153.

<sup>9</sup>Rodolfo Lenz, *La oración y sus partes* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Nascimento, 1944, 4th ed.), par. 73.

## OBLIQUENESS IN SPANISH IMPERATIVE UTTERANCES

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At some point in his study of the Spanish language the serious student must become aware that such textbook groupings as "commands" or "imperatives" treat only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to language use. I wish here to outline my concept of a two dimensional system used by speakers of Spanish to make imperative utterances. One dimension consists of the basic verb forms which make up the nuclei of such utterances. The other dimension consists of another linguistic factor which I will explain as oblique marker usage. In order to outline my proposal in its broadest scope I will begin with a theoretical framework applicable to both American and Peninsular Spanish. Then, I will discuss the pedagogical implications of that framework.

When I speak of imperative utterances I mean those which call for imperative responses as opposed to utterances which narrate or declare something to be true or

false. Usually an imperative utterance contains an overt verb showing the intended imperative response (henceforth abbreviated IR):

1) *Abre la ventana*. Open the window.

2) *Quiero que abras la ventana*. I want you to open the window.

Both (1) and (2) have overt IRs: *abre*, *abras*. There are of course many cases where the IR is elided or simply implied as in example (3):

3) *Y la ventana, si me haces el favor*. And the window, please.

We are all aware of man's adeptness at creating oblique ways to get others to respond. For instance, when a husband asks his wife if she would like a cup of coffee, she may understand it as a request that she prepare coffee for him. And, although she complies, she may in fact chide him for his indirectness. In the following discussion I will consider the basic linguistic tools open to the speaker of Spanish so