



Newness, animacy and continuity of reference in spoken Spanish*

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Abstract

The issue of "topic continuity", raised by Givón 1983, has received much attention through the years, but the parameter of continuity has seldom, if ever, been used in the analysis of referent introductions into spoken discourse, at least in Spanish (cf. Bentivoglio 1992, 1993; Ocampo 1990, 1993). It seemed to us that continuity and introduction of a given referent, if studied conjointly, should shed some light on the interplay of the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors that are at work in spoken Spanish discourse.

Our hypothesis is that there must be a preferred grammatical pattern for the introduction of new (Prince 1981, Chafe 1987) referents and, if such pattern exists, then it should be determined by i) the degree of relevance of each referent in the ensuing discourse; and ii) the semantic properties of the referent.

In order to validate the hypothesis, we analyzed an eight-hour corpus of spoken Spanish and performed the following operations: i) all new referents were divided into four groups (irrelevant, semi-relevant, relevant, very relevant) according to the number of mentions of each referent in the ensuing discourse: **irrelevant (IR)**: one-two mentions; **semi-relevant (SR)**: three to five mentions; **relevant (RR)** (six to eight); **very relevant (VR)**: from nine on; ii) irrelevant referents were discarded from the analysis; iii) each referent was coded according to its grammatical role, iv) to its form (indefinite/definite) and v) to the semantic features of animacy and humanness. The applied methodology entails that only full

Recibido: Octubre 22, 1998 / Aceptado: Noviembre 13, 1998

* A preliminary version of this article was presented at LSRL, XXIV. The data on which the research is based were obtained by means of grant H-07.16/86 of the Consejo de Desarrollo Científico y Humanístico of the Universidad Central de Venezuela; this support is gracefully acknowledged.

NP's were considered as a starting point, whereas all forms (\emptyset , pronouns and N's) were taken into account as following mentions to a same referent. Contrary to Givón 1983's implementation of the persistence parameter, we decided, especially in view of the constructive critique of Fox 1987, to count all mentions—continuous or discontinuous—of a given referent through the entire text of each speaker.

It seems possible to affirm that referents, which share the pragmatic properties of newness and relevance, are also characterized by the same set of syntactic and semantic properties, as they seldom fulfill any other role than that of subject and are always semantically human.

Key words: Spanish, discourse, newness, animacy, continuity.

Novedad, animación y continuidad de referencia en el español hablado

Resumen

El problema de la "continuidad del tópico", planteado por Givón (1983), ha recibido mucha atención, pero el parámetro de continuidad ha sido escasamente utilizado en el análisis de las introducciones referenciales en el discurso hablado, por lo menos en lo que respecta al español (cf. Bentivoglio 1992, 1993; Ocampo 1990, 1993). Nos parece que la continuidad y la introducción de un nuevo referente, si se estudia conjuntamente, debería aclarar en cierto grado la interacción de los factores sintácticos, semánticos y pragmáticos activos en el discurso del español hablado. Nuestra hipótesis es que debe haber un patrón gramatical preferido para la introducción de nuevos referentes (Prince 1981, Chafe 1987) y, si tal referente existe, entonces debe ser determinado por (i) el grado de relevancia de cada referente en el discurso resultante; y (ii) las propiedades semánticas del referente.

Para validar la hipótesis, analizamos un corpus de ocho horas de español hablado y realizamos las siguientes operaciones: (i) todos los nuevos referentes se dividieron en cuatro grupos (irrelevante, semi-relevante, relevante, muy relevante) de acuerdo al número de menciones de cada referente en el discurso resultante: **irrelevante (IR)**: una o dos menciones; **semi-relevante (SR)**: de tres a cinco menciones; **relevante (RR)**: de seis a ocho; **muy relevante (VR)**: de nueve menciones en adelante; (ii) referentes irrelevantes fueron descartados del análisis; (iii) cada referente fue codificado de acuerdo a su rol gramatical; (iv) a su forma (indefinido/definido) y (v) a los rasgos semánticos de animación y humanidad. La metodología aplicada conduce a considerar solamente frases nominales completas como punto de partida, mientras que todas las formas (O, pronombres y sustantivos) fueron tomadas en cuenta como menciones siguientes del mismo referente. En oposición a la implemen-

tación del parámetro de persistencia por Givón (1983), decidimos –especialmente en vista de la crítica constructiva de Fox (1987)– contar todas las menciones –continuas y discontinuas– de un referente dado a través de todo el texto de cada hablante.

Parece posible afirmar que los referentes que comparten las propiedades pragmáticas de novedad y relevancia, también se caracterizan por el mismo conjunto de propiedades sintácticas y semánticas, ya que pocas veces cumplen cualquier otro rol que el de sujeto y son siempre humanos semánticamente.

Palabras clave: español, discurso, novedad, animación, continuidad.

0. Introduction

The issue of topic continuity, raised by Givón 1983b, has received through the years much attention, but the parameter of continuity has seldom, if ever, been used in the analysis of referent introductions in spoken discourse, at least in Spanish. It is our opinion that introduction and continuity of a particular referent, if studied conjointly, should shed some light on the interplay of the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic factors that are at work in spoken Spanish discourse.

Our hypothesis is that there must be a preferred grammatical pattern for the introduction of new referents (Prince 1981 and 1982; Chafe 1987) and, if such pattern exists, it should be determined both by the semantic properties and the relevance of the referent itself. The present research stems from the following observations: i) in a given discourse, some participants are 'more relevant' than others, in the sense that some entities are mentioned more frequently. This particular kind of relevance¹ participants mentioned for the first time in spoken discourse are almost always coded as full NPs² which fulfill a particular syntactic role or are 'unattached'³. The combination of type of information (new, in this case) and role (or lack of role when the NP is unattached) relates to the way how information flow is managed (Chafe 1987; Du Bois 1980, 1987; Du Bois and Thompson 1991).

Examining the studies dedicated to topic continuity in Spanish (Bentivoglio 1982 and 1983), we observed that, on one hand, none of them dealt openly –even though some inferences were possible– with the issue of how a given participant was grammatically coded when first introduced in the discourse. On

the other, studies on the role of participants, their morphological shape and semantic properties, did not systematically consider the issue of their continuity/discontinuity after the first mention (cf. Bentivoglio 1992, 1993; Ocampo 1990). We believe that an analysis, in which both continuity and information flow are taken into account, is possible and could contribute to a better characterization of how speakers use their language. This is the main purpose of the present article.

1. Overview of the literature

1.1. On continuity

Givón 1983 raised the issue of *topic continuity* in the Introduction to the volume he edited, which contained several articles written by different authors on a number of typologically different languages. In Givón's introduction we find basic tenets for determining and measuring discourse continuity and a clear proposal of how to analyze this phenomenon in natural languages. These studies mainly dealt with the linguistics mechanisms (zero-anaphora, unstressed and stressed pronouns, etc.) used to maintain the continuity of a particular referent through a stretch of discourse⁴. Bentivoglio 1983, applying Givón's approach to a sample of three Spanish dialects, found that the maximum of continuity was linguistically coded by verb agreement (i.e. zero anaphora) and the minimum, by existential constructions with indefinite NPs.

Fox 1993 (first published in 1987) contributed an important viewpoint to studies on continuity, which is maintained –mainly even if not exclusively– by means of anaphora, when she writes that

- (1) any treatment of anaphora must seek its understanding in the hierarchical structure of the text type being used as a source of data. Texts may be produced and heard/read in a linear fashion, but they are designed and understood hierarchically, and this fact has dramatic consequences for the linguistic coding employed (Fox 1993: 1)

The consequences of Fox' approach on the present work reflected in the methodology and will be explained in details in section 3.

1.2. On newness

Participants' introduction in the discourse is certainly one of the most debated issues in functional linguistics of the last years. Among the studies dedicated to this issue, Chafe 1987 and Du Bois & Thompson 1991 represent the theoretical framework on which the present analysis is based⁵.

Following the forementioned linguistics, we consider that any discourse entity which is not situationally present nor contextually previously mentioned represents an instance of new (or inactive, in Chafe's terms) information. Further, any entity can be identifiable or non-identifiable (see also Du Bois 1980) according to the speaker's presuppositions about the hearer's knowledge; the speaker's judgement about the identifiability of a new referent triggers its coding as a definite or indefinite NP. Example (2) illustrates a NP which codes a new and non-identifiable entity, whereas (3) codes a new and identifiable one:

- (2) **/New entity, non identifiable, indefinite NP/**
Ø teníamos...cargadoras [...] y una mujer que cocinaba riquísimo... (CD2FA.87)⁶
 'we used to have nannies [...] and a woman who was an excellent cook...'
- (3) **/New entity, identifiable, definite NP/**
 Un atraco, en la librería[...]. Tres hombres. Le pusieron un revolver a la pobre muchacha,... (CD4FA.87)
 'A uphold there, in the bookstore. Three men. They put a revolver to the poor girl,...'

In (2) the new participant is coded, as expected, by the indefinite NP *una mujer*; in (3) the speaker introduces the new referent with a definite NP *la pobre muchacha*, even though no mention of this participant appears in the previous discourse. In this last case, we can speculate that, according to the speaker's judgement, the frame created by the bookstore was sufficient for the hearer to process correctly the definite NP, as the presence of a female employee in a bookstore is easily inferrable⁷.

2. The analysis

Only NPs, either full or pronouns⁸, which represent the first mention of a referential entity were considered in the present

analysis. Their subsequent mentions were taken into account in order to determine the continuity of each item.

2.1. The speech sample

We analyzed an eight-hour corpus of spoken Spanish consisting of the transcripts of sixteen speakers, men and women in the same proportion, of 60 or more years of age, belonging to different socioeconomic levels. Due to the purpose of the present study, none of these extralinguistic variables will be taken into account. The texts represent for each speaker half an hour of recording, which took place in Caracas, during the year 1987, within a research project named *Estudio sociolingüístico del habla de Caracas, 1987*, fully described by Bentivoglio y Sedano 1993. The speech analyzed may be described as semi-casual (Labov 1972) and the event as a free recorded conversation (Silva-Corvalán 1989: 28 and ff.). The sixteen speakers were chosen among forty of the same age group, according to their individual fluency and narrative skills.

2.2. The linguistics factors

The first step in the analysis was that of determining the degree of all new entities. In order to do so we assigned a relevance degree (from 1 to 9) to each referent according to the number of mentions it obtained in the text. We established the following arbitrary scale of relevance degrees:

(4) Degrees of relevance

Irrelevant	(IR)	1 or 2 mentions
Semi relevant	(SR)	3 to 5 mentions
Relevant	(RR)	6 to 9 mentions
Very relevant	(VR)	9 or more mentions

The procedures adopted for the analysis were aimed at determining:

i) The relevance degree of all first mentions referential entities; no mentions of situationally present entities were found in the corpus; the first mentions was considered the starting point and numbered with 1, as *la vieja universidad* 'the old university' in (6), *un libro* 'a book' in (7), *mi papá* 'my daddy' in (8); the following mentions (if existing) of each entity were tracked throughout the entire text, and marked with its corresponding number (from 2). The appropriate degree of relevance was then assigned to all

referents; those found to be irrelevant were excluded from the analysis.

Examples of referent tracking are given in (5-8); mentions of each referent appear as subscripts:

(5) /Irrelevant/

¿Dónde [...] estuvo *el primer teatro de Caracas*₁?
¿Dónde vivía *el conde de San Javier*₁? (CD2MC.87).

'were [...] was 'Caracas' first theater? Where was the count of San Javier living?'

(6) /semi relevant/

... estábamos en *la vieja universidad*₁, en San Francisco ahí ...*una universidad*₂...gigant... gigante en cuanto a belleza, *que*₃ todavía está, todavía está bonita. (CD2MA.87)

'...we were in the old university, there in San Francisco,... a university ... gigantic in its beauty, which still is, is very pretty.'

(7) /Relevant/

...conseguimos *un libro*₁ *que*₂ se llamaba La catástrofe del juego, ... y te juro que *ese libro*₃ me curó en salud [...] el hecho de haber leído yo *ese libro*₄ [...] todas las cosas que yo leí y que yo pude apreciar en *ese libro*₅ [...] entonces yo ... le tengo horror a todo tipo de juegos desde que leí *ese libro*₆. Y no solamente leí *ese*₇ leí muchos otros,... (CD2MA.87)

'...we got a book title La catástrofe del Juego, ...and I swear to you that book cured me [...] the fact of having read that book, all the thing I read and I could appreciate in that book, then I ... I'm horrified at all kinds of games since I read that book. And not only did I read that [book], I read many others,...'

(8) /Very relevant/

Speaker: Mira chico, yo tenía ... una cosa muy especial con mi papá₁. Mi papá₂ era muy dormilón, y él ₃ dormía unas siestas larguísimas. Entonces yo aprovechaba esas siestas y me iba a jugar pa'la esquina metras con los varones. Y papagayo también, y de todo. Y yo regresaba a mi casa [...] y él ₄ todavía ... Mira a veces Ø ₅ se acostaba a las siete

de la noche. Nosotros íbamos al cine, cuando yo era mayorcita. Y no te estoy hablando de mi estadia aquí en el Hatillo, te estoy hablando de La Guaira, porque viví en La Guaira también con mi papá⁶. Y nos íbamos al cine y, cuando regresábamos el vie-
jo⁷ no se había despertado.

Interviewer: ¿ Ø₈ no se daba cuenta?

Speaker: Ø₉ no se daba cuenta, nunca Ø₁₀ se dio cuenta. (CD3FA.87)

Speaker: ' look here, I had ... a very special thing with my daddy. My daddy used to sleep a lot and take very long naps. And then I would take advantage of those naps and go play marbles on the corner with the guys. And, look, sometimes he would go to sleep at seven at night, we would go to the movies, when I was already grown up. I'm not telling you about our stay here in El Hatillo, I'm talking about La Guaira, because I also lived in La Guaira with my daddy. And we used to go to the movies and, when we would come back, the old man wouldn't be up yet.

Interviewer: Didn't he realize it?

Speaker: He didn't realize it, he never realized it.'

ii) the grammatical role (or lack of role) in which the entity was coded when mentioned for the first time, as in (9):

(9) **A** = the most agentive argument of a multiargument verb, as *mi mamá* 'my mom' in (10);

S⁹ = the argument of a one argument verb, as *un supervisor* 'a supervisor', in (11);

X = the argument of the copulative verbs (*ser* and *estar* 'be'), as *don Rómulo Gallegos* in (12);

R= the argument of existential *haber* 'there be', as *otra muchacha* 'another girl', in (13);

O = the least agentive argument of a multiargument verb, as *un libro* 'a book', in (7);

L = locative, as *en la vieja universidad* 'in the old university, in (6);

N = all others roles and unattached NPs, one example is *con mi papá* 'with my daddy', in (8).

(10) /Role A/

... mi madre nunca hacía esas cosas, no era como ahora, ... (CD1MD.87)

'...my mother never did those things, it wasn't as now, ...'

(11) /Role S/

... hasta que por fin un día fue un supervisor¹ y Ø se condolió de mi pena y Ø² me mandó cincuenta pupitres (CD3FA.87).

'...until when finally one day a supervisor came and took pity on me and sent me fifty chairs'.

(12) /Role X/

... le dije que me iba a pasar al Liceo Andrés Bello. En el Liceo Andrés Bello era director Don Rómulo Gallegos¹ que Ø² era primo de mi padre (CD2MA.87).

'...I told him that I was going to change to Liceo Andrés Bello. In Liceo Andrés Bello Don Rómulo Gallegos was the director, and he was my father's cousin'.

(13) /Role R/

Y había otra muchacha¹, que² era muy linda, chiquitica, y él le³ puso por nombre 'Gallito de Bucare' (CDFA.87).

'And there was another girl, who was very pretty, very tiny, and he named her 'Gallito de Bucare''

iii) the NP's form: definite as *mi madre* 'my mother' in (10); indefinite as *un supervisor* 'a supervisor' in (11);

iv) the semantic feature of animacy: animate as *mi papá* 'my daddy', in (8); inanimate as *un libro* 'a book', in (7).

All tokens obtained by means of the described procedures were subsequently coded in order to analyze them statistically with the help of Goldvarb 2.0, a computer software for Macintosh designed by Rand and Sankoff 1990.

The methodology we applied entails that only full NP's were considered as starting points, whereas all forms (zeros, pronouns

TABLE 1A
Distribution of animate referents according to degree of
relevance and syntactic roles

		SR	RR	VR	Total	%
A	n	25	13	12	50	18
	%	50	26	24		
S	n	23	9	21	53	20
	%	43	17	40		
X	n	17	5	10	32	12
	%	53	16	31		
R	n	6	4	2	12	4
	%	50	33	17		
O	n	17	5	17	39	14
	%	44	13	44		
L	n	1	2	1	4	1
	%	25	50	25		
N	n	40	19	22	81	30
	%	49	23	27		
Total	n	129	57	85	271	100
	%	48	21	31		

and nouns) were taken into account as mentions of the same referent. The following restriction applied: first mentions had to be pronounced by the speaker, but ensuing mentions were counted regardless of whether they belonged to the speaker or to interviewer(s), as exemplified in (8). Contrary to Givón 1983b implementation of the persistence parameter, we decided, especially in view of the constructive critique of Fox 1993, to count all mentions –continuous or discontinuous– of a given referent through the entire text. We did not consider as new the reintroduction of an entity, even after a considerable gap as, for example, did Ocampo (1990:126-8)¹⁰. It is worthy observing that reintroductions after a long gap are quite infrequent in our data.

3. Results

Tables 1A and 1B display the numerical distribution of the SR, RR, an VR referents, according to the grammatical role fulfilled by the initial NP; Table 1A reflects the results regarding semantically animate¹¹ referents and Table 1B those regarding inanimate referents.

TABLE 1B
 Distribution of inanimate referents according to degree of
 relevance and syntactic roles

		SR	RR	VR	Total	%
A	n	2	0	0	2	1
	%	100	-	-		
S	n	21	13	3	37	11
	%	57	35	8		
X	n	13	3	6	22	6
	%	59	14	27		
R	n	15	8	1	24	7
	%	63	33	4		
O	n	62	22	3	87	25
	%	71	25	3		
L	n	71	24	10	105	30
	%	68	23	10		
N	n	50	12	11	73	21
	%	68	16	15		
Total	n	234	82	34	350	
	%	67	23	10		

Tables 1A y 1B show that the distribution of both kinds of new entities (animate and inanimate) is quite even across the grammatical roles, with the exception of role (A), which appears to code almost exclusively animate referents (50/52 = 96%), and of the locative (L), where, as expected, a great majority of inanimates (105/109 = 96%) is found.

Another difference between the two groups (animate / inanimate) of new entities concern the relevance degree: i) animate entities are RR or VR rather than SR, whereas the opposite is true for inanimate, which show sharp decline from SR (67%) to VR (10%). This finding confirms what many linguistics say, namely that human discourse is anthropocentric: men talk about other men rather than about things.

We finally submitted the 621 coded tokens to GOLDVARB, establishing animacy (animate vs inanimate) as the dependent variable for the analysis. The results are presented in Table 2.

Both the distributions and the probability weights established by GOLDVARB show that new animate entities tend to be very relevant (.764) rather than relevant or semi-relevant; to fulfill

TABLE 2
 Animate referents according to relevance, syntactic role,
 and definiteness

Factor	Count	% Animate	Weight
Relevant			
VR	85/119	71	.764
RR	57/139	41	.465
SR	129/363	36	.418
Syntactic role			
A	50/52	96	.969
S	53/90	59	.612
X	32/54	59	.611
R	12/36	33	.400
N	85/263	31	.360
O	39/129	31	.348
Definiteness			
Definite	81/131	38	(.521)*
Indefinite	190/409	46	(.459)
N: 621		16 speakers	Input .460

* Not selected as significant by Goldvarb groups in parentheses.

the syntactic roles of A (.969), S(.612) and X (.611) rather than any other role. New inanimate entities, on the contrary, tend to be semi-relevant or relevant and to fulfill the roles of R, N, and O. For both groups of referents the definiteness factor was not deemed significant by the statistical program.

The results differ substantially from those obtained by Ashby and Bentivoglio 1993, who analyzed data from the same Spanish corpus, but did not consider the relevance degree among their variables. The comparison between the two analyses shows that, when this factor is included in the analysis, the results change drastically.

4. Conclusions

In the article, we have demonstrated that in spoken Spanish discourse it exist a preferred pattern for the introduction of new entities according to the animacy. Animate referents tend to show

the highest degree of relevance (VR), and to fulfill the A, S and X syntactic roles; these three roles, in an accusative-nominative language like Spanish, conform the category of subject. Inanimate referents tend to show the lowest and the middle degree of relevance (SR and RR), and to fulfill the R, ¹² N and O syntactic roles.

The present research's results highlight an obvious but seldom empirically validated issue: animate, especially human, referents' characteristics are very different from those of inanimate referents. It may well be the case that other factors, in addition to those considered here, are necessary to better explain the differences between animate and inanimate referents. It seems to us that the relevance degree should be included as an important factor in future studies about information flow in Spanish and in other language as well.

Notes

1. Obviously, there may be other kinds of relevance (cf. Lyons 1979 among others), which we will not discuss here.
2. Sometimes, even though not very frequently, new participants may be introduced by means of an indefinite pronoun, generally accompanied by a relative clause, as in the following example:
 - (i) *Y ellos usaban unos aparaticos que hacían ellos mismos.*
Y había uno que se llamaba A. L., .. (CD1FV.87)
 'And they were using some gadgets made by themselves.
 And there was one [of them] whose name was A. L., ...
 On this same issue see Lyons (1979:101)
3. An unattached NP (see Tao 1993) is not a verb argument, it generally appears in a separate intonation unit (Chafe 1987 and 1993) either because the speakers deliberately introduces a referent in this manner or because s/he they not complete the utterance. Three men, in example (3), represent a clear case of what we consider an unattached NP.
4. In Givón 1983, the notion of topicality was seen as a scalar property. Givón (1991: 911) corrects that point of view, claiming that "scularity in principle of the underlying mental (or physical) dimensions does not automatically mean sca-

larity in fact at the processing level. Cognition –much like grammar– is apparently a reductive, discretizing process”.

5. We acknowledge, however, that Prince 1981 and 1992, Silva-Corvalán 1983 and Ocampo 1991 have been very influential on our analysis, even though space limitations oblige us avoid discussing at length their contributions.
6. The code in parentheses identifies the speakers in the Caracas corpus.
7. It can be that according to Prince 1981 and, after her, Ocampo 1990, *una mujer* would be considered as brand new information, and *la pobre muchacha* as new but inferrable information.
8. Cf. note 2.
9. It may be necessary to add that, contrary to the practice of Dixon 1979 and 1987, among others, we split role S into three (R, S, X), in view of Dutra 1987's remarks on the hybridity of S if considered from a unitary viewpoint. See also Ashby and Bentivoglio 1993.
10. Ocampo 1990 proposes a precise measuring (six sentences) for the gap's allowed length. In others words, if there are more than six sentences between a referent's mentions and a following mention of the same referent, then the reintroduction must be considered as if new.
11. In the examined corpus the great majority of animate referents are human, so that it would be more accurate to say 'human referents'. We did not so, however, in order keep unchanged the terms proposed for this semantic factor.
12. For a discussion on the status of **R** role as subject see Bentivoglio and Sedano 1989.

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