

Insubordinate if-clauses as a politeness strategy in United States Spanish

Requests are considered face-threatening speech acts that favor the implementation of politeness strategies to soften their illocutionary force. Throughout western languages, if-clauses are a well-recognized politeness strategy identified in request formulation (Briz, 2004; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Schwenter, 2016). By using the adverbial *if*, a request appears less imposing and gives the listener an opportunity to reject the proposition while still saving face. In Spanish, if-clauses can be used in requests to initiate noun clauses, adverbial clauses, hypothetical if-then statements, and insubordinate if-clauses (see next page for examples of each structure). For example, a Spanish speaker may formulate a request as a hypothetical statement, such as *Si me pudiera ayudar, estaría muy agradecida* 'If you could help me, I'd be very grateful.'

While this kind of hypothetical statement is readily available to Spanish monolinguals, this syntactic construction is uncharacteristic of the verbal inventory of U.S. Spanish bilinguals (Gutiérrez, 1996). This is because the cognitive load imposed on bilinguals in language contact situations favors a process of simplification in which verb forms such as the conditional and imperfect subjunctive (which are often used in hypotheticals) are avoided and present indicative verb morphology is favored (Lynch, 1999; Silva-Corvalán, 1994). In United States Spanish, reduced usage of conditional and imperfect subjunctive forms motivates speakers to utilize other types of politeness constructions that do not require hypothetical verb morphology.

The present study analyzes how if-clauses are utilized by Spanish speakers in contact and non-contact situations when formulating requests. Special attention is given to the use of insubordinate if-clauses as a means of expressing politeness through hypotheticality. That data for this investigation was collected for a previous study on politeness in which the requests of 118 monolinguals and 188 bilinguals were collected. The monolingual control group consists of Spanish speakers in Mexico City who reported no contact with English. The bilingual speakers represent two types of contact situations, one of stable bilingualism and one of transitional bilingualism. The participants in the situation of stable bilingualism lived in Brownsville, Texas, a city located on the Texas-Mexico border, while those in the transitional bilingualism group lived in Houston, Texas, a city located 350 miles from the border.

A total of 3684 requests were collected. Without prompting participants to utilize any particular syntactic structure, 306 tokens (8.3%) contained an if-clause. While hypothetical if-then statements represented a significant portion of if-clauses in the monolingual group, both bilingual groups strongly disfavored this strategy. Conversely, while insubordinate if-clauses only constituted 8.9% of if-clauses produced by monolinguals, the use of this construction increased to 26.7% and 41.3% of all if-clauses in Brownsville and Houston, respectively. A logistic regression identified significant differences among all three groups. The results suggest that insubordinate if-clauses represent a useful strategy for U.S. bilinguals to express politeness through hypotheticality with the lexical marker *si* 'if' while avoiding hypothetical verb morphology.

After a presentation of data and inferential statistics, the proposed paper will conclude with evidence to support why insubordinate if-clauses can be viewed as an ellipsis for hypothetical if-then statements. This analysis suggests that a syntactic change is currently

underway, and that this change is experiencing acceleration in the contact situation of United States Spanish.

Examples of types of if-clause structures in Spanish:

(1) noun clauses

Hola, quiero preguntar **si puede cambiar la hora de mi cita.**

Hi, I want to ask **if (you) can change my appointment time.**

(2) adverbial clauses

Si no es mucha molestia, me podría brindar la carta por favor.

If it's not too much trouble, could you hand me the menu please.

(3) hypothetical if-then statements

Si me podría cambiar la cita se lo agradecería mucho.

If you could change my appointment, I would be very grateful for it.

(4) insubordinate if-clauses

Si me podría proporcionar otro plato por favor.

If you could give me another plate please.

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