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The present study focuses on the use of Spanish by near-native speakers in the United States. I will consider near-native speakers to be those individuals who speak Spanish as a second language, who are capable of having a complex conversation in that language, who are able to understand any speaker, and who are able to function as professionals using Spanish in their field of work. The near-native speakers for this study consist of clergy and religious sisters from Allentown, Pennsylvania, who incorporate the use of Spanish in their ministry to the Hispanic communities in the United States within the Catholic church. The study examines the use of the indicative vs. subjunctive, the preterit vs. the imperfect, and copula verbs ser *vs.* estar, *in relation to stylistic variables such as type of situation, topic of conversation, and type of discourse.*

The purpose of this investigation is to show the correct use of three grammatical distinctions – indicative vs. subjunctive, preterit vs. imperfect, and *ser* vs. *estar* – in the speech of four near-native speakers of Spanish. Besides examining these three grammatical distinctions, this study also attempts to investigate and quantify the concept of *near-native speaker*. The analysis of the usage frequencies of four near-native speakers of Spanish from Pennsylvania lead to a more accurate and quantitative measure of their performance during a sociolinguistic interview. This investigation also incorporates the correlation of other extralinguistic factors such as topic of conversation, type of discourse, and type of situation with the three linguistic distinctions mentioned above.

Defining *near-native* is as problematic as defining *bilingual*, and the same question can be raised when dealing with both concepts: How "bilingual" or "near-native" is the speaker being examined? While the term *bilingual* continues to be more popular in the non-academic world, the term *near-native* has become commonplace within foreign language departments. Perhaps the term *near-native* tries to solve the unqualified nature of the term bilingual by trying to characterize a speaker who can speak almost as well as a native speaker. Valdés (1998) believes that "it is not surprising that the construct of near-native ability is, itself, extraordinarily complex" (p. 154). This complexity makes "near-nativeness" and the quantification of it a challenge in sociolinguistics and language acquisition research.

The term *near-native* and *superior proficiency* are related, although I do not have evidence to show whether both terms are used synonymously by the ACTFL[1] or by other language institutions such as the Foreign Services. At the school level, these assessment criteria appear to be useful for placing students in appropriate

courses, for accepting a student to a graduate foreign language program, or for proving someone's second language proficiency for a job. Although this system seems to be adequate to categorize a speaker according to his/her level of proficiency in the second language, it falls far short of quantifying the speaker's performance. Indeed, quantifying all the structures may be an impossible task and for that reason certified ACTFL professionals have to rely on subjective observation and rubrics to make an accurate evaluation of the speaker. According to Salaberry (2000), some researchers question the validity of the ACTFL interview "due to the lack of an appropriate theoretical or empirical foundation" (p. 293). Although there is currently not an alternative to the ACTFL proficiency test, the present investigation is an attempt to describe the speech accuracy of an L2 speaker by focusing on three grammatical distinctions in the context of different linguistic situations, types of discourse, and topics of conversation.

Another question to raise, in addition to the question of how to define a near-native speaker, is how the speakers acquired the second language. For students applying to a graduate program in Spanish or who want to prove their knowledge of Spanish, the minimum requirement is that the prospective student have majored in Spanish, although this certification neither proves the student's ability to communicate in the second language nor demonstrates a partial or complete acquisition of the language. Another common proof of "near-nativeness" is if the student has participated in a study abroad program in a Spanish-speaking country or, although less popular, actively participated in a Hispanic community within the United States.

Most second language acquisition studies focus on the first years of study (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). One of the issues investigated, from a sociolinguistic perspective, has been the variability among speakers in a more casual as compared to a more careful situation (Sato, 1985; Tarone, 1983). One of the conclusions presented by these investigators is that there is language variation among people who speak a second language and that there are other extralinguistic factors that affect the language production of non-native speakers. The present study will not focus on phonological variation or on the acquisition mechanisms of a L2 speaker; rather, it takes into consideration the selection of the grammatical categories in question, language variation according to the situation in which the speaker is exposed, as well as the use of different linguistic features by some near-native speakers. The lack of quantitative data to support the notion of near-native speaker makes the present study an attempt to move beyond a simple definition of what a near-native speaker is. This will be accomplished using three grammatical distinctions frequently examined in Spanish sociolinguistic studies. In this sense, these three grammatical distinctions should be taken into account as additional variables to further define the concept of near-native speaker.

METHODOLOGY

The group of near-native speakers for this study consists of two non-Hispanic clergy and two religious sisters (all of them dominant in English) who used Spanish in their ministry within the Catholic church in Hispanic communities. These four speakers, from Allentown, Pennsylvania, participated in this study and their speech was analyzed, taking into consideration three classical linguistic elements studied in Spanish: the use of indicative vs. subjunctive, *ser* vs. *estar*, and preterit vs. imperfect, as well as stylistic variables (topic of conversation, type of discourse, and type of situation). The intent is to show their frequencies for each one of the linguistic elements and to show whether or not stylistic/situational variables influence the speakers' performance. Before selecting a speaker for an interview, at least three other people in the community were consulted about that speaker's performance in the second language. My objective was to corroborate my personal perceptions with more than two other people who see the speaker performing every day. In other words, *near-nativeness* has a social component of acceptance versus non-acceptance by members of the community in which the speaker in question is working.

Bell's (1984) model, style as audience design, which states that speakers design their speech according to the situation or audience, serves as a motivation to examine other factors that may have an effect on language production. This model is important in the sense that it leads sociolinguists to examine language in different situations and to take into consideration various extralinguistic factors that may affect speech. It helps us to understand that native speakers show systematic variation depending on the speech style or situation. A native speaker in a more formal situation, such as an oral presentation or an interview, produces more standard forms than when he/she is in a more informal situation, such as a gathering with close friends; speakers produce more vernacular forms when the addressee is more familiar, when speaking about certain topics, or when narrating rather than arguing about an issue (Medina-Rivera, 1997, 1999; Rickford & McNair-Knox, 1994). Bell's model of responsive production intraspeaker variation looks at the influence of 2nd person addressees and 3rd person addressees (the latter as auditor, overhearer, and eavesdropper). In addition, the model looks at non-audience influences such as setting and topic. These two elements of Bell's model have been incorporated in the present study.

For the purpose of this study, *near-native* is defined as someone

- whose dominant language is English, who speaks Spanish as a second language, and who acquired that second language after the "complete" acquisition of the first language (English), in other words, who was not raised with the two languages at the same time[2];
- who is capable of having a complex conversation, and by complex I mean the possibility of having a conversation about different topics and within different

styles (+/- formal), settings or situations,[3] equivalent to the requirements for a superior level of oral proficiency;

- who is able to understand practically any speaker in that language, not only at a professional level but in an informal setting as well;
- who is able to function as a professional using that language in their field of work, and within a community of speakers of the L2

This definition, as mentioned above, is equivalent to the superior level of proficiency, but it also takes into consideration the way the speaker is using the L2 in the outside world at a professional level and, in this case, within a Hispanic community. Unlike Valdés (1998), I am not interested in near-native speakers within language departments, but rather in other professional settings. Language acquisition studies should take various professional settings into consideration. Whereas language acquisition studies are often limited to the classroom environment, it is also important to observe how people are using their L2 in their working environments.

An important issue in second language acquisition studies is the order in which a speaker acquires the different forms and functions of a language (Zobl, 1982). Zobl states that unmarked features transfer before marked features (i.e., marked = more complex).[4] In this sense, the masculine, the present, and the singular forms are acquired first in the speaker's learning of a second language. Therefore, many Spanish language texts (e.g., *Puntos de Partida, Arriba, Dos Mundos*, etc.) are developed under the same assumption: that the teacher first teaches what is easier to transfer, and assuming that speakers are native speakers of English, the complexities of language forms in a text are in direct relation to English structures and not to other languages. If one looks at a Spanish textbook, it is evident that the uses of *ser* and *estar* are presented before the preterit, that the preterit is presented before the imperfect, and that the imperfect is presented before the subjunctive. Ryan and Lafford (1992) suggest that "for the most part research by L2 investigators has concluded that common stages of acquisition obtain when comparing different languages of origin, children with adults, or different methods of instruction" (p. 714). VanPatten (1985) also suggests that some structures are acquired before others in an L2 speaker, for example, *ser* is acquired before *estar*.

PARTICIPANTS

The four speakers selected for this investigation learned Spanish for a specific reason: ministering to the Hispanic people within the Catholic church setting. All of them use Spanish practically every day and are capable of communicating in different situations: one-on-one conversations with people who come for counseling, in group situations like church meetings, and in more formal situations like preaching or offering religious formation workshops. The four speakers in this study received some basic instruction in Spanish during their college years. The

two female speakers, however, acquired Spanish through several years of service in South America, and through their interaction with the Hispanic community in the Diocese of Allentown. The two male speakers, on the other hand, acquired Spanish in the United States while working in a Hispanic community. Table 1 provides detailed information on the four speakers:

Table 1: Participant Information

Speaker	Years in a Hispanic country	Years working within the Hispanic community in the USA	Years speaking Spanish	Spanish classes	Knowledge of other L2s,and language use
David	0	2	4	Yes [Individual classes]	Polish (4 yrs of schooling) Italian (6 years of schooling; 4 yrs lived in Rome) Currently uses Spanish and English on a daily basis, Italian and Polish for reading purposes
Roberto	0	+30	+30	Yes [5 years in college]	Hungarian (basic conversation at a novice or intermediate level)
Isabel	14 Peru	+30	+30	Yes [6 years of individual classes]	-
María	20 Peru, Chile	+30	+30	Yes [In college] [Individual classes]	-

One of my assumptions before initiating my investigation was that since all the near-native speakers selected for this study use Spanish in different situations, they should be able to style shift like any other native speaker. If this is true, one can compare the language of native and near-native speakers in terms of sociolinguistic variation. My second assumption was that since the *ser* vs. *estar* distinction is generally learned before the preterit vs. imperfect distinction, and the indicative mood is learned before the subjunctive, then what is learned first should also be more ingrained or closer to complete acquisition of the near-native speaker. In

terms of accuracy in speech production, VanPatten (1985, p. 716) suggests that 90% accuracy can be utilized as an indicator of acquisition.

LINGUISTIC ELEMENTS

The three linguistic elements of study for this investigation, as previously mentioned, are three linguistic distinctions that are generally difficult for English speakers of Spanish as a second language: indicative vs. subjunctive, *ser* vs. *estar*, and preterit vs. imperfect. Examples 1-3 show the distinctions for each one of the elements:

Production: The elements below should follow the order presented above: (1) should be indicative and subjective, (2) should be *ser* and *estar*, (3) should be preterit and imperfect.

(1) **Quiero** ir al parque.   Indicative is used in the main
'I want to go to the park.'   clause.

Quiero que tú **vayas** al parque.   Subjunctive is used in a non-
I want you to go to the park.   assertive subordinate clause.

(2) Yo **soy** alto.
'I am tall.'   *Ser* expresses an inherent quality.

Yo **estoy** cansado.
'I am tired.'   *Estar* expresses a state/condition.

(3) Ayer **fui** al parque.
'Yesterday I went to the park.'   Preterit expresses one occasion

Cuando **era** niño iba al parque.
'When I was a child I would go   Imperfect expresses habitual action.
to the park.'

Indicative vs. Subjunctive

The subjunctive mood is practically non-existent in modern English, and an equivalence from one language to the other is not easy to systematize. In an effort to explain the meaning of the subjunctive mood, Klein-Andreu (1975, 1980) distinguishes between "assertion" of the occurrence expressed by the verb for the indicative versus "non-assertion" for the subjunctive. Bergen (1978), continuing with the tradition of finding a simple rule to explain all cases of indicative or subjunctive selection, establishes that the indicative "denotes that the speaker (or actor) of the higher clause regards the proposition expressed by the next lower clause as an objective fact" and the subjunctive "expresses a subjective reservation on the part of

the speaker (or the actor) concerning the reality of that proposition" (p. 221). Bell (1980) criticizes both Klein-Andreu and Bergen for trying to explain all cases with one single rule and suggests "that the scope of the investigation should be widened to include more complex semantic structures" (p. 382). Torres (1989), instead of trying to explain the meaning of the subjunctive forms, shows and explains the way speakers use the subjunctive in different linguistic contexts.

The present investigation shows how near-native speakers of Spanish select the use of the indicative or subjunctive in their oral production. Torres' results serve as a comparative element for the present investigation.

Ser vs. *Estar*

The two copulas *ser* vs. *estar* correspond generally to the verb *to be* in English; *ser* within a frame of "inherent or essential qualities, imperfective, permanent, defining, not susceptible to change, presented within a class frame of reference;" and *estar* characterized by accidental or circumstantial, perfective, temporary, dependent on concrete and/or immediate experience, susceptible to change and presented within an individual frame of reference (Silva-Corvalán, 1986, p. 590). De Mello (1979), in an effort to develop one rule for the use of the copula verb in Spanish, proposes a [-semantic value] for *ser* and a [+semantic value] for *estar* and states that "while *ser* has no semantic value in its attribute role, *estar* has a value beyond that of its function as an attributor" (p. 339). The present investigation is not an attempt to describe the uses of *ser* and *estar*, but rather an effort to observe and quantify what the speaker "does with the copula as opposed to what s/he should be doing" (Ryan & Lafford, 1992, p. 714). VanPatten, in his longitudinal study of 1985, claims that students acquire *ser* before *estar*, "*estar* of location" before "*estar* for condition." Based on Van Patten's study one can expect that the speakers of the present investigation will show higher frequencies of correct uses for *ser* than for *estar*. The results will be compared to those presented by Silva-Corvalán's (1986) speakers from Los Angeles.

Preterit vs. Imperfect

The aspectual distinction preterit vs. imperfect is equivalent to the past tense in English. Although the aspectual distinction exists in English (e.g. *I went* vs. *I was going*), there is no imperfect past in English, and this aspect is expressed by the context of the action by adding phrases such as *used to* and *always*. The preterit is used for complete actions, beginning/end, series of completed actions, time frame, weather events, mental, emotional and physical changes. On the other hand, the imperfect is used for background/description, ongoing actions, habits, time/weather as background, mental, emotional and physical conditions (Zayas-Bazán, Bacon, Garcia, Bacon, & Garcia, 1998). In Spanish narratives, the preterit is used to narrate while the imperfect is used to describe.

Codifing the Items

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed following the same format. In order to evaluate each item as correct or incorrect, I followed my own intuitions as a native speaker of Puerto Rican Spanish. The Hispanic community in Allentown and Bethlehem is predominantly Puerto Rican, and that made it possible for me to make better decisions in terms of what is grammatically acceptable for that specific community. I also took into consideration the specifications presented in a Spanish textbook (*Conexiones*) as well as dialectal variation. For example, Silva-Corvalán (1984) and Klein Andreu (1986) examine the non-standard uses of the conditional in place of the imperfect subjunctive in the Spanish of Covarrubias, Spain. This distinction can also be observed in other varieties of the Spanish spoken in Latin America. Silva-Corvalán (1986) also examines the extension of *estar* in place of *ser* by Mexican speakers living in Los Angeles. In this sense I did not count as incorrect examples such as *Yo iría si podría*, ('I would go if I could') where *podría* takes the position of the imperfect subjunctive *pudiera*; or *La muchacha está bonita* ('The girl is/looks pretty') where *está* is equivalent to *es* (meaning an inherent quality). Even though those examples account for non-standard uses of the language, and might not be typical of Puerto Rican Spanish, all of these forms are possible in the speech of a native speaker. It is important to consider that the Spanish of the United States is influenced by different varieties of Spanish.

Other elements I took into consideration are those examples in which the use of one form or another is based on semantic or pragmatic differences, for example, *Tal vez voy/vaya* ('Maybe I will go'), *Quizás compro/compre* ('Perhaps I will buy'), *Aunque veo/vea* ('Although I see'), *Ayer fui/iba por un camino* ('Yesterday I took/was taking a path'). In all of these cases the difference between the indicative or the subjunctive, or the preterit or the imperfect is not distinct and for that reason either use was taken as correct. Both grammatical acceptability as well as dialectal variation helps to determine correctness vs. incorrectness while analyzing the language of the speakers selected for this study. To codify the data, I included as correct every item in which the speaker used the verb form according to the specification explained above, and as incorrect in every other use. In the majority of such incorrect cases the speakers use preterit in place of the imperfect, indicative in place of the subjunctive, *ser* in place of *estar*, and vice versa. Some examples from the speakers are:

(1) **Indicative vs. Subjunctive   Indicative in place of the subjucntive**
…yo no sé cómo pero, es necesario que la mamá a veces **trabaja**…
…I don't know how but, sometimes it is necessary for the mom to work…
(María)

(2) *Ser* vs. *Estar*   *Ser* **in place of** *estar*
lo mismo que en el espíritu natural de los hispanos, que **es** lleno de, de un espíritu
…similar to the natural spirit of Hispanics, which is full, of, of a spirit… (David)

(3) **Preterit vs. Imperfect**   **Preterit in place of the imperfect**
para mí fue el ejemplo de los sacerdotes y la fe de mi familia, para mi fa milia un sacerdote **fue** una persona, una persona santa, muy importante y muy cerca del señor.
…for me it was the example of the priests and the faith of my family, for me a priest was a person, a holy person, very important and very close to the lord. (David)

     In example 1 the indicative appears in place of the subjunctive (the correct use should be *trabaje*); in example 2 *ser* appears in place of *estar* (the correct use should be *está*); and in example 3 the preterit appears in place of the imperfect (the correct use should be *era*).

     For the present study I quantified the occurrences for the three linguistic distinctions in four speakers, and for each interview (30-45 minutes long, 4100-5200 words) I included four major topics of discussion: religion, family and friends, Hispanic culture, and the use of Spanish as a second language. Each topic consisted of a variety of questions with the intention of producing the four basic discourse genres: narrative, description, exposition, and argumentation.

     Table 2 shows an outline of the interview:

Table 2: Interview Topics

Topic	Type of discourse the interviewer was trying to elicit from the speaker	Questions
Religion	Narrative	Tell me about your calling as a religious person.
	Description	How would you describe your ministry?
	Exposition	What is the role of the church within the United States?
	Argumentation	What is your position on the ordination of women in the clergy?
Family	Narrative	Tell me any story of your childhood.
	Description	Describe your childhood.
	Exposition	How do you see the situation of families today in the United States?
	Argumentation	What is your position on homosexual couples who decide to adopt children?

The Hispanic World	Narrative	Tell me any special story related to your interaction with Hispanics.
	Description	Describe the personality, character and tradition of Hispanics.
	Exposition	What do you think about the socioeconomic conditions of Hispanics today?
	Argumentation	What is your position on the border control of the Department of Immigration?
Language	Narrative	Tell me any funny incident during the time you were learning Spanish.
	Description	How would you describe your Spanish?
	Exposition	What do you think about your experience as a bilingual person?
	Argumentation	What is your position concerning the English Only movement?

In order to determine the type of discourse, I took into consideration the pattern of development or strategy that the speaker used to express the main idea (Kirszner & Mandell, 1995, p. 35). For example, an idea can be expressed by exposing details, giving a definition, analyzing a process or situation (expository), telling a story (narrative), describing an object, a person or a sensation (description), or through a dialogue based on claims and arguments (argumentation). Taking these elements into consideration allowed me to codify the dialogues according to the type of discourse the speaker was producing. The questions in Table 2 were used to elicit different types of discourse for each one of the topics selected for the interview. All speakers went through the same interview format. I eliminated those occurrences in which the type of discourse was not clearly stated.

RESULTS

The following tables present the percentages of correct usage for each of the grammatical distinctions. Total frequency indicates the instances of obligatory contexts in which the target forms were required in the speech data, "the correct use" indicates the instances in which the speaker used the correct form, and "percentage correct" indicates the percentage after dividing "correct use" by "total frequency." Since I am not grouping all the speakers – as it is in the case of many sociolinguistic studies (Rickford & McNair-Knox, 1994 is an exception) – but rather analyzing their speech individually, I did not submit the data to statistical analysis. For that type of analysis I would need three to four hours of conversation for each speaker in order to have enough tokens to run a program such as VARBRUL.[5]

Indicative vs. Subjunctive

During the course of the interview two of the speakers mentioned difficulties with the use of the subjunctive as stated by María in the following quote:

(1) *me gusta mucho español, me gusta leer, me gusta rezar, muchas veces yo rezo en español, leo la Biblia en español, pero quizá estoy un poquito floja realmente en subjuntivo, todavíayo tengo problemas con eso...*

'I like Spanish, I like to read, I like to pray, many times I pray in Spanish, I read the Bible in Spanish, but perhaps I'm really a bit slow in the subjunctive, I still have problems with that...'

Often mastering the use of the subjunctive is a challenge for upper level students; it is also a sign of frustration and what students call the most difficult element in Spanish grammar. Table 3 shows the frequencies for the indicative and the subjunctive for the four speakers in this study:

Table 3: Total and Correct Frequencies for the Indicative and the Subjunctive

Speaker	INDICATIVE			SUBJUNCTIVE		
	Total Frequen-cies	Correct Uses	**Percentage Correct**	Total Frequen-cies	Correct Uses	**Percentage Correct**
Isabel	435	434	**99.8%**	7	6	**85.7%**
María	401	399	**99.5%**	11	4	**36.4%**
Roberto	418	416	**99.5%**	8	8	**100%**
David	281	279	**99.2%**	3	2	**66.7%**

As shown in Table 3, the four speakers selected the indicative correctly in most of the cases, and three of the speakers used the subjective correctly more than 60% of the time. Torres's (1989) study of first- and second-generation speakers of Puerto Rican Spanish are comparable to these findings, showing a standard subjunctive usage of 94.8% and 84.1%, respectively. The first-generation speakers used the subjunctive in over 90% of the cases in 9 of the 10 categories, whereas the second-generation used the prescribed subjunctive 90% of the time in 5 of the 10 categories (usage fluctuates from 53% to 100% for each of the categories). Moreover, Torres shows that native speakers of Spanish (i.e., the first-generation participants in her study) do not use the prescriptive forms of the subjunctive in all instances. In a similar fashion, we cannot expect near-native speakers of Spanish to show 100% correctness in their usage of the subjunctive.

Table 3 shows that María has a correct usage of the subjunctive in 36% of the cases. María, as mentioned in the previous quote, is very self-conscious about her difficulties with the subjunctive. However, not being able to produce it correctly does not appear to limit her ability to understand it in context, which may be facilitated through her habitual reading in Spanish (a factor to consider in further investigation). It is also important to mention that the subjunctive is not as frequent as the indicative in sociolinguistic interviews or in natural conversation. For the

present study the relationship between the subjunctive and the indicative fluctuates from 1 subjunctive per 36 indicatives to 1 subjective per 93 indicatives.

Since my data is more limited than that of Torres (1989) (she included 10 speakers), I was unable to divide my occurrences of subjunctive into syntactic/semantic categories at this time; however, this study confirms Torres's observation that the influence of English does not seem to reduce the usage of subjunctive among speakers, almost certainly because mood selection is primarily determined by syntactic factors.

Another difference with Torres's (1989) study, and perhaps with many other sociolinguistic studies, is that all speakers form a group as members of the same linguistic community and the results are presented as a whole. In the present study the results for each speaker are presented individually, because the purpose is not to show patterns of language variation as in Torres's study, but to show the ability of near-native speakers to behave similarly to native speakers in their linguistic performance, as evidenced in the speech of Roberto and Isabel.

Ser vs. *Estar*

In general, the the correct uses of *ser* and *estar* were very high for all of the speakers (see Table 4 below).

Table 4: Total and Correct Frequencies for *Ser* and *Estar*

Speaker	SER			ESTAR		
	Total Frequencies	Correct Uses	**Percentage Correct**	Total Frequencies	Correct Uses	**Percentage Correct**
Isabel	62	62	**100%**	39	39	**100%**
María	48	48	**100%**	69	68	**98.6**
Roberto	81	79	**97.5%**	28	28	**100%**
David	73	72	**98.6%**	21	13	**61.9%**
Silva-Corvalán 1986[6] (27 speakers)	555	555	**100%**	623	279	**45%**

The selection of *ser* and *estar* reaches percentages of 100% or close to 100% for all of the speakers, with the exception of David's percentage of *estar* of 61.9%. VanPatten (1985) requires a 90% accuracy as a threshold to indicate acquisition. David has been speaking Spanish for fewer years than the other speakers, and his results align with VanPatten's observation that *ser* is acquired before *estar* (VanPatten, 1985, p. 400). It is also important to take into consideration that David is fluent in Italian where the verb *essere* (similar to Spanish *estar*) has replaced most of the instances of *stare* (similar to Spanish *ser*), and *stare* has a very limited use.

Table 4 also includes Silva-Corvalán's (1986) results for three generations of Mexican/Mexican American speakers showing a 45% correct usages of *estar* and 100% for *ser*. Silva-Corvalán observed that for the Mexican dialect the verb *estar* is extended to contexts which in other dialects favor the verb *ser*. This innovative use of *estar* is generally extended to adjectives of size, physical appearance, age, evaluation, sensory character, description (non-animate) which typically favor the verb *ser* in other dialects of Spanish. The uses of *ser* and *estar* may therefore vary from one Spanish variety to another, and in Silva-Corvalán's study, the extension of *estar* does not seem to be motivated only by the speakers' contact with English, but also by dialectal differentiation. In the present study the four speakers are primarily in contact with Puerto Rican Spanish, where the extension of *estar* does not follow the same innovative pattern presented by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in Silva-Corvalán's study.

Preterit vs. Imperfect

Table 5 indicates that the near-native speakers in this study use the preterit correctly more often than the imperfect:

Table 5: Total and Correct Frequencies for the Preterit and the Imperfect

Speaker	PRETERIT			IMPERFECT		
	Total Frequencies	Correct Uses	**Percentage Correct**	Total Frequencies	Correct Uses	**Percentage Correct**
Isabel	102	99	**97.1%**	66	47	**71.2%**
María	50	49	**98.0%**	69	56	**81.2%**
Roberto	96	96	**100%**	73	56	**76.6%**
David	45	43	**95.6%**	57	41	**71.9%**
Montrul 2002	Monolinguals		**100%**	Monolinguals		**100%**
	Simultaneous Bilinguals		**89.9%**	Simultaneous Bilinguals		**95.43%**
	Early L2		**99.56%**	Early L2		**91.69%**
	Late L2		**92.75%**	Late L2		**100%**

While the correct use of the preterit shows percentages above 95% for all of the speakers, the imperfect shows correct percentages below 82% (i.e., below the 90% required by VanPatten). It is significant that the frequency of occurrence of the imperfect is higher than the subjunctive and *estar*; 265 occurrences of the imperfect, compared to 157 for *estar* and 29 for the subjunctive. Therefore, the speakers must negotiate the use of the imperfect much more frequently, and for that reason there is more opportunity for errors.

Reid (1977) presents the French equivalent to the Spanish imperfect – the *imparfait* – as the most challenging grammatical element in the French language. One of the factors, he claims, causing this difficulty is that "the use of the impar-

fait is influenced by its opposition to other tenses" (p. 59), tenses that he does not specify. However, in the present study I observed that the opposition only exists within the boundaries of the preterit vs. imperfect, in other words, an aspectual boundary. No problems were detected within the use of the pluperfect or the perfect indicative (other past tenses in Spanish) among the speakers I interviewed, perhaps because their uses/functions are almost identical to those in English. Montrul (2002) indicates in her study that "perfective morphology appears first" in L1 and L2 speakers, and concludes that "the large majority of studies of Spanish have been set out to corroborate this proposal" (p. 44). Montrul and Slabakova (2000) discuss the difficulties in acquiring the aspectual distinction; however, they state that "advanced L2 learners can eventually acquire the subtle semantic properties of Preterite and Imperfect aspectual tenses" (p. 544). The speakers in the present investigation, with frequencies of correct usage above 70%, are not far away from complete acquisition. However, it is important to remember that three of the speakers have been speaking Spanish for over 30 years, suggesting that Montrul and Slabakova's conclusions may be overly optimistic.

STYLISTIC VARIABLES

The stylistic variables included in this study are topic of conversation, type of discourse, and type of situation. The frequencies and percentages for topic of conversation and type of situation are presented in Table 6 (the percentage indicates the percentage correct, and the numbers in parentheses indicate correct frequencies/total frequencies, respectively):

Table 6: Percentages Correct According to the Topic and Type of Discourse

DISCOURSE	Indicative	Sub-junctive	Ser	Estar	Preterit	Imperfect
Narrative	99.6% (556/558)	**71.4%** (5/7)	98.8% (80/81)	**93.8%** (45/48)	99.0% (199/201)	84.5% (136/161)
Description	99.7% (378/379)	75.0% (3/4)	100% (72/72)	96.6% (28/29)	96.9% (62/64)	**58.7%** (54/92)
Exposition	99.3% (303/305)	81.8% (9/11)	100% (55/55)	**92.5%** (37/40)	100% (19/19)	88.9% (8/9)
Argumenta-tive	99.3% (291/293)	**42.9%** (3/7)	96.4% (54/56)	95.0% (38/40)	77.8% (7/9)	**66.7%** (2/3)

TOPIC	Indicative	Sub-junctive	Ser	Estar	Preterit	Imperfect
Religion	99.4% (353/355)	80.0% (4/5)	96.9% (62/64)	**87.2%** (34/39)	97.8% (89/91)	**76.0%** (57/75)
Family/ Friends	100% (320/320)	**42.9%** (3/7)	98.6% (72/73)	93.1% (27/29)	94.7% (54/57)	**68.5%** (63/92)

Hispanics	99.2% (481/485)	81.8% (9/11)	100% (72/72)	100% (60/60)	100% (90/90)	86.0% (43/50)
Language	99.7% (374/375)	**66.7%** (4/6)	100% (55/55)	93.1% (27/29)	98.2% (54/55)	77.1% (37/48)

Although more data is needed to show strong tendencies, it is possible to observe that both the narrative and the argumentative discourses, as well as the topics involving family/friends and religion produced the lowest frequencies of correct use (the lowest frequencies in each category are marked in bold). It should be noted, however, that these categories do not include many cases on which to base any substantial claims. On the other hand, exposition and description as well as the topics concerning Hispanics and language show the highest frequencies of correct uses.

Medina-Rivera (1997, 1999) showed that narratives are more likely to produce non-standard forms in speech due to their dynamics and tempo, as well as the emotional load that narratives generally carry. However, contrary to the results of the present study, Medina-Rivera also revealed that argumentation is likely to produce more standard forms because these forms are slow in tempo and require more mental processing since the speaker is putting into evidence his/her values and beliefs. But the same level of stress that leads native speakers to produce more standard forms can have a counter effect on non-native speakers. Description and exposition discourses in both studies have high frequencies of standard/correct forms.

Some topics, especially those that are more familiar to the speakers, also produced more non-standard forms as demonstrated in Medina-Rivera (1997, 1999), and in Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994). In the present study, the topics of family/friends and religion produced the lowest frequencies of correct use. Talking about family and friends may not be as stressful as producing narratives, which carry a high emotional load. Such emotionally laden discourse may lead to less careful language use than other topics. The topic about religion is the center of existence for all of the speakers that I interviewed, considering that two of them are priests and two are religious sisters, making that topic very familiar for all of them. Contrary to expectations, it was the topic of Hispanics that produced the highest percentages of correct uses. Possibly, since the interviewer was Hispanic, the speakers were very careful in their judgments and opinions toward Hispanic people and their culture. Furthermore, since all four speakers are advocates of Hispanics in their communities, that topic is likely a very serious issue for all of them.

Besides topic of conversation and type of discourse, I also examined the type of situation. Only two speakers, the priests, were recorded in two situations: an interview and a homily[7] (non-read). The homilies were also audiotaped and transcribed by the investigator. The frequencies are shown in Table 7:

Table 7: Percentages Correct According to the Type of Situation

Speaker/ Situation	Indicative	Subjunc- tive	Ser	Estar	Preterit	Imperfect
Roberto						
Interview	99.5% (416/418)	100% (8/8)	97.5 (79/81)	100% (28/28)	100% (96/96)	76.7% (56/73)
Homily	100% (87/87)	66.7% (2/3)	100% (19/19)	100% (3/3)	100% (3/3)	100% (4/4)
David						
Interview	99.2% (279/281)	66.7% (2/3)	98.6% (72/73)	61.9% (13/21)	95.6% (43/45)	71.9% (41/57)
Homily	100% (158/158)	51.9% (14/27)	96.9% (31/32)	92.3% (12/13)	-	100% (1/1)

In general, during the homilies the two speakers produced the highest percentages of correct uses for almost all of the categories. In the case of the subjunctive, both Roberto and David show lower correct frequencies, but it is important to take into consideration 1) that the production of the subjunctive was more limited throughout all the recordings and 2) the limited cases from which to draw conclusions.

Although the homilies were not read by the priests, there was more oppor-tunity for preparation and organization of ideas in comparison to the interview. For the homily there is also a larger audience, the situation is more formal, and clarity is essential. This confirms Bell's (1984) idea that speakers design their style according to the audience. In earlier studies (Medina-Rivera, 1997, 1999) I examined three different situations – group, interview, oral presentation – where the group situation was the least formal and the oral presentation was the most formal. The results showed that the least formal situation was more likely to pro-duce non-standard forms in the speech of young Puerto Rican professionals and college students, demonstrating that all speakers are able to produce more or less non-standard forms depending upon the situation.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the selection of three grammatical distinctions in four near-native speakers of Spanish who use the language daily as part of their min-istry to Hispanic communities. The distinction, *ser* vs. *estar*, showed the highest percentages of correct forms, while the subjunctive and the imperfect seem to be more challenging in their speech production. The results support VanPatten (1985), Ryan and Lafford (1992), Montrul (2002), Montrul and Slabakova (2000) by showing that some grammatical distinctions are acquired before others (indica-tive before subjunctive, *ser* before *estar*, and perfective before imperfective). One can also hypothesize that the *ser – estar* distinction is probably learned first, then

the indicative — subjunctive and finally the preterit – imperfect. However, more investigation is needed to support this possibility.

I also examined stylistic variables to show that some discourse genres (narrative and argumentative discourse in opposition to description and exposition), as well as some topics (family/friends and religion in opposition to Hispanic people/culture and language), and one situation (interview in opposition to homily) produced the lowest percentages of correct forms. The results for topic of conversation and for type of situation support Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994) and Medina-Rivera (1997, 1999) and are an extension of Bell's (1984) non-audience design factors. The results for "type of discourse," however, seem to contrast with those presented in Medina-Rivera (1997, 1999). Very few sociolinguistic studies incorporate extralinguistic factors such as type of situation, topic of conversation, and type of discourse. Further investigation is therefore needed to establish more definite tendencies and provide a comparative set of data.

In terms of language learning, it is important to mention that the two priests in the present study acquired their Spanish by living and serving the Hispanic community in the United States, and not by a total immersion experience in a Spanish-speaking country. However, as observed in the previous sections, their percentages of correct forms are comparable to the two religious sisters who lived several years in South America. This finding therefore has implications for the way Spanish learners may acquire their second language. With an increase in the Hispanic population (over 40 million according to the Census Bureau), the possibility of looking at the United States as an authentic setting to learn Spanish is becoming more and more feasible. I am not disregarding the study abroad experience for our students; nevertheless, a similar type of immersion experience is also possible in the United States by working, in this case, ministering within a Hispanic community. Both Roberto and David, the two priests who participated in this study, suggest that learning Spanish at a near-native proficiency is possible within the United States. In fact, the United States has the fifth largest population of Hispanics in the World (after Mexico, Spain, Colombia and Argentina). In addition, Hispanics make up 40% of American Catholics. In this sense, the U.S. provides enough exposure and authentic language input and interaction for people to learn Spanish.

All of the speakers (with the exception of María's percentage of correct uses of the subjunctive) showed percentages of correct forms above 60%. One must consider that for some varieties of Spanish, due to dialectal differences, many native speakers would not reach 100% if they were submitted to the standards of prescriptive grammar, as is the case of the near-native speakers of the present study. This observation is supported by the following studies that examined native speakers: Torres (1989), Silva-Corvalán (1986), and Montrul (2002).

VanPatten (1985) suggests that 90% accuracy is an indicator of acquisition, and the speakers of the present study demonstrated above 90% correct for three or more of the six grammatical distinctions. Roberto demonstrated 90% or above in five of the six distinctions (his lowest was the imperfect with 76.6%), Isabel

and María demonstrated 90% or above in four of the categories (with 85.7% and 36.4% for the subjunctive, and 71.2% and 81.2% for the imperfect, respectively), and David demonstrated 90% or above in three of the categories (with 66.7% for the subjunctive, 61.9% for *estar,* and 71.9% for the imperfect).

The interviews in this study were not intended to function as a language proficiency test or as a substitute for the ACTFL interview; however, examining speech about different topics, in varying discourse genres and situations is an alternative way of showing how close a non-native speaker could be to a native speaker in terms of oral proficiency. Although this study only includes the examination of three grammatical distinctions, it is still a reflection of the speech of four L2 speakers of Spanish. From a functional point of view, all four speakers might be considered near-native speakers because they are immersed within a Hispanic community and are capable of communicating in Spanish with very few problems. Moreover, they are able to express themselves in a variety of situations, about a variety of topics, and are able to understand people in the community and to be understood when communicating in Spanish. The format of the interview addresses some of the major concerns presented by Salaberry (2000) who argued one must experiment with "a wide range of interaction formats" that represent "real-life situations" (p. 299). Not many studies incorporate the use of other situations, besides the informal interview. By looking at more types of situations, sociolinguists may have a better perspective on language use and language variation.

The present investigation has limitations in the number of tokens for each one of the grammatical distinctions (especially for the subjunctive). In order to elicit more cases of subjunctive in an informal interview the researcher would need to record each participant for three to four hours. It would be interesting to experiment with other situations (e.g. a meeting, a pastoral counseling session) or registers (e.g. a letter, a composition). These are directions for the future; however, the present investigation examined the language of near-native/superior speakers, taking into consideration extralinguistic variables that have an effect in language production.

NOTES

[1] The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) provides specific assessment criteria to determine the proficiency level of speakers of a second language (novice, intermediate, advanced, and superior). Using an interview format, a certified professional determines the proficiency level in terms of global tasks and functions, context/content, accuracy, and text type. A speaker at the superior level is expected to discuss topics extensively, support opinions and hypothesize, deal with linguistically unfamiliar situations, interact in a formal or informal setting, have a wide range of topics of conversation, have no pattern of errors in basic structures, or errors that interfere with communication, and show extended discourse.

[2] This distinction is important to avoid confusion with the term heritage language speaker. That term refers to speakers who are fluent or have been exposed to two languages since

childhood (i.e. English and another language), who learned that language within the family environment, with the possibility of being accentless in both, but without the level of acquisition and performance of a native speaker of that other language.

[3] This might be equivalent to the level of superior established by the ACTFL.

[4] There are different definitions of markedness, and some of them seem to be contradictory; however, for the purpose of this investigation I am referring to the definition Zobl presents in his paper.

[5] VARBRUL is perhaps the most frequent statistical program used by sociolinguists/variationists in their investigations.

[6] In her study, Silva-Corvalán refers to the frequency of innovative uses, which in her cases was 55%. Here I am referring to the correct uses (100 - 55 = 45).

[7] A homily is what people used to call the "sermon" or preaching. Some priests read their homilies, but in the Hispanic churches it is more common not to read. Some priests and deacons bring just an outline.

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