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## PREPOSED SUBJECTS IN QUESTIONS: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

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THE PREPOSING of subject pronouns in questions which contain an interrogative word, e.g., *¿qué tú tienes?*, instead of the inversion *¿qué tienes tú?* has recently come up for discussion in this journal, and raises a number of interesting theoretical and methodological questions. Davis<sup>1</sup> observed this phenomenon among Cubans, and cited general feelings of English influence. Quirk,<sup>2</sup> in turn, noted that the preposed pronoun also occurs in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. To this may be added the fact that the present writer has observed no similar tendency among Mexican or Chicano speakers, thus adding further arguments against simple influence of English. This paper will add to what Davis and Quirk have written, not in the way of a solution to the problem, but rather in an attempt to turn the attention of other investigators towards some of the inherent linguistic peculiarities of this phenomenon.

Found only in casual speech, the preposing of subject pronouns in questions beginning with an interrogative word is difficult to study systematically, and the available data are fragmentary and confusing. According to the data presented by Davis and Quirk, it appears that *tú*, and in some instances *usted* and *ustedes*, are the only pronouns allowed in such a variant construction, which may occur with a variety of interrogative words. In reality, however, the problem is much more complex, for, external observations on their behavior notwithstanding, many Cuban and Puerto Rican speakers informed the present writer that they found the preposed subject construction equally acceptable with *él*, *ella*, *ellos*, etc. In fact, the only constraint appears to be the presence of a proper name, and then only in some

cases: examples such as \**¿que José quiere?* were felt to be less than acceptable.<sup>3</sup> Several Cubans felt that the preposed subject was the only "normal" form in casual conversation, with the inverted subject sounding more "poetic" or offering a direct challenge, as in *¿qué quieres tú?* Despite such reflections, it still seems apparent that this phenomenon, while evidently being rapidly generalized, spread from a nucleus of expressions involving *tú*, although by now the situation has probably become too confused for an accurate determination.

Although preposing of the subject pronouns may apparently occur with any verbal tense, it seems to the present writer that, notwithstanding the introspection of native speakers the majority of such cases occur in the present tense, followed by the preterite and then by the imperfect, with insufficient observations being available for the other tenses. In addition, the presence of intervening clitic pronouns appears to constrain, at least partially, the preposing of subject pronouns. While one may insert a reflexive pronoun, as in *¿cómo tú te llamas?*, it is less common to find a first person pronoun intervening, as in *¿qué tú me dijiste?*, and perhaps less common still to find an intervening third person pronoun as in *¿qué tú le dijiste?* or a sequence of two clitic pronouns, as in *¿cómo tú se lo dijiste?*

Davis advances two hypotheses to account for the preposed pronoun. First, to account for the predominance of the second person pronoun, he suggests that "most questions will be couched in the second person singular familiar, hence the likelihood of that form's being the predominant one" (p. 332). While possessing no statistical evidence to back up this claim, the present writer has not noticed,

in listening to spontaneous conversations and taped interviews, any preponderance of *tú* questions, except of course when the speaker was dealing with a topic directly concerning the listener; however, given the typical interpersonal interaction characterizing informal conversations, there may well be substance to this observation. Davis further suggests that the ordinarily tonic *tú* has become, in the cases under discussion, atonic, through a process of alternating stress, thereby placing primary emphasis on the interrogative proposition, rather than on the subject. Again, this observation seems plausible, especially in light of the historical parallels adduced by Davis; equally plausible, it seems, is the possibility of a reverse causality: that the stress reduction and concomitant de-emphasis of the subject pronoun are the result of additional factors.

Taking up the case from here, Quirk notes the possibility of influence of the African languages imported to the Caribbean region, and also the parallel constructions to be found in Brazilian Portuguese: *‘Onde você foi?’*, etc. Of much more central importance to linguistic theory, however, is the observation that, in the Caribbean region, syllable-final and particularly word-final [s] is most usually aspirated to [h], or lost altogether in casual speech; thus, the use of the otherwise redundant *tú* may be the result of a desire to avoid phonetic merger of the verbal forms. This suggestion may be countered by two observations, as Quirk himself notes. First of all, in other parts of the Spanish-speaking world, such as Andalucía and Chile, aspiration and loss of final [s] occurs without engendering preposing of subject pronouns in questions. Secondly, in those dialects, particularly in the Caribbean, where aspiration and eventual loss of final [s] does occur, this loss is often accompanied by a change in the timbre of the preceding vowel, thus in effect providing a new morphophonemic contrast which would preserve the redundancy of

the pronoun *tú*.<sup>5</sup>

The last-mentioned hypothesis, postulating an internal linguistic motivation for the syntactic shift in question, is of sufficient preciseness and general verifiability to be of more than passing interest, particularly since it is a well-documented fact that phonetic mergers or losses are known to have been constrained by the desire to preserve morphological material on the surface.<sup>6</sup> And yet, in its presently stated form, the hypothesis is still quite vague and leaves a number of crucial issues untouched. Therefore, it is felt that a more detailed examination of certain aspects of Spanish morphophonology would help in evaluating the potential for internal linguistic change.

We must now consider the question of the function of grammatical concord, so common in Spanish, much less so in French (if one disregards the orthography),<sup>7</sup> and comparatively scarce in English. Concord is in fact a method of promoting redundancy in language, since a certain measure of redundancy is essential to the effective functioning of language as an information-carrying code. A totally efficient language, i.e. with no redundancy, would be so compact that even the slightest distortion would result in serious errors of comprehension. As a consequence, all known natural languages have certain characteristic redundancies built into them, quite frequently in the form of CHECK MORPHEMES. This is a term used in information theory,<sup>8</sup> and refers to morphemes, in themselves bearing no information related to the message, but which are periodically inserted in the message to insure that it is being properly received. Thus, such grammatical devices as gender, number and personal concord in Spanish guard against propagation of errors of syntactic analysis, by providing a periodic monitoring of such relations as subject, object, scope of modifiers, etc. In a sentence such as *los libros nuevos están sobre la mesa*, number is marked in four places,

thus unequivocally specifying the subject of the verb, while the three-way gender marking ties the modifiers to the noun.

While the notion of retardation of sound change to avoid merger of morphological or semantic categories remains a hotly debated topic, in view of the issue of teleological influences in linguistic evolution, it appears clear that the greater the morphological burden carried by a given sequence, the less are its chances of complete obliteration.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, grammatical redundancy may be exploited in additional ways, as for example to emphasize a subject: *yo no tengo nada*, an object: *a mí no me importa*, etc.

Let us now turn to the function of word-final /s/ in Spanish. In most instances, final /s/ signals the plural morpheme in nouns and adjectives,<sup>10</sup> and the second person singular morpheme in verbal forms, except in the preterite<sup>11</sup> and in the copula *es*. In the case of nominal plural endings, the category PLURAL may also be signalled by the articles, including the suppletive pair //el//:/los// as well as the normally distinguished pair //la//:/las//. Among verbal forms, except in the preterite and the copula, only the addition of subject pronouns can make the final /s/ redundant in the second person singular forms.

Given these facts, one would be led to predict that, in the generally weak implosive position, syllable-final [s] will be most often aspirated, or more generally, lost, in those instances where no loss of morphological material would be occasioned; e.g. word-internally, as in *mismo* and *isla*.<sup>12</sup> However, in cases where a grammatical distinction is involved, one would anticipate fewer instances of total loss, and possibly even of aspiration, which, given the generally noisy conditions of linguistic interaction, may obliterate the presence of the morpheme //s//. Not surprisingly, in a study realized among Puerto Rican speakers in Jersey City,<sup>13</sup> these predictions were in large measure borne out. In informal conversational

styles, it was found that, while final [s] in nouns was most frequently dropped, the same morphological signal in adjectives and articles was dropped in only a fraction of the cases. The authors of this study note (p. 389) that "once the plural marker has already been marked or realized on the article or adjective, by virtue of the very rule of agreement it becomes 'redundant' also to distribute it to the following noun."<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, no data were collected concerning the relative frequency of loss of final [s] in the predictably plural articles *los* as opposed to the normally marked *las*; the present writer's observations on Cuban and Puerto Rican Spanish, as yet unconfirmed statistically, indicate a slight preference for *los* as a favorable environment for loss of [s].<sup>15</sup>

Turning now to the verbal endings, it was similarly found that final [s] among verbs was more frequently aspirated than lost, although instances of loss were much higher, particularly when the following word began with a vowel. Here again, no distinction was made between cases in which final [s] is a true signal of second person singular and those involving the third person copula *es*; significantly, however, the authors note (p. 390) that they suspect [s] would be lost more frequently in the second person marker, "given the grammatical redundancy of the subject pronoun *tú* which accompanies this verbal inflection." Once again we seem to be faced with the possibility of a reverse causality. Is final [s] in such cases redundant because the subject pronoun *tú* is most often retained, or vice versa?

The above facts indicate the complexity of the situation, and highlight what in practical terms amounts to the impossibility of sorting out the problems of causality in any other than a hypothetical fashion. Nonetheless, armed with the overall facts of Spanish morphophonology, as well as the dialectal information, one may hope to at least offer a reasonably constrained conjecture. We start by noting that aspiration

and other modifications of syllable-final [s] appear to be general phonetically-motivated processes, resulting from phonetic factors involving the implosive position,<sup>16</sup> and are found in a number of Spanish dialects, also being paralleled by the evolution of syllable-final [r] and [l] in Spanish, as well as of final [s] in Old French and Portuguese. Consequently, if in fact the subject pronouns *tú* and *usted* are used more frequently in those dialects where aspiration of final [s] is frequent, it is most reasonable to suppose that this retention has been at least in part motivated by morphological considerations, rather than to assume the reverse causality. Even in those instances where a change in final vowel timbre has accompanied loss of final [s], thus potentially providing a rephonemization of the grammatical distinctions lost along with the [s], use of the redundant subject pronouns would serve to reinforce what otherwise would be an extremely tenuous phonological opposition. Spanish normally distinguishes only five vowels on the phonological level; thus, the addition of another three or four phonemes in a single position, involving moreover an opposition not otherwise utilized in the language (of the sort TENSE-LAX, or something similar), would place the information-carrying potential of the language under a considerable strain, particularly considering that it is in final (unaccented) position that Spanish has traditionally distinguished the fewest number of vowels.<sup>17</sup>

Concerning the relative position of the subject pronouns with respect to the verb, it appears that the reinforced usage of the pronouns occasioned by the drive to preserve morphological oppositions may be leading to a closer than normal relation between the normally separable subject-verb pair. It would appear, in fact, that in many instances, this pair may become (on the phonetic level only), welded into a NEXUS,<sup>18</sup> or group of words which behaves phonetically and phonologically as a single

word, i.e. in which the behavior characteristic of word boundaries has disappeared from the interior of the group. The formation of nexus combinations has, in the history of the Romance languages and elsewhere, led to the creation of synthetic forms from analytic configurations, for example in the formation of the Romance future pattern from the Vulgar Latin analytic pattern: *amare habēo* > *amaré*, etc. A similar trend may be noted in French, and to a lesser extent in Spanish, where the new analytic future forms, in *aller* and *ir*, respectively, which have largely replaced the synthetic forms, are tending to behave as single words: *je vais aimer* and *yo voy (a) hacer*. It has been speculated, however, that analysis by preposing of forms, as opposed to analysis by suffixation, as in the Vulgar Latin future forms, will not lead to the complete conversion to synthetic forms, partly because both elements are freely combinable in other syntagmatic patterns, and also because other elements may intervene.<sup>19</sup>

In the colloquial Spanish of Cuba and Puerto Rico, the increased use of the subject pronouns of personal address appears to be leading to the occasional formation of nexus compounds of the type [tusábe], [uhtedise], etc.<sup>20</sup> The creation of an extraordinarily close bond between the subject pronoun and the verb may therefore cause the two words to behave as one during such transformations as interrogation, which normally entail the separation of the two words, thus potentially leading to configurations such as *¿qué* [tutjéne]?. The formation of a nexus combination would account for the destressing of the subject pronoun: since the combination of subject + verb would in effect be behaving like a single word, the main accent would fall on the verbal portion of the combination. It would also appear to account for the observation that the presence of intervening clitic pronouns may constrain the retention of the preposed subject pronoun in questions since such inserted

forms in effect destroy the (highly tenuous at best) nexus relationship, as does the insertion of *no* during negation. In the case of stereotyped reflexive patterns such as *¿cómo tú te llamas?*, the reflexive pronoun appears to have already formed a nexus with the verb, thus maintaining the possibility of forming a larger nexus with a subject pronoun.

In old Spanish, usage was much more flexible with respect to the relative placement of subject pronouns, clitic pronouns, and negative particles. Taking a random example, from Alfonso X (*Primera crónica general*, chap. 59), we have: "Par Dios, no eran estas las cosas que me tu dices cuando estabas conmigo," illustrating the retention of the bond between subject and verb. From *El Cid*, we get examples like (line 151): "que gelo non ventassen," showing the greater mobility of the negative particle.<sup>21</sup>

The extension of the preposed subject to *ustedes*, which is accompanied by a verbal form not participating in the loss of morphological inflections, would appear to be a case of analogy, since the predominant factor in the preposing of subjects seems to be personal address, characteristic of the colloquial styles of speech.

The predominance of the preposed subject in the present tense may be the result of the statistical prevalence of this tense in normal conversation, and the transference to the also frequently used preterite tense, in which the need to maintain grammatical distinctions is realized by the differentiated endings, would then be ascribable to the generalization of the pattern established in the present tense. The imperfect tense, where loss of final [s] in the second person forms potentially entails a three-way merger of verbal forms, would also appear to demand an excessive use of subject pronouns; however, the imperfect, together with the conditional and the subjunctive, has always been less differentiated in terms of endings, perhaps in view

of the somewhat diminished use of these tenses in conversational styles, as compared with the present and preterite,<sup>22</sup> and differentiation of subjects is often determined from context.

As an additional determining factor, we may note that the general subject-object inversion in questions is usually obligatory only in the presence of an interrogative word such as *cómo*, *qué*, and *cuándo*, whereas a simple declarative sentence may be questioned by merely altering the intonation: *¿tú lo crees?* Therefore, there exists the clear possibility of syntagmatic influence and interference between two sorts of grammatical transformations: one which merely changes intonation during interrogation, and one which inverts subject and verb, i.e. the difference between *yes-no* questions and information-requesting questions.<sup>23</sup> The area of syntagmatic interference of large-scale grammatical patterns is a wide-open field for future investigation, which has not yet received its deserved attention.

As a final note, it should be added that the fact that loss of final [s] in such areas as Chile and Andalucía is not generally accompanied by retention of preposed subject pronouns in questions is irrelevant to the existence of this phenomenon in other dialects. The important fact is that a situation was created which could lead to a specified route of linguistic evolution, not that a particular language or dialect did or did not follow this route. A language is not a deterministic entity, but a fluid system representing the confluence of the speech habits of its speakers. It is, therefore, unreasonable to require a language to follow any other than the most basic laws or directions.

THE ABOVE REMARKS were not intended to imply a unified hypothesis on the origin of the phenomenon in question, but rather to suggest those avenues of approach still open to study. It would, in particular, be interesting to discover

whether any analogous situation exists in such countries as Argentina, where aspiration of final [s] is coupled with the *voseo*, resulting in verbal forms in which the second-person distinction is maintained in yet another way. Also of related interest is the preposing of the subject pronoun in (formal) commands, as in *usted perdone*, heard in Cuban and Puerto Rican Spanish, which may be in some way connected with the behavior of questions. Only by combining the results of phonetic, phonological, syntactic and sociological observations may a final solution be anticipated, since the problem is very evidently not a simple one.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>J. Cary Davis, "Tú, ¿qué tú tienes?," *Hispania*, 54 (May 1971), 331-33.

<sup>2</sup>Ronald J. Quirk, "On the Extent and Origin of Questions in the form of "¿Qué tú tienes?," *Hispania*, 55 (May 1972), 303-04.

<sup>3</sup>In indirect questions, even the preposing of first person pronouns seems acceptable. As an example, in the story "El Jefe," by Emilio Díaz Valcárcel (*Panorama: narraciones 1955-1967* [Río Piedras: Editorial Cultural, 1971, p. 264]), we find: "Después cuatro doctores vestidos de soldado me preguntaron qué yo creía del ejército y yo les dije que creía que sí."

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Charles Kany, *American Spanish Syntax* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1945), p. 125. For some lexical parallels between Cuban Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese, see A. Tenório D'Albuquerque, "Cubanisms e brasileirismos," *Boletín de la Academia Cubana de la Lengua*, 2 (1953), 268-87.

<sup>5</sup>Tomás Navarro Tomás, *El español en Puerto Rico* (Río Piedras: Univ. of Puerto Rico, 1948), p. 44; "Desdoblamiento de fonemas vocálicos," *Revista de Filología Hispánica*, 1 (1939), 165-7; Cristina Isbaşescu, *El español en Cuba* (Bucharest: Ed. Academiei R.S.R., 1968); Joseph H. Matluck, "Fonemas finales en el consonantismo puertorriqueño," *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*, 15 (1961), 332-42 [p. 333]; Halvor J. Clegg, "Análisis espectrográfico de los fonemas /aeo/ en un ideolecto de la Habana," Masters' thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1967.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, William Labov, "Contraction, Deletion and Inherent Variability of the English Copula," *Language*, 45 (1969), 715-62.

<sup>7</sup>Cf., for example, Jesse Levitt, "The Agreement of the Past Participle in Modern French:

Orthographic Convention or Linguistic Fact?," *Linguistics*, 114 (1973), 25-42.

<sup>8</sup>For a description of the function of check morphemes, see Petr Beckmann, *The Structure of Language: a New Approach* (Boulder, Colo.: Golem Press, 1972).

<sup>9</sup>For some examples from the Romance languages, involving final vowels, see John Lipski, "Diachronic Hierarchies in Romance," Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Alberta, 1974, Chap. 4.

<sup>10</sup>However, at times the /e/ of the variant ending -es also plays a role in signalling the plural; see John Lipski, "Towards a Production Model of Spanish Morphology: A Further Look at Plurals," *Studia Linguistica*, 28 (1974), 83-99.

<sup>11</sup>However, in the preterite, an analogical s is frequently added to regularize the paradigm: *dijistes, hablastes*, etc.

<sup>12</sup>However, there are a few "minimal pairs" involving word-internal s in syllable-final position, such as *pescar-pecar*. While such pairs are crucial to theories of "functional load," to date no research has been done on the retention of this distinction in Spanish.

<sup>13</sup>Roxana Ma and Eleanor Herasimchuk, "The linguistic dimensions of a bilingual neighborhood," in Joshua A. Fishman, et al., *Bilingualism in the Barrio* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 347-464.

<sup>14</sup>Similar results may be found for the Spanish of El Salvador in the study by D. Lincoln Canfield, "Observaciones sobre el español salvadoreño," *Filología* (Buenos Aires), 6 (1960), 29-76 [p. 48].

<sup>15</sup>For a similar study, involving retention of l in the French articles of Montreal French, see Gillian Sankoff and Henrietta Cedergren, "Some Results of a Sociolinguistic Study of Montreal French," in Regna Darnell, ed., *Linguistic Diversity in Canadian Society* (Edmonton, 1971), pp. 61-87. In this study it was found that l was deleted more frequently in articles on syntagms where it was predictable.

<sup>16</sup>However, there may be additional phonotactic factors involved. For example, the drive for open syllabicity has been postulated as having contributed to the similar loss of syllable-final s in old French by Jürgen Klausenburger, *French Prosodics and Phonotactics* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1972).

<sup>17</sup>See, for example, R. Menéndez Pidal, *Manual de gramática histórica española* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1966, 12th ed.), p. 44.

<sup>18</sup>See Ernst Pulgram, *Syllable, Word, Nexus, Cursus* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), pp. 25 ff., for further description of nexus combinations.

<sup>19</sup>Ernst Pulgram, "Synthetic and Analytic Morphological Constructs," in *Weltoffene Romanistik: Festschrift Alwin Kuhn zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. G. Plangg and E. Tiefenthaler (Innsbruck, 1963), pp. 35-42.

<sup>20</sup>A similar process may be observed in modern French, where not only does *liaison* of the final *s* in *vous* aid in the formation of nexus combinations, but the *u* of *tu* is frequently lost before vowels, e.g., *t'es fou*.

<sup>21</sup>The quotation from *El Cid* comes from *El Poema de Mio Cid*, ed. R. Menéndez Pidal (Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 1971), p. 113. The citation from Alfonso X is taken from *Antología de Alfonso X el Sabio*, ed. A. Solalinde (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1941), p. 79. For further discussion of these syntactic possibilities, see Rafael Lapesa,

*Historia de la lengua española* (Madrid, 1968, 7th ed.), p. 169.

<sup>22</sup>For a rough idea of the frequency of usage of the various tenses in informal styles, see Rodger A. Farley, "Time and the Subjunctive in Contemporary Spanish," *Hispania*, 53 (1970), 466-75 [p. 467].

<sup>23</sup>For a description of these transformations, see R. P. Stockwell, J. D. Bowen and J. W. Martin, *The Grammatical Structures of English and Spanish* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 220-30; Roger L. Hadlich, *A Transformational Grammar of Spanish* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 115-19. The former book mentions constructions of the sort under discussion, with preposed subject during interrogation, and considers them to be an error of English interference.

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