

## Feature valuation, variation, and minimalism: Gender in Afro-Bolivian Spanish

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**Abstract:** This article develops an analysis of gender-agreement phenomena in the Afro-Bolivian Spanish (ABS) Determiner Phrase (DP). The present study combines a formal syntactic analysis with certain aspects of sociolinguistic methodology to account for variability patterns in the data. In particular, we provide a minimalist account to analyze the cross-generational change found in the community under study. We claim that such a change is leading to an expansion of the gender agreement domain of an Afro-Hispanic dialect which is progressively getting closer to standard Spanish.

**Keywords:** Afro-Bolivian Spanish, gender agreement, determiner phrase, variation, valuation.

**Resumen:** Este artículo desarrolla un análisis del fenómeno de concordancia de género en el Sintagma Determinante (SD) del español afro-boliviano (EAB). El presente estudio combina un análisis sintáctico formal con ciertos aspectos de la metodología sociolingüística para dar cuenta de los patrones de variación encontrados en los datos. En particular se toma el modelo minimista para analizar el cambio transgeneracional observado en la comunidad estudiada. Se propone que dicho cambio está provocando una expansión del ámbito de concordancia de género en un dialecto afro-hispánico que está quedando cada vez más próximo al español estándar.

**Palabras clave:** español afro-boliviano, concordancia de género, sintagma determinante, variación, cotejo de rasgos.

**Resumo:** Este artigo desenvolve uma análise de fenômenos de concordância de gênero no Sintagma Determinante (DP) do Espanhol Afro-Boliviano (EAB). O presente estudo combina uma análise sintática formal com certos aspectos da metodologia sociolinguística para explicar padrões de variabilidade nos dados. Em particular, fornecemos uma abordagem minimalista para analisar a mudança intergeracional encontrada na comunidade em estudo. Defendemos que tal mudança está a conduzir a uma expansão do domínio de concordância de gênero de um dialecto Afro-Hispânico que progressivamente se aproxima do Espanhol padrão.

**Palavras-chave:** Espanhol Afro-Boliviano, concordância de gênero, sintagma determinante, variação, valoração.



## 1. Introduction

Afro-Bolivian Spanish (ABS) is an Afro-Hispanic dialect spoken in Los Yungas, Department of La Paz, Bolivia. The present study will propose a model capable of accounting for ABS gender agreement processes and for the variability found in the data.

African slavery was formally abolished in Bolivia in 1826 after independence from Spain. It was reestablished in 1830 and abolished again in 1831. However, until 1952, when the Land Reform took place, Afro-Bolivians have been employed in Los Yungas as slaves in *haciendas* (Crespo 1977). The exact origin of ABS is not yet completely clear. Lipski (2008) suggests that traditional ABS had been the result of the nativization of an earlier pidgin, while Sessarego (2011) has indicated that ABS was probably never a case of radical creolization, but rather a language closely resembling Spanish from the very beginning. Different authors hold different opinions on the origin of ABS; nevertheless, it seems clear that all contemporary Afro-Bolivian speakers also speak a variety of Highland Bolivian Spanish (HBS), which may have been influenced to a greater or less degree by the traditional Afro-Bolivian dialect, depending on an individual's age, level of education, and mobility (Lipski 2008; Sessarego 2009). The contact scenario between traditional ABS and HBS leads to intense language variation. The present article focuses on the variable gender-agreement patterns attested in the Afro-Bolivian community.

The following sections will present an analysis of this topic. Section 2 is a description of the main ABS DP features; Section 3 presents the methodology adopted to collect the data for this study; Section 4 provides an account of the gender agreement patterns found in the Afro-Bolivian community; Section 5 accounts for data variability patterns within a minimalist account; Section 6 adds an evolutionary dimension to such an analysis; finally, Section 7 presents our conclusions.

## 2. The Afro-Bolivian Spanish DP

Lipski (2006) has identified five main DP characteristics that distinguish ABS from standard Spanish: (a) lack of noun-adjective gender agreement; (b) no plural suffixes on nouns and adjectives; (c) use of a single invariant plural definite article; (d) elimination of definite articles in generic constructions; and (e), retention of plural /s/ only on the first element of plural DPs.

The following examples illustrate cases of (a) and (b): *esos amiga* [HBS, *esas amigas*] 'those friends'; *nuestro cultura antiguo* [HBS, *nuestra cultura antigua*]. As far as (c) is concerned, *lu* is the invariant plural definite article in ABS: *lu taza* [HBS, *las tazas*] 'the cups,' *lu juamía* [HBS, *las familias*] 'the families'. Definite



articles may also be eliminated when nouns take on a generic reading (d), while they would be required in the same constructions in standard Spanish: *perro ta flojo* [HBS, *los perros son flojos*] ‘dogs are worthless’(cf. Gutiérrez-Rexach & Sessarego 2011 for a more detailed account on ABS bare nouns). Finally, cases of (e) can be illustrated by the following examples: *esos fiesta* [HBS, *esas fiestas*] ‘those parties’; *en idioma antigo di mis abuelo* [HBS, *en el idioma antiguo de mis abuelos*] ‘in the old language of my grandparents’. In the present article we will deal only with tokens involving gender agreement across the DP (a, c), so that we will leave for further studies cases concerning the rest of the characteristics identified by Lipski (b, d, e) (cf. Delicado-Cantero & Sessarego 2011 for an analysis of number agreement).

### 3. Variability and data collection

In recent years, the comparison of speakers’ grammaticality judgments with real production data to develop more fine-grained, empirically-testable generalizations has gained acceptance among generative syntacticians; in particular, among those working on microparametric syntax (Cornips & Poletto 2005). In collecting data for microparametric analysis, it is therefore crucial to gather both grammaticality judgements as well as naturalistic interviews. In line with this trend, the informants who participated in the present study were first interviewed, and then asked to answer grammaticality judgments from an oral questionnaire. Twelve recorded interviews were conducted during July 2008, for a total of almost thirteen hours of conversation with Afro-Bolivian speakers residing in the communities of Tocaña, Mururata and Chijchipa, North Yungas. The informants were native speakers of this dialect who did not speak any other language spoken in Bolivia, such as Quechua or Aymara. The interviews were conducted by letting the speaker talk about any topic of their liking and asking them follow-up questions. Only later, usually a day or two after the interview, the same informant was asked for grammaticality judgments. This was done in order to not affect the results of the interview by telling the speaker the nature of the phenomena under analysis in advance.

Responses on grammaticality-judgment tasks rely, at least in part, on explicit prescriptive notions held by speakers. One way of diminishing this effect, which proved successful according to experimental methods described in Labov (1984), is to ask for grammaticality judgments in an indirect fashion. Thus, to discover whether or not a variable was present in the community, not only direct intuitions were elicited (‘Do you judge X a grammatical/better sentence than Y?’; ‘Can you say X?’); also indirect questions were asked (‘Is variant X present in this community?’; ‘Do you know anybody who would say X?’). The comparison of these two different sources of data resulted in the



interesting -but not unexpected- finding that almost everybody who claimed not to say X, but to know people who could say it, were found using an X structure several times during the naturalistic interview. This would indicate that such a structure was indeed part of their grammar.

#### 4. Gender-agreement configurations

An interesting discovery from our fieldwork was that the informants participating in the study had diverging grammatical intuitions on DP gender agreement. Twelve Afro-Bolivian speakers of different ages participated in the study; all of them indicated that in the most radical variety of this dialect gender agreement appears only on singular definite articles, while the remaining determiners and adjectives show default-masculine morphology (1). Nevertheless, none of our speakers claimed to use this kind of language pattern. They considered it typical of old dialect, which is not commonly heard these days.

- (1) a. Todo            la            comida        delicioso  
 all-M-SG        the-F-SG meal-F-SG    delicious-M-SG  
 'All the delicious food'
- b. Todo            lu            comida        delicioso  
 all-M-SG        the-M-PL meal-F-SG    delicious-M-SG  
 'All the delicious foods'
- c. Este/ese            comida        delicioso  
 This/that-M-SG    meal-F-SG    delicious-M-SG  
 'This/that delicious food'
- d. Mucho/un        comida        delicioso  
 Much/a-M-SG    meal-F-SG    delicious-M-SG  
 'Much/a delicious food'

One subject in his 80s also presented gender agreement on plural definite articles and demonstratives (2), but not on other categories:

- (2) a. Todo            la            comida        delicioso  
 all-M-SG        the-F-SG meal-F-SG    delicious-M-SG  
 'All the delicious food'
- b. Todo            las            comida        delicioso  
 all-M-SG        the-F-PL meal-F-SG    delicious-M-SG  
 'All the delicious foods'
- c. Esta/esa            comida        delicioso  
 This/that-F-SG    meal-F-SG    delicious-M-SG  
 'This/that delicious food'

Informants of ages ranging from 51 to 84 (7/12) used agreement on plural and singular definite articles, demonstratives, pre-nominal adjectives, and also on weak quantifiers (3):

- (3) Mucha/ una comida delicioso  
 Much/a-F-SG meal-F-SG delicious-M-SG  
 'Much/a delicious food'

Finally, the youngest group -four people from 21 to 50 years of age- used gender agreement for all the elements, including *todo* and post-nominal adjectives (4):

- (4) Toda la comida deliciosa  
 all-F-SG the-F-SG meal-F-SG delicious-F-SG  
 'All that delicious food'

The following table summarizes the agreement patterns attested:

**Table 1. Agreement configurations: results from the data collected through means of grammaticality judgments.**

	SPEAKERS	AGREEING PATTERNS	
	Number of informants identifying this gender-agreement configuration as their grammar	DP categories agreeing in gender with the noun	DP categories presenting default-masculine agreement
PATTERN 1	0 <sup>1</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Singular definite articles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Plural definite articles</li> <li>▪ Demonstratives</li> <li>▪ Strong quantifiers</li> <li>▪ Weak quantifiers</li> <li>▪ Prenominal adjectives</li> <li>▪ Postnominal adjectives</li> </ul>
PATTERN 2	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Singular definite articles</li> <li>▪ Plural definite articles</li> <li>▪ Demonstratives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Strong quantifiers</li> <li>▪ Weak quantifiers</li> <li>▪ Prenominal adjectives</li> <li>▪ Postnominal adjectives</li> </ul>
PATTERN 3	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Singular definite articles</li> <li>▪ Plural definite articles</li> <li>▪ Demonstratives</li> <li>▪ Weak quantifiers</li> <li>▪ Prenominal adjectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Strong quantifiers</li> <li>▪ Postnominal adjectives</li> </ul>
PATTERN 4	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Singular definite articles</li> <li>▪ Plural definite articles</li> <li>▪ Demonstratives</li> <li>▪ Weak quantifiers</li> <li>▪ Prenominal adjectives</li> <li>▪ Strong quantifiers</li> <li>▪ Postnominal adjectives</li> </ul>	

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<sup>1</sup> All informants identified this pattern as a feature of an old dialect, rarely heard in the community.

At a first glance, the configurations reported in table 1 may suggest the presence of four different gender agreement grammars in the Afro-Bolivian community under study; however, a closer analysis of the empirical data from the oral interviews indicates that this is not the case. Natural data analysis also contradicts proposals postulating the presence of several alternative parallel grammars, accessible to the speaker at the same time (Kroch 2000; Henry 2005). Henry (2005), for example, argues for the existence of a ‘formal’ and an ‘informal’ grammar in Belfast English. In formal situations, speakers would use a grammar for which the forms *there is/ there are* require agreement, while for informal situations a different grammar would allow the verb to not agree with the subject, thus resulting in the default singular construction.

These accounts do not seem to explain what we observe in ABS. In fact, within the one-hour interview period, the switches between the four potential parallel grammars were so frequent for certain individuals that no formal/informal style alternation might serve as a reasonable justification. Additionally, if the data for plural marking are introduced into the picture, the number of potentially-competing grammars increases exponentially (Delicado-Cantero & Sessarego 2011), thus further constraining the feasibility of such processing. Table 2 summarizes the relative weight of different structural factors in determining gender agreement:

**Table 2. Cross-generational variable rule analysis of the contribution of internal factors to the probability of lack of gender agreement in Afro-Bolivian DP <sup>2</sup>**

GRAMMATICAL CATEGORY	Factor Weight	% Lack Agreement	N%	data
Post-Nom. Adj.	.95	550	272	19
Strong.Q.	.66	35	275	11
Pre-Nom. Adj.	.64	14	220	19
Indef. Art.	.62	12	280	11
WeakQ	.60	10	102	4
Dem	.24	3	84	3
Def. Art.	.23	2	1371	53
	<i>Range</i>			
	61			

<sup>2</sup> Total = 2604; Log likelihood = -624.215; Total Chi-square = 202.0101; Chi-square/cell = 21.6291; Significance = 0.001; Input = 0.041.

## 5. Agreement in DP

Traditionally, language intra-speaker variation has been excluded from formal linguistic analyses. However, more recently, several formal linguists have analyzed variation beyond the usual parametric inter-language domain (Adger & Smith 2005; Adger 2006). Under this new approach, intra-speaker variation, which had been often disregarded as a case of E-language, becomes a key topic of linguistic research (Adger & Trousdale 2007).

Several minimalist proposals (Chomsky 2001, 2002) conceive syntactic derivations as strictly dependent on feature valuation and checking. The distinction between interpretable and non-interpretable features has proven very useful. Several features have an interpretation at LF, thus they are semantically-interpretable features. Other features, on the contrary, lack such semantic import and are there to trigger the necessary merger or agreement operations during the derivation. Adger & Smith (2005) also argue for characterizing syntactic variation in terms of the interplay of (un)interpretable features. Certain uninterpretable features may be present in one category but absent in another. Since they are uninterpretable, they would have no semantic repercussion, thus being equally legitimate for a convergent derivation. Therefore, variation can be driven from the specification of the uninterpretable features in a derivation (Adger & Smith 2005: 161). As expected, syntax per se remains invariable or “perfect” (Brody 2003), given that variation is located only in the lexical component. Variation will occur when one item or other enters the numeration and takes part in a syntactic derivation. Several (social) factors may affect the outcome: ease of lexical access (probably linked to frequency of use), speaker-hearer relationships, social identity, etc. (Adger & Smith 2005: 164).

For these reasons, an account of gender agreement based on a minimalist model seems more adequate to describe the ABS phenomena. Gender agreement can be viewed as the result of valuation processes which do not necessarily require movement but just a configurational feature-checking mechanism (Piccolo 2008). Gender agreement, in fact, involves the transmission or sharing of features with nominal origin to other lexical items (adjectives) or to functional elements (determiners, quantifiers). Neither the demonstrative nor the adjective comes from the lexicon with a value for gender. The gender feature of determiners and adjectives is lexically *unvalued* (Chomsky 2001), and gets *valued* as a consequence of a syntactic process of agreement with the gender feature of the noun (cf. Pesetsky & Torrego 2007). Determiners and adjectives act as probes for the Agree operation.

Recent work on agreement operations advocates a version of agreement which departs from the previous view of this operation as a ‘feature

assignment' mechanism (Chomsky 2000). Rather, this process is viewed as an instance of 'feature sharing' (Frampton & Gutmann 2000; Pesetsky & Torrego 2007). Within the probe-goal theory of the syntactic computation, the operation Agree can be formally defined as in (5).

(5) *Agree* (Pesetsky and Torrego 2007:4)

- i. An unvalued feature  $F$  (a *probe*) on a head  $H$  at syntactic location  $\alpha$  ( $F\alpha$ ) scans its c-command domain for another instance of  $F$  (a *goal*) at location  $\beta$  ( $F\beta$ ) with which to agree.
- ii. Replace  $F\alpha$  with  $F\beta$ , so that the same feature is present in both locations.

If a goal is valued for  $F$ , replacing the token-value of the probe with the value of the goal results in an instance of valued  $F$  substituting for the specification of the unvalued probe. A valued  $F$  may now serve as the goal for some ulterior operation of Agree triggered by an unvalued, higher instance of  $F$  serving as a new probe. The result is that a single feature  $F$  will be shared by several positions, and the process could iterate further. An element drawn from the numeration with a uninterpretable valued feature will be specified as  $[u(n)interpretable]F(eature):+]$ ; a feature of the same kind that has not participated in Agree and is not already valued is annotated (where relevant) with a minus symbol:  $[uF:-]$  and, after the Agree operation takes place, it turns into  $[uF:+]$ . On the other hand, an element coming from the numeration without a specification for such a feature, will be annotated as  $[no-F]$ , and it will not be able to act as a probe for Agree operations of that particular kind<sup>3</sup>.

(6)  $[uF:+] \dots [uF:+] \dots [uF:+] \dots [F:+] \not\prec [no-F]$

Therefore, if we postulate that an uninterpretable instance of a feature such as gender may be present in certain DP elements but absent in others, and that variation is the result of differences in the feature specification of certain items in the initial numeration, it follows that contrasts in overt syntax will be the result of differences in the computation of varying specifications. We propose an account of the different gender-agreement configurations across DP strings in ABS that can be summarized in the following fashion:<sup>4</sup>

(7)

[DP una	[NP curva	ancha]
$[uFem:+]$	$[Fem:+]$	$[uFem:+]$

<sup>3</sup> This notation is a somehow modified version of the notation proposed in Adger (2010).

<sup>4</sup> A reviewer claims that it would be better to write  $[Fem:-]$  rather than  $[no-Fem]$ , for example. Nevertheless, this would not be the right thing to do because we are not saying that the feature is unvalued or valued with '-', we are claiming that there is no specification for such a feature.

[DP una	[NP curva	ancho]
[uFem:+].....	[Fem:+].....	✕..... [no-Fem]
[DP un	[NP curva	ancho]
[no-Fem] .....	[Fem:+].....	✕..... [no-Fem]
[DP a	[NP curve	large]
'A large curve'		

Therefore, we claim that this approach can account for all the gender-agreement configurations found in the ABS Determiner Phrase by postulating the presence/absence of unvalued gender features on different DP components. Results from cross-generational statistical analyses (Sessarego 2009) suggest that ABS is undergoing a cross-generational change in its grammar, in which stigmatized basilectal ABS features are being substituted by more prestigious HBS ones. One result of this transition is the introduction of a wider range of gender-agreement configurations in a language which originally made little use of it. In minimalist terms, this phenomenon can be seen as the emergence and development of unvalued features on elements which previously were not specified for them.

Given these data, we may hypothesize that in ABS unvalued gender features developed gradually: first on certain elements (e.g. weak determiners) and only later on others (e.g. strong quantifiers, adjectives). However, even though this is the general tendency, different linguistic and social factors may affect the selection of an item, and therefore the overt-syntax result.

## 6. A new proposal: The Local Agreement Gradience Function

Recall that findings from grammaticality judgments led to the identification of four different patterns of agreement (see 1-4). Nevertheless, there is a considerable amount of variability, thus indicating that agreement patterns are not completely stable. For this reason, certain ideas proposed by Adger & Smith (2005) to account for unvalued uninterpretable features seem more adequate to capture the nature of the phenomena found in ABS. The nature of the element occurring with the nominal head (e.g. articles, adjectives, strong/weak quantifiers, etc.) has a clear effect on the output; however, not only computational factors condition the agreement operation, but also lexical ones seem to play a crucial role.

While grammaticality judgments were discordant for certain syntactic categories among informants, every participant agreed on the use of *el* and *la* as respectively the masculine singular definite article and the feminine singular definite one. Nevertheless, there are several cases indicating that certain nouns in ABS possess a different gender from their standard Spanish counterparts. For this reason, ABS *el* may appear with nouns that in standard Spanish are



feminine, while ABS *la* may precede nouns that in standard Spanish are masculine.

(8) a. *Él dice que es el máximo autoridad*

[HBS, *Él dice que es la máxima autoridad*],

'He says he is the maximum authority'

b. *La sistema de hacienda no sirve pa' nada*

[HBS, *El sistema de hacienda no sirve para nada*]

'The hacienda system is useless'

Gender mismatches on adjectives and determiners when comparing ABS and Standard HBS are common, with masculine gender prevailing over feminine. We claim that these differences are due to two separate factors: (a) Certain words listed in the HBS lexicon as feminine, are listed in ABS as masculine and vice versa; (b) The valuation process of agreement in ABS departs from standard Spanish in that certain ABS elements lack the unvalued features present in their Spanish counterparts.

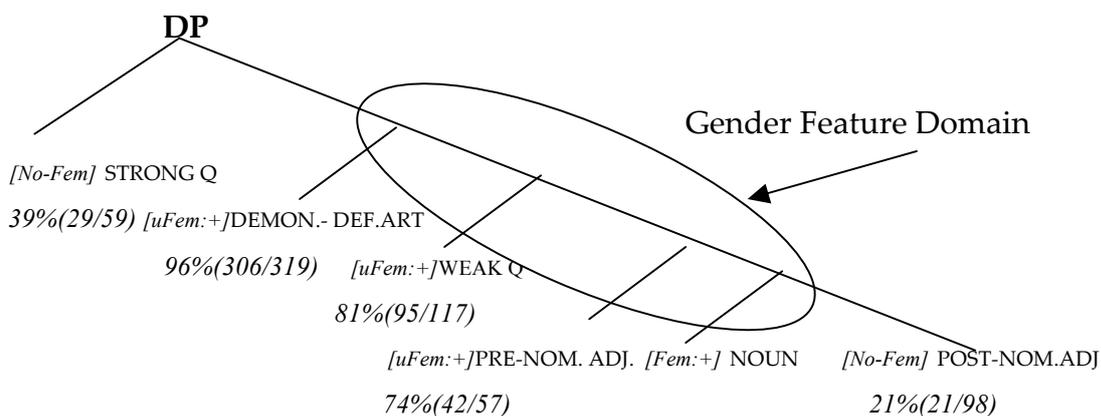
Several external factors may affect item selection: ease of lexical access (probably linked to frequency of use), speaker-hearer relationships, social identity, age, etc. (Adger & Smith 2005: 164). When looking at table 3, we can observe that generation is, in fact, a significant factor group, with the oldest group (80+) strongly favoring disagreement (Factor Weight .67) and the 21-50 group disfavoring it (Factor Weight .35). These data reflect the presence of a cross-generational change, pushing ABS in the direction of HBS. Young generations did not experience the segregation imposed by the *hacienda* system and had more chances to have contact with the Spanish spoken outside the community. These elements, in addition to the stigmatization attached to the Afro-Hispanic vernacular, are pushing the younger members of the community to quickly replace the basilectal features with more prestigious HBS ones.

**Table 3. Cross-generational variable rule analysis of the contribution of external factors to the probability of lack of gender agreement in Afro-Bolivian DP <sup>5</sup>**

GENERATION	Factor Weight	% Lack Agreement	N%	data
80+	.67	21	651	25
51-80	.56	11	927	36
21-50	.35	1	1026	39
	<i>Range</i>			
	32			

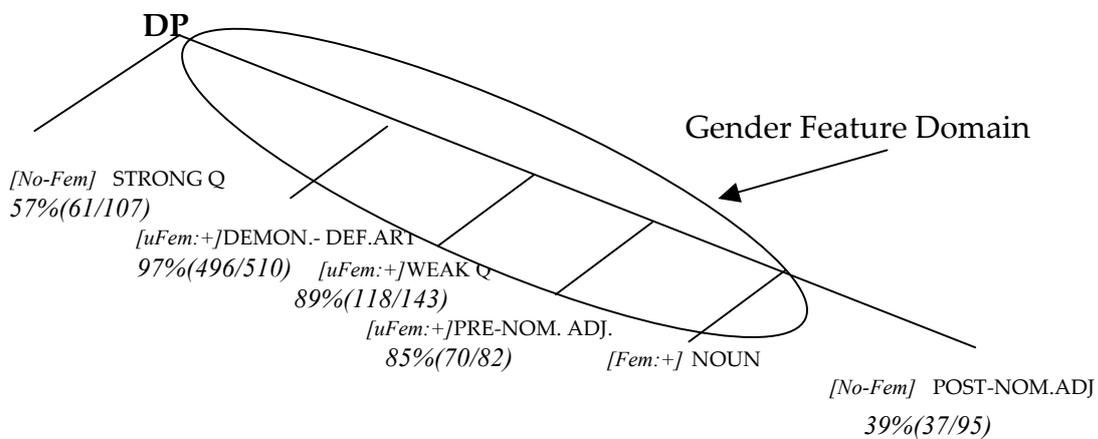
Even though there are no wider diachronic data available, by looking at the synchronic results for the three generations under analysis, we can get an idea of how the gender-agreement domain might have expanded in the DP domain in ABS –for a general survey of the structure of DP in Spanish see Bosque & Gutiérrez-Rexach (2009). The three relevant generations show three different levels of gender agreement. While for the +80 generation agreement is mainly limited to demonstratives, definite articles, weak quantifiers and pre-nominal adjectives; for the 51-80 generation, strong quantifiers also agree in the majority of instances. On the other hand, the 21-50-generation informants show 50% agreement with post-nominal adjectives.

**Figure 1. Gender agreement patterns for 80+ generation according to grammatical category (percentages and raw numbers).**

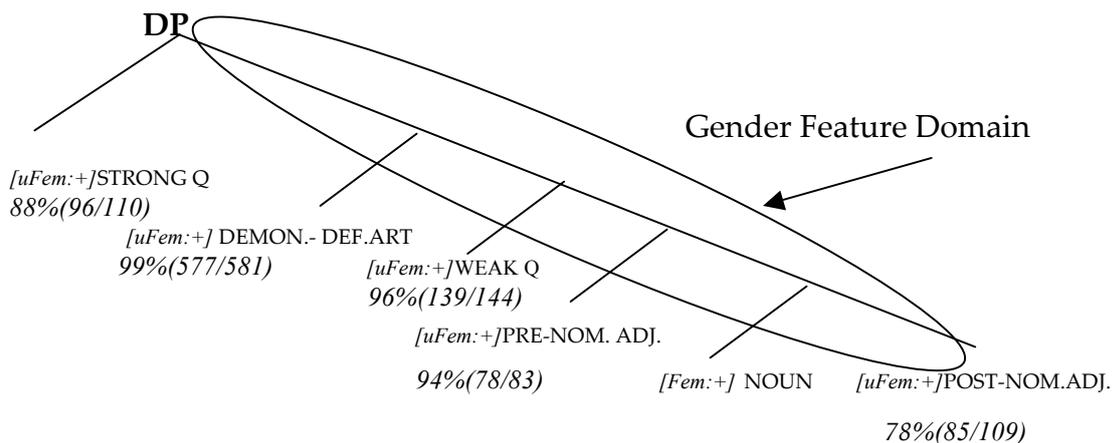


<sup>5</sup> Total = 2604; Log likelihood = -624.215; Total Chi-square = 202.0101; Chi-square/cell = 21.6291; Significance = 0.001; Input = 0.041.

**Figure 2. Gender agreement patterns for 51-80 generation according to grammatical category (percentages and raw numbers).**



**Figure 3. Gender agreement patterns for 21-50 generation according to grammatical category (percentages and raw numbers).**



Gender agreement evolution seems to develop cross-generationally in a systematic way. In fact, for all the three figures, the following gender agreement ranking holds across the grammatical categories analyzed (where < indicates earlier development and increased frequency):

(9) DEM /D < WEAK Q < PRE-N A < STRONG Q < POST-N A

This property, in addition to the fact that all singular definite articles agree with the noun in gender, might indicate that in a previous stage gender agreement was limited to singular definite articles, and it gradually extended to the rest of the categories. Setting aside those mismatches that are due to different specifications in the lexicon, all the rest have to be viewed as the by-

product of a specific locality constraint on gender agreement/valuation. This constraint is conditioned by the derivational position of the affected probes with respect to the nominal head. Additionally, we assume that prenominal adjectives agree because they are in the domain of the Q probes, either by direct insertion or movement (Gutiérrez-Rexach & Mallen 2001).

Thus, in general we formulate the following Local-Agreement Gradience Function (LAGF): (i) If A and B are potential probes for feature F in goal G and B is closer (more local) to G than A, then AGREE can apply between A and G only if it applies between B and G. The closer a functional head is to the noun, the more likely it is to enter into an agreement (sharing) relation with it. Additionally, (ii) A functional element becomes a potential probe for F when it is specified as unvalued for F, and (iii) There is speaker variation with respect to the specification of F.

The main consequence of LAGF is that we predict gradience of agreement in ABS: Weak Qs are more likely to agree with N; Prenominal Adjectives and Postnominal Adjectives are less likely; Strong Q are the least likely.

From a grammatical perspective, our data show how evolutionary dynamics meets dialectal variation: LAGF determines a coherence measure for performance differences in the candidate grammars of a population, consistent with Nowak's (2002) and Nowak, Komarova & Niyogi (2001) findings –cf. also Adger (2010) for a compatible perspective.<sup>6</sup> Population and social dynamics moves the convergence point (ideal fitness) of LAGF in ABS closer to standard Spanish. This eventually entails a generalized application of Agree/gender valuation within the DP in younger generations. The main consequence of situation is that contact with HBS/standard varieties leads younger speakers to apply Agree to higher probes. Agreement is triggered when the relevant probe becomes [uFem] rather than [No-Fem].

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<sup>6</sup> The issue of syntactic variation and its integration in a minimalist and/or biolinguistic perspective is currently the subject of intense debate. There are different ways of implementing this integration: situating it in one component or other, expanding or eliminating parameters (Boeckx 2010), etc. Some of the proposals are highly programmatic and lack sufficient grounding on specific linguistic analyses. We believe that taking a closer look at data from different sources and conducting a careful analysis of individual cases is a necessary step for testing the empirical predictions and general validity of these proposals.



## 7. Conclusions

The analysis of linguistic variation has been one of the cornerstones of several linguistic theories in the last decades, and variationist data has been used with different purposes. Certain approaches (functionalist syntax, variationist sociolinguistics, etc.) go as far as using variation as a stepping stone to make claims about the nonexistence of core linguistic invariants and grammatical universals in the realms of structure and meaning. More recently, several approaches within the minimalist program have advanced proposals taking dialectal and idiolectal variation in syntactic data as the basis for theories about the nature of the computational component and the triggers for variation and change.

The view defended in this paper considers variation as an intrinsic element of human language. Its emergence is a complex process resulting from the interaction of syntactic (computational) constraints and general patterns guiding linguistic evolution (Nowak 2002). An important goal of syntactic theory is to characterize the ingredients of variation in a systematic fashion. Our specific proposal is to attribute a significant role to the differences in the specification of lexical items and the interaction of syntactic features with syntactic operations. Here we have concluded that locality conditions on Agree can change over time, triggering the emergence of variation in the output. Finally, this paper explains the linguistic constraints regulating gender agreement in an Afro-Hispanic vernacular approximating to a more prestigious Spanish dialect. The process of linguistic variation and change is driven by certain well-known social factors through a path that is determined by syntactic constraints.

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Reception date/Fecha de recepción/Data de recepção: 03/12/2010

Revision date/Fecha de revisión/Data de revisão: 14/04/2011

Acceptation date/Fecha de aceptación/Data de aceitação: 23/07/2011

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