

## **Lexical Frequency and Morphosyntactic Variation:**

### **Subject Pronoun Use in Mandarin Chinese**

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With the rise of exemplar theory (Bybee, 2010), the role of lexical frequency in language variation and change has been the object of considerable study, particularly in phonology. Results, however, have been mixed, with some studies showing strong frequency effects (e.g. Bybee 2002; Jurafsky et al. 2001) and others showing no such effects (e.g. Walker 2012). Recently, Erker and Guy (2012) extended the analysis of frequency to morphosyntactic variation and examined the role of frequency in variation between null and overt subject personal pronouns (SPPs) in New York City Spanish. Their results, which later studies have been unable to replicate (Bayley, Greer, & Holland 2013; Martínez-Sanz & van Herk 2013), suggest that frequency either activates or amplifies the effects of other constraints, such as co-reference. This paper extends the study of frequency effects on null pronoun variation to Mandarin Chinese. We use two different measures of frequency, corpus frequency and rank in a frequency dictionary (Xiao, Rayson, & McEnery 2009). Results of multivariate analysis of more than 6,500 tokens with Rbrul (Johnson 2009) collected in several different contexts in Harbin, China from native speakers of Mandarin suggest that frequency, regardless of how it is measured, has only a small effect on speakers' choices between null and overt pronouns. In fact, the effect of frequency is considerably less than the effect of other well-established constraints such as co-reference and person and number. The results presented in this study, as well as results presented in Bayley et al. (2013) and Martínez-Sanz and van Herk (2013), suggest that the role of frequency, at least in this area of the grammar, has been considerably exaggerated and that well-established linguistic constraints provide a better explanation for subject pronoun variation than frequency.