

## ON THE MEANINGS AND FUNCTIONS OF GRAMMATICAL CHOICE: THE SPANISH FIRST-PERSON PLURAL IN WRITTEN-PRESS DISCOURSE

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### Abstract

Grammatical persons and their variable referential scopes play an important role in the configuration of discourse and in the achievement of communicative goals. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the use of the Spanish first-person plural from the viewpoint of morphosyntactic choice and style construction. The study focuses on clauses with unexpressed subjects, which in the case of *nosotros* 'we' are by far the more frequent option. A written-press corpus is analyzed whose materials are distributed into five different textual genres, while participants are characterized through two psychosocial features: Socioprofessional identity and gender. The overall frequencies of first-person plural subjects, as well as the rates of audience-exclusive vs. -inclusive uses, are calculated according to each external factor. Subsequent qualitative analysis shows that the choice of the first-person plural situates discourse in an intermediate zone along the continuum from subjectivity to objectivity, helping to shape an intersubjective perspective, most clearly in its inclusive uses. It is also concluded that the qualitative, interactional facet of linguistic choice is by no means independent of statistical variation patterns: Both types of data contribute to the understanding of morphosyntactic choices as creative stylistic resources.

**Keywords:** Morphosyntactic variation; Grammatical person; Subjects; Personal deixis; Written-press discourse; Style.

### 1. Introduction: Variation, meaning and style<sup>1</sup>

Far from traditional views of linguistic style as involving a choice among sets of different socially marked lexical alternates (Joos 1961), as well as from the focus on phonetic realizations as the clearest indicators of (in)formality (Labov 1966, 1972 and

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most subsequent variationist literature), today grammatical constructions tend to be seen as the elements that most significantly characterize situational variation in languages (cf. Biber & Conrad 2009; Serrano & Aijón Oliva 2011). Their particular features also make them especially interesting for analyses of variation and style. In contrast with most lexical words, they are contextually versatile and can achieve relatively high frequencies in discourse. In contrast with sounds and phonemes, they are endowed with discursive meanings and can carry out pragmatic functions. There is every reason to believe that linguistic variation, rather than constituting a mere matter of frequency and co-occurrence - these being its most evident external manifestations -, should be viewed as indexing the existence of different ways of expression, involving not just structural but also semantic and pragmatic differences.

The hypothesis can be put forward that each grammatical form has a unique meaning not exactly matching that of any other one, not even that of its purported 'variants' or 'alternatives' (Aijón Oliva 2011: 25-26). Many authors working on different theoretical lines offer perspectives on the essential iconicity of grammar (cf. Langacker 1987, 2009; Goldberg 1995; Croft & Cruse 2004; Wulff 2006; García 2009; among others). Nevertheless, iconicity is not absolute - otherwise we should expect all languages to be basically identical - but rather is intermingled with more arbitrary or conventional rules (cf. Givón 2001: 34ff). This means that the implications of grammatical choice cannot be fully understood outside a particular social and interactional context.

The task of investigating the social and pragmatic effects of morphosyntactic constructions in relation to their intrinsic meanings is in accordance with the goals of cognitive sociolinguistics, which aims to extend the study of individual cognition into that of social or collective cognition (cf. Kristiansen and Dirven 2008). What is more, the statistical distributions of linguistic forms across social groups and situations might not just be due to their psychosocial evaluation, but also to their meanings and pragmatic functions, which would cause them to be preferred within certain situations and by the types of speakers participating in them (Finegan & Biber 2001).<sup>2</sup> Thus, if 'style' is to be understood as the construction of personal and social identities in interaction through communicative choices (cf. Coupland 2007; Auer ed. 2007; Eckert 2008, etc.), it seems obvious that meaningful morphosyntactic constructions can be used as powerful stylistic tools.

However, the study of communicative styles is still in great need of theoretical and analytical development (cf. Selting 2009). As pointed out by Rickford & Eckert (2001: 5), styles and registers are usually approached as co-occurrence patterns of variables across large corpora; but style primarily stems from particular interaction, which makes it necessary to complement quantitative approaches with qualitative ones (Virtanen 2010: 55). Correlational patterns could hardly be independent of particular communication instances: The large-scale psychosocial values of linguistic forms are realized as well as progressively reformulated in interaction. A much more comprehensive notion of *choice* itself is probably needed. Choice is not, as generally assumed by structural and variationist approaches, the mere process of selection among

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<sup>2</sup> The hypothesis that social and situational styles are quantitatively differentiated by preferences in meaning and not just form was already put forward by Lavandera (1978) in her criticism of structural, non-semantic approaches to morphosyntactic variation.

a limited number of formal alternatives. Rather, it should be seen as the human potential to creatively construct meanings within communicative contexts, a notion that can also be inferred from current research on style and identity. It is often impossible - and probably not necessary - to ascertain how many communicative options a speaker had at his/her disposal in a particular context; it may be much more productive to analyze each linguistic form in itself and the meanings it helps create when it is chosen.

Starting from such premises, the present study will investigate first-person plural clause subjects as meaningful grammatical choices in the Spanish language and within the specific domain of the written press. As is known, subject pronouns and person verb inflections are deictic units with the power to orientate the interpretation of discourse (see Section 2 below). The first-person plural perspective will be approached as a stylistic resource that may help participants construct discourse while they display some personal and professional identity. More specifically, the study aims to answer the following questions:

- What is the basic meaning of the first-person plural as a morphosyntactic and discursive choice?
- Are first-person plural subjects unequally frequent across textual genres and social groups in the written press?
- If so, can the statistical patterning of the construction be explained according to the meanings it generates in particular contexts?

We shall start by addressing the meaning of the first-person plural as a discursive perspective in Section 2. In Section 3 we specify the main features of the corpus, the situational and psychosocial factors to be analyzed, and the methodology employed. Section 4 investigates the correlations between first-person plural subjects and written-press genres, and discusses the main functions served by the former in particular contexts. The same type of analysis is conducted in relation to social-group variation in Section 5. Finally, in Section 6 the fundamental conclusions of the study are summed up.

## **2. The first-person plural in Spanish**

In most languages, first- and second-person pronouns possess a special pragmatic and cognitive status, to the point that they are readily to be assimilated to the pronominal forms (cf. Bhat 2004: ch. 1). They are not discursive substitutes for noun phrases, but deictic units directly signaling their extratextual referents, whose presence in the interaction is presupposed whether they become explicit or not. Siewierska (2010: 42) points out their higher cognitive accessibility in comparison with third-person referents, which tend to be verbalized more often whenever they come into the focus of attention.

As for Spanish *nosotros* 'we', and contrary to what the structural paradigm of grammatical persons may lead to assume, it is not simply the plural form of *yo* 'I' (cf. Rivarola 1984: 205-206; Serrano 2011: 96-98). At an abstract level, this person indexes a plurality in which the speaker is always included in some way - though, as shall be demonstrated, the implications of such inclusion can be quite varied. According to

Alarcos (1980: 209), the first-person plural is used to designate “the first person and other non-first persons”.<sup>3</sup> Almela (2000: 5-10) views it as meaning “the plural speaker”, irrespective of the specific participants involved in the interaction. Even if *yo* were ‘the speaker’ and *nosotros* ‘the speakers’, the latter would promote a much more diffuse interpretation of referents.

It thus seems clear that the first-person plural has quite different semantic traits from those of its apparent singular counterpart. In contrast to the usual deictic transparency of *yo* and, to a lesser extent, *tú* ‘you (sing.)’, *nosotros* is what could be termed an *opaque deictic* unit (Satorre Grau 2002: 355). The identification of its particular reference needs to be locally made, and sometimes it is not even necessary (cf. Posio 2012: 343). Such natural indefiniteness makes it possible for the first-person plural to generate multiple meanings in context. In fact, it can even have the interlocutor as its primary referential scope, in cases like *How are we today?*, e.g. when uttered by a doctor to a patient (cf. De Cock 2011 on this particular use in Spanish and English). But even in such contexts the speaker, by choosing the plural perspective, will be suggesting his/her own implication in the content expressed. Speakers can be assumed to use the first-person plural in order to reach out of themselves towards an extended notional sphere; this form thus reflects an iconic unfolding rather than a mere plurality of the *I*.

In our view, the basic meaning of this choice - the indexation of a reference where the speaker is always included, but that somehow is wider than him/her - can help explain its statistical distribution as a clause subject as well as its communicative potential in particular contexts. Descriptive grammatical studies have long noted some manifestations of such potential, even if seldom seeking a general explanation for them. From Bello (1860: 55) to the latest grammar by the Real Academia (2009: 1173), a variety of uses of the first-person plural in expository and argumentative, mainly written texts have been observed. Example (1) shows one such case, with the author using first-person plurals across his argumentation (*recordemos* ‘let us remember’, *ya conocemos* ‘we are quite aware’).<sup>4</sup>

- (1) *Recordemos* al psicópata A. Hitler o al sanguinario Stalin, sin olvidar a otros monstruos antidemocráticos. ... También Hitler llegó al poder democráticamente, y ya *conocemos* la catástrofe que protagonizó. (Opinion piece. *La Gaceta*, 11/05/04: 5)

‘Let us remember the psychopath A. Hitler or the bloodthirsty Stalin, not to mention other antidemocratic monsters ... Hitler too was democratically elected to power, and we are quite aware of the catastrophe he caused.’

The aforementioned grammar by the Real Academia connects this typical authorial use to a more general ‘sociative plural’, intended to assimilate the viewpoint of the speaker/writer to that of the audience. In a similar vein, the first-person plural has been traditionally characterized as a ‘modesty’ or ‘politeness’ trait when its actual referent is the speaker him-/herself, who would be trying to ‘hide’ behind a less compromising plural perspective. Example (2) shows a typical case in which the author of an expository-argumentative text avoids direct self-indexation (i.e. *seguiré*

<sup>3</sup> Our translation of this and any other quotes and examples in Spanish.

<sup>4</sup> See Section 3 for the description of the corpus used in this study.

*explicando* ‘I’ll explain this further’) through a plural form.

- (2) ¿Un galimatías?... ¡No!, simplemente un ejemplo de los recursos de nuestro idioma. *Seguiremos explicándonos*. (Opinion piece. *El Adelanto*, 08/20/04: 5)

‘Is this gibberish? No—just an illustration of the rich resources of our language. *We’ll explain* this further.’

We can also mention historical uses of the first-person plural such as the so-called *majestic* one (i.e. the ‘royal *we*’ of English), supposedly reserved for people from royalty or the church, and which is virtually nonexistent in contemporary Spanish (cf. the discussion of a well-known example in English by Richards 2006: 4).

But all such impressionistic characterizations are rather unsystematic and do not suffice to capture all the communicative complexity of first-person plural perspectives. These can index the wish of the speaker to depersonalize content, to identify him-/herself with some human group, or to seek agreement with his/her addressees, among other interactional goals (cf. Stewart 2001; Posio 2012).<sup>5</sup> Deeper analysis is needed in which both quantitative and qualitative considerations are taken into account, in order to outline a more realistic and accurate description of first-person plural subjects as stylistic resources.

In this study, the referential variability of these subjects will be viewed as a particularly important matter of communicative choice. Specifically, the focus will be put on the variable inclusion of the audience within their referential scope. Usually, the meaning of the clause and/or its discursive context make it possible to differentiate between what will be termed *audience-inclusive* vs. *-exclusive* uses (cf. also De Cock 2011: 2763; Serrano 2011). Examples (1) and (2) above can be taken to illustrate them respectively. In the first one, the writer includes both him-/herself and his/her supposed readers as the clause subject. On the other hand, in exclusive contexts like (2) the writer actually refers to him-/herself or - more commonly - to some group for which he/she acts as a representative, but to which the audience is external. There are also occasional ambiguous cases where reference tracking is probably not even required; these are more coherently classified as inclusive, since there is no apparent intention on the part of the speaker to signal a particular group.

### 3. Corpus and methodology

The textual materials used in this study come from the written section of the *Corpus de Lenguaje de los Medios de Comunicación de Salamanca* (MEDIASA).<sup>6</sup> All texts in this section are instances of local written-press discourse from Salamanca, a Spanish town in

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<sup>5</sup> When discussing the English first-person plural *we*, Helmbrecht (2002: 45) similarly points out that, rather than alluding to specific referents, it is often intended to establish a social and emotional link with the interlocutor (see also the different studies collected in Duszak ed. 2002). Langacker (2009: 126) notes that its lack of referential transparency makes it possible for it to be used as an impersonalizing resource.

<sup>6</sup> The whole text of the corpus is published as an appendix to Aijón Oliva (2006). It includes a parallel section of transcribed local radio programs that will not be analyzed in the present study.

the center-west of the Iberian Peninsula with a registered population of 152,048.<sup>7</sup> The texts were collected during the years 2003 and 2004 from randomly chosen printed issues of the three main local journals: *La Gaceta*, *El Adelanto* and *Tribuna*. These are all daily general newspapers combining information, opinion and discussion of various local matters. Ideologically, whereas *La Gaceta* is a relatively conservative newspaper that often aligns itself with the policies of the local right-wing administration, the other two journals are usually critical of such policies. The three of them also include abundant non-local materials - regional, national and international information - provided by news agencies; however, these materials were not considered for inclusion in the corpus, in order to limit its geographical and thematic scope. All authors of the texts are residents in Salamanca or its metropolitan area.

The corpus comprises 348 different texts, adding up to a total 150,582 words. The size and internal structure of the corpus have been designed to facilitate the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches in the study of linguistic variation and choice. Despite being obviously small, it is expected to provide sufficient amounts of morphosyntactic tokens and thus allow for fairly reliable statistical calculations; but, at the same time, its limited size should make it possible to observe and discuss the particular circumstances and contextual motivations for *each* of those tokens. The corpus was collected in the same community where the author resides and after extensive observation within the specific domain of local mass-media communication, specifically through a series of interviews between the author and newspaper editors and writers, who in some cases also offered the possibility to watch their everyday working dynamics first-hand, including the collection of information as well as the composition and editing of texts. This complies with the growing need to enrich the study of linguistic variation with detailed ethnographic and interactional research, as put forward by Eckert (2000, 2008), Bucholtz & Hall (2005) and others.

The texts are classified into five different textual genres. In turn, participants are characterized according to two different psychosocial traits: Socioprofessional identity and gender. Let us now go through these factors as they are manifested in the texts of the corpus.

### 3.1. Textual genre

Genres can be understood as patterns of communicative interaction with recognizable purposes, and whose particular situational characteristics - channel, relationship between participants, topics discussed and so forth - are more or less recurrent within a given community. Yet the degree of specificity in these respects is itself rather variable: There are strictly defined genres where little formal and thematic variation is allowed, as well as other, much looser ones. The relevant genres within a community or interactional domain should be ethnographically discovered and characterized, always taking into account that the formalization of genres entails some degree of abstraction, and that we may find texts not readily to be assimilated to one particular category. In compiling the MEDIASA corpus, a distinction was made between five written-press

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<sup>7</sup> Data from January 2012, according to the Spanish Instituto Nacional de Estadística (www.ine.es).

genres, based not only on the formal layout of texts and the section of the journal where they appeared, but also on the typical co-occurrence of some textual and interactional features that we will now briefly discuss:

- *News items*. This is the most prototypical genre within the local written press. Its goal is to inform of very recent events, their actors, causes and consequences, usually adopting an inverted-pyramid structure whereby information is presented in order of decreasing importance. News items are expected to be as informational and objective as possible, with no reference to the writer's viewpoint. The use of first- and second-person verb forms is practically limited to direct-speech interpolations within the main text.
- *Stories*. They are mainly informational-narrative texts written by journalists, and as such their textual features approach those of news items. However, they are usually distinguishable from the latter by their length and expository detail - offering abundant supplementary materials such as images, statistics and related discussion - as well as their lack of urgency: They address everyday matters, recent social trends and changes, etc., rather than last-minute facts. They also allow for a somewhat wider array of discursive perspectives and expressive choices.
- *Opinion pieces*. These are argumentative texts usually authored by people possessing some kind of social or intellectual prominence. They cover a wide range of topics, from politics and economy to reflections on the past or just everyday anecdotes, but always regarded from the personal viewpoint of the writer. A wide variety of expressive resources is found, often with strong literary elaboration.
- *Letters to the editor*. Their topic range and their mainly argumentative orientation are analogous to those found in opinion pieces. However, their authors are not journalists nor socially prominent people writing by invitation, but particular citizens who want to express their opinion on some matter, or report on some fact for public knowledge. Letters also tend to be much shorter and straightforward, with fewer digressions and less varied resources.
- *Interviews*. This last genre has some relationship to oral communication, since the texts stem from previously recorded conversations between a journalist and someone whose expertise or opinions are considered relevant. However, the rigid distribution of speech turns and the recurrent question-answer structure clearly distinguish interviews from more prototypical spontaneous oral interaction. Also, the possibility of introducing grammatical, lexical and textual changes in the process of editing into written language must not be overlooked.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, the concept of 'authorship' is problematic in a corpus of written-press discourse, since the editor in chief and other journalists working for the newspaper have the chance to edit any texts and quotations by others. However, the inquiries conducted within the local journalistic scene indicate that formal alteration of opinion pieces and letters to the editor is seen as justified only in cases of evident spelling or grammatical mistakes, or when such texts need to be abridged in order to fit within the page. In the case of interviews, the re-ordering or editing out of excerpts may also be occasionally necessary for the latter reason. Anyway, such procedures are unlikely to condition the distributional tendencies of grammatical choices such as the one under study.

From the preceding descriptions it can be inferred that written-press genres are differentiated along a number of functional continua, including literacy vs. orality, objective information vs. writer involvement, and degree of stylistic freedom (cf. also Biber 1988; Biber & Conrad 2009). Even if it is not the goal of the present study to discuss each of those dimensions in detail, they are all likely to interact with grammatical choices.

Table 1 shows the word counts and the number of texts and different authors in each of the five genres.<sup>9</sup>

<i>Genre</i>	<i>Word count</i>	<i>Number of texts</i>	<i>Number of different authors</i>
News items	59,651	126	53
Stories	30,314	48	30
Opinion pieces	30,128	65	39
Letters to the editor	15,201	67	56
Interviews	15,288	42	63

Table 1. Word count, number of texts and of authors in each textual genre

### 3.2. Psychosocial features

#### 3.2.1. Socioprofessional identity

Observation of the local written press reveals some recurrent ways of self-presentation by participants, partly imposed by the very textual genres they take part in. These will be termed *socioprofessional identities*, referring to more or less specific aggregates of personal features and interactional roles. Each one is characterized by a set of communicative rights and obligations, and is in fact what justifies someone's participation in the written press - he/she may be a hired journalist whose job is to inform the audience, a guest whose appearance is considered relevant for some reason, an 'ordinary' person voicing the opinions and concerns of the street, etc. Four basic identity types have been distinguished:

- *Journalists*. The professionals of mass communication can be thought to hold a

<sup>9</sup> The different sizes of the genres aim to reflect their unequal share in local newspapers as a whole, even if the actual proportions are not intended as being strictly accurate. For example, letters to the editor do not usually take up more than half a page in a printed issue, but they are still quite interesting as a textual genre, so it seems desirable to have a sufficient sample of them.

In the case of interviews, both the interviewer and the interviewee are considered as 'authors', since discourse is necessarily constructed through the interaction between them, which explains why the number of authors in this genre is higher than with other texts. But, of course, the interviewer's words and those of the interviewee were differentiated in terms of the psychosocial features under study.



dominant position in media discourse, having the chance to control what reaches readers and how it reaches them. However, their power is countered by the social exposure inherent to their job - they work for a presumably large, heterogeneous and mostly unknown audience that will inevitably judge their professional performance. Thus they are often obliged to display images of efficiency, education, neutrality, etc., with reflections on their expressive choices.

- *Public figures*. This is a more heterogeneous group, comprising people not professionally devoted to media communication but who are invited to participate in it. These include intellectuals who write opinion pieces, as well as prominent people responding to an interview or whose words are quoted within informational texts: Entrepreneurs, artists, sportspersons, advertisers, representatives for companies and associations, etc. Just like journalists, they often seem to be guided by the purpose of displaying a personal image of professionalism; however, they also enjoy a greater degree of expressive freedom, given their usual position as guests.
- *Politicians*. These include participants presenting themselves as political-party or trade-union representatives. They could have been included in the previous group; the decision to treat them separately is based on the peculiarities of their interactional behavior - characterized by an explicit orientation to persuasive communication - as well as on their conspicuous social profile in the community. Obviously, politicians tend to be highly aware of the stylistic potential of their linguistic choices (e.g. Blas Arroyo 2003).
- *Private individuals*. Finally, this group comprises people who only take part in media interactions circumstantially and often on their own initiative: Authors of letters to the editor or passers-by being interviewed by reporters. Their occupations and social affiliations are not always made clear, and sometimes not even their names are mentioned.

It is worth stressing that these categories do not imply a 'vertically' stratified view of social structure, as is typical of correlational linguistic studies. The expected communicative differences among the groups will be related to their interactional prerogatives and duties in particular contexts rather than to socio-economic power, even if direct relationships can of course exist between both domains. It is also quite likely that the same speaker may adopt various identities and make different expressive choices depending on the communicative situation and on his/her own goals. However, it would be necessary to have the same people participate in a variety of written-press genres in order to study the latter aspect in depth.

### 3.2.2. *Gender*

This is one of the psychosocial features most often assessed in correlational inquiries, partly due to its physically objective basis. However, as has long been pointed out, it makes little sense to regard gender from a merely biological or at best sociostructural viewpoint. It is in fact a complex psychosocial construction, subsuming all that it means

to be a man or a woman in a particular social setting. Modern research on language and identity has repeatedly shown that gender is above all an interactional category undergoing continuous construction and reformulation (e.g. Edwards 2009: 134; Coates 2011: 272). In other words, conclusions on the relationship between language and gender cannot be drawn solely from the quantitative assessment of male vs. female usage, since this is likely to reinforce prejudices and overgeneralizations such as the frequent view of women as linguistically more conservative, or of men as reinforcing in-group solidarity through their speech. The consideration of linguistic choice within its context is always crucial in order to appropriately assess gender differences (Eckert 1989: 247; Cameron 1993: 3). The present study will also discuss whether a morphosyntactic choice such as first-person plural subjects might be related to gender construction in discourse.

In most texts of the corpus, the gender of the participants can be straightforwardly identified through their first names; only a few pieces in the subsections of letters and news items could not be classified according to this factor, either because they were anonymous or because they were signed by a group of people, e.g. the editorial staff or some association. However, these texts were still labeled according to textual genre as well as to socioprofessional identity.

The number of male vs. female participants across the corpus is unequal, as are those of members in the different socioprofessional categories - for example, in news items and stories the authors are always journalists, while this group never shows up in letters to the editor. The numerical distribution of the psychosocial features analyzed is shown in Table 2.

<i>Genre</i>	<i>Journalist</i>	<i>Public figure</i>	<i>Politician</i>	<i>Private ind.</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
News items	53	0	0	0	23	27
Stories	30	0	0	0	8	22
Opinion pieces	9	29	1	0	31	8
Letters to the ed.	0	6	4	46	42	12
Interviews	19	31	5	8	33	30
<i>Total</i>	111	66	10	54	137	99

Table 2. Distribution of authors' psychosocial categories across the five genres

### 3.3. Methodology

In the study of linguistic variation, although it is sometimes the case that all formal alternatives in a given context can be listed, it proves rather more common - especially at non-phonological levels - to find non-discrete sets of structurally and meaningfully related options. Language is less a succession of causes and effects than a process of

dynamic, creative construction. The idea that speakers/writers will opt for a form based on its contrast to other ones may prove reductionist, overlooking the multiple, subtle contextual meanings choices may generate in discourse (Aijón Oliva & Serrano 2012). Thus, instead of measuring percentages and/or probabilities of constructions in relation to alleged alternatives, it may be more fruitful to calculate their overall frequencies according to some external measure, such as word or clause number (cf. Macaulay 2009: ch. 7 on some applications of this procedure). Since it is not clear that the first-person plural perspective can be described as a variant entering into opposition with some other ones, this kind of analytical approach seems reasonable.<sup>10</sup>

Also, it must be taken into account that Spanish is a language where the subject's non-expression is usually much more frequent than its expression, and even more so in written discourse - only 24 out of 638 first-person plural clauses in our corpus have an expressed subject (3.76%). Therefore it is not items of the pronoun *nosotros*, but of verbs with the *-mos* first-person plural inflectional ending and no overt subject that we will be calculating. The special stylistic values of the expressed first-person plural subject will have to be addressed in subsequent research (cf. also Serrano 2011 on expression vs. non-expression of first-person plural subjects).

In order to know how many tokens of the construction are produced per each 1,000 words, it will suffice to use the following formula:<sup>11</sup>

$$\text{Frequency index} = \frac{\text{Number of tokens} \times 1,000}{\text{Word count}}$$

This index provides an objective basis for comparison among textual genres and psychosocial groups, making it possible to ascertain the degree to which each of them resorts to first-person plural subjects. The statistical significance of the results will be assessed through the Mann-Whitney *U* test when comparing just two groups - e.g. male vs. female authors - , and the Kruskal-Wallis *H* test when comparing more than two groups. These are the respective non-parametric alternatives to Student's *t* test and the analysis of variance, and have been chosen due to their higher reliability when the distribution of the data cannot be assumed to be strictly normal.<sup>12</sup>

A further step will be to calculate the percentages of audience-exclusive vs. -inclusive uses of the first-person plural, also according to each of the situational and social factors considered. In this case the data, which entail the comparison of two

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<sup>10</sup> The traditional variationist methodology - based on the comparison among different structural choices - is only adequate when all possibilities in a given context can be exhaustively listed. This may be the case with the alternation between the expression and non-expression of Spanish subjects (e.g. *Él llamó / Llamó* 'He called') or between their preverbal and postverbal placement when expressed (e.g. *Él llamó / Llamó él*). But the situation is clearly different when investigating the choice of clause subject: There is little point in trying to decide how many and which choices would have been possible in each discursive context.

<sup>11</sup> Calculating frequencies per 1,000 words is of course a methodological choice. It has the advantage of generally producing values above 1 while being adequate for research on smaller corpora.

<sup>12</sup> The statistical analyses have been carried out with the aid of the software packages IBM SPSS 20 and SOFA Statistics 1.3.2. See Macaulay (2009: 80ff) for an illustration of the use of the Mann-Whitney *U* test for the analysis of normalized frequencies of linguistic choices.

nominal variables, will be subjected to Pearson's chi-square tests in order to check their significance.

However, it must be pointed out that, in an approach to variation that focuses on stylistic creativity, statistical tests should be viewed as a methodological aid to an analysis aimed at transcending the description of quantitative patterns and explaining the meaning of linguistic choice in context. All quantitative patterns found will therefore have to be discussed and interpreted alongside the qualitative analysis of particular excerpts from the corpus. The main goal is to determine how the meaning of the grammatical form under study relates to its selection in particular contexts as well as to its quantitative patterning across social and situational categories. This way, it should be feasible to start paving the way towards a global and explanatory view of morphosyntactic choice and communicative styles.

#### 4. The first-person plural across the discursive continuum

Table 3 shows the frequency of first-person plural subjects per 1,000 words in each of the textual genres in the corpus. These data are also graphically represented in Figure 1.

<i>Textual genre</i>	<i>Word count</i>	<i>Items of first-person plurals</i>	<i>Frequency per 1,000 words</i>
News items	59,651	93	1.56
Stories	30,314	65	2.14
Opinion pieces	30,128	201	6.67
Letters to the editor	15,201	118	7.76
Interviews	15,288	137	8.96
<i>Total</i>	150,582	614	4.08

Kruskal-Wallis  $H$  test:  $H=23.077$ ; degrees of freedom: 4;  $p<0.001$

Table 3. First-person plural subjects and written-press genres

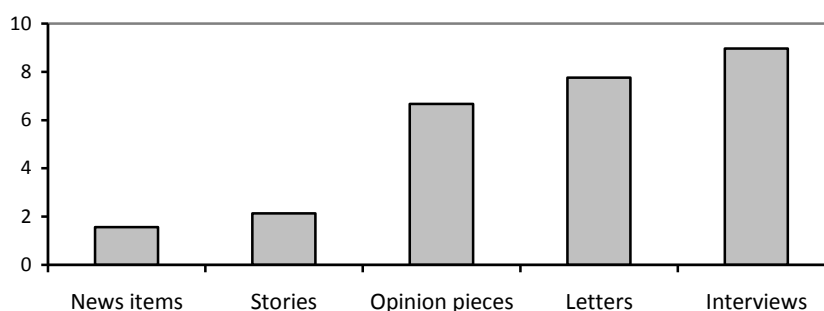


Figure 1. Frequencies of first-person plural subjects per 1,000 words across written-press genres

Even if the genres might seem to follow two different basic tendencies regarding the indexation of first-person plurals - with news items and stories on one side, and opinion pieces, letters and interviews on the other - , the application of statistical tests within each group shows that their internal differences can also be considered significant at a 99% confidence level ( $p=0.002$ ;  $p=0.009$  respectively). Altogether, what the results suggest is that the grammatical choice under study is related to functional dimensions of genres such as orality, writer involvement and argumentation or persuasion. The genres with the lower scores are in fact those closer to the prototype of informational written discourse - stories and especially news items - ; the contrary happens with those more oriented to personal involvement and argumentation - opinion pieces, letters and interviews.

One possible way to explain the situational distribution of the first-person plural, and particularly its low frequency in informational written genres, would be to assume that this form helps anchor discourse in a subjective perspective. This is a feature that is most probably shared with all other first- and second-person deictic forms. The notion of *subjectivity* denotes the tendency to build discourse around the direct participants, and particularly the speaker, rather than third-person, often inanimate referents (cf. Langacker 1987: 131ff; Hopper & Traugott 2003: 3; Croft & Cruse 2004: 62-63, among others). Conversely, the suppression of personal indexations and the displacement towards the third person tend to enhance *objectivity*, which entails focusing more on the external reality than on speakers themselves (cf. Albentosa & Moya 2000; Farrar & Jones 2002: 6). When writers choose to adopt a first-person plural perspective where a third-person or impersonal one would also be possible, they are suggesting some involvement of themselves as well as others - that is, discourse is de-objectivized. Examples (3) and (4), presenting similar thematic contexts, make it possible to compare the impersonal perspective of a journal story (*se pueda pasear* 'one/people can take a walk') with the first-person plural one of a letter (*podamos disfrutar* 'we (all) can enjoy').

- (3) [El parque] sólo necesita que pasen unos años para que crezcan enredaderas y *se pueda pasear* a la sombra. (Story. *La Gaceta*, 08/12/04: 16)

'The park just needs some years for its vines to grow, so *people can take a walk* in the shade.'

- (4) Que esta pequeña crítica a tan magna obra sirva para todos *podamos disfrutar* de la glorieta sin percances. (Letter to the editor. *El Adelanto*, 07/29/04: 6)

'May this small criticism of such a great construction be of help so that *we all can enjoy* the roundabout without risks.'

In fact, however, such a link between the use of the first-person plural and subjectivity is at best a part of the picture. Its simple characterization as a 'subjective' choice would not explain why it often seems intended to avoid the straightforward personalization suggested by *yo* 'I' and first-person singular inflection, particularly in more authorial genres like opinion pieces and letters to the editor. In Section 2 above we

alluded to the resource termed ‘sociative’ plural, aimed to assimilate the viewpoint of the writer to that of the readers, as well as the ‘modesty’ plural, whereby the author avoids direct self-indexation in discourse together with the personal responsibility it may entail. Similarly, in (4) above it could be argued that the author is attributing to the community at large what is just a personal wish. However, these are but contextually triggered manifestations of a more general discursive and cognitive meaning. What the choice of a plural rather than singular first-person subject actually seems to index in all these cases is a move towards *intersubjectivity*, understood as the construction of a shared perspective between speakers/writers and their audience, geared towards convergent knowledge of the world (e.g. Nuyts 2001: 39, Scheibman 2007: 133, Sidnell 2010: 12). Mutual understanding is not guaranteed by virtue of a shared set of symbols, but rather must be continuously achieved through the work of those engaged in a communicative act (Crossley 1996: 82); this is especially evident in deictic forms such as personal pronouns, whose reference can constantly change and needs to be re-identified with each context. Whereas intersubjectivity has been studied mostly within conversational exchanges, Haddington (2007: 309) points out that this dimension may appear in any kind of discourse.

The first-person plural subject can often be seen as a communicative choice aimed to align or assimilate the perspective of the speaker/writer with that of the audience. Whereas the first-person singular indicates a personal stance, the plural suggests interpersonal involvement, which can be interpreted as (possibly feigned) shared responsibility. This is patent in the following example, where the author adopts a first-person plural perspective to indicate that the need to ‘open the door’ to immigrants concerns readers as well as himself.

- (5) El drama de la inmigración está ahí. Lllaman a nuestra puerta y *hemos de abrirla*. De lo contrario, *perderemos* humanidad y sosiego. (Opinion piece. *La Gaceta*, 01/29/04: 5)

‘The drama of immigration is out there. They are knocking on our door and *we must open* it. Otherwise *we’ll lose* our humanity and our peace of mind.’

Starting from the preceding discussion, a discursive continuum can be proposed from subjectivity through intersubjectivity to objectivity, with the different grammatical persons occupying different areas along it (cf. also the considerations of Heritage 2007). As the grammatical perspective moves away from the speaker him-/herself, discourse will become increasingly less subjective. Figure 2 is intended to illustrate this continuum with the paradigm of Spanish subject pronouns.

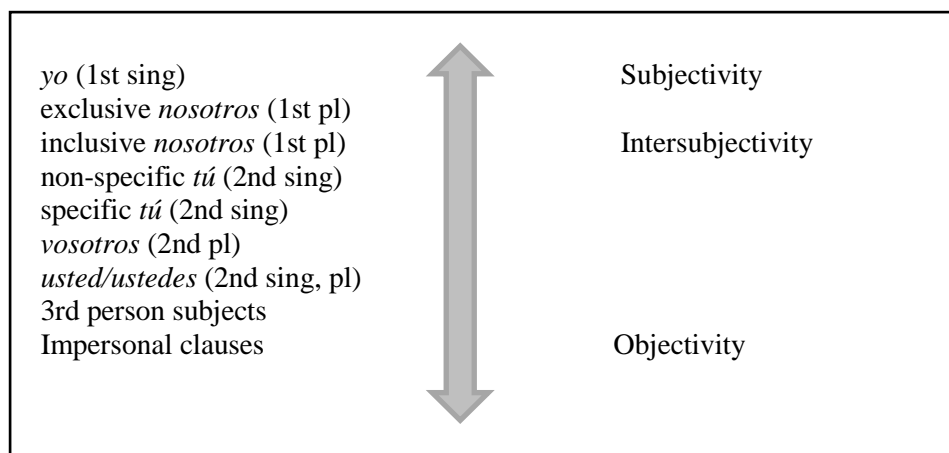


Figure 2. Grammatical persons across the subjectivity-intersubjectivity-objectivity continuum

It is important to stress the gradual nature of the notions considered; each grammatical person is viewed as embodying each of them to different degrees. Nuyts (2001: 306) points out that there are no clearcut limits between subjectivity and intersubjectivity - the latter might also be seen as a particular facet of the former. In any case, it seems sensible to view intersubjectivity as placed in an intermediate zone between the poles of subjectivity and objectivity, and as most clearly related to audience-inclusive *nosotros* and, to a lesser extent, to non-specific *tú* 'you'.

In effect, the singular second person, when used with a non-specific reference in order to expose speakers' experiences or stances (see example 6), can be thought to take the intersubjective perspective of inclusive *nosotros* a further step towards objectivity, given that in this case there is no formal indexation of the speaker (cf. also Serrano & Aijón Oliva, in press). The next step along the continuum would be specific second persons (example 7), whereby discourse is constructed from the perspective of a particular interlocutor and no speaker involvement is implied anymore. Even so, focusing on the interactional partner will be a more intersubjective and less objective choice than focusing on third persons.<sup>13</sup>

- (6) Cuando en pleno siglo XXI *abres* el grifo de la cocina de tu casa y no sale agua sólo *puedes acordarte* de la familia de los responsables. (Letter to the editor. *La Gaceta*, 06/26/04: 6)

'When *you run* the kitchen tap well into the 21st century and no water comes out, *you can't help* sparing a thought for the families of those responsible.'

- (7) Por segundo año consecutivo *superaste* la fase local de la Olimpiada, y ahora la

<sup>13</sup> It is also interesting to comment on the second-person pronoun *usted* and its plural *ustedes*, which are usually described as the respective 'formal' or 'polite' variants of *tú* and *vosotros*. Coming from noun phrases meaning 'your mercy' (cf. Penny 1993: 138-140), they cause third-person agreement in the verb, which results in the indexical displacement of discourse away from the interlocutors and thus in higher objectivity. García (2009: ch. 1) views these subjects as a special grammatical person that she labels *II'* and places between the second and third ones.

regional, *¿te lo esperabas?* (Interview. *La Gaceta*, 06/04/04: 20)

‘For the second year in a row *you’ve won* the local phase of the [Math] Olympiad, and now the regional phase as well. *Did you expect this?*’

As regards the first-person plural, its wide referential variability is responsible for the fairly broad segment of the continuum it covers. Reference to audience-exclusive and clearly specified groups will be close to the domain of the first-person singular, whereas more general plural reference such as that in example (4) above will approach the less subjective perspectives of second and third persons. However, the fact that the speaker is always indexically included in *nosotros* (cf. Section 2) necessarily establishes a difference with them as well. This is why the meaning created by this choice in discourse is best described as intersubjective, and particularly so in audience-inclusive contexts, where the writer and his/her audience appear as merged.

It is also necessary to analyze the specific frequencies of audience-exclusive vs. -inclusive uses in each of the five genres, which are displayed in Table 4. There are three genres where exclusive uses account for more than 80% of the total items - news items, stories and interviews - and two where inclusive ones are more frequent, although to different degrees - opinion pieces and letters. Figure 3 shows the relative proportions of exclusion vs. inclusion in each of the genres, which are obtained by comparing the observed and expected values in each cell.

<i>Textual genre</i>	<i>Audience exclusion</i>		<i>Audience inclusion</i>	
	#	%	#	%
News items	82	88.2	11	11.8
Stories	56	86.2	9	13.8
Opinion pieces	37	18.4	164	81.6
Letters to the editor	52	44.1	66	55.9
Interviews	115	83.9	22	16.1

Pearson’s chi-square test:  $\chi^2=228.211$ ; degrees of freedom: 4;  $p<0.001$

Table 4. Audience exclusion vs. inclusion and textual genres



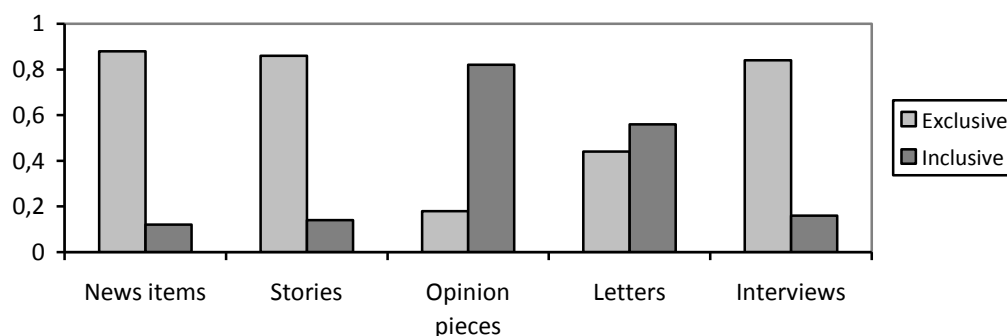


Figure 3. Proportions of audience inclusion vs. exclusion according to textual genre

When comparing particular genres, the difference between news items and stories turned out to lack statistical significance ( $\chi^2=0.141$ ;  $p=0.787$ ), just like that between stories and interviews ( $\chi^2=0.166$ ;  $p=0.684$ ). In other words, the management of the reference of first-person plurals across these three genres seems to follow a common pattern.

The results can be explained by comparing the functional and thematic features of the genres under study. Audience-inclusive plurals seem to be perceived as an adequate perspective for written discourse that combines exposition with persuasive intent. On the other hand, first-person plural subjects in interviews usually appear when someone is talking on behalf of a particular group in which neither the interviewer nor the readers are included. This is also frequent in letters to the editor; but the strong argumentative orientation of this genre, just like that of opinion pieces, makes inclusive uses more common.

An interviewee often speaks on behalf of a group or corporation whose activities or ideology he/she is assumed to (re)present. In example (8), the owner of a music store details the type of activity carried out by him and his employees.

- (8) *Llevamos en este sector desde el año 1966. Nuestra actividad esencial se basa en el sector de la música, en el que tenemos, además de una gran experiencia, una enorme variedad, que va desde la música clásica hasta lo más nuevo en el mercado. (Interview. El Adelanto, 12/12/03: 18)*

*'We've worked in this sector since 1966. Our activity is essentially centered on music, a field in which we have much experience and offer a huge variety of materials, from classical works to the latest releases.'*

For their part, the more informational genres - news items and stories - usually stick to a third-person or impersonal stance, whereby the use of the first and second persons is confined to direct-speech interpolations analogous to the kind of discourse found in interviews. This is illustrated by example (9), where the words of a basketball coach representing his team are quoted.

- (9) Sobre el rival declara que "cada partido es diferente y todavía *estamos* muy cortos de

gente, pero si *lo sacamos* adelante *habríamos cumplido* uno de nuestros objetivos y *podríamos igualar* nuestra mejor racha de triunfos”, finalizó. (News item. *La Gaceta*, 01/31/04: 54)

‘As for their upcoming rivals, he states that “each game is different and *we are* still short of players, but if *we* only *made* it *we’d* achieve one of our goals and *we’d* match our best win-run so far,” he concluded.’

On the other hand, the use of first-person plurals across the main text of these pieces seems possible only when presenting stances as rather commonplace and hardly debatable, such as the notion that modern society is strongly materialistic (example 10), an opinion that is intersubjectivized, that is, built into (assumed) shared knowledge through audience inclusion. Obviously, it would be even harder to find exclusive uses in such contexts.

- (10) La sociedad consumista en la que *vivimos* hace que muchas personas se equivoquen y piensen que la compra de una mascota viva no es muy diferente a la de un pantalón o un juguete: una simple cuestión de dinero. (Story. *El Adelanto*, 07/12/04: 12)

‘The materialistic society in which *we live* leads many people to assume wrongly that buying a living pet is not so different from buying pants or toys—that it is just a matter of money.’

The analysis carried out and the examples reviewed across this section suggest that the identity and communicative stance adopted by writers in each context can often be as relevant as the textual genre itself. Through the use of the first-person plural, it is possible to position oneself as the representative of a given group, just as it is possible to elude direct responsibility on the content of the discourse or to achieve other goals directly related to self-presentation. Taking this into account, the following section will be devoted to the stylistic construction of personal identities through morphosyntactic choice.

## 5. The first-person plural and the situated identities of participants

The different frequencies of first-person plural subjects across genres could be related to the identities displayed by people within the communicative acts in which they engage. As explained in Section 3.2, two different psychosocial features will be analyzed: Socioprofessional identity and gender.

### 5.1. Socioprofessional identity

The authors of the written texts of the MEDIASA corpus were classified into four different groups, namely *journalists*, *public figures*, *politicians* and *private individuals*. As regards the overall frequencies of first-person plural subjects (see Table 5), politicians achieve the highest score, followed at some distance by two groups with quite similar frequencies - public figures and private individuals - , whereas this choice

is very rare in the writing of journalists, with only 0.36 items per 1,000 words. The results are graphically represented in Figure 4.

<i>Socioprofessional group</i>	<i>Word count</i>	<i>Items of first-person plurals</i>	<i>Frequency per 1,000 words</i>
Journalists	98,817	36	0.36
Public figures	28,429	297	10.45
Politicians	5,306	86	16.2
Private individuals	18,030	195	10.81

Kruskal-Wallis  $H$  test:  $H=16.897$ ; degrees of freedom: 3;  $p<0.001$

Table 5. First-person plural subjects and socioprofessional groups

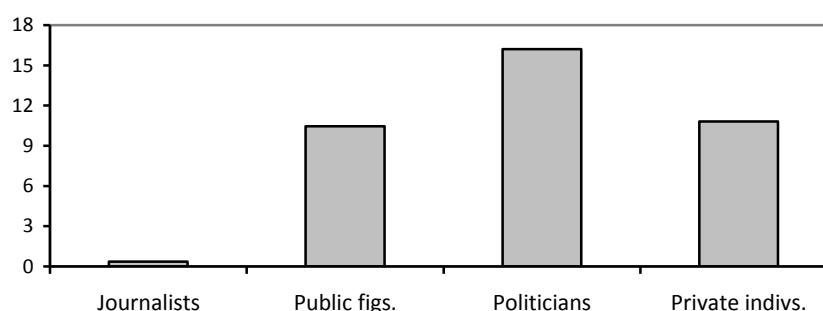


Figure 4. Frequencies of first-person plural subjects per 1,000 words across socioprofessional groups

The frequencies obtained by public figures and private individuals are, however, quite close. In fact, a Mann-Whitney  $U$  test conducted on these two groups showed that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected at a 95% confidence level ( $p=0.076$ ). In turn, politicians and journalists show quite opposite tendencies regarding the choice under study.

The socioprofessional presentation of participants is obviously quite related to the kinds of personal identities that are predefined or favored by the textual genres in which they engage. This is especially evident in the case of journalists, whose very low score is no doubt related to the kinds of texts they usually write, i.e. news items and stories (see Section 4). They will generally adopt an objective - rather than subjective or intersubjective - perspective, which may at the same time come to be perceived as a feature of their writing style. In turn, the first-person plural is most often used by politicians, who seem to perceive it as a means of indexing membership in some group, be it their specific political association - in which case there is no inclusion of the

audience - or the larger community. In the following utterances from an interview, we can find instances of both types of reference.

- (11) Los salmantinos *nos movilizamos* porque no *queríamos* que nada se perdiera. ... Lo bueno que tiene un partido como el PP es que no todos *tenemos que pensar* lo mismo. *Somos* un partido con libertad de expresión y pensamiento y en lo fundamental hay unidad. (Politician. Interview. *La Gaceta*, 06/02/04: 27)

‘We, the Salamanca people, *mobilized* because *we did not want* to be deprived of [some historical documents] ... The good thing about a party such as the PP is that *we all don’t need to think* the same. *We are* a party whose principles are grounded in freedom of speech and thought, and there is general agreement on them.’

First, the speaker seeks to identify himself with the concerns and demands of the local community by suggesting his own involvement in a series of public demonstrations (*we mobilized*; *we did not want*). Later, when talking about his own party, the repeated use of the first-person plural is in accordance with the image of internal cohesion he intends to display (*we are a party whose principles*, etc.).<sup>14</sup>

As acknowledged before, it is difficult to detach the social identities and interactional goals of speakers from the textual genres in which they take part. However, in our view the important point to be made is that journalists, through their almost total lack of first-person plural indexations, do not just obey the communicative demands of certain genres, but at the same time display the kind of professional image they consider most appropriate in those particular contexts. Such indexations, even with a diffuse reference as is often found in opinion pieces - being variably interpretable as ‘we, the public’, ‘we Spaniards’, etc. - , would likely suggest ideological bias and subjectivity, which are obvious countervalues for information professionals. In turn, relatively high rates of first-person indexation are in accordance with the ways of self-presentation usually sought by private individuals, as well as intellectuals and other public figures, when writing public argumentative texts. This largely explains the close similarity in their respective frequencies of first-person plurals. In example (12), employees at a public hospital relate the difficulties of their work and the scarce support provided by the administration. In (13), a university professor discusses how educators are forced to deal with declining levels of knowledge among their students.

- (12) Poco les importa si *tenemos que doblar* turno, si *perdemos* nuestros descansos, o si *tenemos que hacernos* cargo de 30 pacientes en el turno de noche. (Private individual. Letter to the editor. *La Gaceta*, 06/09/04: 8)

‘They don’t care much if *we need to do* double shifts, if *we miss* our rest periods, or if *we need to take care* of 30 patients during a night shift.’

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<sup>14</sup> We could go further and propose that the transition from one group to another in the course of the interview might suggest a very subtle identification between them. In other words, the political group and the local community would be implied to be much *the same*, and the speaker would represent both simultaneously (see also example 13 below).

- (13) Hoy no *podemos dar* por sabidos conocimientos culturales básicos que, años atrás, tan solo merecían una ligera mención por parte del profesor universitario, de manera que muchas veces *tenemos que descender* de nivel si *queremos* que los alumnos entiendan cuestiones que *podemos calificar* como elementales. (Public person. Opinion piece. *La Gaceta*, 12/12/03: 5)

‘Today *we cannot presuppose* even the most basic cultural knowledge with our students ... so *we are often obliged to simplify* our exposition if *we want* them to understand points *we can consider elementary*.’

In the latter excerpt, the writer seems to perform a subtle referential transition from an exclusive first-person perspective - referring to university professors - to a more diffuse one in the last clause: In *points we can consider elementary*, the first-person subject is more likely interpreted as an instance of the inclusive plurals typical of expository and argumentative discourse, implying that anyone reading the text, not just professors, will consider such points elementary. This way the author would be reducing the subjectivity of her particular argumentation and drawing readers to agree with it by suggesting a shared perspective on the facts. Such a rhetorical move follows the opposite direction to the one discussed in example (11) above; in that case, the political representative started from inclusion - alluding to the whole community - and then focused on his own group as a part of it, with the likely intention of sending a message to potential voters. Both excerpts offer different illustrations of how the referential variability of the first-person plural, together with the oscillation between subjectivity and intersubjectivity, can help achieve particular communicative goals.

The calculation of frequencies of exclusive vs. inclusive uses also offers very interesting results (see Table 6). Whereas inclusion is dominant in the writing of journalists and - to a much lesser extent - in that of public figures, a strong orientation towards exclusion is observed with private individuals and especially politicians. Figure 5 represents the relative proportion of each variant with each socioprofessional group.

<i>Socioprofessional group</i>	<i>Audience exclusion</i>		<i>Audience inclusion</i>	
	#	%	#	%
Journalists	7	19.4	29	80.6
Public figures	137	46.1	160	53.9
Politicians	69	80.2	17	19.8
Private individuals	129	66.2	66	33.8

Pearson's chi-square test:  $\chi^2=59.818$ ; degrees of freedom: 3;  $p<0.001$

Table 6. Audience exclusion vs. inclusion and socioprofessional groups

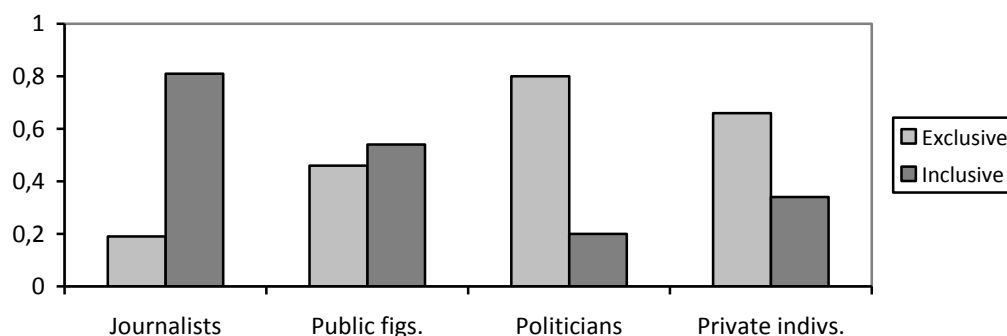


Figure 5. Proportions of audience inclusion vs. exclusion according to socioprofessional group

The results are fairly different across the four groups, and even in those that appear to be closer - politicians and private individuals - , the null hypothesis can be rejected ( $\chi^2=5.684$ ;  $p=0.017$ ). As for public figures vs. private individuals, it turns out that, while both have practically the same tendency towards first-person plural indexation (recall Table 5), they have partly different communicative goals, the latter group more assiduously making use of audience exclusion. All this can be taken as a reflection of the communicative preferences discussed above, and supports the notion that first-person plural subjects are a discursive choice involved in the creation of identity styles.

## 5.2. Gender

Frequency differences could also be hypothesized in relation to the situated identities each gender group tends to unfold. The results are in fact quite remarkable, as shown in Table 7 and Figure 6.

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Word count</i>	<i>Items of first-person plurals</i>	<i>Frequency per 1,000 words</i>
Male	75,527	463	6.13
Female	66,547	132	1.98

Mann-Whitney *U* test:  $U=0.0$ ;  $Z=2.611$ ; two-tailed  $p=0.009$

Table 7. First-person plural subjects and gender

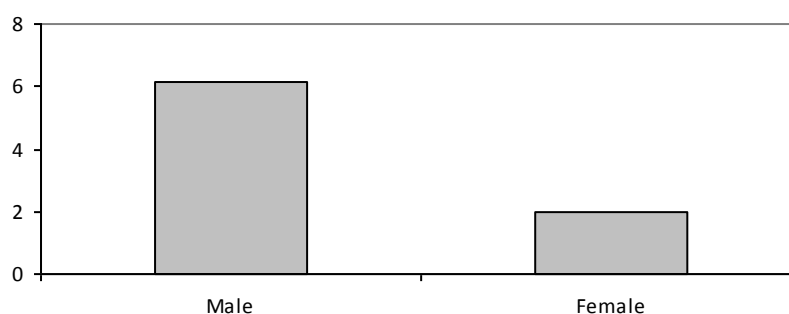


Figure 6. Frequencies of first-person plural subjects per 1,000 words across gender groups

First-person plurals appear more than three times as often among male participants as they do among female ones. As pointed out when addressing socioprofessional identities, this is again partly related to textual genres: A majority of opinion pieces and letters to the editor are signed by men, while in many cases it is women that author informational texts. Table 8 - reprising some of the data displayed in Table 2 above - details the number and percentage of male vs. female participants in each of the five textual genres.

<i>Genre</i>	<i>Male authors</i>		<i>Female authors</i>	
	#	%	#	%
News items	23	46	27	54
Stories	8	26.7	22	73.3
Opinion pieces	31	79.5	8	20.5
Letters to the editor	42	77.8	12	22.2
Interviews	33	52.4	30	47.6

Table 8. Distribution of gender groups according to textual genre

As can be observed, while there are 31 male authors out of a total of 39 with opinion pieces, and 44 out of 56 with letters to the editor, the situation is reversed with news items and specially stories, where we find 22 female authors out of a total of 30. In the case of interviews, there are more women in the group of interviewers (12 out of 19) and more men in that of interviewees (26 out of 44). Such a distribution does not seem to have a straightforward explanation, but it could be suggesting some differential allocation of communicative roles in local media, with men occupying socially powerful positions that would seem to make them eligible for the expression of personal views. This in turn might reflect a more general situation of social and cultural inequality. We obviously cannot draw such far-reaching conclusions from the present data; however, the notion that male speakers tend to assume more assertive interactional roles, and that this is grounded in large-scale cultural and psychosocial factors, is hardly new (cf. Tannen ed. 1993; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet eds. 2003).

Again, it will be necessary to assess the distribution of exclusive vs. inclusive

uses. The results are displayed in Table 9. Whereas men are more inclined to exclusion, women show a slight preference for inclusive uses. However, the differences are not as extreme as with the factors previously considered, and in this case the chi-square test indicates that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected at a 95% confidence level.

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Audience exclusion</i>		<i>Audience inclusion</i>	
	#	%	#	%
Male	262	56.6	201	43.4
Female	63	47.7	69	52.3

Pearson's chi-square test:  $\chi^2=3.253$ ; degrees of freedom: 1;  $p=0.071$

Table 9. Audience exclusion vs. inclusion and gender

In fact, it should be noted that the dominance of male authors in opinion pieces, as well as of female ones in news items and stories, might have made the opposite tendencies more plausible, i.e. for women to prefer the exclusion of the audience, in accordance with the usual strategy in more informational genres. In order to explain this, it is useful to look at the communicative roles men and women tend to assume in the genres under study. In those with the highest scores of exclusive plurals - news items, stories and interviews - women most often act as journalists/interviewers and thus have fewer chances to produce first-person plurals altogether. In fact, most tokens in the first two genres appear within quotations of male speakers and are audience-exclusive (see example 9 above).

But it is also possible that the expressive preferences of each gender group might have partly countered the tendencies favored by genres. Female participants in the corpus are somewhat more prone to appeal to the readers, apparently intending to suggest a coincidence of views as well as, perhaps, relieve themselves from direct responsibility. In example (14), a female author comments on the provisional results of a sports competition, presenting it as a collaborative effort in which the whole community, not just the local players, is involved (*where we were just a week ago*). In (15), readers get involved in the writer's negative assessment of the preceding years (*we have spent the last four years* - the context making it clear that the subject is audience-inclusive). The subsequent use of a non-specific second person (*saying what you think*) is also a choice intended to involve the audience and one that takes a further step towards discursive objectivity (see again Section 4 on the contrast among these grammatical persons).

- (14) Y aunque no *echemos* las campanas al vuelo no está nada mal lo conseguido hasta el momento sobre todo, si *nos acordamos* cómo *íbamos* hace una semana. (Female. Opinion piece. *Tribuna*, 08/26/04: 64)

'And, even if *we should not get* too excited about the situation, the advances made so far are not bad, especially if *we think* of where *we were* just a week ago.'



- (15) *hemos pasado* los últimos cuatro años bajo la crispación, la opresión y hasta con el sentimiento de culpabilidad que te da el sentirte perseguido por decir lo que piensas (Female. Opinion piece. *El Adelanto*, 05/17/04: 4)

‘*We have spent* the last four years under tension, oppression and even the guilty feeling of being persecuted for saying what you think.’

On the other hand, across the corpus it is more usual for men to appear as representing a group of people in which the audience is not included, as in example (16), uttered by the coach of a local football team (recall also examples 8 and 11 above).

- (16) Aquí no *nos marcamos* más retos que trabajar seriamente. Los resultados se miran menos y *queremos* dar buena imagen. (Male. Interview. *La Gaceta*, 11/04/04: 57)

‘The only challenge *we’re taking on* is to keep on working seriously. *We’re* more interested in causing a good impression than in the actual scores.’

As already observed, the first-person plural can often be interpreted - particularly in audience-inclusive contexts - as a move from subjectivity to intersubjectivity. In this respect, Hirschman (1973) concluded that women tend to use pronouns like inclusive *we* and non-specific *you* more often, which in our model are choices favoring less subjective perspectives than that of the first-person singular.<sup>15</sup> Our results may also be linked to those of Coates (2011), who finds higher frequencies among all-female groups for (subjective) hedging markers like *I think*, *sort of* and *probably*, as well as prosodic and paralinguistic features used to express subjectively-based epistemic modality in English. She concludes that “women exploit the polypragmatic nature of epistemic modal forms. They use them to mitigate the force of an utterance in order to respect addressees’ face needs” (p. 216).<sup>16</sup> Rather than assuming straightforward links between each gender group and subjectivity vs. objectivity, we can conclude that they tend to use subjectivizing resources in different ways. For men, such resources are often aimed at reinforcing self-assertion and authority; for women, they help reduce the suggestion of personal certainty in favor of a more or less subtle search for a coincidence of views with the others. This is also supported by the different preference of the groups for audience-exclusive vs. -inclusive first-person plurals; even if the distribution did not prove to be statistically significant, the analysis of specific examples showed that there is in fact some tendency to construct different communicative styles in this regard, based on different ways to handle subjectivity.

Collaborative orientations have often been observed in the study of female speech, and the notion that women tend to favor interactional co-operation over self-expression and imposition is widespread across gender studies: They are not so inclined

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<sup>15</sup> However, Hirschman also found that women used more first-person and less third-person pronouns than men. As for speaker-inclusive uses of the Spanish second-person singular *tú* ‘you’, which also seem to be more frequent in female speech, cf. Serrano & Aijón Oliva (in press).

<sup>16</sup> According to Coates, this is related to women’s greater interest in discussing personal or sentimental topics. Whereas this should trigger the creation of a more subjective style, a strategy can be perceived in female speech to moderate what might be perceived as an intention to impose personal views on the addressees.

to explicit self-assertion, often presenting their stances in different ways (e.g. Holmes & Schnurr 2006; Maltz & Borker 2011). But, as has been shown, this also seems to be tightly related to the types of textual genres in which each group participates more often. From the analysis it can be concluded that the development of communicative styles can show up even in such basic grammatical aspects as the choice of clause subjects. However, further research on morphosyntactic choice from this viewpoint will be needed for the findings of the present inquiry to be confirmed and developed.

## 6. Conclusions

Morphosyntactic choice is not just a formal phenomenon, but also a meaningful and functional one. Each grammatical form has a unique meaning not exactly matching that of any other one, and this is crucial for explaining the existence and use of variation. Each communicative situation entails particular roles, relationships and goals that favor the choice of some formal and meaningful choices over others. The Spanish first-person plural, with its variable reference in which the speaker is necessarily included - but hearers may not be - offers a good illustration of this.

As a first-person form, it might be straightforwardly interpreted as a trait of discursive subjectivity; however, the analysis of its communicative functions in particular contexts gives a more complex picture. In many instances of written discourse its use is in fact intended to diminish the responsibility of the writer and de-subjectivize personal stances, often seeking to involve the audience in the content and develop a shared perspective of it. In other words, the choice of the first-person plural is placed in an intermediate zone along the continuum from subjectivity to objectivity, being a resource for the construction of intersubjective discourse.

The inclusion vs. exclusion of the audience in this kind of subject plays a particularly relevant role in its communicative possibilities across the written press. Inclusion is most apt for argumentative genres such as opinion pieces and letters to the editor, in which others' agreement is presented as a given. On the other hand, in its audience-exclusive uses it constitutes a tool for indexing group memberships. This is particularly frequent in more informational genres like news items, stories and interviews. Values like these also explain the potential of first-person plurals for the stylistic management of identity traits such as socioprofessional presentation - with politicians favoring audience-exclusive uses, whereas journalists strongly disprefer first-person indexations altogether - as well as gender - with women apparently being more prone to using inclusive plurals.

More generally, it has been shown that the different sources of variation in the use of first-person plurals are by no means independent. Textual genres tend to favor certain personal identities and communicative stances as most advantageous for the attainment of interactional goals. However, the effects of creative choices on the part of speakers/writers should not be overlooked. Linguistic forms are loaded with psychosocial meanings that become renewed and reformulated with each communicative act. This is why statistical analysis alone cannot fully explain the complex reality of linguistic choice; detailed analysis and interpretation in particular contexts is equally crucial.

Finally, the present findings on the choice of first-person plurals need to be accommodated within a much broader picture of grammatical-discursive resources in general. Each grammatical person occupies a different position along the subjectivity-intersubjectivity-objectivity continuum, and thus helps configure a different discursive perspective. Paying attention to the contrast among the different grammatical persons, as well as to their variable referential possibilities, offers many possibilities for future research on communicative variation and choice.

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