

## Overt nonspecific *Ellos* in Spanish in New York

Naomi Lapidus and Ricardo Otheguy

In general Spanish, references to nonspecific third-person plurals are usually made by means of a verb occurring with the null form of the subject pronoun, as in *llamaron del banco*, rather than by means of a verb occurring with the overt form of the subject pronoun. In contrast to the position in this discussion, the literature presents null pronouns in these nonspecific 3PL contexts as resulting from a categorical syntactic rule, when in fact we consider that they are the result of a strong pragmatic constraint: overt *ellos* for nonspecific references are rare, not ungrammatical. That is, one occasionally does find in the Spanish of Latin America nonspecific 3PL NPs with overt subject pronouns, as in the disfavored but grammatical *ellos llamaron del banco*. This study, based on a large corpus of sociolinguistic interviews from the CUNY Project on the Spanish of New York, reveals that, among bilinguals in New York City whose exposure to English is intensive, such nonspecific *ellos* are even more frequent.

The literature on 3PL nonspecific NPs recognizes three degrees of nonspecificity. Among both contact and non-contact speakers, the use of overt nonspecific *ellos* increases as nonspecificity decreases, though the absolute numbers are much larger in New York. In this way, the contact dialect is a quantitatively enhanced copy of the qualitatively identical pre-contact variety. Since, as the evidence presented here shows, examples of overt nonspecific *ellos* are found in Spanish in Latin America, their appearance in Spanish in New York does not represent a radical change in the syntax of contact Spanish; instead, these usages are an example of the familiar situation where contact varieties expand usages that were already incipient in the pre-contact community. Thus, the study would appear to indicate that the use of overt nonspecific *ellos* in New York represents a quantitative change in the strength of a pragmatic constraint that guides the use of subject pronouns, not a qualitative change in a syntactic rule that governs their use.

**Keywords:** nonspecific *ellos*, overt and null subject pronouns, direct transfer, indirect transfer

## 1. Introduction

In the Spanish spoken in New York City (NYC), use of the subject personal pronoun *ellos* appears to deviate from the usage prevailing in the Latin American countries from which NYC Latinos or their parents emigrated. In particular, in NYC we hear *ellos* that have no identifiable referent. For example, a speaker may say *ellos le llamaron del banco* 'they called you from the bank', even though neither the speaker nor the interlocutor has any notion regarding the identity of the callers.

Because of the similarities with equivalent usages in English, the conclusion seems warranted that overt nonspecific *ellos*, as we call this linguistic form, is an instance of contact-induced grammatical change in Spanish in NYC. Such a conclusion would contradict the belief that bilingualism of the kind observed in U.S. Hispanic communities, which tends to last for only two or at most three generations, is not intense or long-lasting enough to produce true grammatical innovations in Spanish in the U.S. This paper shows, however, that the use of overt nonspecific *ellos* in NYC is not an instance of grammatical innovation since examples of overt nonspecific *ellos* are found in Latin America as well. The NYC usage is, rather, a change in the strength of governing constraints, leading to sharp increases in the frequency of overt nonspecific *ellos*, and is, therefore, an example of the well-known phenomenon of contact communities intensifying and expanding linguistic behaviors that were already incipient in the varieties of origin.

The analysis of overt nonspecific *ellos* offered here is based on 142 sociolinguistic interviews, each of approximately one hour's duration, taken from the *CUNY Project on the Spanish of New York*. The fully transcribed interviews of the corpus contain over 60,000 verbs with non-lexical subjects that form the basis of our analysis. The 142 interviews constitute a subset of a much larger stock of 415 interviews that the project has gathered over the past fifteen years. Each of the 142 interviews was selected in order to conform to a set of stratification requirements that insure that the corpus is representative of the NYC Latino population. Under the stratification procedure, the interviews in the corpus provide equivalent representation according to national origin, age, generation, New York or Latin American birth, years in NYC, age of arrival, level of education, knowledge of English, and a range of other socio-demographic factors.<sup>1</sup> In discussing subject personal pronouns (SPPs), we follow standard terminology and speak of an overt SPP when the pronoun is present, as in *ellos hablan* 'they speak', and of a null SPP when the pronoun is absent, for example, *hablan* 'they speak'.

The position that grammar is largely impermeable to external influences has been upheld by many scholars, among them: Appel & Mynskén 1987; Meillet 1921; Sapir 1921; Silva-Corvalán 1994, 1995, 2000; Weinreich 1953. Consistent with this view is the idea that, in situations of language contact, entirely foreign structural features are not incorporated into the syntax or morphology of the recipient linguistic system. Under situations of very extensive contact, however, radically incompatible foreign features can penetrate a recipient language, as is the case, for example, with Turkish agglutinative patterns of noun and verb inflection in Asia Minor Greek (Thomason & Kaufman 1988:219)

The impact of English on the Spanish spoken in the United States provides a current test case of external influence. In a well-known position, Silva-Corvalán distinguishes between *direct* and *indirect* transfer. Direct transfer involves the introduction of brand new structures into the contact variety; indirect transfer involves changes in a feature already present in the pre-contact variety (1994:4). Silva-Corvalán's general stance is that direct transfer is rare in contact situations and for the most part, not found in the Spanish spoken in the U.S. For direct transfer to occur, she argues, it would have to reach down to the level of syntax that does not interact with semantics, pragmatics, or discourse, that is, a level of abstract syntactic structure in which functions are empty slots, the words which could occupy the slots are not taken into consideration,<sup>2</sup> (Silva-Corvalán 2000:12, our translation). It is this level of grammar that Silva-Corvalán deems 'remarkably impermeable to foreign influence' (1994:166).

Both English and Spanish have subject personal pronouns (SPPs) but, whereas in English SPPs are nearly always overt, in Spanish they are highly variable. In the bilingual Mexican community of Los Angeles, Spanish SPPs are undergoing a process of indirect transfer. Silva-Corvalán finds, with regard to SPPs, that contact with English has not introduced any new structures, nor has it had an effect at the level of abstract syntax. However, she does find that contact with English may be stimulating the expansion of the contexts in which SPPs appear (1994:154–165). As a helpful point of comparison with the indirect transfer to which SPPs are being subjected in Los Angeles, Silva-Corvalán offers hypothetical cases like (1). In her view, utterances like (1) are not actually found in either pre-contact or contact Spanish, but if they were to appear in contact dialects, they would represent the kind of usage that would provide evidence of direct transfer (1994:146).

(1) \* *Ellos me robaron el auto* [said without knowing who stole the car]  
 "They've stolen my car"

To describe the type of NP which appears as the subject in (1), we use the term *nonspecific*.<sup>2</sup> Silva-Corvalán's point, then, is that in pre-contact Spanish, the overt SPP *ellos* is categorically excluded from occurring as a nonspecific. This categorical exclusion is in force at the level of abstract syntax. Moreover, and conforming to the ban on direct transfers, the exclusion, according to Silva-Corvalán, is as categorical in the contact dialect as it is in the pre-contact variety, since instances of (1) fail to occur in both varieties.

Silva-Corvalán's observation that 3PL nonspecific NPs with overt SPP *ellos* are categorically absent from both pre-contact and contact Spanish is widely accepted (see, for example, Cameron 1997:35; Fernández Soriano 1999:1218; Jaeggli 1986:46; Luján 1999:1293; Suñer 1983). According to this view, when an overt 3PL SPP *ellos* appears, the reference is necessarily specific. That is, the null 3PL SPP in (2a) can refer to an unidentified entity, as in 'people'; but the overt 3PL *ellos* in (2b) can refer only to a designated group of people, in this case 'my parents':<sup>3</sup>

- (2) a. *Ø dicen que fumar no es sano.*  
 Ø say-3PL that smoke-INF not is healthy.  
 "They say that smoking is not healthy."  
 [nonspecific: people say that smoking is not healthy]
- b. *Ellos dicen que fumar no es sano.*  
 they say-3PL that smoke-INF not is healthy.  
 "They say that smoking is not healthy."  
 [specific: my parents say that smoking is not healthy]

In English, on the other hand, where very few contexts support the absence of an overt subject (see Napoli 1982:85 for examples of subject omission in English), the overt SPP *they* in (3) can have either nonspecific or specific reference.

- (3) They say that smoking is unhealthy.  
 [specific: my parents say that smoking is unhealthy]  
 [nonspecific: smoking is said to be unhealthy]

As already stated, Silva-Corvalán's generalization is that structural features that are not already present in the pre-contact variety are not incorporated into the contact variety. She argues that if constructions like (2b) preclude nonspecific reference in general Spanish, they will not acquire the ability to make such reference in Spanish in the U.S.

However, as we show below, usages of overt nonspecific *ellos* do occur in contact varieties in the U.S., specifically in the Spanish spoken in New York.

Example (1) is thus not hypothetical; it represents real usage. This finding would appear to counter Silva-Corvalán's generalization, as it would seem to represent the introduction of a completely new, non-Spanish structure into the contact variety. We have discovered, however, that overt nonspecific *ellos* is also found in what we call Newcomer Spanish, that is, in the speech of Latinos who have only recently arrived in NYC, and whose usage very likely still reflects Latin American norms. Silva-Corvalán's generalization still holds, therefore, not because the phenomenon does not occur in the contact variety, where it does indeed occur, but because it is already present in the pre-contact system.

## 2. The study

### 2.1 Informants

The 142 interviews in the corpus discussed above provided us with samples of Spanish by speakers from the six countries with the highest representation in the Latino population of NYC: Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico; and Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico. For the purposes of this study, we have classified the informants from the six countries into three groups that differ in the degree of exposure to English that we can presume each of the groups has undergone. We label the three groups: *Newcomers* (N = 38), *Immigrants* (N = 57), and *New York Born and/or Raised* (N = 46).

- Newcomers arrived at age 17 or older and have been in NYC for no more than five years.
- Immigrants arrived at age 13 or older and have been in NYC for six years or more.
- New York Born and/or Raised (NYBRs) were born in NYC or arrived at age 12 or younger.

One of our informants did not meet any of these three criteria and his speech sample had to be discarded, so we ended up basing our analysis on the speech of 141 informants.

To qualify as a Newcomer, the informant had to be age 17 or older upon arrival because we wanted our Newcomers to be fully-formed users of Spanish who had not been exposed to U.S. teenage culture or U.S. high schools, with their attendant pressures to adapt and conform culturally and linguistically.

Similarly, we required them to have been here for no longer than five years (many of our Newcomers have been in NYC for only a few months), because we wanted influences from English and U.S. culture to have had very little time to exert themselves on these informants. The minimum age-of-arrival requirement and the maximum years-in-NYC requirement guaranteed that our Newcomers are fairly reasonable representatives of pre-contact usage.

Our use of age 12 as a cut-off point to distinguish between Immigrants and the New York Born and/or Raised follows a common practice in the literature (see, for example, Silva-Corvalán 1994:15). Evidence suggests that discourse and pragmatic functions of referring expressions are acquired very late in childhood (Bellavsky 1994; Cairns et al. 1995; Hickmann 1987:167–170; Hickmann 1995:205–208). Therefore, compared to teenagers and adults, the linguistic system of the child who is 12 or younger is not yet fully developed, and should be more susceptible to influence from a second language. As a result, informants who arrive at age 12 or younger can reasonably be presumed to resemble bilinguals born in New York more than they do Newcomers or Immigrants who arrive at a later age.

## 2.2 Coding the data

All non-lexical NPs in the corpus occurring in construction with 3PL verbs were coded for whether they had an overt or null SPP, and for whether the reference of the non-lexical NP was specific or nonspecific. We classified as nonspecific any non-lexical 3PL NP which lacks an explicit antecedent in the linguistic context, or whose explicit antecedent was the word *alguien* 'someone'. We did not try to intuit whether or not the speaker had a specific referent in mind. Although the identifiability of a referent is often considered central to the definition of specificity (see, for example, Givón 1978:293–4), this criterion is not always reliable. There are, for instance, cases of reported speech in which the speaker need not know the referent of a specific NP. If John says, *George says he met with a certain student of his today*, then *a certain student* is a specific NP, but John need not know its referent (Higginbotham 1987:64). By setting aside both speaker knowledge and our own intuitions, and relying instead on the simple criterion of the existence of an overt antecedent, we reduce subjectivity in the coding and further the reliability of our study.

In some cases, the grammar of the *hearer* may impose a specific referent where one is absent. Consider the following example, from a 24 year-old Cuban informant who falls under our NYBR category (arrived in NYC at age six

and has been in the U.S. for 18 years). In the English translation of this example, boldface *they* corresponds to 3PL overt nonspecific SPPs (that is, overt *ellos*) in the Spanish original, whereas in-parentthesis (*they*) correspond to 3PL nonspecific null SPPs.

- (4) *Disco, disco... ya está arde. A mí me gusta más rock, pero me gustan muchos diferentes estilos de música, pues... a mí me gusta mucho la música pero, no pienso que tengo, no sé si se dice así en español, un buen oído para la música. Entonces, después de un tiempo me suena todo igual, pero me gusta, ¿tú sabes? A mí me gusta mucho el rock, me gusta diferente tip... típico de música americana, de que, no sé, ellos, ellos lo llamarían diferentes cosas, pero yo lo llamo todo rock, ¿tú sabes? Como ellos tienen, like ballads, ellos tienen funky, ellos tienen rock, y tienen heavy metal, y tienen new wave, para mí esto es todo bien mezclada. (013U)*
- Disco, disco is already dead. I like rock better. I like a lot of different styles of music. I like music a lot, but I don't think that I have, I don't know if you say it like this in Spanish, a good ear for music. So, after a while, everything sounds the same to me, but I like it, you know? I like rock a lot, I like different types of American music, of which, I don't know, **they**, **they** would call it different things, but I call it all rock. You know? Like **they** have ballads, **they** have funky, **they** have rock, **(they)** have heavy metal, and **(they)** have new wave. For me, this is all mixed.

Some readers of previous versions of this paper have suggested that the overt *ellos* here refers to *los americanos*, that is, English-speaking people from the U.S., and that this specific reference is implied by the mention of *música americana*, "American music." Other readers see no such reference and regard these *ellos* as similar to the common type of bleached English *they* that is found, for example, in number (3) above. Careful reading points to the latter interpretation. The speaker distinguishes himself from people who can classify different types of music and who know how to use labels like "funky" and "ballads." Certainly, the set of people who make these distinctions is not restricted to *los americanos*. Still, the possibility that some readers may misinterpret these examples as specific necessitates the kind of clear definition that we have worked with, which is based on the linguistic context and not on the coder's intuitions. All these *ellos* are nonspecific because there is no antecedent for them anywhere in the context, irrespective of any speculations about what the speaker might have had in mind.

2.3 Overt nonspecific *ellos* in the corpus as a whole

The use of overt nonspecific *ellos* in our corpus is infrequent, but real. Table 1 shows that 33 percent of all verbs with 3PL non-lexical NPs make nonspecific reference. Of these, the majority appears with null SPPs, but some do show up with overt *s*. Of all nonspecific 3PL non-lexical NPs appearing in construction with verbs, 96 percent appear with nulls, leaving a small but real four percent with overt *ellos* (see Table 2).

Table 1. 3PL Vbs with non-lexical subjects, according to specific and nonspecific reference in 141 informants

	N	Pct
Specific reference	5662	67
Nonspecific reference	2834	33
Total 3PL Vbs	8496	100

Table 2. 3PL Vbs with nonlexical subjects making nonspecific reference, according to overt and null SPPs

	N	Pct
Null SPP	2727	96
Nonspecific reference	107	4
Total 3PL Vbs	2834	100

This very small incidence of 3PL nonspecific NPs with overt SPPs (and the likely need for very large corpora to register their presence) is probably the reason why such usages have escaped the attention of researchers.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the belief that overt 3PL nonspecific SPPs do not exist may arise from methodological problems with data derived from grammaticality judgments. It may very well be that rare, but grammatical, linguistic forms, such as overt nonspecific *ellos*, have such a low frequency that they cannot be retrieved by informants, or by linguists acting as informants, when requests are made for grammaticality judgments.

2.4 Overt nonspecific *ellos* in Spanish among Newcomers, Immigrants and New York Born and/or Raised Informants

Significantly, the 107 cases of overt SPPs found in nonspecific 3PL NPs in our corpus are not limited to Immigrants or NYBRs, but are also found in the

speech of Newcomers. Example (5) is from a 24 year-old Colombian Newcomer who has been in NYC for just five years.

- (5) — *Es una ciudad que... que luce más como un pueblo y se llama xxx y nadie en la vida ha oído de esa ciudad, porque está perdida por allá en xxx.*  
 — *¿Dónde queda?*  
 — *En la... eh... queda en la parte norte, en el... ellos la llaman, la xxx.*  
*Está en la bahía de San Francisco alrededor de... está como a una hora de San Francisco.* (194C)  
 — "It's a city that... that looks more like a town and it's called xxx and nobody in the world has heard of this city because it's lost out there in xxx."  
 — "Where is it?"  
 — "In the... it's in the northern part, in the... they call it, the xxx. It's in the San Francisco bay area around... it's about an hour from San Francisco."

This overt nonspecific *ellos* found in *ellos la llaman* 'they call it' has no referent. There is no antecedent in the linguistic context, nor is there any indication, explicit or implied, that there is any particular group that calls this city by its name. Here, *ellos la llaman* is very much like *se llama*, 'it's called'.

Example (6) is also from a Newcomer, this one a 23-year-old from Puerto Rico who has been in NYC only three years.

- (6) *Si yo voy a Santo Domingo o Venezuela, o Ecuador o cualquiera de estos países a buscar un trabajo, solamente por la simple razón de que estudié en Nueva York y sé inglés, ellos son capaz de quitarme el trabajo a un empleado de ellos para dármelo a mí simplemente porque yo soy un americano.* (198P)  
 "If I go to Santo Domingo or Venezuela, or Ecuador or any of these countries to look for work, only for the simple reason that I studied in New York or I know English, they are capable of taking away a job from an employee of theirs to give it to me simply because I'm an American."

In this example, no particular group of employers is designated, nor does the speaker refer to a specific country in Latin America. And even though a hearer faced with this overt *ellos* may conjure up a referent, an employer in Venezuela, for instance, no specific antecedent in fact exists in the context that can serve as referent for *ellos*.

The analysis that overt nonspecific *ellos* is forbidden by the syntax of general, non-contact Spanish is seriously eroded by examples like (5) and (6), which are taken from speakers who know little or no English and have barely had any exposure to NYC, and whose speech is thus highly representative of non-contact Spanish. Data like (5) and (6) suggest that overt nonspecific *ellos* is not forbidden in the pre-contact dialects: it is simply statistically disfavored. It is thus disfavoring that then abates in the contact dialect, where overt nonspecific *ellos* becomes less rare.

The existence of overt nonspecific *ellos* in Latin America, illustrated from our Newcomer data in (5) and (6), suggests that the Silva-Corvalán ban on direct transfer discussed above still survives. It survives, however, not because a restriction at the level of abstract syntax imported from Latin America has remained in force in contact Spanish, but because there was no such restriction to begin with. What is found in pre-contact Spanish is not a syntactic restriction that categorically bans overt nonspecific *ellos*, but simply a pragmatic constraint that disfavors it. The generalization remains in place because in this case, as in many others, the difference between the pre-contact and contact varieties rests, not on a qualitative syntactic alteration, but on a quantitative pragmatic change. Under these pragmatic changes, certain constraining factors (such as the constraint that sharply disfavors overt nonspecific *ellos* in general Spanish) become weaker in the contact variety, allowing large increases in the frequency of the affected forms.

In this regard, Spanish in NYC confirms the generalization that contact varieties, rather than eliminating categorical grammatical injunctions, tend instead to relax quantitative pragmatic constraints. The result is the acceleration and amplification of possibilities already available in the language, a point which has been made by Silva-Corvalán (1994:214), with respect to Spanish in

Table 3. Overt nonspecific *ellos* in three groups of speakers

	Nonspecific 3 <sup>rd</sup> PL NPs with <i>ellos</i>	
	Non-lexical Nonspecific 3 <sup>rd</sup> PL NPs N	N % <sup>a</sup>
Newcomers	675	15
Immigrants	1296	39
NYBRs	863	53
Totals	2834	107

F = 10,  $p < .01$

<sup>a</sup>This column shows the percent of *ellos* out of all non-lexical 3<sup>rd</sup> PL NPs for each informant group (e.g. 15/675 = 0.02).

the U.S. and which has been part of the discussion for other areas of Spanish in contact (Company Company 1995, 2001). This view of the contact community as elaborating on existing grammatical possibilities resembles the analysis by Otheguy (1993, 1995) of many so-called structural calques which appear to exemplify structural changes but which are in fact simply cultural innovations expressed through an unchanged lexical and grammatical system.

The increase in the use of overt nonspecific *ellos*, starting from just 15 cases in our Newcomers and growing steadily in Immigrants and NYBRs, is documented in Table 3.

Significance and post-hoc analyses show that the overall results of Table 3 are significant, as is the difference between NYBRs and the other two groups. However, the post-hoc analysis does not grant significance to the difference between Newcomers and Immigrants ( $p = .658$ ). These results tell us that, starting from a baseline of real though scant use of overt SPP *ellos* in nonspecific 3<sup>rd</sup> PL NPs among Newcomers, there is an increase among Immigrants and then again among NYBRs. However, the most reliable difference in usage is between the more innovating NYBRs on the one hand, and the more conservative Newcomers and Immigrants on the other.

## 2.5 Overt nonspecific *ellos* in the Spanish of New York Born and/or Raised

The study reveals that NYBRs differ significantly from the other two groups. Their Spanish shows indirect transfer from English, that is, contact with English results in an increased production of overt nonspecific *ellos*. The appearance of these forms does not represent the introduction of a foreign structure into Spanish, but rather the stimulation of a somewhat dormant phenomenon. The abundance of this phenomenon in English is most likely the reason for the impact of English on Spanish in this area of the grammar.

A possible explanation for NYBR informants' particular propensity to this influence is that the subtle knowledge needed to use pronouns in an adult-like way is acquired very late. Therefore, a Spanish-speaking child who arrives in New York and begins to learn English at say, age 10, brings to the task a still incomplete set of discourse-pragmatic rules that may be highly susceptible to English influence. Similarly, for children who are born in NYC and acquire both languages natively, cross-linguistic interaction is predicted to occur at the interface between syntax and discourse-pragmatics (see Hulk & Müller, 2000 and Müller & Hulk, 2001 for one of the most recent theories of bilingual first language acquisition).

3. Different degrees of nonspecificity in overt nonspecific *ellos*

Examples of overt nonspecific *ellos* occur with varying degrees of nonspecificity. We have divided our sample into three types of overt nonspecific *ellos*.

- Nonreferential — These pronouns do not designate any referent. They are like the bleached pronoun *they* in English, as in *They say smoking is unhealthy*, where *they* does not refer to a specific entity.
- Semireferential — The set of possible referents is restricted, for example, by a locative or the context.
- Corporate — These pronouns refer to some unspecified but socially designated group of people, for example, governments, bosses, criminals, doctors, people at the bank, school officials...<sup>5</sup>

Nonreferential pronouns are the most nonspecific of the three types. They are also the most noticeable and unusual. As an example of nonreferential, we repeat example (5), taken from a Colombian Newcomer, and use it here as example (7).

- (7) — *Es una ciudad que... que luce más como un pueblo y se llama xxx y nadie en la vida ha oído de esa ciudad, porque está perdida por allá en xxx.*  
 — *¿Dónde queda?*  
 — *En la... eh... queda en la parte norte, en el... ellos la llaman, la xxx. Está en la bahía de San Francisco alrededor de... está como a una hora de San Francisco.* (194C)  
 — “It’s a city that... that looks more like a town and it’s called xxx and nobody in the world has heard of this city because it’s lost out there in xxx.”  
 — “Where is it?”  
 — “In the... it’s in the northern part, in the... they call it, the xxx. It’s in the San Francisco bay area around... it’s about an hour from San Francisco.”

As discussed above, the *ellos* found in *ellos la llaman* ‘they call it’ has no referent. No antecedent exists in the context and there is no way to recover who it is that calls the city by its name.

Semireferential pronouns are less nonspecific than nonreferentials because a set of possible referents is delineated. Example (6), repeated here as (8), is a semireferential usage from a Puerto Rican Newcomer.

- (8) *Si yo voy a Santo Domingo o Venezuela, o Ecuador o cualquiera de estos países a buscar un trabajo, solamente por la simple razón de que estudié en Nueva York y sé inglés, ellos son capaz de quitarte el trabajo a un empleado de ellos para dármele a mí simplemente porque yo soy un americano.* (198P)

“If I go to Santo Domingo or Venezuela, or Ecuador or any of these countries to look for work, only for the simple reason that I studied in New York or I know English, they are capable of taking away a job from an employee of theirs to give it to me simply because I’m an American.”

In this example, *ellos* refers to employers in Latin America. The set of possible referents is restricted, but not specific. As mentioned above, no particular group of employers is designated, nor does the speaker refer to a specific country in Latin America. This type of overt nonspecific *ellos* easily escapes notice because, as we have noted, the hearer/reader, and the analyst, may conjure up an image of a referent, as in an employer in Venezuela.

The third type is the least nonspecific of the three. Consider the following excerpt from a 25 year-old NYBR, of Colombian origin, who arrived in the U.S. at age nine and has been here for 16 years.

- (9) *Mandaron a hacer uno de esos labors a máquina de escribir, pero resulta que da la casualidad que me encontré con el presidente de la compañía en la oficina y él me preguntó que cómo me llamaba, cuántos años tenía, se sorprendió que yo le contesté y le hablé el inglés lo más de bien, y me dijo que qué yo hacía trabajando ahí teniendo yo un tío... que habi... que hablaba muy bien el idioma. Después como al mes me llamó y me dijo que ellos se iban a mudar y que necesitaban un... una persona en la oficina y me dijeron que iban a tener el puesto pendiente, cuan... antes de mudarse la compañía para el piso en que estamos, ellos me llamaron a la oficina y me dijeron que si quería el trabajo... (208C)*

“(They) sent for someone to do one of those typewriting jobs, but it turns out that I coincidentally met the president of the company in the office and he asked me my name, how old I was, he was surprised that I answered him and that I spoke English so well and he said to me, what was I doing working there having a lang... that I spoke the language so well. After a month, he called me and told me that they were going to move and that (they) needed a... a person in the office and they told me that (they) were going to have the job pending, when... before the company moved to the floor that we’re on, they called me to the office and (they) told me that if I wanted the job.”

The set of possible referents for *ellos* above is far more restricted than the set for nonreferential and semireferential *ellos*: they can only include people who work at the company. Even so, these 'corporate *ellos*' merit the status of overt nonspecific SPPs. Very often the referent of corporate *ellos* is a single individual. Consider the second boldface *ellos* above in *ellos me llamaron*, 'they called me'. Even though it is likely that only one person called the informant to the office, the 3PL SPP is used. The plural, as opposed to the 3rd person singular, reduces the importance of any one particular agent, demonstrating that the function of *ellos* here is to achieve nonspecificity. On the other hand, corporate *ellos* may create the illusion of specific reference because the group to which the individuals belong is explicitly mentioned. It is not surprising, then, that these corporate overt nonspecific *ellos* are especially difficult for researchers to detect.

Our data show that, as nonspecificity decreases, the use of overt nonspecific *ellos* increases, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequencies of types of overt nonspecific *ellos*

	N	Pct.
Nonreferential	15	14
Semireferential	36	34
Corporate	56	52
Total	107	100

The nonreferential type is the scarcest; the 15 instances in our corpus represent 14 percent of the entire set of overt nonspecific *ellos*. Semireferentials are about twice as common, representing a third of the examples. Finally, more than half of all overt nonspecific *ellos* are corporates.

This generalization appears to hold true for all of our informants. Table 5 shows that the proportions of each type of overt nonspecific *ellos* are similar among the three groups. Nonreferentials make up from 10 to 20 percent of nonspecifics; semireferentials range from 27 to 41 percent; and corporates represent about half of nonspecifics for all three groups of informants.

As exposure to English increases, the frequency of all three types of overt nonspecific *ellos* increases. However, the general pattern remains: the less specific the referent, the less likely it is that an overt nonspecific 3PL SPP *ellos* will be used.

Table 5. Types of overt nonspecific *ellos* among three groups of informants

Types of overt nonspecific <i>ellos</i>	Newcomers		Immigrants		NYBRs	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Nonreferential	3	20	4	10	8	15
Semireferential	4	27	16	41	16	30
Corporate	8	53	19	49	29	55
Totals for each informant group	15	100	39	100	53	100

#### 4. Conclusion

In many linguistic theories, a variety of phenomena are described using categorical rules. One such categorical rule states the injunction against nonspecificity in Spanish overt *ellos*. Very often, however, organizing principles governing linguistic phenomena represent tendencies, not absolutes. The present study uncovers the inadequacy of a widely accepted categorical rule in Spanish. Overt nonspecific *ellos* occurs in both pre-contact and contact varieties of Spanish. Both varieties point to a general tendency: the more nonspecific the referent, the less likely it is that the 3PL SPP will occur in its overt *ellos* form. Starting from a scant but nevertheless firm usage base in general Spanish that includes all types of overt nonspecific *ellos* and that is especially strong on the corporate ones, contact with English then stimulates the use of these overt nonspecific 3PL SPPs, increasing their frequency in the contact variety. But since these over-abundant examples of overt nonspecific *ellos* of NYC Spanish were already present in general Spanish, their occurrence in the contact dialect does not threaten the generalization by Silva-Corvalán and others regarding contact-induced grammatical change. It remains true that, for the most part, contact-induced change in situations of immigrant and second-generation bilingualism tends, with regards to grammar, to take the form of disturbances in the frequencies of linguistic forms and in the strength of their governing pragmatic constraints, not the form of radical syntactic alterations.

#### Notes

1. The corpus of the CUNY Project on the Spanish of New York was started by Ana Cecilia Zemella and was created under the supervision of Zemella and the second author of the present paper. The project received a start-up grant from the City University of New York and was primarily supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation (BCS 0004133), both of which are gratefully acknowledged.



2. In formalist semantics, the terms *specific* and *nonspecific* have been used to describe two readings of indefinite expressions (see, for example, Fodor & Sag, 1982). Consider (i)

- (i) A student in our class got a 100 on the exam.  
 a. Her name is Ana.  
 b. We all want to know who it was.

If (a) is the continuation of (i), the referent for *a student* is already determined at the time (i) is uttered. On the other hand, if the continuation is (b), the referent of *a student* is undetermined when the speaker utters (i). The term *specific* has been used to characterize the interpretation that coincides with (a), and *nonspecific* that which coincides with (b). However, as pointed out by Von Stechow (2002:252–3), the property of specificity is not restricted to indefinite NPs. He provides the example in (ii) to illustrate a nonspecific definite NP.

- (ii) They'll never find the man that will please them.

It is reasonable, then, to extend the notion of specificity beyond discussions of indefinite NPs.

3. Various terms have been used to describe the type of construction in (2a). Jaeggli uses the term *arbitrary plural construction* (1986:45). Suner calls it the equivalent of the English indefinite *they*' (1983:191). Luján includes this construction in a section called *las oraciones impersonales*, 'impersonal sentences' (1999:1293). In the variationist literature, the term 'nonspecific' has been used (cf. Cameron, 1997:35).

4. Silva-Corvalán (1994:163) examined 30 hours of speech for her study of subject expression. In these 30 hours, she encountered 285 3PL verbs. In our corpus there are 8,496 3PL verbs.

5. We follow Cabredo Hohenberg (2003), Castiells-Suarez (1994), Pesetsky (1995) in our use of the term 'corporate'.

## References

- Appel, R. & P. Muysken. 1987. *Language contact and bilingualism*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Belavsky, N. 1994. *The evolution of pronominal reference in children's narratives: Who are they?* Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA.
- Cabredo Hohenberg, Patricia. 2003. 'Arbitrary readings of 3PL pronominals'. *Proceedings of the conference sub7 – Sinn und Bedeutung*, ed. by Matthias Weisgerber. Arbeitspapiere Nr. 114. FB, Sprachwissenschaft, Universität Konstanz.
- Cairns, H., D. McDaniel, J. Ryan Hsu, & D. Konstantyn. 1995. 'Grammatical and discourse principles in children's grammars: The pronoun coreference requirement'. *CUNY Forum*, 19, 27–38. Ph.D. Program in Linguistics, Graduate Center of the City University of New York.
- Cameron, R. 1997. 'Accessibility theory in a variable syntax of Spanish'. *Journal of Pragmatics* 28, 29–67.
- Castiells-Suarez, E. 1994. 'Aspect and arbitrary interpretation'. *University of Massachusetts Occasional Papers 17*, 49–61. *Functional Projections* ed. by E. Benedicto and J. Runner. Company Company, Concepción. 1995. 'Cantidad vs. calidad en el contacto de lenguas. Una incursión metodológica en los poseivos redundantes del Español americano'. *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 43, 305–340.
- Company Company, Concepción. 2001. '¿Préstamos en sintaxis? Una propuesta metodológica'. *El indigenismo americano II* ed. por A. Palacios and I. García Tesoro, 191–211. Valencia: Universitat de Valencia.
- Fernandez Soriano, O. 1999. 'El pronombre personal. Formas y distribuciones. Pronombres átonos y tónicos'. *Gramática descriptiva de la lengua española*, 1209–1274. Real Academia Española, Madrid: Espasa.
- Fodor, J. & I. Sag. 1982. 'Referential and quantificational indefinites'. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 5, 355–398.
- Givón, T. 1978. 'Definiteness and referentiality'. *Universals of Human Language Volume 4: Syntax* ed. by Joseph Greenberg, 291–330. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Hickmann, M. 1987. 'The pragmatics of reference in child language: Some issues in developmental theory'. *Social and functional approaches to language and thought* ed. by Maya Hickmann, 165–184. Orlando, Florida: Academic Press.
- Hickmann, M. 1995. 'Discourse organization and reference'. *The handbook of child language* ed. by Paul Fletcher and Brian MacWhinney, 194–218. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Higginbotham, J. 1987. 'Indefinites and predication'. *The representation of (in)definiteness* ed. by E. Reuland and A. ter Meulen, 43–70. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Hulk, A. & N. Müller. 2000. 'Bilingual first language acquisition at the interface between syntax and pragmatics'. *Bilingualism: Language and cognition* 3, 227–244.
- Jaeggli, O. 1986. 'Arbitrary plural pronominals'. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 4, 43–76.
- Luján, M. 1999. 'Expresión y omisión del pronombre personal'. *Gramática descriptiva de la lengua española*, 1275–1315. Real Academia Española, Madrid: Espasa.
- Meillet, A. 1921. *Linguistique historique et linguistique générale*. Paris: Champion.
- Müller, N. & A. Hulk. 2001. 'Crosslinguistic influence in bilingual language acquisition: Italian and French as recipient languages'. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 4, 1–21.
- Napoli, D. 1982. 'Initial material deletion in English'. *Glossa* 16, 85–111.
- Otheguy, Ricardo. 1993. 'A reconsideration of the notion of loan translation in the analysis of U.S. Spanish'. *Spanish in the United States: Linguistic contact and diversity* ed. by Ana Roca and John M. Lipski, 21–41. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Otheguy, Ricardo. 1995. 'When contact speakers talk, linguistic theory listens'. *Meaning as explanation: Advances in linguistic sign theory* ed. by Ellen Contini-Morava and Barbara Sussman Goldberg, 213–242. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Pesetsky, D. 1995. *Zero Syntax*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Sapir, E. 1921. *Language*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company.
- Silva-Corvalán, C. 1994. *Language contact and change: Spanish in Los Angeles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

