The Rise and Fall of Impersonal Pronouns in Spanish

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In Spanish, there are many ways to express impersonality. Some of these are presented in (1). In (1a), we have the impersonal se, in (1b) we have the third person plural, in (1c) the second person singular, in (1d) the pronoun uno, and finally in (1e) we have the form omne ‘man’ (cf. Fr. on) which, although is now extinct, was used at least until the late sixteenth century. This paper is devoted to the forms presented in (1d) and (1e), that is, uno and omne.¹

(1) a. Se solicita(n) albañiles
‘Builders needed’

b. Dicen que Juan es buena persona
‘They say John is a good person’

c. Cuando te pasan esas cosas, es difícil reponerse
‘When these things happen to you, it is difficult to recover’

d. Con María, uno nunca sabe qué esperar
‘With María, one never knows what to expect’

e. Grand piedad es dar omne consejo a los menores
‘Great mercy is to give advise to the young’

1. Corpus

omne 14 texts from the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries (275000 words, 142 cases of generic omne) and some examples taken from various texts from the sixteenth century.

uno 2 texts from the sixteenth century (75000 words, 30 cases) and 89 additional examples of Modern Spanish from 4 novels and newspapers.

2. Omne

The grammaticalization of generic pronouns on the basis of nouns meaning ‘man’ is straightforward. First, the noun is used in generic contexts usually without any determiners. Then, it gradually acquires morphosyntactic characteristics that distinguish it from the original noun. In some cases, phonetic erosion takes place. Note that, as stated by Haspelmath (1997:12) ‘formally distinct generic pronouns do not seem to be very widespread.’

Latin lacked generic pronouns and in its place, it employed different grammatical strategies such as the passive voice, the third person singular, the second person, etc. (Ernoult & Thomas, 1953: 144-46).

The use of the descendants of HOMO with an impersonal value seems to have its origins in late Latin, as in (2), which explains that in several Romance languages there has been, at some point, a generic pronoun derived from it. This is the case in old Provençal, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish, and modern French and Catalan.

(2) Ubi homo desiderium suum complevi videt [Peregrinatio Aetheriae, 13,1]
‘when one sees his wish accomplished’

The use of generic omne is well document throughout the Middle Ages. Some of its main characteristics are:

¹I will refer to the Castilian generic pronoun derived from Latin HOMO as omne, for it is the most common graphic variant in medieval texts.
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- In contrast to French on, omne is mainly found in texts with a highly moral content, such as exempla collections, and doctrinal literature.

  (3) porque en la casa del lloro aura omne memoria de commo ha de morir [Proverbios, 229]
  ‘because in the house of sorrow omne will know how will one die’

- Omne was never used to designate a referent, singular or plural, to which an action is attributed, as French on. This use of on was translated in Old Spanish with the 3pp (Kärde 1943).

  (4) Si demanderent a cayphas que on ne li dounast [Grail, Fragments 2.23, apud Kärde 1943: 16]
  Enbiaron al carcerero de Cayphas que non diesen de comer
  ‘They demanded the jailer of Cayphas not to feed us’

- In medieval Spanish, generic omne is usually left bare, but in some cases the definite singular article can precede it. As shown in (6), variation may occur even in a same paragraph.

  (5) por fuyr el hombre de un peligro, cae en otro mayor [Celestina, 108]
  ‘in order to escape from a danger, the man falls in a bigger one’

  (6) Et acaesçe así commo a los cabellos que, quando el omne tiene en la cabeza, péinalos et úntalos con las mejores unturas que puede, et después que son fuera de la cabeza, halos omne asco de ver [Calila, 107]
  ‘and it happens as with hair, that when the man has them in the head, he combs them and rub them with the best unctions that he can, but when they are not on the head, omne feels disgusted by them’

Note that in early stages of the grammaticalization of French on, there was also variation with respect of the use of the article, as shown in example (7), taken from Meyer-Lübke (1923 [1890-1906]: III.106-109).

  (7) doit l’om penseir [Dialogues du pape Grégoire, 27, 18]
  ‘one most think’
  pour sun seingnur deit hum sufrir destreiz [Roland, 1010]
  ‘for his lord one should suffer with good heart’

- Omne is not restricted to subjects (8a). It can also be DO (8b) and IO (8c):

  (8) a. Et dizen que la cosa que omne con mayor derecho deve sofrir es aquella que por ninguna guisa non puede mudar [Calila, 217]
  ‘And they say that the thing for which omne most rightly must suffer is that which cannot be changed by any means’
  b. Qualquier mala nueua basta para poner a omne en trabajo [Proverbs, 17]
  ‘Any bad news is sufficient to put omne in difficulty’
  c. lo qual... abreua a omne los dias & le pone en todo trabajo [Proverbs, 325]
  ‘... which abbreviates the days to omne and puts him in all kinds of trouble’

- Omne can occur both with transitive (9a) and intransitive verbs (9b). Se only appears with intransitive verbs from the sixteenth century on.

  (9) a. el temor es vna tristeza o turbaçion que omne tiene esperando algund mal [Proverbs, 114]
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‘fear is a kind of sadness or inquietude that omne has while waiting for something bad’

b. quando omne teme, commo todos los mienbros quedan syn sangre & se va la sangre al coraçon..., queda omne amarillo [Proverbios, 117]

‘when omne fears, as all the limbs are left with no blood and the blood goes to the heart, omne becomes yellow’

- Omne is frequently found with pronominal and reflexive verbs on the one hand (10), and with infinitives, on the other. Note that with infinitives there is variation between the use of omne and null-subject (11).

(10) Mala voluntad es acostunbrarse omne a lo ageno [Proverbios, 226]

‘It is bad will that omne gets used to someone else’s things’

(11) E algunos dijeron que la bienauenturança estaua en tener mucho dinero, otros dijeron que en ser omne mucho famoso, otros dijeron que en tener omne grandes dignidades y señorios [Proverbios, 201]

‘and some said that happiness was in having a lot of money, others said that it was in being omne famous, others that in having omne great dignities and dominions’

- Omne is usually postverbal, both with infinitives (11) and with conjugated verbs (12).

(12) Tantas vezes muere omne, quantas vezes pierde lo suyo [Proverbios, 1]

‘As many times dies omne as (he) looses his things’

- Similarly to clitics, it cannot occur in absolute sentence initial position. I have only found one exception, which is presented in (13):

(13) Omne non deue temer & reçelar el peligro ... [Proverbios, 3]

‘Omne must not fear or distrust danger’

From the sixteenth century, omne begins to be used as a hidden fist person. With this nuance it is associated to popular speech in Golden-Age theatre (Guillet 1925, Carrasco 1988).

(14) En conclusión / Piensan que hombre es camaleón / Que se mantiene del aire [Salamantina, apud Guillet 1925:451]

‘In sum / they think that omne is a camaleon/ that lives on air’

(15) Como hombre es mujer y vieja, hacen burla de hombre [Refranes, 174]

‘as omne is a woman and old,they make fun of omne’

Como hombre está preñada, no se puede abajar [Refranes, 174]

‘as omne is pregnant, (omne) cannot bend down’

During the sixteenth century and with the inclusion of omne in this new domain, its frequency of use began to diminish until it finally disappeared, probably in the first decades of the seventeenth century (Guillet 1925).

3. Uno

The rise of generic or impersonal uno in Golden-Age Spanish is linked to the development of the indefinite article.

Latin ÚNUS: ‘the one’, ‘the only’, ‘one and the same’(Ernout & Meillet 1959:748). Later, ÚNUS begins to be used similarly to QUÍDAM.
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Figure 1: The grammaticalization of the indefinite article (Givón, 1981)

(16) a. et accedens unus scriba ait illi magister sequar te quocumque ieris [Vulgate, Matthew 8:19]
   ‘A scribe came, and said to him, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go”.’

The specific use of the indefinite article is well attested since the first Castilian texts. As for the non-specific use, the number of cases starts to be numerically relevant around the fifteenth century (Pozas Loyo 2010).

(17) a. penava por mi amor un cavallero que se llamava Calisto [Celestina, 333]
   ‘a gentleman whose name was Calisto was suffering for my love’
b. quisiera una gran bofetada en mitad de mi cara [Celestina, 208]
   ‘I would like a big slap in the middle of my face’

As for generics, excluding taxonomic readings (18), generic un is a feature of Golden-Age Spanish (19).

(18) Et semeia al figado de una aue que llaman cayracoz [Lapidario, 220]
   ‘And it looks like the liver of a bird called cayracoz’

(19) Preguntado el filósofo Neótido que cuál era el más sano consejo que entre todos los consejos un hombre para sí podía tomar respondió [Menosprecio, 129]
   ‘When the philosopher Neotido was ask which was the best advise that among them all a man could get, he replied’

Once the indefinite article was introduced into generics, the pronominal form uno started to be used in these contexts. The first example is found in the Diálogo de la Lengua of Juan de Valdés, written in 1535, text in which there are ten occurrences of uno. In Menosprecio de corte, alabanza de aldea, from 1539 (21), there are at least 30 cases of uno.

(20) quando queremos dezir que uno quiere mucho una cosa, dezimos que sta lisiado por ella [Diálogo, 112]
   ‘when we want to say that one really wants something we say that he is crippled for it’

(21) porque más fácilmente menosprecio uno lo que vee con los ojos, que no lo que ya tiene entre las manos [Menosprecio, 24]
   ‘because one more easily despise what one sees with the eyes, than what one has in the hands’
   ¿Qué vida, qué fortuna, qué gusto ni qué descanso, puede tener uno en palacio ... ? [Menosprecio, 237]
   ‘What life, what fortune, what rest can one have in palace ... ?’
   es muy gran locura dar uno lo que no puede dar [Menosprecio, 204]
   ‘it is mad to give away what one cannot give away’

Some of the most important characteristics of uno are (cf. Kärde 1943, Ridruejo 1980, Carrasco 1988, Ricós 2002):

- It is not restricted to subjects (22a). It can also fulfil other functions, such as DO (22b) and IO (22c). Additionally, as shown in (22d) it can appear in PPs.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>predicate nouns</th>
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(22) a. Si se deseaba realizar un viaje de mayor categoría, más rápido y con menos escalas, debía uno ir a Nueva York [Fuga, 53]
   ‘If one wanted to travel more elegantly, more quickly and with less stops, one needed to go to New York’

b. Cuando uno comienza anda uno dándole mucha lata a los medios, para que los medios lo ayuden a uno [Reforma, 25-01-2006]
   ‘When one begins (one’s career), one is always begging the media for help’

c. A uno siempre le gusta descubrir qué secretos, qué costumbres se traen de sus tierras [Casa verde, 308]
   ‘One always likes to discover what secrets, what habits they bring from their lands’

d. Nieves asintió: no había como la tierra de uno [Casa verde, 180]
   ‘Nieves nodded: there was nothing like one’s land’

- It can trigger anaphoric chains.

(23) Uno es su niñez, su familia, unos cuantos amigos, algunos amores [Fuga, 22]
   ‘One is one’s childhood, one’s family, a couple of friends, some love stories’

- It is often found with pronominal and reflexive verbs.

(24) Les decía que puede llegar el momento en que uno se harte [Viento, 162]
   ‘I was telling them that there can be a point at which one gets fed up’

Lo que pasa... es que uno no se anima a llevar la amistad hasta el final [Viento, 211]
   ‘What happens is that one doesn’t dare to take friendship to the end’

- It can act as a hidden or masked first person. This seems to be a later development. I have not been able to find any clear cases in Medieval nor Golden-Age Spanish texts.

(25) Al llegar encontré que sí está pasando mucho, sí, mis amigos tenían razón, me perdí algo que debí haber vivido, ¿por qué se toma uno el trabajo tan en serio?, ¿cómo pude en mi lista de prioridades poner primero el rodaje de una película que estar en la elección más importante que ha vivido México desde que yo existo [Reforma, 8-08-2006]
   ‘When I arrived, I found that a lot was happening, yes, my friends were right, I missed something that I should have lived. Why does one take the job so seriously? How could I put in my priority list the making of a film before than being at the most important election that Mexico has had since I exist?’

- In some cases, the feminine form una is found. Note that una is used only when two conditions are fulfilled: 1) the speaker is a woman and 2) the generalization stated only concerns women (e.g. giving birth). When this is not the case, the unmarked masculine form is generally preferred, as in (27), where only condition 1 (the speaker is a woman) in fulfilled.

(26) Muchas gracias tenemos que dar a Dios por haber nacido españolas. Si hubiéramos nacido en China, a lo mejor nuestros hijos se iban al limbo sin remisión. ¡Tener hijos para eso! ¡Con lo que una sufre para tenerlos y con la guerra que dan de chicos! [Colmena, 137]
   ‘We should be very grateful to God for being Spanish. If we had been born in China, maybe our children would go to the limbo without remission. Having children for that! With what one(fem) suffers to have them and with all the trouble they give when they are young!’

(27) Ya no, porque habían comenzado a discutir - dijo la Chunga -. Uno viene aquí a divertirse, nada de peleas [Casa verde, 335]
   ‘Not anymore, because they have started to argue - la Chunga said -. One comes here to have fun, not fights.’
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4. The fall of *omne* and the rise of *uno*

According to Brown (1931), the disappearance of *omne* had three causes:

1. Its frequency of use was never too high.
2. Spanish had already other ways to express impersonality such as the *se*, the passive voice, and the 3pp.
3. Given that there was no phonetic erosion, the form was always ambiguous.

Brown (1931): the fall of *omne* was the result of an election between synonymic forms, namely *se*, the passive and the 3pp, in which the most conflictive in terms of ambiguity and less rooted in the language was eliminated.

Although Brown’s three claims are correct, there are two problems with his conclusion:

a) *Omne* and *se*, the periphrastic passive, and 3pp are not strictly interchangeable.

b) Brown does not explain why neither the low frequency of use nor the ambiguity caused *omne* to be eliminated in the Middle-Ages, during which it had a well established functional domain.

5. Conclusions

Although undoubtedly the disappearance of *omne* had more than one cause, its final trigger was the rise of *uno*. *Omne* and *uno* share a number of characteristics, such as their generic interpretation, the possibility of fulfilling syntactic functions other that subject, their capacity to appear with pronominal and reflexive verbs, and the fact that both can be anaphorically linked to other elements in the sentence. Moreover, both forms developed, at one point of their evolution, the nuance of a hidden first person (see Kärde 1943, Carrasco 1988).

The disappearance of *omne* and the birth of generic *uno* can be regarded as part of a larger process, namely the reorganization of the Spanish indefinite paradigm which, as Malkiel (1948) showed, took place in the late fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries.

6. Corpus

6.1. Main corpus

6.1.1. Thirteenth Century


Sendebar *Sendebar o libro de los engaños de las mujeres*, edición de María de Jesús Lacarra, Madrid: Cátedra, 1989.


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6.1.2. Fifteenth Century


6.2. Additional Corpus


Reforma Diario *Reforma*, Mexico.

El País Diario *El País*, España

References


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