

On the depronominization of *les* in peninsular Spanish

La despronominalización de *les* en el español peninsular

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Abstract: *The use of the singular dative clitic “le” in contexts where the plural form “les” should be used (usually known as “depronominization”) is a well-known and documented phenomenon in Spanish. Recent studies have suggested that the phenomenon is more advanced in Latin American varieties of Spanish than in peninsular Spanish. Given that the Spanish that was brought to America followed the Sevillian norm (as opposed to the central-northern norm from the north of the peninsula), there are reasons to believe that this process might be more developed in the south of Spain than in the north. The present study tried to confirm that hypothesis by analyzing data from the online corpus COSER. Results showed that the hypothesis was correct and that there is a clear difference between the south and the north of Spain in terms of the depronominization of “les”.*

Keywords: dative, clitics, depronominization

Resumen: *El uso del clítico dativo “le” en contextos donde debería usarse la forma plural “les” (generalmente conocido como “despronominalización”) es un fenómeno conocido y bien documentado en español. Algunos estudios recientes sugieren que este fenómeno está más avanzado en las variedades de español de Latinoamérica que en la variedad peninsular. Dado que el español que llegó a América seguía la norma sevillana (en lugar de la norma centro-norteña que se hablaba en el norte peninsular), hay razones para creer que este proceso está más desarrollado en el sur de España que en el norte. El presente estudio intentó confirmar esta hipótesis mediante el análisis de datos tomados del corpus en línea COSER. Los resultados mostraron que la hipótesis es correcta y que existe una clara diferencia entre el norte y el sur de España en cuanto a la despronominalización del clítico “les”.*

Palabras clave: dativo, clíticos, despronominalización

1. Introduction

In the Spanish language, indirect object phrases usually co-occur with a dative clitic. Both elements of the sentence are co-referent and agree in number. In many occasions, however, this agreement is missing, and so it is common to find a singular dative clitic referring to a plural indirect object phrase. Sentences (1) and (2) below illustrate this case:

- (1) Manuel **les** leyó un cuento a sus hijos.
Manuel 3pIO.pl read.he a story to his children
'Manuel read his children a story'.
- (2) Manuel **le** leyó un cuento a sus hijos.
Manuel 3pIO.sg read.he a story to his children
'Manuel read his children a story'.

In sentences (1) and (2) the same meaning is conveyed, though in sentence (1) there is agreement between the full noun phrase referring to the indirect object and the dative clitic, and in sentence (2) there is a lack thereof. Despite of the fact that this phenomenon has been historically attested, some scholars (e.g., Bogard, 1992; Company, 2006; among others) have claimed that this lack of agreement constitutes a process of 'depronominalization'.

The phenomenon has been studied in different Spanish-speaking regions in order to determine the linguistic and extralinguistic factors that motivate it. However, no conclusive results have been found yet. Nevertheless, according to the studies by DeMello (1992) and Sorenson (2013), the phenomenon seems to be less developed in the northern-peninsular variety of Spanish (henceforth northern norm). Since rates of clitic depronominalization are higher in Latin-American varieties than in Peninsular Spanish, Sorenson (2013) hypothesized that there could be significant differences between the degree of depronominalization in the northern norm and in southern-peninsular Spanish (henceforth southern norm). This draws from the idea that the southern norm was the one transferred to the Americas in the colonization era, and so there should be similarities (as there are in other linguistic phenomena) between the southern norm and Latin-American Spanish, generally speaking.

The present study draws from this latter hypothesis and tries to determine whether the process of depronominalization is less developed in the northern norm than in the southern norm. To do that, data from an online corpus (*Corpus Oral y Sonoro del Español Rural*) were analyzed.

The paper starts with a general overview of the main works that have looked at this phenomenon. Then, the methodology and results are presented. Finally, a discussion follows in which results are interpreted in light of previous findings.

2. Literature review

The fact that accusative and dative objects behave differently from one another in Spanish has been widely documented in the literature. From a diachronic perspective, Company (2003) has claimed that the Spanish language is changing from a dative-accusative object system to a primary-secondary object system. She claims that these objects were marked with a distinct case in Latin. However, the accusative object is now behaving as the main object of the

sentence and the indirect object is only expressing agreement with the verb. The evidence she cites comes from the different ways indirect objects can be marked in Spanish. For example, with the preposition *a* (3), with a doubled clitic (4) or with a doubled clitic that does not agree with the verb (5), among others. These ‘irregularities’ in the marking of the dative signal that there is an ongoing change in the language.

- (3) Miguel envió una carta a su madre.
Miguel sent.he a letter to his mother
‘Miguel sent his mother a letter’.
- (4) Miguel *le*_i envió una carta a su madre.
Miguel 3pIO.sg sent.he a letter to his mother
‘Miguel sent his mother a letter’.
- (5) Miguel *le*_i envió una carta a sus abuelos.
Miguel 3pIO.sg sent.he a letter to his grandparents
‘Miguel sent his grandparents a letter’.

The present study focuses on sentences like (5), where there is a lack of agreement between the full noun phrase that acts as the indirect object and the dative clitic co-referent with it.

Generative syntacticians have also discussed this “irregular” behavior of Spanish objects and have focused largely on clitics (Marchis and Alexiadou, 2013). Blear (1999) states that accusative clitics fill a syntactic position different from that of dative clitics. According to this author, dative clitics occupy a higher syntactic position within the determiner phrase than accusative clitics, which are part of a secondary lower position. Being in a higher position means that dative clitics, in this case, are closer to the verb. Thus, dative clitics in Spanish can be considered inflectional markers that accompany the verb, while accusative clitics are determiners that complete the verb meaning. This would explain why accusative clitics have not lost features such as gender¹ or number, which are always present. In the case of dative clitics, the closer they are to the verb, the less morphological features they show.

Variationist approaches to Spanish clitics have focused both on diachronic and synchronic analysis. Becerra Bascuñán (2007) analyzed the historical development of the dative depronominalization process and she claimed that it was already occurring in the fifteenth century, as in (6), taken from *Vida de Sant Isidoro* (Alfonso Martínez de Toledo, 1438).

¹ Except for cases of *leísmo*, which will not be discussed in this paper.

- (6) Da a los siervos: lo que le: es
 give.2p.sg to the servants 3pDO.sg that 3pIO.sg be.3p.sg
 necesario.
 necessary
 ‘Give the servants what they need’.

These depronominized instances were, however, rare and occurred only sporadically. Nevertheless, they have become much more frequent throughout the years (Soler, 1992). According to Company (2001), the dative depronominization is an example of ongoing linguistic change.

Synchronic studies have looked at how developed this process is in different Spanish-speaking regions, as well as at what factors trigger such lack of agreement. In this regard, DeMello (1992) was the first one that studied this phenomenon. He analyzed oral data taken from a corpus in which eleven important Spanish-speaking cities were represented. Those cities were Bogota (Colombia), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Caracas (Venezuela), Havana (Cuba), La Paz (Bolivia), Lima (Peru), Madrid and Seville (Spain), Mexico DF (Mexico), San Juan (Puerto Rico), and Santiago (Chile). He looked at the number of occurrences of *le* instead of *les* in his corpus and reported its frequency. Although no inferential statistical analyses were run, he made some observations that opened new avenues for research in subsequent studies. DeMello found that Bogota was the city where the process was most developed and Madrid, the least. He also noted that the singular *le* was most likely to occur when referring to [+human] indirect objects, although he did not run any inferential statistical analysis to support this observation, as previously mentioned. Likewise, he also found that older women produced more instances of *le* than men. Regarding Peninsular Spanish, he also observed that Seville’s results were more similar to those of Venezuela and Chile than to those of Madrid, an interesting fact taking into account that Seville and Madrid are part of the same country.

Subsequent studies have focused on specific Spanish-speaking regions in order to provide an insight into the factors that influence the lack of agreement. Huerta (2005) analyzed a written and oral corpus from Mexico and looked at several linguistic factors. Most of them were semantic and pragmatic. The factors that were found to be significant were: animacy of the indirect object (i.e., greater use of *le* with [-animate] indirect objects), definition of the indirect object (i.e., greater use of *le* with abstract indirect objects), thematic role of the indirect object (i.e., greater use of *le* with recipients), expansion of the indirect object (i.e., the longer the indirect object phrase, the greater usage of *le*), co-presence of a direct object in the same sentence (i.e., when a direct object is present, there is a greater usage of *le*), and centrality of the indirect object (i.e., if the indirect object is not pragmatically central to the sentence, there is a greater usage of *le*).

Caicedo Villa (2011), on the other hand, used a written corpus to analyze the phenomenon in Colombia. Although she did not run inferential statistics, she reported that the use of *le* tended to occur when the dative clitic appeared after the indirect object phrase and when the indirect object was [-animate].

A study by Sorenson (2013) tried to replicate DeMello's (1992) results two decades later. This time, he used written data instead of oral data. His corpus comprised newspapers published in the same eleven cities that were considered in DeMello's study. Sorenson found that Seville was the city with the greatest use of *le* and Madrid was the city where that variant was least used. Sorenson concluded that the fact that the two peninsular cities represented the two extremes of dative depronominalization could not be a chance result. Thus, he hypothesized that the lack of dative clitic agreement could be a distinctive feature of the southern norm in contrast to the northern norm, as happens with other linguistic features, such as the loss of the phonological distinction between /θ/ and /s/, or the use of *ustedes* followed by a verb conjugated in the second person plural form (i.e., *vosotros* form). Concerning linguistic factors, Sorenson's results agreed with those of DeMello that *le* is mostly used with [+human] indirect objects. Regarding gender, on the other hand, there were no significant differences between men and women, as reported by an inferential statistical analysis.

To date, no study has focused on the hypothesis proposed by Sorenson (2013) that the dative depronominalization process is at different stages of development in the northern norm and in the southern norm. Furthermore, the factors that influence the lack of agreement are also unclear up to date, since results found so far are quite contradictory. What seems to be clear, however, is that the linguistic factors which motivate the phenomenon are usually semantic and pragmatic, rather than phonological or morphological (Soto, Sadowsky and Martínez, 2014). Some scholars (e.g., Rini, 1998) have shown that the fact this phenomenon occurs in areas where final /s/ is not aspirated constitutes enough evidence that phonological factors are not driving this phenomenon. Likewise, morphological accounts pose that the use of *le* instead of *les* is frequent because it is redundant, as the full PP acting as indirect object already marks number (Pérez, 2000). Nevertheless, the fact that this phenomenon occurs even when the PP is absent shows that this is a weak hypothesis (Sánchez, 2005).

3. Research questions and hypotheses

Drawing on previous findings, this study has two main research questions:

- 1) Are there any differences between the depronominalization process found in the northern norm and in the southern norm?
- 2) What linguistic and extralinguistic factors favor each variant?

According to the studies presented in the preceding section, it is expected that the northern norm will show a less advanced process of depronominalization compared to the southern norm. Regarding the second research question, it is expected that [+human] indirect objects will favor lack of clitic agreement, since the same was found in DeMello (1992) and Sorenson (2013). Although Huerta Flores (2005) and Caicedo Villa (2011) found the opposite results, their studies did not include any peninsular data. Regarding other linguistic factors that will be taken into account, there are no specific expected results, since no study including peninsular data has been conducted so far. Finally, in terms of extralinguistic factors, gender might not be significant, as other studies have shown, but region will, as hypothesized for the first research question.

4. Methodology

4.1. Data

In order to answer the research questions posed in the previous section, data from the two different norms (i.e., northern norm and southern norm) were analyzed. Data came from the online corpus *COSEER (Corpus Oral y Sonoro del Español Rural)*. This corpus includes oral sociolinguistic interviews from people who live in rural areas in Spain. They are usually asked about their personal experiences, life in their villages, and traditions.

However, it is important to mention that this corpus also has some limitations that might constraint the social analysis of linguistic phenomena, such as including speakers who are usually old and from a low sociocultural level. Furthermore, the corpus does not include any data from urban areas, where linguistic phenomena might work differently. Nevertheless, this corpus was chosen for being the largest source of oral data from Peninsular Spanish currently available to the general public. Several aspects were taken into account when selecting the data for this study so as to ensure they were representative of the phenomenon under study. Firstly, data had to come from villages that were next to the cities from which each norm spread. Thus, villages had to be either near Seville or near Madrid. Moreover, villages had to be well connected to those cities (e.g., by means of a highway). That is, they could not be isolated from those cities or otherwise the norm might have not spread to those areas. Additionally, villages could not be in mountainous land either, in order to avoid the same problem.

After a careful analysis of all the villages available in the online corpus, 24 of them were selected, half of them belonging to the southern norm and half of them belonging to the northern norm. Figure 1 below shows the name of the villages that were chosen as well as the distance (in kilometers) to the city from which each norm spread.

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Northern-norm villages	Distance to Madrid (in kms.)	Southern-norm villages	Distance to Seville (in kms.)
Manzanares el Real	53	Aguilar de la Frontera	141
Humanes de Madrid	29	Algar	132
Sieteiglesias	77	Almadén de la Plata	70
Valdilecha	46	Antequera	160
Aguaviva de la Vega	180	Cardeña	211
Almajano	248	Chucena	42
Pulgar	103	Zufre	87
Tembleque	95	Constantina	88
Beratón	268	Casariche	123
Alboreca	140	San José de Malcocinado	136
Canredondo	138	Espera	75
Yebra	77	Torrecedera	107

Fig. 1: Villages considered for the study with distance to each of the norms

The precise location of each village can be seen in Figure 2 and Figure 3 below. Purple dots represent the ‘normative city’ and red dots represent each of the villages selected for the study.



Fig. 2: Location of villages belonging to the northern norm

In Figure 2, villages are surrounding Madrid, the capital city of Spain. The nearest village is only 29 kilometers away from it, and the farthest one is 268 kilometers away. One could argue that villages up north next to Soria are too far away from Madrid. However, it has usually been assumed that that area still follows the northern norm, due to historic reasons (Penny, 2002).

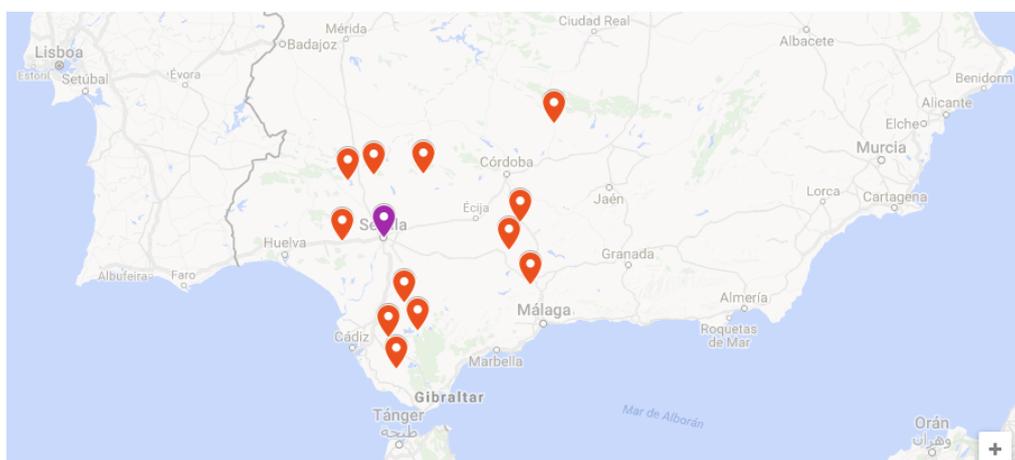


Fig. 3: Location of villages belonging to the southern norm

Something similar happens with Figure 3, where some villages can be claimed to be far away from Seville. The southern norm is usually considered the basis of the Western Andalusian variety of Spanish, and it usually encompasses the provinces of Huelva, Seville, and Cadiz. The other provinces, on the other hand, are said to be part of the Eastern Andalusian norm. Nevertheless, the isoglosses are not that clear, and the provinces of Cordoba and Malaga sometimes show Western features as well (Jiménez, 2017; EHA, 2018). For this reason, some villages located in the most Western area of those two provinces have been included in the study.

4.2. Participants

Concerning speakers, there was a total of 28 people from those villages. Half of them belonged to the northern norm (N=14) and the other half belonged to the southern norm (N=14). For each norm, there were 5 male speakers and 9 female speakers. As stated before, all of them were old, with ages ranging from 55 to 91 in the case of the northern norm and from 60 to 84 in the case of the southern norm. They all had a low sociocultural level.

4.3. Envelope of variation

For this study, transcriptions of the oral interviews were thoroughly analyzed. It is important to mention here that the southern norm tends to aspirate final /s/, so one could say these transcriptions were probably not adequate for the analysis. However, the corpus transcription guidelines state that all aspirations of final /s/ should be transcribed as orthographic -s. Thus, it

is assumed that the difference between *le* and *les* was clearly marked in the transcriptions used for the analysis. In any case, results should be taken with caution, as more studies will be needed to avoid this potential limitation as well as the others presented in section 4.1 before.

Only ditransitive sentences were considered, as long as they included a plural indirect object. That is, sentences could present either *le* or *les*. After this initial analysis, a total of 328 tokens that fell within the previous category were found. Sentences (7), (8) and (9) below are examples of sentences that were considered for the study.

- (7) A las muchachas_i **les**_i hacían las madres unas
To the girls 3pIO.pl made.they the mothers
muñecas de trapo.
rag dolls
'Mothers used to make rag dolls for their girls'.
- (8) **Le**_i doy una orientación a mis nietos_i.
3pIO.sg give.I an orientation to my grandchildren
'I provide guidance to my grandchildren'.
- (9) No se **le**_i hace autopsia a los Papas_i.
No 3imp 3pIO.sg do.it autopsy to the Popes
'Autopsies are not conducted on Popes'.

4.4. Factors

Tokens were coded attending to the linguistic and extralinguistic factors that were taken into consideration for the study. Linguistic factors were both semantic and pragmatic-syntactic. Within semantic factors, animacy of the indirect object was considered. This could be either [+human], [+animate] or [-animate]. Regarding the other factors, number of the direct object (i.e., singular or plural), enclisis (i.e., enclitic pronoun or free proclitic pronoun), and position of the indirect object were considered. The latter referred to whether the dative PP appeared before the verb, after it or whether it was absent. The 'absent' category was used in cases when the indirect object was not explicitly present in the sentence but it could be drawn from previous context (e.g., when it was mentioned in the previous sentence).

Extralinguistic factors included both norm (i.e., northern or southern norm) and gender (i.e., male or female). Figure 4 below presents a summary of the factors considered for this study together with their levels.

Factors	Levels
<i>Linguistic</i>	
Animacy of the indirect object	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [+human] • [+animate] • [-animate]
Number of the direct object	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Singular • Plural
Enclisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enclitic pronoun • Free pronoun
Position of the indirect object	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before the verb • After the verb • Absent
<i>Extralinguistic</i>	
Norm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Northern norm • Southern norm
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male • Female

Fig. 4: Factors and levels

5. Results

Once all data had been coded, statistical analyses were conducted in order to answer each of the research questions posed. Firstly, descriptive statistics showed the rate of usage of *le* and *les* in each of the norms. Out of the 150 tokens of the southern norm, 61 contained the variant *les* and 89 contained the variant *le*. Concerning the northern norm, out of 178 tokens, 14 contained the singular form *le* and 164 the plural form *les*. If we translate these numbers into percentages in order to compare the data from the two norms, we see that the plural clitic *les* is used 92% of the time in the northern norm and 59.3% of the time in the southern norm. This indicates that the plural is still the preferred variant among speakers from both norms. However, the use of the singular *le* is much more common in the southern norm (40.7% of the time versus 8% of the time in the northern norm). Figure 5 and Figure 6 show these percentages. These preliminary descriptive results already show that there is a difference in the depronominization process between the northern and the southern norms.

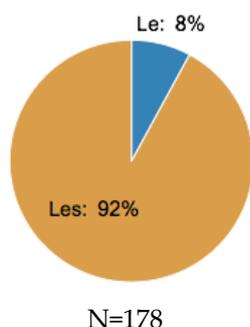


Fig. 5: Use of 'le' and 'les' in the northern norm

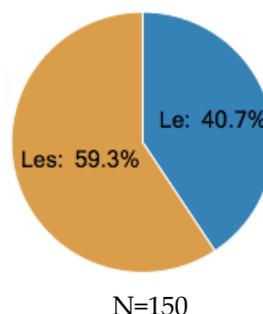


Fig. 6: Use of 'le' and 'les' in the southern norm

In order to determine whether the difference in the use of *les* between the two norms was significant, an inferential statistical analysis was conducted. More specifically, a mixed effects binomial logistic regression was run. This analysis allows to model the relationship between a categorical dependent variable (i.e., use of *le* versus use of *les*) and several explanatory predictors. Additionally, the variable 'speaker' was included as a random effect, in order to account for subject-level variation. This model was conducted using the free statistical software R (R Core Team, 2013). The results of this model can be seen in Figure 7 below.

Fixed effects	Estimates	Lower limit	Upper limit	Standard error	Significance
Intercept	-0.5080	-1.4969	0.4808	0.5045	
Norm-Northern	-2.0630	-2.7645	-2.120	-1.3615	***
Gender-Male	0.4401	-0.2318	1.1120	0.3428	
Enclisis-Enclitic	-0.1292	-1.0035	0.7450	0.4461	
Animacy-Human	-0.9648	-1.8038	-0.1258	0.4280	*
Animacy-Inanimate	0.9962	-0.0344	2.0267	0.5258	.
Position-After	1.6066	0.8439	2.3693	0.3892	***
Position-Before	0.6852	-0.4543	1.8248	0.5814	
Number of DO-Singular	0.1347	-0.5807	0.8501	0.7120	
Random effects	Variance	Standard deviation			
Speaker-intercept	0	0			

Significance values: '***' $p < .001$; '**' $p = .01$; '.' $p = .05$

Fig. 7: Results from the mixed effects binomial logistic regression

According to the model, use of the singular form *le* is significantly less likely to occur in the northern norm than in the southern norm ($\beta = -2.06$, $z = -5.76$, $p < .001$). However, the other extralinguistic factor that was considered for the study (i.e., gender) turned out not to be significant ($\beta = 0.44$, $z = 1.28$, $p > .05$). Regarding the linguistic factors that might trigger the use of the singular clitic *le* as opposed to the plural *les*, only two of them were significant. On the one hand, the position of the indirect object phrase had an effect. More specifically, when such phrase appeared after the verb, there was a higher probability that

the singular form *le* was used ($\beta = 1.60$, $z = 4.13$, $p < .001$). Animacy was also found to have an effect on the use of the clitic. In this case, when the indirect object referred to a [+human] entity, the use of the plural form *les* was preferred ($\beta = -0.96$, $z = -2.25$, $p = .01$). Nevertheless, when the indirect object referred to an [-animate] entity, the singular form *le* was preferred ($\beta = 0.99$, $z = 1.89$, $p = .05$). It is also important to mention that the factors of enclisis and number of the direct object played no significant role in this phenomenon. As for random effects, the variance was 0, which means that there was not subject-level variation.

Overall, the first research question that motivated the study (i.e., whether there are differences in the depronominization process) could be answered affirmatively based on these results. On the other hand, the answer to the second research question (i.e., the factors that motivate the phenomenon) is more complex. Only two linguistic factors have an effect on the depronominization process: the position of the indirect object in the sentence and the animacy of the indirect object. No other factor, other than the norm itself, is able to explain why this phenomenon occurs. These findings are discussed in the following section.

6. Discussion

The present study analyzed Spanish ditransitive sentences taken from the online corpus *COSE*R to determine whether there were differences in the use of the singular dative clitic *le* between the northern norm and the southern norm. Previous studies (DeMello, 1992; Sorenson, 2013) suggested that the northern norm would show a more conservative usage of the singular clitic *le*, as opposed to the standard *les* in plural. The results of this study confirmed that initial hypothesis, by showing that the innovative singular form is much more used in the southern norm than in the northern norm. Nevertheless, it is important to point out here that the present study had some limitations and thus these results should not be generalized. In the first place, data available in the corpus were subjected to several constraints, as only old speakers of a low sociocultural level were available. Similarly, all data came from small rural villages, and although the study controlled for this by making sure all villages had good connections with their respective metropolis, data from urban areas could lead to different results. Lastly, the fact that the transcriptions of the oral interviews might have not properly indicated the difference between an aspirated /s/ and a missing /s/ shows the need for future research concerning this phenomenon. Additionally, in order to draw any conclusion regarding the diachronic evolution of this phenomenon, data from other places should be considered and contrasted too. For example, the Andalusian hypothesis (*hipótesis andalucista*) states that a linguistic continuum should be found between the southern norm, the Canary Islands norm, and the Caribbean norm. This means that the results from this study can only speak of synchronic differences.

Regarding the linguistic factors that favored each of the variants, this study did find two significant factors, namely animacy and position of the indirect object in the sentence. However, these results do not agree with what previous studies have found, since in many cases they were contradictory. In the case of animacy, the studies by DeMello (1992) and Sorenson (2013) found that the singular clitic *le* was mostly used with [+human] indirect objects. However, this study found that it was [-animate] indirect objects that favored the use of the singular clitic the most. In this regard, the results follow what Caicedo Villa (2011) and Huerta Flores (2005) found for Colombia and Mexico, respectively. Additionally, the fact that a greater use of the depronominalized *le* occurred when the indirect object appeared after the verb is also in line with what Caicedo Villa (2011) found for Colombia.

Overall, the analyses of linguistic factors that were conducted did not help clarify what motivates the use of the singular clitic *le*, so future studies should consider more data and more linguistic factors in order to determine the actual forces that are driving this linguistic change. It could be the case that different linguistic factors motivate the change in each country and that is why some of the results available to date are contradictory. What does seem to be clear, however, is the fact that this change is not motivated by social factors, since no study up to date has found any significant relationship between a social factor (e.g., gender) and a greater use of the singular clitic.

7. Conclusion

The study showed that there are significant differences in the use of the singular dative clitic *le* between the northern norm and the southern norm. This result agrees with the hypothesis posed by Sorenson (2013). However, when analyzing the linguistic and extralinguistic factors that motivated the use of *le* in each norm, no clear conclusions could be reached, since results did not agree with previous findings and, in some cases, they were even contradictory. Future studies need to be conducted in order to include more data and more factors. That way, this phenomenon could be better understood.

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