The Afro-Bolivian Spanish Determiner Phrase
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Microparametric syntax is a growing field of research, which can be used as a tool to test formal syntactic theories (Barbiers & Cornips 2001). The field of syntactic microvariation has developed significantly during the last decade; particular attention has been paid to the study of microparametric variation across Italian, Dutch, and English dialects (see, for example, Adger & Smith 2005; Barbiers & Cornips 2001; Benincà 1989; Poletto 2000). So far, not many microparametric studies of this kind have been conducted on Spanish; in particular, Afro-Hispanic contact varieties have never been studied by adopting this approach. This opens up a new field of investigation, which, if addressed in a methodological and systematic way, could lead to interesting discoveries. The main purpose of this book was to create a foundation to build such a research program.

From a theoretical point of view, Afro-Hispanic contact varieties represent an important group of Spanish dialects. In fact, these languages are rich in constructions that would be considered ungrammatical in standard Spanish (stSp). For the most part, the varieties that developed in Latin America from the contact of African languages and Spanish at the time of slavery are not “radical creoles.” Conversely, they present parametric configurations relatively similar to Spanish, but at the same time, they bear differences that can be traced back to fossilized second language acquisition strategies. Such dialectal differences provide researchers with a great linguistic laboratory
(Kayne 2000), where generative hypotheses, traditionally developed on the intuitions of standard language speakers, can be tested and evaluated against a different, but closely related, set of linguistic data.

In this work, my attention was primarily directed at two different objectives. The first goal was to shed light on the unclear origin of ABS by analyzing the available sociohistorical data as well as the linguistic evidence found in this language. The second goal was to explore certain aspects of the Afro-Bolivian Spanish (ABS) Determiner Phrase (DP) to provide a testing ground for verifying the feasibility of current linguistic hypotheses and, when appropriate, to propose new solutions in light of the empirical data collected.

As far as the origin of ABS is concerned, my findings indicate that ABS is a language that approximated Spanish from its inception and probably did not develop from the nativization of an earlier pidgin, as suggested by Lipski (2008). In fact, several factors have affected the dimension of African slavery in Bolivia and consequently the presence of a black population in the territory since the sixteenth century. We observed that the Spanish Crown's monopoly of slave trading, the geographic location of Bolivia, and the availability of a native workforce affected the cost of Africans, raising their price and, as a result, reducing the number and the dimension of slave transactions. The non-massive introduction of a black workforce into the territory favored the acquisition of a closer approximation to Spanish by the slaves. Moreover, the Yungan hacienda was not a plantation society of the kind found elsewhere in the Americas; it was characterized by low black/white ratio and relatively high social mobility. Linguistic findings suggest that the grammatical elements of ABS, which had been invoked in the literature as potential creole indicators, can also be ascribed to a conventionalized advanced second language, which probably crystallized in these rural valleys and did not undergo processes of standardization imposed elsewhere by urban society and the linguistic norm.

With respect to the second objective, the close proximity of ABS to stSp provided us with a great “syntactic testing lab.” In particular, I focused on bare nouns, N-ellipsis, gender and number agreement processes and their variability. The study of ABS bare nouns revealed that Chierchia’s (1998) Nominal Mapping Parameter does not hold. In fact, contrary to what is predicted by Chierchia, in this Afro-Hispanic vernacular bare singular nouns can appear in both subject and object positions, while definite articles, plural morphology, and lexicalized count/mass distinctions are present. We concluded that the so-called bare nouns in ABS are not actually bare; rather, they are embedded into a DP structure headed by an empty D head (in line
with Longobardi 1994). We saw that these nouns can take on several interpretations, depending on the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic context in which they appear.

As far as N-ellipses are concerned, some important parametric differences and similarities could be encountered between stSp and ABS. In fact, comparison of the ABS and the stSp data indicated that even if ABS is not inflectionally rich, it allows all the elliptical configurations encountered in stSp. The examples provided also indicated that, in ABS, as well as in stSp, gender, differently from number, is a feature of the noun, which gets deleted in the process of elision. This fact appears to contradict approaches that postulate a unique projection for number and gender (e.g., Ritter 1991, 1993), as well as those that argue in favor of two separate projections, NumP and a GenP (e.g., Bernstein 1993, Picallo 1991). In fact, masculine and feminine nouns do not seem to be derivable from the same lexical entry. Data, on the other hand, back a framework in which lexical entries are clearly different in gender specifications before entering the syntactic numeration. Therefore, only NumP is a licit projection while ‘gender’ is lexically specified in N. Moreover, in this Afro-Hispanic dialect, nouns can often be elided also in contexts for which an ungrammatical construction would obtain in stSp, namely when the elided noun is followed by cun ‘with.’ A curious peculiarity, which might explain why cun-PP can licitly survive nominal ellipsis in this vernacular, is that ABS cun is often used where de would be preferred in stSp. As all elliptical patterns are the same in ABS and stSp with the exception of cun/con constructions, I assumed that this distinction must have to do with such prepositions. This statement is justified, as con/cun presents different grammatical behaviors in the two languages.

In contrast with some previous analyses (Ticio 2003, 2005), the model I proposed attempted to avoid ad hoc post-syntactic movements and insertion operations. It agrees with other proposals (Kayne 1994; Kester & Slee-man 2002) in ascribing a special status to stSp de and que, namely the status of complementizer heads, and based on the cross-linguistic data, it extends such a generalization to ABS di, que, and cun.

Traditional ABS does not possess the richness in feature specification characteristic of stSp and other Romance languages. In traditional ABS, nouns are specified for gender, but this feature is not morphologically marked on the majority of the DP elements (it only appears on singular definite articles). Also, the morphological distribution of number marking is much more restricted: it is limited to determiners, and it never applies to adjectives, nouns, and quantifiers. For this reason, I suggested that in traditional ABS nouns do not carry number features at all, while Num enters
the derivation with a valued and interpretable number specification. These parametric differences between ABS and stSp shed some light on current debates concerning the role of Agree. Namely, we saw that ABS poverty of feature specifications does not prevent this language from presenting the same adjective+noun and noun+adjective order combinations encountered in Romance languages, thus suggesting that N raising is probably not triggered by phi-agreement.

The data collected through means of grammaticality judgments and sociolinguistic interviews indicated several different gender/number agreement patterns. The analysis of these variable data led us to depart from sociolinguistic models that propose the presence of variable rules (Labov 1972), as well as the frameworks that analyze variation in terms of competing grammatical systems (Kroch 1989), or as the alternation of formal/informal styles (DeCamp 1971; Henry 2005). Conversely, we embraced Adger & Smith’s (2005) approach, which postulates that overt variability depends on covert lexical selection, where syntactic operations (Merge, Move, Agree) remain constant and universal (see Borer 1984; Chomsky 1995) Also, the study of cross-generational gender agreement evolution allowed the formulation of the Local Agreement Gradience Function (LAGF), which predicts a gradual development of uninterpretable feature specifications on the DP categories depending on their degree of proximity to N.

This book explored some aspects of the syntax of the ABS DP; it combined sociolinguistic techniques of data collection and generative models of analysis to obtain more fine-grained, empirically-testable generalization. This composite approach has proven very suitable to the formal study of a highly stigmatized dialect like Afro-Bolivian Spanish. While for the analysis of ‘bare’ nouns and N-ellipses I adopted a more traditional, formal methodology of data collection, which relied mainly on direct grammaticality judgments, for the study of gender and number agreement phenomena, I combined naturalistic data collection to the employment of indirect elicitations. This allowed us to strengthen the empirical bases of syntactic analysis and limit the influence of prescriptive pressure on the results (see Cornips & Poletto 2005; Labov 1984), thus unveiling the presence of syntactic constructions that would have otherwise remained hidden.

The present study represents the first microparametric work on an Afro-Hispanic contact variety. Afro-Hispanic dialects offer a great opportunity for microparametric studies; there is plenty to do for those who are willing to take on this challenge.