

ON THE EVOLUTION OF AFRO-BOLIVIAN SPANISH SUBJECT- VERB AGREEMENT: VARIATION AND CHANGE¹

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Resum. Sobre l'evolució de la concordança subjecte-verb a l'espanyol afro-bolivià: variació i canvi. Aquest article analitza la variació de la concordança entre subjecte i verb en l'espanyol afro-bolivià, tot avaluant la interacció dels factors socials i lingüístics. Les descripcions qualitatives del fenomen (Lipski 2009) semblen indicar un procés de canvi, consistent en la sistemàtica substitució del trets basilectals estigmatitzats afro-bolivians per altres propis de la varietat més prestigiosa de l'espanyol utilitzada a Bolívia. La meua anàlisi quantitativa mostra que el fenomen està afectat significativament per factors socials diversos com són l'edat dels parlants i el seu nivell educatiu, així com factors lingüístics com el temps verbal i la persona/nombre del subjecte. L'estudi destaca el procés d'aproximació d'una varietat de l'espanyol a una altra de més prestigi. Els resultats indiquen que tot i que aquest canvi està causat per factors socials, segueix les mateixes línies que s'han observat en l'itinerari d'adquisició de la concordança subjecte-verb de l'espanyol com a L1 (Radford and Ploennig-Pacheco 1995) i com a L2 (Hawkins 2001).

Key words: espanyol afro-bolivià, concordança subjecte-verb.

Abstract. On the evolution of Afro-Bolivian Spanish subject-verb agreement: Variation and Change. This paper analyzes subject-verb agreement variation in Afro-Bolivian Spanish (ABS), evaluating the interaction of social and linguistic factors. Qualitative descriptions of the phenomenon (Lipski 2009) seem to indicate a case of "change in

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progress”, consisting in the systematic substitution of stigmatized basilectal Afro-Bolivian features with more prestigious Highland Bolivian Spanish (HBS) ones. My quantitative analysis shows that the phenomenon is significantly affected by different social factors: speaker’s Age (Range 62), and Education (Range 24); as well as, by linguistic ones: Verbal Tense (Range 29) and Subject Person/Number (Range 18). The study highlights an on-going process of post-bozal Spanish approximation to a more prestigious variety. Findings strongly indicate that although this change is prompted by social factors, it follows clear lines within the acquisitional path of Spanish subject-verb agreement suggested for L1 (Radford and Ploennig-Pacheco 1995) and L2 learners (Hawkins 2001).

Key words: Afro-Bolivian Spanish, subject-verb agreement.

1. Introduction

This study investigates subject-verb agreement variation in Afro-Bolivian Spanish (ABS), an Afro-Hispanic dialect spoken in Los Yungas, Department of La Paz, Bolivia.

Descriptive articles about ABS have been published during the last years by John Lipski (2006 a,b,c,d), who analyzed qualitatively the differences encountered between this dialect and other Spanish varieties; however a quantitative study has not yet been done. The purpose of this work is therefore to fill the gap and shed some light on the linguistic constraints regulating subject-verb agreement; moreover, sociolinguistic inferences will be derived from the data presented.

In order to accomplish this second goal, it is crucial to provide a brief socio-historical overview of ABS, as well as, a description of the most salient features of its verbal system.

ABS is supposed to be the oldest surviving Afro-Hispanic dialect in Latin America. Its speakers are believed to be the descendents of African slaves taken to the New World to work in Potosí silver mines during the XVI century, and subsequently, around the XVIII century, employed in Los Yungas (Department of La Paz), tropical valley where they could better acclimatize and do agricultural work (Lipski 2007).

Since that period till 1952, when the Land Reform took place, Afro-Bolivians have been employed in Los Yungas as slaves in *haciendas*. After the Land Reform, the majority of the Afro-Bolivians remained in the region becoming the new owners of small parts of the land that once belonged to the plantation, where they used to work in slavery. Even though Afro-Yungueños are nowadays free people and their life conditions improved during the last 60 years, their situation is far from being optimal, as the daily pro-capita incomes, proceeding from growing and selling café and coca, do not reach the \$4 (Lipski 2005).

The most important North Yungas communities containing high concentrations of Afro-Bolivians, are Tocaña, Mururata, Chijchipa, Coscoma, Dorado Chico and Khala Khala. In South Yungas the principal black community is Chicaloma. Both areas are

mainly inhabited by Aymara-speaking indigenous population. Black Yunguenos in South Yungas have frequently intermarried with Aymaras and speak the Aymara language (Lipski 2006a). As a result, in this area only a few of the traditional dialect traits are heard. On the other hand, in the North Yungas communities, Afro-Bolivians remain linguistically and culturally separate from Aymaras and a restructured post-bozal Afro-Hispanic speech still survives as intra-group means of communication.

In addition to what is left of the traditional post-bozal Afro-Yungueño dialect, all contemporary Afro-Yungueños speak, according to their level of education and contact with other areas of Bolivia, a variety of Highland Bolivian Spanish (HBS). In North Yungas communities the majority of older Afro-Bolivians have at least passive competence in the traditional dialects, however as Lipski (2007) observes, full competence is probably limited to at most a few hundred individuals.

Typically until 1952 black peons were not allowed to attend school, several older members of these communities are therefore nearly or totally illiterate. However after that date, the *haciendas* system ended and basic public education reached Afro-Yungueño communities. According to Lipski (2007), the result of studying Spanish through attending schools provoked a gradual drop of the traditional dialect by Afro-Bolivians, so that some features of this vernacular have gradually been displaced by Highland Bolivian Spanish ones.

As far as this change is concerned, feature substitution is not random. Rather, what can be observed is the transition from one system to another, where internal and external factors play a quantifiable role.

The focus of the present study is on the social and linguistic implications characterizing this transition. The rest of the paper is organized in the following sections: Session 2 provides a brief illustration of ABS Verbal Phrase features, Session 3 is a description of data and methodology adopted in this work, Session 4 presents the results, and Session 5 finally concludes.

2. ABS Verbal Phrase features

Lipski (2009) pointed out several features, which make Afro-Bolivian Spanish Verb Phrase depart from Patrimonial Spanish worldwide and which are consistent with earlier Afro-Hispanic bozal language as well as with Afro-Iberian creole languages: (a) Use of the Spanish 3rd person singular as invariant verb form for all persons and numbers; (b) Use of *nuay* [Spanish *no hay* 'there is/are not'] and *nuabía* [Spanish *no había* 'there was/were not'] instead of *no tener* 'to not have'; (c) Use of *tener* 'to have' instead of *haber* 'to exist' to express existence; Possible restructuring of the TMA system, which would consist of: (d) Constructions based on invariant *ta(ba)* + INFINITIVE instead of conjugated verbs; (e) Constructions based on invariant *ya* + INFINITIVE instead of conjugated verbs; (f) Constructions based on invariant *va* + INFINITIVE instead of conjugated verbs.

Cases of (a) are exemplified by the following examples: *Nojotro tiene [nosotros tenemos] jrutita* ‘we have fruit’; *yo no conoció hacienda [yo no conocí hacienda]* ‘I never knew the haciendas’; *yo miró jay [yo miré]* ‘I saw [it]’.

Alternation between the verbs of existence and possession (b and c) can be observed in the following cases: *Yo nuay cajúé [no tengo café]* ‘I don’t have any coffee’; *Ele nuay ningún marido nada [ella no tiene ningún marido]* ‘she does not have any husband at all’; *Tiene un negrita qui taba aquí [había una mujer negra que estaba aquí]* ‘there was a black woman who lived here’; *Tenia un señora, un negra [había una señora, una negra]* ‘there was a woman, a black woman’.

Constructions based on invariant *ta(ba)/yal/va* + INFINITIVE (d, e and f) are a bit controversial as they are not systematic and can be heard only quite sporadically.

The analysis of *ta* (d) as a creole preverbal marker can be questioned because of its close relation to aspiration and deletion of syllable-final /s/ in cases such as *está* ‘he/she is’. ¿*Quién ta comprá?* [¿*quién está comprando?*] ‘who is buying [coca]?’; ¿*andi pue tia ta i?* [¿*adónde está yendo, tia?*] ‘where are you going, ma’am?’

Ya + INFINITIVE constructions are ambiguous (e). The cases that Lipski provides correspond to similar sentences in Standard Spanish: *Furlano ya muri* [murió] ‘so and so just died’; *Ya vini [vino] temprano tia Francisca* ‘Francisca came early’. Lipski suggests that they consist of a perfective particle *ya* followed by the infinitive verb form (e.g. *morir, venir*), which underwent vowel raising in the first syllable and /r/ deletion in word final position. Alternatively, they might be seen as preterit roots (*mur-, vin-*) followed by the thematic vowel *-i* without person and number agreement marking. More data are needed to provide a definitive account of the issue; unfortunately Lipski could find only few examples of this phenomenon.

Also the possible use of *va* as future/irrealis particle is somehow dubious (f). *Nojotro va trabajá [nosotros vamos a trabajar]* ‘We are going to work’; *Yo va recogé mi leña [Yo voy a recoger mi leña]* ‘I’m going to get my firewood’. Since all dialects of Spanish use periphrastic future constructions based on *ir* ‘go’ + *a* ‘to’ + infinitive with future reference, and since the preposition *a* is absorbed phonetically by the 3s. verb *va* (< *va a*), the only feature which clearly distinguishes Afro-Bolivian Spanish from other non-contact varieties is, in the case of the supposed *va* marker, the lack of subject-verb agreement.

For the purpose of this study I analyzed only instances of subject-verb (dis-)agreement (a), as they are a clear feature of ABS frequently encountered in the speech of my informants. On the other hand, I decided to leave for future research the analysis of the phenomena reported in (b,c,d,e), as their frequency in my corpus was quite limited, and a quantitative study could not be conducted.

3. Data and methodology

2646 tokens were extracted from a corpus of 12 recorded interviews I taped during summer 2008, for a total of almost 12 hours of conversation with Afro-Bolivian speakers residing in the communities of Tocaña, Mururata and Chijchipa, North Yungas. The interviews were conducted by letting the speakers talk about any topic of their liking and asking them follow-up questions, in line with the principle of Tangential Shift (Labov 1984, p. 37). The goal was therefore to attempt to reduce the Observer's Paradox (Labov 1972) as much as possible.

The speakers were selected in order to have individuals belonging to different groups according to the external factor groups considered, namely: Gender, Level of Education, and Generation.

Within the factor group Gender the categories contrasted were obviously Male vs. Female. Gender has often proved to be a significant factor in cases of variation due to change in progress (Labov 1990). Moreover, women in Afro-Bolivian communities are those who sell agriculture products at the market and have therefore greater contact with the outside world and with HBS.

As far as the Level of Education is concerned, two sub-groups were identified:

A) Illiterate speakers.

B) Speakers who attended primary school or beyond the primary school.

Education is a crucial factor; the exposure of members of the black community to HBS taught at school had an effect on traditional ABS. This change should therefore be reflected in the presence of more traditional ABS verbal features in the speech of the least educated speakers.

Within the group Generation, I contrasted three different categories of speakers according to their age: 21-40; 41-70; 71+. What I expected to find was a progressive increase in subject-verb disagreement in older generations as a result of the lack of education, the racial segregation, and the *hacienda* system, which kept Afro-Bolivians as slaves until 1952, year of the Land Reform.

Generation and Education are two factors which often go together in Afro-Bolivian communities. In fact, it is difficult to find literate individuals among the members of the eldest generation, as well as it is hard to encounter illiterate people in the youngest group.

For this reason, in my corpus all the 71+ informants were illiterate, while all the youngest had primary education or beyond. The only age group for which both illiterate and literate speakers were not hard to encounter was the 40-71. For this generation, tokens were coded for one illiterate man, one illiterate woman, one literate man and one literate woman.

My analysis took into consideration also internal/linguistic factor groups, namely: subject person/number and the verbal tense.

Lipski (2006d: 109) observes that several Afro-Bolivians exhibit partial subject-verb agreement. In these cases concord seems to be more prominent with 1st person singular: *yo como* ‘I eat’, but *nojotro come* [*comemos*] ‘we eat’. Being able to quantify the patterns of subject-verb agreement, in a language like ABS, might reveal interesting acquisitional paths. In fact, it is generally claimed that in the process of acquiring Spanish either as L1 (Radford and Ploennig-Pacheco 1995) or as L2 (Hawkins 2001), the first form to emerge is the 3rd person singular, usually followed by the 1st one. Such pattern would be motivated by the 3rd person singular being the most frequent and “unmarked” in conversational speech, while the 1st one being the most salient to the speaker (Bybee 1985; Pizzuto and Caselli 1994; Baxter 1997).

Also tense distinction seems to play a role in subject-verb concord. Lipski (2006d, p. 111) points out that there are speakers who exhibit subject-verb agreement in the present tense, but use invariant forms in the preterit and imperfect: *tú comes* ‘you eat’, but *tú comió* [*comiste*] ‘you ate’, *tú comía* [*comías*] ‘you used to eat’. The privileged position of the present tense as regards full subject-verb agreement is also consistent with the prominence of the present tense as the most frequent in ordinary discourse, as well as the first tense to be mastered in both first and second language acquisition (Bybee 1985; Pizzuto and Caselli 1994). Besides, also Baxter (1997, p. 281), in a similar study on the verb system of Helvecia Portuguese, proposes the acquisitional order *person-number in present tense > person-number in preterite* for that Afro-Portuguese dialect.

Lipski (2009) observes the presence of full subject-verb agreement in present perfect forms (*yo he comido* ‘I have eaten’, *él ha comido* ‘he has eaten’). Such a contrast with respect to the other verbal tenses made him hypothesize that those constructions might not have been part of the original ABS dialect, but would rather be the result of a more recent borrowing from contemporary HBS.

In the present quantitative analysis I coded for present indicative (*Yo como* ‘I eat’), preterite (*Yo comí* ‘I ate’), imperfect (*Yo comía* ‘I used to eat’), and present perfect (*Yo he comido* ‘I have eaten’). This was done in order to test empirically all previous qualitative observations about the effect of Tense on subject-verb agreement in ABS.

4. Results

My data were analyzed using GoldVarbX program (Sankoff *et al.* 2005), which calculates probabilities for the application of a given rule. Results were extracted by operationalizing the 2646 tokens in several GoldVarbX analyses for internal/linguistic factors and for external/social ones.

All internal factor groups selected resulted to be significant (Table 1).

	Factor Weight	% Lack Agreement	N	% data
TENSE				
Imperfect	.80	35	577	22
Preterite	.79	31	267	10
Present Indicative	.66	23	1316	50
Present Perfect	.16	00	486	18
	<i>Range</i>			
	68			
PERSON/NUMBER				
2 nd singular	.74	44	193	7
2 nd plural	.61	22	23	1
3rd plural	.60	21	1450	55
1st plural	.45	20	306	12
1st singular	.43	19	674	25
	<i>Range</i>			
	31			

Table 1. Variable rule analysis of the contribution of internal factors to the probability of lack of subject-verb agreement DP. (Total = 2646; Total Chi-square = 20.4750; Chi-square/cell = 1.4625; Log likelihood = -1223.783; Significance = 0.000; Input 0.121.)

As shown in Table 1, Tense was the most significant Factor Group, with imperfect strongly favoring subject-verb disagreement (Factor Weight .80) and Present Perfect favoring it (Factor Weight .16).

In this first data run I decided to keep verbal tenses separate in order to test Lipski's observation concerning full subject-verb agreement in the present perfect. My empirical findings support Lipski's claim, in that all the auxiliary *haber* verbs but one agreed with their respective subjects. In fact, only one token out of 486 showed disagreement:

¿Tú ha[s]	tomado	harto? (MB, tkn. 236)
You have-2-SG.	eat-PART	much
'Did you drink a lot?'		

Moreover, this single instance of lack of concord in the present perfect is somehow questionable as /s/ weakening is a phonological process that can be encountered in ABS (Lipski 2009, p. 70-71).

For this reason, I omitted all instances of present perfect from my second run of internal factors. As imperfect and preterit showed very similar factor weights, .80 and .79 respectively, I collapsed them. I created two new categories under the Tense Factor Group: Present vs. Past. This operation also helped me get more comparable numbers, as present indicative verbs tend to be more common than past ones.

As far as the Person/Number Factor Group was concerned, 2nd person singular was the category favoring disagreement the most (Factor Weight .74), while 1st person singular favored the least (Factor Weight .43). Moreover, 2nd person plural and 3rd person plural presented very similar Factor Weights. .61 and .60 respectively. In standard Bolivian Spanish, as in the rest of the Spanish Latin American dialects, 2nd and 3rd person plural take the same verbal form. Besides, due to the nature of the one-to-one sociolinguistic interviews I conducted, very few were the instances of 2nd person plural, only 23.

For these reasons, besides excluding the present perfect tokens and creating the new Past vs. Present Tense subdivision, in a second run of the internal factors I decided to collapse 2nd and 3rd person plural. The new coding scheme adopted (Table 2) allowed a more accurate analysis of the factors affecting subject-verb agreement in ABS.

	Factor Weight	% Lack Agreement	N	% data
PERSON/NUMBER				
2 ND singular	.73	43	193	9
2 ND 3rd plural	.60	37	1102	51
1 ST plural	.45	26	258	12
1 ST singular	.44	21	607	28
	<i>Range</i>			
	29			
TENSE				
Past	.61	34	649	30
Present	.43	22	1511	70
	<i>Range</i>			
	18			

Table 2. Variable rule analysis of the contribution of internal factors to the probability of lack of subject-verb agreement. (Total = 2160; Total Chi-square = 4.1881; Chi-square/cell = 0.5235; Log likelihood = -1217.213; Significance = 0.000; Input 0.261).

This time Person/Number turned out to be the most significant factor group (Range 29), indicating that the almost invariable present perfect tokens included in the first run were having a considerable effect on our results. However, for Table 2, the order of favoring and disfavoring factors matches with the one of Table 1; again 2nd person singular favors disagreement the most (Factor Weight .73), and 1st person singular disfavors it with the lowest value (Factor Weight .44). Results are therefore in line with the prediction that the first conjugated form to emerge is almost always the first person singular. On the other hand, second person singular verbs seem to be the most reluctant forms to agree with the subject.

A possible explanation for why this is the case might be partially provided by phonological reasons. While the rate of /s/ retention in the Andean region ranks among the highest of all Spanish dialects worldwide (Lipski 1983, 1984), in the traditional Afro-vernacular spoken in Los Yungas syllable-final /s/ is sometimes aspirated or elided (Lipski 2009, p. 70). Therefore, as the present indicative and imperfect 2nd person singular forms differ from their 3rd person counterparts only for a final /s/, the higher rate of disagreement for these constructions could partially be ascribed to processes of elision.

Results for Tense indicate that subject-verb concord with Past tenses (Factor Weight .61) is lower than with Present ones (Factor Weight .43). These findings suggest that the mastering of the present tense conjugations is likely to happen before the complete acquisition of the past paradigm, in line with Baxter's (1997) quantitative results for Helvecia-Portuguese and with Lipski's (2006d) observations for ABS. Frequency of occurrence seems to play a crucial role in patterning present/past agreement variation. Present verbs are in fact more common in ordinary speech and therefore easier to be mastered, as results indicate in Table 2.

As far as the external factor groups are concerned, all the selected ones resulted to be significant but one, Gender (Table3).

Gender did not seem to play a significant role in regulating the variation. I expected women to lead the process of change (Labov 1990), especially because of their work at the market. However, it seems that the differences in contact with HBS induced by male/female subdivision of work are not enough as to affect subject-verb agreement significantly.

	Factor Weight	% Lack Agreement	N	% data
GENERATION				
71+	.73	44	748	35
41-70	.71	34	716	33
21-40	.11	01	696	32
	<i>Range</i>			
	62			
EDUCATION				
A (illiterate)	.61	43	1173	54
B (primary+)	.37	07	987	46
	<i>Range</i>			
	24			
GENDER				
Male	[.51]	27	1203	49
Female	[.49]	27	1401	51

Table 3. Variable rule analysis of the contribution of external factors to the probability of lack of subject-verb agreement. (Total = 2604; Total Chi-square = 26.8969; Chi-square/cell = 3.3621; Log likelihood = -1007.908; Significance = 0.000; Input 0.157.)

Generation was the most significant Factor Group (Range 62), with 71+ strongly favoring disagreement (Factor Weight .73) and 21-40 disfavoring it (Factor Weight .11). These data reflect the presence of a cross-generational change in progress pushing ABS in the direction of HBS. Young generations did not experience the segregation imposed by the *hacienda* system and had more chances to have contact with standard Spanish. These elements, in addition to the stigmatization attached to the Afro vernacular, pushed the younger members of the community to replace the basilectal features with more prestigious HBS ones. By looking at the Lack of Agreement percentages in Table 3, it can be noticed that the youngest generation presents only a 1% of disagreement, while the 71+ group shows a 44%. As inter-speaker variability among these two groups was minimal, ranging from 0% to 2% of lack of concord in the 21-40 group and from 41% to 46% in the 71+ generation, we can conclude that two very distinct verbal systems are present in these Afro-Bolivian communities: one maintained by old, illiterate speakers, which presents little verbal agreement, and one employed by the younger, literate generation, which consists pretty much of the agreement system of Standard Spanish. In between these two extremes we find the 41-70 generation, which presents a Factor Weight of .71 and, as we said in Session 3, is more heterogeneous from the educational point of view.

Education is therefore crucial Factor Group (Range 24). Afro-Bolivians who attended primary education or higher present less disagreement phenomena (Factor Weight .37), on the other hand, those who had no education show a higher level of lack of concord, reflected in a relatively higher Factor Weight .61.

As I mentioned before, Generation and Education are two factors that often overlap in the Afro-Bolivian communities. It is hard to find literate old people as much as it is to find illiterate young ones. In my corpus I Included 6 literate and 6 illiterate informants, but besides from the mid-generation, which contains both classes of speakers, the youngest and the oldest groups are internally very homogeneous. For this reason, in order to test the effects of education separately from age, I decided to run the data from the 41-70 generation individually (Table 3). In this way, it was possible to observe whether a significant difference between literate and illiterate speakers within the same age group existed.

	Factor Weight	% Lack Agreement	N	% data
EDUCATION				
A (illiterate)	.59	42	425	59
B (primary+)	.37	22	291	41
	<i>Range</i>			
	24			
GENDER				
Male	[.52]	35	362	51
Female	[.48]	33	354	49

Table 4. Variable rule analysis of the contribution of external factors to the probability of lack of subject-verb agreement the middle generation. (Total = 716; Total Chi-square = 25.5891 Chi-square/cell = 6.3973; Log likelihood = -442.267; Significance = 0.000; Input 0.330.)

As it can be observed in Table 4, Education played a crucial role in patterning subject-verb concord variation for the 41-70 Generation. While Gender did not seem to have any significant effect, literacy clearly affected the probability of finding agreement. In the 40-71 Generation, illiterate speakers favored disagreement (Factor Weight .59), while literate ones disfavored it (Factor Weight .37).

5. Conclusions

This study offers a quantitative approach to variable subject-verb agreement in Afro-Bolivian Spanish, an Afro vernacular dialect spoken in Los Yungas, Department of La Paz, Bolivia. Results indicate a clear case of cross-generational change in progress, consist-

ing in the systematic substitution of basilectal Afro-Bolivian features with contemporary Highland Bolivian Spanish ones.

The underlying reasons pushing Afro-Bolivian speech in the direction of a more prestigious Spanish variety are essentially the stigmatization of the Afro vernacular and the increasing contact with a more prestigious Spanish dialect. Contact with Bolivian Spanish increased sensibly after 1952, year of the Bolivian Land Reform, which freed Afro-Bolivians from slavery and introduced education in the black communities. These changes, which affected the socio-economical scenario of black Bolivia during the last six decades, are reflected in the speech of the members of its community. For this reason Generation and Education proved to be significant factor groups affecting the variation.

While among the external factors considered gender did not show particular significance, the internal factors selected resulted to have an important effect on concord phenomena. On one hand, Present Tense resulted to be indicative of a higher rate of agreement. This is motivated by the fact that in this process of transition, frequency may play a crucial role and present tenses tend to be more common in speech than past ones (Bybee 1985; Pizzuto and Caselli 1994). On the other hand, the 1st person singular form provided evidence for the claims that identify it as the first verbal form to be mastered after the 3rd person singular in parallel cases of language restructuring reported for Helvecia Portuguese (Baxter 1997).

From a theoretical perspective, my results document a case of cross-generational change in progress, in which an Afro-Hispanic vernacular approximates to a more prestigious Spanish dialect. Findings strongly indicate that although this change is prompted by social factors, it follows clear lines within the acquisitional path of Spanish subject-verb agreement suggested for L1 (Radford and Ploennig-Pacheco 1995) and L2 learners (Hawkins 2001).

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