5
Examining Sociopragmatic Variation

5.0 Introduction
In the preceding chapters, we saw that the main bulk of the studies carried out in the sociopragmatics of Spanish has focused on the examination of particular phenomena (the realization of speech acts, aspects of the organization of conversation, politeness manifestations) in a variety of Spanish in contrast with another language, with English and Swedish constituting the contrasting languages par excellence. Contrastive studies of Spanish(es), however, have so far received considerably less attention and, in their vast majority, have only implicitly touched upon the notion of sociopragmatic variation (see, for example, the studies undertaken in Scandinavia, 5.2.2).

In this chapter, we define sociopragmatic variation, report on the type of studies that have been carried out in this area by Hispanists, and give an account of the corresponding findings according to the aspects of sociopragmatic variation examined; namely, variation in speech act realization, variation in conversational organization and politeness variation.

5.1 Towards a definition of sociopragmatic variation
When one thinks of (linguistic) variation, the first disciplines that come to mind are dialectology and sociolinguistics. While the former examines linguistic variation according to geographic areas, the latter, like (socio)pragmatics, explores aspects of the multitudinous relationship between language, society and culture. One of the goals of (correlational) sociolinguistic research is the examination of language variation in sociocultural contexts. Sociocultural contexts can be as broad as a
speech community (Hymes, 1974) or a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) or as narrow as interpersonal communication. More specifically, (correlational) sociolinguistics mainly focuses on the ways in which spoken and written discourse relates to social variation, in particular, to biosocial factors, such as age, sex, race, socio-economic class, occupation, ethnic identity, and so on. Elucidating whether such relationships are systematic and collective as opposed to idiosyncratic and persistent over time (Apte, 1989) is, therefore, its main aim.

Sociopragmatics shares this concern in that it also preoccupies itself with the study of discourse in sociocultural contexts. Unlike correlational sociolinguistic research, however, the main goal of sociopragmatic research is the examination of ‘meaning in interaction’ where ‘meaning is seen as a dynamic process, involving the negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, the context utterance (physical, social, linguistic) and the meaning potential of what is being said’ (Thomas, 1995, p. 22). As culture is seen as a model of and for reality that individuals internalize, without necessarily being conscious of it (Geertz, 1973), we argue that the interactants’ assigning of meaning will, to a greater or lesser extent, reflect their own sociocultural knowledge and norms. Thus, one of the goals of sociopragmatics is to uncover the cultural norms which underlie the interactional features of a given social group in a given social context; that is to say, to make the interactants’ implicit sociocultural knowledge and values explicit. Therefore, unlike studies in sociolinguistic variation, which investigate linguistic performance as it correlates with biosocial factors, studies in sociopragmatic variation seek primarily to examine differences in meaning in interaction as effected by sociocultural factors, such as institutional context and family context, of the participants and of the (situational) context itself. In this sense, sociopragmatics, like the ethnography of speaking (Hymes, 1962; see also Chapter 6), understood in its traditional sense, also seeks to identify the rules and premises which motivate communicative behaviour. However, unlike the ethnography of speaking, where data are traditionally collected through ethnographic observation and analysed according to three basic units of analysis (namely, that of the speech community, speech event and speech act), sociopragmatic research makes use of a variety of data collection methods and units of analysis, as in, speech acts, the organization of conversation, and politeness strategies (see Chapter 6).

Sociopragmatic variation may thus be defined as the way in which speakers vary their use of language in similar situational contexts with similar communicative purposes and thus exhibit different interactional