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## Gender loss in accusative clitics in Basque Spanish

A contact-induced convergence phenomenon

**Abstract:** This paper describes the use of feminine *leísmo* for the variety of Spanish spoken in the Basque Country, i.e., the use of the unstressed dative pronoun *le* to refer to feminine direct objects. After reviewing its presence in historical texts, as well as its synchronic geographical and social distribution, we link *leísmo* in Basque Spanish with some grammatical characteristics of the other language spoken in this area, namely Basque. Taking this contact situation as our starting point, we put forward different arguments to corroborate our theory, including the existence of similar phenomena in other Spanish varieties in contact with languages whose pronominal systems are partly akin to those of the Basque language. Lastly, we will explain the phenomenon of feminine *leísmo* in Basque Spanish by assuming the models of contact-induced change and convergence developed by Palacios (2005) for cases in which gender has been eliminated in clitics in Latin American Spanish. In this way, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of little-known processes of grammatical convergence in Spanish in situations of contact with other languages.

**Keywords:** Basque Spanish, convergence, language contact, clitics, dative and accusative pronouns, gender loss

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**Note:** This research is part of the project “COREC: Corpus Oral de Referencia del Español en Contacto. Fase I: Lenguas Minoritarias” headed by Azucena Palacios (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) and Sara Gómez Seibane (Universidad de La Rioja), funded by the Spanish Ministry for Science and Innovation (Ref. PID2019-105865GB-I00). A previous version of this paper was presented at the *International Conference on Linguistics of Ibero-Romance Languages: Ibero-Romance in Contact and in Contrast*, Ghent University, December 14–16, 2015. We would like to thank those present for their comments and suggestions, which were helpful in improving this study. We also want to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments. Any errors are solely ours.

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110736250-002>

## 1 Introduction

The use of dative clitics *le* and *les* to refer to feminine direct object – as well as masculine ones, which constitutes the phenomenon known as *leísmo*, common throughout the whole of northern Spain – is widely documented in the Spanish variety spoken in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (onwards Basque Country) and in neighboring areas where we know that Basque was still spoken in the 18th century, such as the northern half of Navarre (Gómez Seibane 2012a; Camus/Gómez Seibane 2015b). This so-called feminine *leísmo* has been commonly accounted for as being one of the effects of contact between the two languages present in the region, Basque and Spanish (Fernández-Ordóñez 1999). In (1) we give an example of this phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

- (1) La chica<sub>i</sub> llegó a tal hora a su casa y el cura *le*<sub>i</sub> vio (COSER, Aulesti, Bizkaia).  
 ‘The girl arrived home at such a time and the priest saw her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) from his house’.

This paper is structured as follows: first we present the data and methodology that were used (section 2); the section 3 outlines the parameters on which the clitics in the Spanish spoken in northern Spain are based. Focusing on Spanish *leísmo* found in the Basque Country, section 4 describes its presence in historical texts and outlines its geographical, social, syntactic and semantic distribution. In section 5, we relate *leísmo* in Basque Spanish to the grammatical characteristics of Basque, the other language spoken in this area, taking into account its conditions of use and its syntactic distribution. We also offer examples of similar phenomena that occur relatively commonly in other Spanish contact varieties whose pronominal systems are partly akin to those of the Basque language. Using the previous, section 5 offers an explanation of feminine *leísmo* found in the Basque Country, based on the models of contact-induced change and convergence developed by Palacios (2005) for cases in which gender is lost in clitics in Latin American Spanish. More generally, we hope to contribute to a better awareness of grammatical convergence processes in contexts of language contact and, in

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<sup>1</sup> In the examples, clitics will be highlighted in bold, and referents will be underlined. When elements are co-referential, they will be co-indexed. *Leísmo* involves the use of dative *le/s* instead of the accusative *lo/s* or *la/s*. Therefore, the English glosses will mark *le/s* as DAT, and we will indicate the syntactic function in brackets (DIRECT OBJECT) when necessary. For a better understanding of the examples, we sometimes clarify the gender of the referent or the clitic in brackets (feminine as FEM, masculine as MASC, neuter as NEUT). PL is used for plural referents and SING for singular ones. Sources of used examples are mentioned, as well as their origin (town and province).

particular, to draw attention to the interest of studies on lesser known Spanish varieties in contact with other languages.

## 2 Data and methodology

For a comprehensive description of *leísmo* found in the Basque Country, we used data gathered from various sources, as outlined below.

- a. Linguistic corpora: oral data gathered from different corpora.
  - The open-access COSER corpus (*Corpus Oral y Sonoro del Español Rural*; ‘Audible Corpus of Spoken Rural Spanish’), based on uneducated informants over the age of 60 from rural areas of Spain (Fernández-Ordóñez 2005–present). The interviews that have been included in this work were recorded in 2000 in Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa and Araba, the three provinces of the Basque Country.
  - An oral sample of ten bilingual speakers, with different degrees of proficiency in the Basque language, aged between 25 and 50, born and living in semi-urban areas of the Basque Country in x. This corpus contains semi-structured informal interviews conducted at informants’ home. It has been also used for other contact studies (Gómez Seibane 2012b; 2012c). We will refer to this corpus as the Corpus of the Basque Country (CoBasCo).
- b. Linguistic atlas: Oral data with *leísmo* found in rural areas adjacent to the Basque Country proceeding from the *Atlas Lingüístico y Etnográfico de Aragón, Navarra y La Rioja* (ALEANR; Alvar et al. 1979–1983).
- c. A questionnaire on the acceptability of *leísmo*: it was conducted among twenty educated Basque Spanish-speaking adults from urban areas (Donostia-San Sebastián) and backed by a control survey with another twenty non-Basque adults from Castilla-La Mancha, Extremadura and Andalusia. They were asked to fill in the correct clitic in twenty sentences with different types of complements (direct and indirect objects) and referents (human/non-human, masculine/feminine, singular/plural). This survey will be referred to as the Direct and Indirect Objects Questionnaire (DIOQuest).
- d. A comprehensive bibliographical analysis of empirical studies on *leísmo*.
  - Studies on historical documents relating to the Basque region (Gómez Seibane 2004; 2010; Camus 2015) and a corpus of letters written by three bilingual farm managers that worked for an aristocratic family in a rural area of Gipuzkoa (Gómez Seibane in this volume). Examples of this corpus will be quoted both as part of the corresponding published studies and as Historical Corpus of the Basque Country (HiCoBasCo).

- Corpus-based studies on Basque-Spanish contact, such as Urrutia (1988), Landa (1995), Echenique (1996), Fernández Ulloa (2002) and Paasch-Kaiser (2015).
- Studies of current oral corpora focusing on situations where Spanish is in contact with Amerindian languages like Quechua, Guaraní and Mayan languages (Lipski 1996; Palacios 1998; 2000; 2002; 2005; Fernández-Ordóñez 1999).

These sources provide empirical data for our presentation of the peculiarities of the phenomenon of *leísmo* found in the Basque region, seen from several different perspectives (geographic, social-historical, syntactic-semantic), while also facilitating a comparison of this type of *leísmo* with that of other areas in which Spanish is in contact with Amerindian languages that share to a certain extent typological features with Basque. The aims of this paper are as follows:

- a. To document the presence of feminine *leísmo* from the first texts written in Castilian in the Basque Country territory.
- b. To show the presence and acceptance of this phenomenon in different types of Basque Country speakers, such as monolinguals in Spanish, semi-speakers and bilinguals or (nearly) fully competent in both languages, following as such Campbell/Muntzel (1989). We do not aim to quantitative analyses, but rather want to describe qualitatively the general situation and main characteristics of the phenomenon under study.
- c. To demonstrate the presence of this phenomenon in contiguous regions, such as the Northern part of Navarre.
- d. To connect and discuss similar results of feminine *leísmo* in other Spanish contact varieties in the Americas.

### 3 *Leísmo* in pronominal systems in Spanish

*Leísmo* involves the elimination of case and gender in unstressed third-person pronouns. Depending on the antecedent, a distinction can be made between the use of originally dative *le* for a masculine person (*A su hijo; le; castigaron en el colegio* ‘His son (MASC), they punished him-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) at school’), for a female one (*A la niña; le; llevaron al parque* ‘The little girl (FEM), they took her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) to the park’) and for an object, generally morphologically masculine in Spanish (*Ese libro; ya le; he leído* ‘That book (MASC), I have already read it-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT)’). Although *leísmo* is a widespread phenomenon in Spanish, historically it has been more commonly used to refer to masculine

antecedents than to feminine ones (Gómez Seibane 2013, 38–44). In the following section, an outline is given of the criteria that govern the selection parameters of a particular pronoun in Spanish (namely, case, animacy, (dis)continuity, gender and number). The differences in the organisation and importance of these parameters, among others, give rise to *leísmo*.

### 3.1 The etymological and *leísta* system

The etymological or case-distinguishing system, inherited from Latin, is widely known to base the use of third person clitics on three parameters: case, gender and number. Case is the most important parameter because, depending on whether the referent of the pronoun is an indirect or direct object, the dative *le/s* or the accusative *lo/s* and *la/s* will be selected, respectively. Following this initial rule, the antecedent's semantic features, more specifically its gender and number, play a decisive role, particularly in the selection of the appropriate accusative clitic (masculine *lo/s* and feminine *la/s*), since the dative clitic (*le/s*) does not exhibit any distinction for gender, just for number. The pronoun thus always reflects the syntactic function of the referent, together with the number of the antecedent (2a), whereas its grammatical gender is only visible in the case of the accusative pronoun (2b).

- (2) a. A María, *le*<sub>i</sub> regalaron un pijama por su cumpleaños. A Pedro y a Juan, *los*<sub>i</sub> vieron por la calle.  
 'Maria, they gave her-DAT<sup>2</sup> some pyjamas for her birthday. Pedro and Juan, they saw them-ACC MASC PL in the street.'
- b. La ropa, *la*<sub>i</sub> lava en casa. Los tomates, *los*<sub>i</sub> compra en la frutería.  
 'The clothes (FEM SING), she washes them-ACC FEM SING at home. The tomatoes (MASC PL), she buys them-ACC MASC PL at the greengrocer's.'

Within this system, we can find so-called *leísmo aparente* (apparent *leísmo*), i.e., the use of *le/s* with a series of verbs and constructions that permit this variation in the verb valency.<sup>3</sup> The uses described above are extended both geographically

<sup>2</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>3</sup> The verbs that admit this accusative-dative variation include emotion verbs (such as *asombrar*, *encantar* or *halagar*), verbs whose direct object can be omitted (*atender*, *servir*, *pagar*), and verbs with alternating or preferential uses of the accusative and dative (*ayudar*, *obedecer*). As for constructions, mention should be made of infinitive clauses with verbs of influence (*ordenar* and *invitar a*), predicates with an unstressed pronoun and subject complement, the impersonal

and sociolinguistically. On the one hand, they are present in a large part of Spain, including the northern area in contact with the Basque Country (to the south and east), like La Rioja, the southern half of Navarre and Aragon (Gómez Seibane 2012a, 30). On the other hand, they are also characteristic of educated oral and written Spanish (Fernández-Ordóñez 1999, 1386–1390), since according to the Spanish Royal Academy (*Real Academia Española*; RAE), the use of *le* for a singular masculine person as a direct object is not considered wrong, given its widespread traditional use in educated language and by writers of recognised repute, although the use of *lo* is preferred (RAE/ASALE 2009, 1215). Given the above, this case-distinguishing system, which has come to be accepted as the standard one, exerts a certain influence on the local pronominal system used in the Basque Country.

### 3.2 The Cantabrian and the referential systems

In a large part of the north-west area of Spain which is in contact with the Spanish spoken in the Basque Country, the parameters that rule the use of pronouns follow a different system, leading to a usage different from that described in section 3.1. In comparison with the system outlined in the previous section, the pronominal paradigms described below reveal differences in the expression of case and gender, while they conserve the inflection for number. In these systems, *leísmo* is thus the result of the reorganisation of the pronominal paradigm according to different parameters.

In the two pronominal systems in contact along the western area of the Basque Country, case no longer plays a decisive role in the selection of the clitic. Instead, the determining factors are the antecedent's semantic features, and in particular the distinction between uncountable or countable nouns.<sup>4</sup> This distinction has

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form *se* followed by a pronoun, and polite use of *leísmo* (Fernández-Ordóñez 1999, 1323–1339). Some authors consider the above contexts to be one of the possible factors that led the dative to replace the accusative (Lapesa 1968).

<sup>4</sup> It is worth remembering that uncountable nouns refer to things that “can be endlessly divided while still conserving their intrinsic nature and name” (Bello cited by Bosque 1999, 8; translation is ours), like substances or materials (*water, air, sand*), qualities (*height, laziness, sobriety*), sensations or feelings (*love, enthusiasm*), states (*calm, fever*) and certain capacities (*memory, power*). However, no classification has been made of the semantic notions expressed by uncountable nouns, since many nouns behave grammatically like countable ones in some languages and uncountable ones in others. In contrast with uncountable nouns, countable ones “cannot be divided without losing their identity, as is the case of a *tree* or *table*” (Bello cited by Bosque 1999, 8; translation is ours).

important syntactic consequences in Spanish, associated with the possible combination (or not) of the noun with certain determiners and quantifiers (Bosque 1999, 10–13) and with pronominal usage in certain varieties of Spanish in northern Spain. Indeed, in a large part of northern Spain, neutral pronouns can express the uncountable nature of its referent, a phenomenon traditionally known as the mass neuter (Fernández-Ordóñez 2006; 2007). As illustrated in (3), when the nouns *caracoles* ('snails', masculine plural), *leña* ('firewood', feminine singular) and *remolachas* ('beetroot', feminine plural) are interpreted as uncountable, the neutral pronouns *lo* and *ello* can be used to refer to them due to *ad sensum* agreement, that is, agreement based on the word's semantic features as opposed to its lexical ones (masculine plural, feminine singular or feminine plural, respectively).

- (3) a. ¿Había gente que se dedicaba a coger caracoles<sub>i</sub>? – Habrán cogi[d]o muchos los chavales y se los<sub>i</sub> pagaban bien, pero ahora ya no vienen, venían muchos de Burgos y de Bilbao, venían a comprarlo<sub>i</sub>; (Fernández-Ordóñez 2007, 426).  
 'Were there people dedicated to collecting snails (MASC UNCOUNT)? – The lads must have gathered a lot of them and they have paid them-ACC MASC PL well, but they don't come anymore. Many came from Burgos and Bilbao to buy it-ACC NEUT'.
- b. [P]a[ra] este tiempo era mejor leña<sub>i</sub>, metías un montón de ello<sub>i</sub> y no te calentabas casi (Fernández-Ordóñez 2006, 106).  
 'For this weather, firewood (FEM UNCOUNT) was better. You put on a pile of it-ACC NEUT but you barely warmed up'.
- c. ¿Y cómo sacaban las remolachas<sub>i</sub> de la tierra? – Entonces con una horca se lo<sub>i</sub> solía sacar o con el ara[d]o. [. . .] Después había que sacudirlo, cortarles la hoja, limpiarlas para llevarlo<sub>i</sub> a la fábrica si lo<sub>i</sub> llevabas (Fernández-Ordóñez 2006, 107).  
 'And how did they get the beetroot (FEM UNCOUNT) out of the ground? – Back then, they used to get it-ACC NEUT out with a fork or plough. [. . .] After, you had to shake it-ACC NEUT, cut the leaves off, and clean them to take it-ACC NEUT to the factory if you took it-ACC NEUT'.

The prevalence of the antecedent's semantic features over its syntactic function takes place in a large part of Cantabria. As a result of this re-structuring, *le/s* is used for the masculine accusative and dative to refer to countable antecedents. Consequently, in this area, *leísmo* affects masculine countable words that are animate (4a) or inanimate (4b), while feminine countable words (4c) conserve their case and agreement with gender in the accusative.

- (4) a. Unos *le<sub>i</sub>* llamaban pa[ra] sacar piedra pa una cabaña, otros *le<sub>i</sub>* llamaban pa[ra] hacer cosas [al marido] (Fernández-Ordóñez 1994, 105).  
 ‘Some called him-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) to quarry stone for a hut, others called him-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) to do things [her husband]’.
- b. El carro<sub>i</sub> *le<sub>i</sub>* tengo, ya no *le<sub>i</sub>* usan, porque resulta que se han hecho todos a un tractor (Fernández-Ordóñez 1994, 105).  
 ‘The cart (MASC), I have it-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT), they no longer use it-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) because it turns out they’ve all got their hands on a tractor’.
- c. Esa cerda<sub>i</sub> *la<sub>i</sub>* engordábamos pa matarla<sub>i</sub>. [. . .] Abrirle y ya sacar las morcillas<sub>i</sub>, lavarlas<sub>i</sub>. (Fernández-Ordóñez 1994, 106).  
 ‘That sow (FEM) we fattened it-ACC FEM to kill it-ACC FEM. [. . .] Open it and take out the sausages (FEM), wash them-ACC FEM’.

According to Fernández-Ordóñez (2001, 422; 2012, 90–91), the origin of the Cantabrian pronominal paradigm seems to have been the result of dialect contact. Indeed, in this pronominal system *le* was adopted as an accusative pronoun, like in the Basque pronominal system (see 3.3), but it was adjusted according to the features that worked in the Cantabrian variety, gender and countability.

The second area where the noun’s semantics prevail over case stretches from the north-western half of Castile to almost the middle of Spain. Here, uncountable and countable nouns can be formally distinguished and, in the latter case, attention is also paid to gender and number, but the non-distinction of case in the singular and plural is almost general. This readjustment of the pronominal system, known in this case as the referential system, has led the Spanish spoken in this area to be characterised not only by *leísmo* (5a), but by *laísmo*, i.e., the use of the accusative forms *la* and *las* instead of the datives *le* and *les* (5b), and also by *loísmo*, i.e., the use of the accusative forms *lo* and *los* instead of the dative *le* and *les* (5c).

- (5) a. Al niño<sub>i</sub> *le<sub>i</sub>* llevaron al hospital. El tractor<sub>i</sub> hace tiempo que *le<sub>i</sub>* vendimos (Fernández-Ordóñez 1999, 1361).  
 ‘The little boy, they took him-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) to hospital. The tractor we sold it-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) a long time ago’.
- b. A la oveja<sub>i</sub> hay que esquilarla<sub>i</sub> teniendo cuidado de no darla<sub>i</sub> cortes. A esa camisa<sub>i</sub> *la<sub>i</sub>* quité el cuello para arreglarla<sub>i</sub> (Fernández-Ordóñez 1999, 1361).  
 ‘The sheep (FEM), we must shear it-ACC FEM, taking care not to cut it-ACC FEM. Lit. From that blouse, I took from it-ACC FEM (INDIRECT OBJECT) the collar off to repair it-ACC FEM’.



- c. Según recogías la sangre<sub>i</sub> del cerdo, lo<sub>i</sub> revolvías, ibas dándole lo<sub>i</sub> vueltas (Fernández-Ordóñez 1999, 1361).

‘As you collected the blood (FEM UNCOUNT DIRECT OBJECT) from the pig, you stirred it-ACC NEUT (DIRECT OBJECT), turning it-ACC NEUT (DIRECT OBJECT) round’.

Consequently, in western areas near the Basque Country, the paradigm is reorganised using the criterion of countability versus uncountability, which in turn influences the maintenance of case and gender (Table 1). The referential pronominal system used in most of Castile depends thus on both the categorisation of the antecedent into countable or uncountable and partially on its gender. With uncountable nouns, the agreement with gender and case disappears and *lo* is used. In the case of countable nouns, the morphological markers denoting feminine agreement are conserved but case disappears, so that *le* is used as a pronoun for masculine nouns and *la* for feminine ones. On the other hand, with the Cantabrian system, the clitics are distributed depending on whether a noun is countable or uncountable, partially on gender and case, although as not evenly as for the last parameter. *Le* is used for uncountable nouns if they are dative and *lo* if they are accusative, while the pronouns for countable nouns are still inflected for gender and case only in the feminine because *le* tends to be used if they are masculine.

**Table 1:** Pronominal uses in the referential and the Cantabrian systems.

| System      | Noun        | Pronoun                | Gender                | Case   |
|-------------|-------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------|
| Referential | Uncountable | <i>Lo</i>              | No                    | No     |
|             | Countable   | <i>Le, les/La, las</i> | No (masc.)/Yes (fem.) | No     |
| Cantabrian  | Uncountable | <i>Le/Lo</i>           | No                    | Yes    |
|             | Countable   | <i>Le, les/La, las</i> | No (masc.)/Yes (fem.) | No/Yes |

### 3.3 The Basque system

The peculiarities of the Basque pronominal system include the use of *leísmo* for animate masculine and feminine direct objects, including animals (6a) and humans (6b). The extension of the dative clitic *le/s* to the accusative with these types of antecedents means that animacy appears to be the main parameter on which the pronominal system depends: with animate entities, *le/s* is selected, with as a consequence that case and gender are eliminated.

- (6) a. Se suelta el cerdo<sub>i</sub>, el carnicero le<sub>i</sub> agarra de así. A mí me gustaban mucho las ovejas<sub>i</sub> [. . .] por eso les<sub>i</sub> tengo todavía (Fernández-Ordóñez 1999, 1350).  
 ‘The pig (MASC) is let loose, the butcher grabs it-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) like this. I liked sheep (FEM) very much [. . .], that’s why I still have them-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT)’.
- b. Pues el domingo siguiente, primero les<sub>i</sub> llamó a las madres<sub>i</sub>. Le<sub>i</sub> ponían de rodillas, medio agachada a la mujer<sub>i</sub> allí (COSER, Aulesti, Bizkaia).  
 ‘So the following Sunday, first he called them-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) the mothers. They put her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) on her knees, crouching, the woman there’.

*Le/s* also tends to double the post-verbal lexical direct object as in (6b), although aspects relating to grammar or the sociolinguistic circumstances in which this phenomenon occurs are not adequately described yet (Fernández-Ordóñez 1994; 1999; Landa 1995). So far, the first results indicate that the differences in direct object doubling constructions in the Basque system are qualitative and quantitative, compared to data from central-peninsular Spanish (Gómez Seibane 2017; 2020a).<sup>5</sup>

Further, inanimate nouns maintain the case distinction since for the dative *le/les* is used whereas for the accusative *lo/s* or *la/s* can be used or the clitic can be omitted, as in (7).

- (7) Los filetes rusos de mi madre<sub>i</sub> en casa  $\emptyset$ <sub>i</sub> solíamos hacer (Camus/Gómez Seibane 2015b, 227).  
 ‘My mother’s breaded fillets, we used to make at home’.

The three phenomena that affect the Basque pronominal system (null object, clitic doubling and *leísmo*) have been considered as part of the object clitic agreement paradigm in which animacy hierarchies are crucial. As Landa (1995, 236–237) concluded “[the] null object construction stands for a [-animate] null pronominal in argument position agreeing with a phonologically covert clitic, whereas the object clitic doubled construction with [+animate] objects –

<sup>5</sup> Dialectal differences lie in cognitive and referential factors (Gómez Seibane 2017; 2020a). Cognitive factors, related to the accessibility of referents in the mind of speakers, indicate that the Basque corpus duplicates semi-active and inactive direct objects, while in the central variety corpus semi-active and active ones are preferred. As regards the referential factors, related to the type of co-referential accusative phrase, the Basque corpus duplicates nominal, human and animate, usually definite, but not always individuated, phrases. The central-peninsular variety selects nominal and pronominal referents, preferably inanimate, definite and individuated.

regardless of whether they are phonologically realised or not – represents verb object agreement instantiated by the object clitic *le*”.

While further research on the characteristics of direct object doubling constructions in this Spanish variety remain pending, our proposal partially agrees with Landa (1995). As she pointed out already, animacy appears to be a determining parameter in the reorganisation of the Basque pronominal paradigm (Gómez Seibane 2020b). This entails the partial elimination of gender and case, above all for human antecedents. The preference for this parameter thus leads to a partial cancellation of both case – in keeping with the internal tendency in Spanish (section 3.1 and 3.2) – and gender, most likely because the latter is an inflectional category that does not exist in Basque (section 5). The models of contact-induced change and convergence outlined in section 5 offer insights into how this ordering came about.<sup>6</sup>

## 4 The distribution of *leísmo* in Basque Spanish

In this section, an outline is given of the extent to which *leísmo* has been (and still is) used in the Basque Country from the perspective of historical documentation, its current geographical and social distribution and the syntactic and semantic contexts in which the phenomenon occurs.

### 4.1 Historical presence

Historical studies of archival documents and private correspondence<sup>7</sup> in the Basque area<sup>8</sup> highlight the use of *leísmo* with masculine human antecedents as a more common phenomenon in the singular and as a growing one in the plural from the 16th century onward. In the case of feminine human antecedents, *le* was used for the accusative in the 16th and 17th centuries, as can be observed in the examples in (8a) and (8b), respectively. In the 17th century, the quantitative data available give a frequency of 7.2% (4/55) for this type of feminine *leísmo* in

<sup>6</sup> See also Gómez Seibane (in this volume).

<sup>7</sup> For some years, diachronic research has prioritised these sources since they are easier to tie in with a specific geographical region and to a specific moment in time and because there is no third-party interference when original documents are used.

<sup>8</sup> Prior to this date, in the Basque area there are relatively few documents written in Spanish.

singular (clitics referring to plural referents are very scarce), whereas the accusative clitic *la* is the preferred one (92.8%) (Gómez Seibane 2010).<sup>9</sup>

- (8) a. Pareció Mancia de Ugarrío, [. . .] e dixo que *le*<sub>i</sub> recibiesen (Gómez Seibane 2010, 143).  
 ‘Mancia de Ugarrío appeared [. . .] and asked for them to receive her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT)’.
- b. Que a ella<sub>i</sub> *le*<sub>i</sub> había maltratado en algunas ocasiones (Gómez Seibane 2010, 143).  
 ‘That she, he had mistreated her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) on some occasions’.

During the 18th century, the use of *leísmo* increased with these two types of antecedents. In the case of feminine humans, using *le* instead of *la* in the singular, as in (9), rose to a frequency of 43% (9/21) in private letters from people who had migrated to the Americas, although these percentages should be taken with caution, given the limited number of occurrences.

- (9) Dios *le*<sub>i</sub> tenga en su santa gloria. Y con esto no *le*<sub>i</sub> canzo más [mi mujer] (Gómez Seibane 2004, 44).  
 ‘May God keep her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) in his holy glory. And with this, I shall not tire her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) anymore [my wife]’.

In private 19th century correspondence, the use of *leísmo* with human masculine objects is widespread, amounting to 76.5% (62/81), while with feminine ones it seems to be a change in progress, accounting for a percentage of 24.1% (19/79) (Gómez Seibane in this volume). The importance of these data becomes clearer when compared with the frequencies obtained for a corpus of monolingual documents of the same type: for the masculine, the percentage of *leísmo* is 31.6% (31/98), while for the feminine it is 4.9% (2/41) and it is found in passages with formulaic forms.

The available data from 19th century allow us to characterize the feminine human *leísmo* in Gipuzkoa, at least, as a phenomenon present in both the middle socio-economic (10a) and high classes (10b). *Leísmo* appears in the letters of the three bilingual farm managers and in letters written by a member of the aristocratic family for whom they worked (for a detailed description of Zavala family, see Camus 2015).

<sup>9</sup> To provide a better understanding of the examples, the orthography and punctuation have been modernised up to a certain degree.

- (10) a. Temprano a la Balbina<sub>i</sub> ya estube a visitar<sub>le</sub><sub>i</sub> (Gómez Seibane in this volume).  
 ‘Early I went to visit her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT), Balbina’.
- b. Vi a aquel señor que le<sub>i</sub> acompañó a la Dolores<sub>i</sub> a Burdeos (Camus 2015, 1784).  
 ‘I saw that gentleman who accompanied her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT), Dolores, to Bordeaux’.

## 4.2 Social and geographical distribution

Map 1 shows the area of Spain where the feminine *leísmo* has been detected. Both in northwest Navarre and the Basque Country, cases of this phenomenon have been found, as can be seen in the examples from COSER for inland Bizkaia (11a), Gipuzkoa (11b) and the northern edge of Araba (11c). It should be pointed out that this area coincides with points of intense contact between Spanish and Basque, particularly Gipuzkoa and inland Bizkaia.



**Map 1:** Area of feminine *leísmo* in the Basque Country and northern half of Navarre (based on Camus/Gómez Seibane 2015b and data from ALEANR).

- (11) a. La chica<sub>i</sub> llegó a tal hora a su casa y el cura le<sub>i</sub> vio (COSER, Aulesti, Bizkaia).  
 ‘The girl arrived home at such a time and the priest saw her- DAT (DIRECT OBJECT)’.
- b. Era costumbre de acompañar<sub>le</sub><sub>i</sub> a casa a la chica (COSER, Errezil, Gipuzkoa).  
 ‘It was customary to accompany her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) home, the girl’.
- c. Resulta que la madre esperándole [a la hija] (COSER, Luzuriaga, Araba).  
 ‘It turns out that the mother was waiting for her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) [her daughter]’.

As for its social distribution, the COSER corpus highlights that *le/s* is almost always used for feminine personal antecedents and that these uses are firmly established among older uneducated/lowly educated speakers living in Basque-speaking rural areas. Moreover, the frequency of use is lower in an oral corpus of bilingual speakers, aged between 25 and 50, who are highly educated and semi-urban (Gómez Seibane 2012c), since these speakers alternate *le/s* and *la/s* for feminine personal accusatives (12).

- (12) Pues igual el primero que leí. [. . .]. De una niña<sub>i</sub> que era india, que con ocho años sus padres *la*<sub>i</sub> vendieron ya a un viejo verde y aquel pues ya con ocho años *la*<sub>i</sub> violaba y *le*<sub>i</sub> hizo de todo [. . .] Cuando creció mató al marido que *le*<sub>i</sub> violó (CoBasCo, Mendaro, Gipuzkoa).  
 ‘Well maybe the first I read. [. . .] About a girl who was Indian, whose parents sold her-ACC at the age of eight to a dirty old man, and he raped her-ACC at the age of eight and did all kinds of things to her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) [. . .] When she grew up, she killed the husband who had raped her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT)’.

Indeed, studies based on urban and semi-urban localities agree that the feminine personal *leísmo* is not a systematic phenomenon, as speakers alternate dative and accusative clitics (Urrutia 1988; Fernández Ulloa 2002; Paasch-Kaiser 2015), probably due to pressure of the standard Spanish system (see 3.1). Nonetheless, the feminine personal *leísmo* is not used only by bilingual speakers. This phenomenon has also been found in the speech of three of twenty monolingual Spanish speakers analysed by Paasch-Kaiser (2015, 320–323). Moreover, a survey of the acceptability of this phenomenon among educated adult Basque Spanish-speakers born in Donostia-San Sebastián (DIOQuest) shows that such uses are regularly accepted. Many of these speakers even correct sentences where an accusative clitic *la/las* appears as Direct Object as in *Ana se encontró con sus hermanas y las acompañó a casa* ‘Ana met her sisters and accompanied them-ACC FEM home’, and insert *le/les* in its place. On the contrary, the answers of non-Basque speakers in DIOQuest are very different: they always reject sentences with feminine *leísmo*, but seem to have more doubts with masculine *leísmo*.

### 4.3 Syntactic-semantic contexts of occurrence

A description of the syntactic and semantic features of clauses with *leísmo* will now be given, paying special attention to the semantics of the antecedents, lexical aspect of the verbs involved, the degree to which the object is affected, and

the type of syntactic construction in which the phenomenon occurs. The antecedents of pronominalised direct objects with *le/s* are characterised by the fact that they are human. This type of antecedent is the one commonly used and accepted by all speakers, whether they are bilingual or monolingual. *Leísmo* is also possible with non-human animate antecedents (13a), although not very common, and tends to be typical of rural speech. Cases with inanimate antecedents (13b), on the other contrary, are also found in Basque-speaking rural settings, but Spanish speakers from urban areas seem not to accept them.<sup>10</sup>

- (13) a. *Atar*<sub>i</sub> *a la yegua*<sub>i</sub> *allá pa[ra]* *que coma yerba* (COSER, Luzuriaga, Araba).  
 ‘The mare (FEM), tie it-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) there for it to eat the grass’.
- b. – ¿Con *la miel*<sub>i</sub> *qué hacían?* – ¡Joé!, *la miel*<sub>i</sub> *pues vender*<sub>i</sub>. (Camus/Gómez Seibane 2015b, 291).  
 ‘– For what did they use honey (FEM)? – ¡Gosh! Honey? Well they sold it-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT)’.

As for the types of verbs, lexical aspect does not seem to play a decisive role in the presence of *leísmo*, since it is possible with states (14a), activities (11b), accomplishments (12) and achievements (14b). In contrast, the relationship between the direct object and the type of action expressed by the verb does seem relevant. Indeed, many cases of *leísmo* involve verbs of affectation and thus objects affected by the action of the verb (15) or verbs of cognitive activity that have experiencer subjects and affected direct objects as the theme, such as (14a) and (16).

- (14) a. Aquí *le*<sub>i</sub> *conocí a mi mujer*<sub>i</sub> (Camus/Gómez Seibane 2015a, 219, note 4).  
 ‘Here I met her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT), my wife’.
- b. *La Brígida no le*<sub>i</sub> *encontré en casa* (Gómez Seibane in this volume).  
 ‘Brígida, I didn’t find her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) at home’.
- (15) a. No *les*<sub>i</sub> *voy a dejar en la estacada a esta gente*<sub>i</sub> (Gómez Seibane 2012b, 211).  
 ‘I am not going to leave them-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) in the lurch, those people’.
- b. [R]esulta que *mi madre*<sub>i</sub> *le*<sub>i</sub> *llevaron el 3 de mayo a operar* (COSER, Tolosa, Gipuzkoa).  
 ‘It turns out that, my mother, they took her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) for an operation on May 3rd’.

<sup>10</sup> In this section, examples that have appeared before in the text are reproduced again to show different aspects of the phenomenon. Example (12) is partially reproduced in (14c) and (18b); examples (11b) and (14b) are the same; also (10b) and (17a); and (1), (11a) and (19a), as well.

- (16) La Sor Juana nos dice que en la semana pasada *le<sub>i</sub>* vio a Mercedes<sub>i</sub> (HiCoBasCo).  
 ‘Sister Juana tells us that last week she saw her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT), Mercedes’.

As for the characteristics of syntactic constructions with *leísmo*, it should be noted that cases in which the pronoun doubles a direct object in the canonical position are very common (10b). There are also many examples of constructions where it doubles thematised objects or left-dislocated ones (17).

- (17) Temprano a la Balbina<sub>i</sub>, ya estube a visitar*le<sub>i</sub>* (HiCoBasCo).  
 ‘Early I went to visit her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT), Balbina’.

*Leísmo* also occurs in relative clauses with (18) co-referential and non co-referential relative pronouns (14c). Likewise, the direct object can occur in a previous clause (11a) or can even be found in another person’s intervention (19).

- (18) La otra<sub>i</sub>, de diez y seis a diez y siete años [. . .] en la costura, mucho más adelantada, que *le<sub>i</sub>* tuvimos en San Sebastián (HiCoBasCo).  
 ‘The other one of 16 or 17 [. . .] much more advanced in sewing, we had her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) in San Sebastian’.
- (19) – Está Marile<sub>i</sub> arriba. – Ya *le<sub>i</sub>* he visto (CoBasCo, Gernika, Bizkaia).  
 ‘– Marile is upstairs. – I have already seen her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT)’.

## 5 Basque in contact with Spanish. Towards an account of feminine *leísmo*

The gender loss in accusative clitics has been associated with the influence of Basque on this variety of Spanish. As Echenique (1987) pointed out, *leísmo* is a simplifying and reorganizing phenomenon of the pronominal system. Along the same lines, Fernández Ulloa (2002) emphasised the importance of the lack of gender morphemes in the Basque language as a trigger for an opposition based on animacy in the pronominal system of this variety of Spanish. For Landa (1995, 154 footnote 7), however, the explanation of *leísmo* in terms of contact is not sufficient, as she considers that “this does not explain why Basque Spanish *leísmo* is limited to human referents”.

Agreeing with the hypothesis of language contact as an external factor for the change, Fernández-Ordóñez (2012, 85–99) has considered that the origin of the use of dative morphology for accusative contexts could be explained in



Basque Spanish as an extension of Differential Object Marking (DOM) to the verb. In this variety, DOM is realised not only on the noun (by the preposition *a*), but also on the verb (morphologically marking with *le/s*). While considering the changes in the Spanish varieties in contact with non Indo-European languages, such as Quechua, Guaraní and Basque, with the same characteristics (i.e. lack of gender and object clitics, null agreement morphemes), Fernández-Ordóñez has posited that “there was a grammatical rearrangement or replacement of one category (gender) by another category (case)” (Fernández-Ordóñez 2012, 99).

As we will see, the information provided in the previous section clearly confirms the contact-based explanation for feminine *leísmo*. We will defend that intense contact between Spanish and other languages with no clitic pronouns or gender will eventually trigger a process of linguistic convergence. This process occurs in an area of Spanish where there exists already variation in the clitic pronouns system. This convergence affects the three relevant categories in terms of pronominal selection in Spanish: gender, number and case.

## 5.1 Gender in Basque

Firstly, Basque has grammatical features that tend to promote gender loss in Spanish pronouns used by Basque speakers. We must remember that in this language there is no category similar to the pronominal clitics in Spanish. Instead, the information that they provide is necessarily integrated in the verbal morphology. That is, in the case of accusative forms, the personal forms of the verb are necessarily inflected for number and person, and they agree with direct objects in the same sentence or the antecedents of which can be traced back to an earlier part of the discourse, or can be understood contextually when implicit. The following examples illustrate this:

- (20) a. Esta mañana he encontrado esos libros<sub>i</sub>. *Los*<sub>i</sub> he comprado enseguida.  
 ‘This morning I came across those books. I bought them-ACC at once’.
- b. Gaur goizean liburu horiek<sub>i</sub> aurkitu *ditu*<sub>i</sub>. Berehala erosi *ditu*.  
 ‘This morning I came across those books (DIRECT OBJECT). I bought them-ACC at once’.

Note how, in Spanish (20a), there is a first mention of the lexical direct object without clitic doubling and a second mention of the same direct object in the form of the clitic *los* in the following sentence, which is necessarily anaphorically interpreted. However, the Basque version of the same sequence (20b) incorporates an obligatory morphological third-person plural accusative marker *-it-* in

the verbal form *ditut*, which, in the first sentence, agrees with the explicit lexical direct object and replicates it, whilst in the second the same marker *-it-* allows us to refer back to it without having to repeat it.

In addition to this striking structural difference between the Spanish pronominal system which includes anaphoric clitics and the Basque one with morphological agreement with the different verbal arguments, whether they are explicit or not, there is a fundamental difference in terms of how gender is marked. As we have just pointed out, Basque verbal morphemes indicate number and person but not gender. Indeed, pronouns in Basque, like other nominal categories or verbs, do not include formal markers that distinguish masculine from feminine antecedents or any other type of information reminiscent of Spanish grammatical gender.<sup>11</sup> Thus, as shown in sentences (21), a direct object referring to masculine entities, like *gizonak* ‘men’ (21a), and another one with a feminine referent, like *emakumeak* ‘women’, is expressed in exactly the same way in the auxiliary of the verbal form *aurkitu ditut* by using the third-person plural accusative marker *-it-*, as is also used in (20).

- (21) a. Herriko gizonak aurkitu ditut.  
           ‘I came across the men of the town’.  
       b. Herriko emakumeak aurkitu ditut.  
           ‘I came across the women of the town’.

In sum, Basque, the language in contact with Spanish in the Basque Country, not only necessarily identifies direct objects through the use of morphological markers, but it also lacks the nominal or verbal inflection for gender and does thus not mark the gender of nominal antecedents.

## 5.2 Contact between Basque and Spanish

Although the current contact situation between Spanish and Basque, detailed in section 5.1, provides a first explanation for the use of feminine *leísmo* in Basque Spanish, historical information on the links between Spanish and Basque as well as the geographical and sociolinguistic distribution of the phenomenon under study point unequivocally in the same direction (see sections 4.1 and 4.2).

<sup>11</sup> With the exception of the informal second-person singular pronoun, *hi*, which does incorporate a distinction between masculine and feminine in the verbal morphology, the other pronouns – including the more formal second person singular and more common *zu* – do not include this feature, which is also absent in the rest of the Basque grammar.

However, it must be kept in mind that the current scenario of strong contact between Basque and Spanish in areas where Basque is still L1 is, in fact, a pale reflection of what must have been the situation throughout the whole of the Modern Age, the period in which Basque started being displaced in most regions to the south of today's Basque speaking areas. The language's replacement and displacement intensified in the 19th century to the final decades of the 20th century and was aided by the spread of compulsory education and the region's industrialisation (Camus/Gómez Seibane 2010). Obviously, the process of language change included initially stages in which there was access to Spanish and bilingualism spread among the Basque speaking population, favouring the emergence of relatively stable language transfer phenomena. As already said, it is a situation that continues today, although education has ensured more organised access to knowledge of both languages and an increase in the number of balanced bilinguals, which limits the spread of transfers from one language to the other. Indeed, there are now hardly any monolingual Basque speakers and bilinguals with limited proficiency in Spanish are equally rare; and if found, they are invariably elderly people with rural backgrounds. Despite the evolving situation, it cannot be denied that, both historically and today, the Spanish variety spoken in large parts of the Basque Country is the product of a contact situation in which elements of Basque have been transferred, such as for instance feminine *leísmo*.

Indeed, as we have seen, gender loss in accusative clitics can be observed in Basque Spanish spoken in those areas of the Basque Country where Basque remained spoken until relatively recently. On the contrary, it is totally absent in areas where no historical evidence for Basque exists. This is the case of the most western areas of Bizkaia and Araba and southern areas of the banks of the Ebro in Araba and Navarre. As displayed in Map 1, in today's Spanish-speaking areas of Araba and Navarre, where Basque was spoken until at least the end of the 19th century, it is common to document the use of *le, les* for *la, las*. It is equally elucidating that the phenomenon is most common in the Basque-speaking areas of inner Bizkaia and northwest Navarre, together with Gipuzkoa (Camus/Gómez Seibane 2015a; 2015b) and is very significantly used in rural areas, where Basque is the first language for most of the population and Spanish is used less commonly (See the data cited above from COSER and from our corpus of oral interviews).

In this regard, we must again insist on the diastratic differences that can be inferred from the sources and interviews with urban speakers cited in section 3.2. Remember that it is among the monolingual Spanish-speaking urban population that the phenomenon is less common, although it might be accepted. Additionally, it increases in frequency as informants' knowledge of Basque increases, as is the case for the population for whom Spanish is an acquired language.

It can hence be concluded that there is a correlation between the feminine *leísmo* and knowledge of Basque (Camus/Gómez Seibane 2015a; 2015b).

### 5.3 Gender loss in Spanish in contact with Amerindian languages

Lastly, another argument corroborates the link between gender loss in the pronominal system and contact with Basque, to wit, the presence of the same trait in other Spanish varieties in contact with languages where, like Basque, gender is not marked. This link between the use of clitics in Basque Spanish and those in varieties of Latin American Spanish in strong contact with Amerindian languages has often been observed and has been described in detail in the last twenty years (Lipski 1996; Palacios 1998; 2005; Fernández-Ordóñez 1999, 1341; Gómez Seibane 2012a, 38–49). In what follows we will now provide clear illustrations of this. Concretely, we will exemplify this similarity with cases of Spanish varieties in contact with Quechua, Guaraní and Mayan languages.

#### 5.3.1 Spanish in the Andes in contact with Quechua

In the highland or mountainous areas of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, Spanish has evolved in bilingual settings and is in heavy contact with Amerindian languages, particularly Quechua (in Ecuador known as Quichua) and, to a lesser extent, Aymara. These languages do not have an unstressed pronominal system (clitics) for the third person nor do they distinguish between masculine or feminine, unlike Spanish (Palacios 2005, 72). They further only incorporate an indication of the object in the verb if it has an animate referent. All these traits are evocative of the discussed characteristics of Basque. Moreover, as we will see now, they also appear in the Spanish spoken in this area of the Andes (Fernández-Ordóñez 1999; Palacios 2002; 2005; Gómez Seibane 2012a).

Firstly, in the Spanish variety spoken in the Ecuadorian mountains (which largely includes the variety spoken in the capital, Quito), the presence of a *leísmo*-type pronominal system, in which the originally dative form *le/les* is also widely used for both masculine and feminine accusatives, is well documented (Palacios 2005, 66–67; Gómez Seibane 2012a, 39–40), as can be seen in the following examples.

- (22) a. *Les<sub>i</sub> van a matar [a ellos<sub>i</sub>]* (Fernández-Ordóñez 1999, 1342).  
 ‘They are going to kill them-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) [them]’.

- b. *Le<sub>i</sub> vi a la Rosa<sub>i</sub>* (Palacios 2005, example 2a)  
 ‘I saw her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT), Rosa’.

Although this widespread use of *le/s* seems to be frequent, particularly with animate antecedents, there are also examples with inanimate direct objects, like those in (23).

- (23) a. *Les<sub>i</sub> aplasté a toditos<sub>i</sub> para hacer un pastel [los plátanos]* (Gómez Seibane 2012a, 40).  
 ‘I squashed all of them-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) to make a cake [the bananas (MASC)]’.
- b. *Les cociné y les<sub>i</sub> metí al horno [las papas<sub>i</sub>]* (Gómez Seibane 2012a, 40).  
 ‘I cooked them-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) and put-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) in the oven [the potatoes (FEM)]’.

In this respect, it is important to note that Ecuadorian Highland Spanish also very frequently resorts to the omission of clitics, so-called null objects, if the direct object’s antecedent is inanimate, as shown in (24), in a very similar way as in Basque Spanish (see section 3.3).

- (24) *La leche<sub>i</sub> Ø<sub>i</sub> vendían a 1,20 \$* (Fernández-Ordóñez 1999, 1342).  
 ‘They sold the milk at \$1.20’.

A similar simplification can be found in the mountainous regions of Peru, Bolivia and northwest Argentina, areas with strong contact between Spanish and Quechua, or Spanish and Aymara. The loss or neutralisation of gender is here also observed in accusative clitics. In this case, however, the chosen form is not *le/s* but *lo*, both for the masculine and feminine – which is why they are referred to as *loísmo* varieties – and also for the singular and plural, as shown in (25).

- (25) a. *El hombre campesino por ejemplo a la guitarra<sub>i</sub> lo<sub>i</sub> tiene como ciencia* (Palacios 2005, example 1a).  
 ‘Peasants, for instance, the guitar (FEM SING) regard it-ACC MASC SING to be a science’.
- b. *A los de Huayranphue<sub>i</sub>. . . yo he ido a vacunarlo<sub>i</sub>* (Palacios 2005, example 1b).  
 ‘Those from Huayranphue (MASC PL), I went to vaccinate them-ACC MASC SING’.

As a result, unlike in Ecuadorian Highland Spanish, these varieties neutralize gender and number, but continue to maintain the distinction between the dative (*le*) and the accusative (*lo*). It is important to highlight another common feature: like Basque and Ecuadorian Highland Spanish, in these varieties examples can also be found of the omission of accusative clitics, as illustrated in (26).

- (26) a. A todas las mujeres<sub>i</sub> Ø<sub>i</sub> han llevado al mercado (Gómez Seibane 2012a, 41).  
 ‘The women, they have taken to market’.  
 b. Esos bultos<sub>i</sub> Ø<sub>i</sub> vas a llevar a la tienda (Gómez Seibane 2012a, 41).  
 ‘These parcels, you are going to take to the shop’.

### 5.3.2 Spanish in contact with Guaraní

In Paraguay and also in the provinces of Misiones, Corrientes and the eastern side of Chaco and Formosa, in the northeast of Argentina near the border with Paraguay, there is also a strong language contact situation and, to a greater or lesser extent, bilingualism in Spanish and Guaraní. Like Quechua/Quichua and Aymara, Guaraní does not have pronominal clitics. Instead, it uses a pronominal construction with postpositions for the third person that does not distinguish between the accusative and the dative nor mark gender. These properties can also be seen in the Spanish of this whole area in different ways, as we will see now (Fernández-Ordóñez 1999; Palacios 2000; 2005; Gómez Seibane 2012a).

Firstly, gender loss is widespread throughout this whole area, normally with a preference for *leísmo*, like in Ecuador, as shown in (27).

- (27) *Le*<sub>i</sub> vi ayer a María<sub>i</sub> (Gómez Seibane 2012a, 44).  
 ‘I saw her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT) yesterday, María’.

Cases with the pronoun *lo* are also documented in rural areas of Paraguay, Peru, Bolivia and northwest Argentina. As shown in the examples in (28), the form *lo* is used for feminine (28a) and masculine (28b) referents.

- (28) a. El que puede se ha comprado una vaca<sub>i</sub> en su época y *lo*<sub>i</sub> va criando (Palacios 2000, 131).  
 ‘He who could bought in his day a cow (FEM) and rears it-ACC MASC SING’.  
 b. La familia a lo mejor prepara un serdito<sub>i</sub> (sic) o un serdo<sub>i</sub> (sic) para matar*lo*<sub>i</sub> en Navidad (Palacios 2000, 131).  
 ‘Maybe the family will prepare a piglet (MASC) or a pig (MASC) to slaughter it-ACC MASC SING at Christmas’.

Distinctions in number are often eliminated too, particularly in Paraguay; as such, the form *le* ends up functioning in *leísmo* varieties as a single clitic for all kinds of objects.

- (29) a. En Estados Unidos por ejemplo los norteamericanos *le*<sub>i</sub> tienen como animales [a los indios]<sub>i</sub> (Gómez Seibane 2012a, 43)  
 ‘In the United States, for instance, North Americans regard them-DAT SING (DIRECT OBJECT) as animals [the Indians]’.
- b. *Le*<sub>i</sub> saluda a la señora<sub>i</sub> (Fernández-Ordóñez 1999, 1348).  
 ‘I greet her-DAT (DIRECT OBJECT), the lady’.
- c. Los peregrinantes<sub>i</sub> acuden de todos los puntos del país, sin importar*le*<sub>i</sub> los más duros sacrificios (Fernández-Ordóñez 1999, 1348).  
 ‘Pilgrims flock from all corners of the country, without that the harshest of sacrifices matters them-DAT SING’.

Once again, as in the Spanish contact varieties reviewed here, the omission of accusative clitics is also documented, albeit more often for objects referring to inanimate antecedents (30).

- (30) El tronco<sub>i</sub> había que arrastrar  $\emptyset$ <sub>i</sub> hasta la picada (Gómez Seibane 2012a, 44).  
 ‘The trunk they had to drag to the forest trail’.

### 5.3.3 Spanish in contact with Mayan languages

Lastly, in areas of Guatemala where native Mayan languages are mainly spoken – for instance, in the Tzotujil area –, bilingual inhabitants speak a Spanish with simplified pronominal systems (Palacios 2005; Gómez Seibane 2012a). In this case, the pronoun that neutralizes gender for the accusative is *lo* and, as in Paraguay, it is also used indistinctly for the singular and plural. In (31), examples of these Guatemalan constructions with *lo* are given.

- (31) Me fueron a dejar a la escuela, pero yo *lo*<sub>i</sub> quería soltar a mimamá<sub>i</sub> (Gómez Seibane 2012a, 48).  
 ‘They went to leave me at school, but I wanted to let her-ACC MASC go, my mother (FEM)’.

Once again, these varieties usually exhibit null objects, particularly in the case of lesser educated speakers with lower proficiency in Spanish (32).

- (32) [Y] el niño<sub>i</sub> que tuvo no *lo*<sub>i</sub> quería, prefirió ir a tirar  $\emptyset$ <sub>i</sub> al río (Gómez Seibane 2012a, 48).  
 ‘[And] the little boy, she did not want him-ACC, she preferred to throw (him)in the river’.

A similar use of *lo* can be found in Mexico in the Mayan area (Yucatán), as well as among speakers of Nahuatl (Lipski 1996, 305–306; Gómez Seibane 2012a, 47–48), where *lo* can even be used for the dative (33).

- (33) *Lo*<sub>i</sub> van a dar de comer [a la gente<sub>i</sub> en una fiesta] (Gómez Seibane 2012a, 48).  
 ‘They are going to give food to them-ACC MASC SING [to the people (FEM SING) at a party]’.

In sum, parallels in the clitics use in Basque Spanish and Latin American Spanish varieties in contact with Amerindian languages appear to support the existence of a shared explanation, following which a change has occurred due to long-lasting heavy contact. This is the hypothesis that we aim to explore in the following section.

## 6 Convergence between Basque and Spanish: The pronominal system in Basque Spanish

As Palacios has argued (2005, 71), it is reasonable to believe that contact contexts can give rise to general processes of change in which similar mechanisms can be found, with equally similar consequences and results. It is therefore legitimate to try to seek common explanations for phenomena found in such contact situations, like those in Latin American areas in contact with Amerindian languages. Palacios (2005) provides an explanatory model that, considering the parallels with Latin American situations, can be useful to explain what has occurred to the Basque Spanish.

### 6.1 A pronominal clitic convergence model

Palacios’ analysis of the Latin American Spanish phenomena for which there is a reduction in the unstressed pronoun paradigm starts out from the observation that the social and linguistic conditions are very similar as there is heavy contact. The languages that coexist with Spanish all have pronominal systems with



similar structural properties – no clitic pronouns nor gender – and it is in this grammatical aspect that Spanish displays a change. Due to convergence, similar structures from different coexisting languages – in this case the pronominal systems of Spanish and various Amerindian languages – exert a mutual influence on each other. Thus changes are set in motion that lead to the disappearance of previously existing differences, particularly in parts of the system where there was already a certain degree of variation and, hence, instability. The outcome is the contact-induced process of structural re-organisation or re-structuring, often resulting in the extension or simplification of a syntactic or morphological paradigm (Palacios 2005, 83–85). In the case of the unstressed pronoun or clitic paradigms of the aforementioned Spanish varieties in contact with Amerindian languages, this convergence has led to modifications that have a crucial impact on the three parameters that govern the pronoun selection, namely, gender, number and case. What then occurs is that at least one of them – and often two or even three – are eliminated or neutralised leading to the simplification of the original pronominal paradigm in Spanish.

As Palacios (2005) points out, the way in which the aforementioned morphological features are affected seems to respond to a set of general principles, and so the elimination of one or more of them does not seem to be random but based on a hierarchy, evidently associated with the characteristics of the languages in contact. According to this hierarchy, gender is the feature most likely to be neutralised, followed by number and case. Interestingly, this order seems to be corroborated by language acquisition data, namely the way in which children acquire these distinctions in the pronominal clitics in Spanish. As Palacios shows (2005, 75–76) from different studies with bilingual Spanish children under the age of three living in Los Angeles and Quechua speakers with Spanish as L2, the first distinction that they master is case (*le/lo*); this is generally followed by number, while the contrast between masculine and feminine comes last, which explains in turn why it is the first feature that is lost.

Considering all this, neither of the two ways of simplifying the pronominal paradigms documented in the Spanish in contact with Amerindian languages, is then surprising. On the one hand, we have the varieties with *loísmo* (Peru, Bolivia, northwest Argentina, Guatemala, and Mexico), where gender is lost for the accusative and sometimes number, but the resulting single form, *lo*, continues to be distinguished from the dative *le*. This choice of *lo* as a neutral pronoun with no reference to gender can be explained by its use in standard Spanish as an unmarked form, i.e. the form necessarily used in all cases with a joint masculine and feminine antecedent, and also in sentence and other types of anaphora. These circumstances no doubt facilitate its reading as a more comprehensive form.

On the other hand, there are the *leísmo* varieties of Spanish found in Ecuador or Paraguay, where gender loss (and number) favours the dative clitic *le*, which in turn implies the neutralisation of case. The reason for this more extreme option might be due to the fact that the forms of the dative do not incorporate gender in Spanish and can thus be used to refer to both masculine and feminine. This makes them the perfect candidate to function as pronouns with no gender marking. But, as Palacios also rightly notes (2005, 77), in the grammar of Spanish numerous changes affect the marking of datives and accusatives, often resulting in the extension of dative markers to the accusative. The phenomenon of *leísmo* found in the studied varieties of Spanish would merely be another example of this change brought about by an external agent, that is, contact with Amerindian languages.

In this respect, it is essential to bear in mind some external factors that are key when measuring the intensity of the contact: the level of the informants' education and, closely linked to this, their level of bilingualism or, rather, their proficiency in the various languages involved. In addition, the presence of a language with more marked or distinctive characteristics than that of the standard model is clearly conditioned by the community's level of proficiency in that language. It is possible to find striking variation in (a) incipient bilingual speakers with a low educational and low proficiency level in the language in question – for instance, in settings where Quechua or Guaraní is the first language –, (b) successive bilingual speakers with more proficiency in Spanish, and (c) balanced bilingual speakers. The resulting scenario, in areas of heavy contact, is the presence of an intricate continuum of linguistic varieties and, as a result, notable sociolinguistic variation. This is something that we have already proven in the case of Basque Spanish (Camus/Gómez Seibane 2015a), a variety to which we will now apply Palacios' explanatory model (2005).

## 6.2 The pronominal system in Basque Spanish

As discussed previously, Basque Spanish spoken is a variety of Spanish that has evolved in conditions of long-lasting heavy contact with Basque, a language which it has replaced in some areas and with which it continues to coexist in others. Not so long ago, this contact took place in conditions very similar to those that can still be found in the Latin American areas described above. As in these cases, Basque, the substrate language, has no morphological gender and treats direct objects with masculine and feminine antecedents in the same way. Moreover, Basque Spanish is characterised by an unstressed pronoun paradigm with a considerable degree of variation and instability, as shown in section

3, with different competing systems, some of which erase the differences between the accusative and the dative pronouns.

We believe that, given these contact conditions, the use of the unstressed pronouns in Basque Spanish can be regarded as the result of a convergence process, which partly coincides with the one described by Palacios (2005) for the uses in Latin American Spanish varieties in contact with Amerindian languages (Camus/Gómez Seibane 2015a, 214–216). The differences in between Basque and Spanish gradually faded for this particular grammatical aspect and modifications that can be interpreted as due to convergence between the two grammars showed up. On the one hand, as in Castilian Spanish, this new variety of Spanish partly tends to neutralize the case-related distinctions typical of the Castilian Spanish, generalizing it in the case of animate antecedents (*leísmo*). On the other hand, a new Basque-related innovation is also incorporated: the elimination of gender distinctions (the masculine and feminine *leísmo*), a phenomenon unknown in neighbouring Spanish dialects. Furthermore, as explained in section 3.3, the pronominal system of Basque Spanish is also characterised by two other innovations: the omission of accusative clitics when referring to inanimate antecedents and the pronominal doubling of direct object pronouns with human referents.

Our account of the contact-induced gender loss in Basque Spanish spoken is thus supported by the same arguments relating to Latin America Spanish contact varieties. As gender markers are at the bottom of the pronominal hierarchy scale, this makes them more prone to change, thus explaining their neutralisation in contact situations with a language that does not use them. Likewise, neutralisation through the form *le* can also be accounted for, namely by the fact that *le* is an ideal candidate for this function since in its traditional dative use, it refers indistinctly to feminine and masculine antecedents. We have also pointed out that the extension of this original form of the dative to the accusative (initially only in reference to masculine antecedents) is a sign of long-lasting evolutionary trends in Spanish: the extension of dative markers at the detriment of accusative ones. This is also the case for the preposition *a* to mark human (and, sometimes, animate) direct objects and, far more relevant to our case, the elimination of case-related distinctions in third person clitics that regularly occurs in Spain's mainland dialects with *leísmo*.

Lastly, processes induced by language contact must be taken into account. Also in the case of Basque, although the characteristics of the system of unstressed pronouns described in this paper – and, among them, feminine *leísmo* – are noticeably different from those of the standard variety of Spanish, the extent to which they are used by speakers will depend on the person's level of proficiency in Spanish. It is particularly noticeable in the case of incipient bilingual speakers (of which there are very few in the Basque case) or among successive bilingual speakers (who are far more numerous). On the other hand, even though

large numbers of monolingual Spanish speakers may accept and occasionally use it, they tend to reintroduce the standard use of gender in the accusative and, as a consequence, they use the feminine *la* more regularly than the masculine *le*.

## 7 Concluding remarks

This paper examined the grammatical, historical, geographic, social and linguistic scope of feminine *leísmo* in Basque Spanish while taking into account the general context of the variations in the system of unstressed pronouns found in mainland European Spanish.

Its growing presence in written texts from the 16th century onward and its current use in Basque speaking areas and among older bilingual informants with a lower educational level who live in rural areas, have been detailed. In contrast, it occurs less among Spanish speakers living in urban areas or with a university education, although they do accept it as grammatical. We have further shown how it is particularly common when replacing human direct objects and in clitic doubling constructions.

Lastly, using Palacios' model (2005) developed for Spanish in contact with American languages, an explanation was proposed for this phenomenon in Basque Spanish, according to which convergence took place between the grammars Basque and Spanish with respect to the use of unstressed pronouns. This resulted in the (partial) loss of gender markers – that do not exist in Basque – and, following general evolutionary trends found in Spanish, dative forms extend overtaking accusative functions.

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