For the past three decades, variation in subject expression has been widely studied in Spanish, and many researchers have been highly interested in exploring the linguistic, stylistic and social factors that determine the patterning of subject expression (Bentivoglio 1987, Cameron 1992, Silva-Corvalán 1994, Morales 1997, Flores-Ferrán 2004, Amaral & Schwenter 2005, Otheguy et al. 2007, among others). Nevertheless, despite the existence of numerous works examining subject expression in different Spanish varieties, little is known about the distribution of this linguistic phenomenon in Basque Spanish. In this paper I seek to determine the configuration and distribution of overt vs. null subject usage operating in Basque Spanish.

While Caribbean Spanish dialects (i.e. Puerto Rican and Dominican Spanish) have shown high rates of overt subject expression, Cameron (1992) found significant differences when comparing PR Spanish to Madrid Spanish, with the latter showing more null subjects. The present study analyzes the Corpus Oral y Sonoro del Español Rural (COSER) of Basque Spanish, from which I extracted approximately 1000 tokens of null and overt subjects from 8 speakers. The results of a multivariate analysis using GoldVarb X show that differences also arise WITHIN the Iberian Peninsula. First, as regards overall frequency, I show that Basque Spanish displays even lower rates of overt subject expression (16%) than Madrid Spanish (21%). In fact, it shows the lowest rates of subject expression that have ever been observed in variationist studies of subject expression in Spanish (cf. Mayol 2011).

In addition to the overall differences in frequency of null vs. overt subjects in Basque Spanish, and how these distinguish this variety from other Peninsular varieties, there are also important differences in priming and switch reference effects. As is well-known, switch reference is the most important factor for predicting overt vs. null subject expression in Spanish (Flores-Ferrán 2007). However, the results of my analysis show that switch reference is only operative in the context of a prior NULL subject, i.e. a switch in subject referent significantly affects subject expression only when a null subject precedes. When a subject is preceded by an overt pronominal subject, the priming effect of the overt pronoun nullifies the switch reference effect: subjects with the same referent as a preceding overt subject are likewise overt 73% of the time, while subjects whose referent differs from those of a preceding overt subject are overt 74% of the time. This nullification of the switch reference effect does not occur in the case of null subjects, which show significantly different rates of overt subject expression depending on same vs. switch reference.

I postulate that Basque Spanish differs from other Spanish varieties due to its contact with Basque, also a null subject language. The intersection of two null subject varieties has created a situation whereby there is a cumulative effect in Basque Spanish, leading to higher rates of null subjects than found in other varieties of Spanish. In addition, the switch reference constraint operative in other Spanish varieties has been modified in Basque Spanish, such that overt subjects prime overt subjects, without regard for same vs. switch reference.