

Differential Object Marking and discourse prominence in Spanish

Tiago Augusto Duarte, Marco García García & Klaus von Heusinger

University of Cologne

In Spanish, human, indefinite direct objects optionally receive Differential Object Marking (DOM), realized by *a*, which is derived from the homophone preposition *a* ‘to’. The parameters that determine DOM are animacy, referentiality and information structure (inter alia Fábregas 2013). Leonetti (2004) and Iemmolo (2010) assume that the crucial parameter for DOM is topicality, which they define in terms of aboutness topic. In this presentation, we take a more general discourse perspective and assume with Chiriacescu & von Heusinger (2010) that DOM marking signals the prominence of the direct object. We measure the discourse prominence of arguments by their topic continuity (Givón 1983), i.e., by their frequency to be anaphorically taken up in the subsequent discourse. Thus, we predict for Spanish that DOM marked human indefinite direct objects are more often rementioned in the following discourse than unmarked human direct objects.

We tested this hypothesis with a corpus study and a paragraph continuation task. The corpus study is based on the *Corpus del Español del Siglo XXI*. The study focuses on written European Spanish and analyzes sentences containing both a human subject (Ref1) and an indefinite human direct object (Ref2), such as in (1). Two searches were employed, one with DOM and the other without DOM. In total, 3942 sentences were analyzed, of which we could only use 112 sentences with human arguments in subject and object position. We annotated the first following clause for anaphoric uptake of Ref1 and Ref2. Because of this scarce data, we conducted an online paragraph continuation experiment with 24 test items consisting of a small paragraph with three sentences and two or three human referents, of which the last one was introduced by an indefinite direct object with or without DOM (see ex. (2)). We asked participants to add one continuation sentence to each test item. The experiment was distributed via Prolific and we annotated 1848 test sentences produced by 77 participants, who were all native European Spanish speakers.

The results are summarized in Table 1. As for the corpus search, the numbers reveal that there are more referential uptakes of direct objects (Ref2) with DOM than without DOM. Moreover, we observe the mirror images for uptakes of the subject (Ref1). With regard to the paragraph continuation task, the results show first of all that there is a much higher frequency of uptake for direct objects (Ref2) than for subjects (Ref1). The results from the paragraph continuation task indicate a slight preference of uptake for the direct objects with DOM. Interestingly, this effect is most pronounced for contexts with three human referents, while it is not visible in contexts with two referents (see Table 2). We think that contexts with more than two referents allow to better model the subtle effects of DOM on referent management in discourse.

We conclude that our corpus search as well as our paragraph continuation task supports the hypothesis that DOM signals discourse prominence of human indefinite direct objects in Spanish.

(1) **Context:**

Mi padre₁ envió a un hombre₂ a buscarme
'My father₁ sent DOM a man₂ to look for me'

Continuation:

y desde luego que ese batidor₂ era bueno, porque me encontró.
'and of course this scout₂ was good, because he found me.'

(CORPES XXI, 2011. Martínez, Gabi, *Sólo para gigantes*)

(2) **Context:**

El productor₁ veía que no quedaba demasiado tiempo de rodaje. Se dio cuenta de que el director₃ estaba totalmente desbordado y para que el proyecto no sufriese ningún retraso, envió un a ayudante₂.

'The producer₁ noticed that there was not much time left for shooting. He₁ realised that the director₃ was totally overwhelmed and to ensure that the project was not delayed, he₁ sent DOM an assistant₂.'

Continuation:

El ayudante₂ consiguió cumplir con las expectativas | y el proyecto se logró hacer en el tiempo esperado.

'The assistant₂ was able to meet expectations and the project was completed on time.'

	Corpus		Experiment	
	Ref1	Ref2	Ref1	Ref2
DOM	42,2% (35/83)	48,2% (40/83)	35,0% (297/848)	74,4% (631/848)
No DOM	55,2% (16/29)	37,9% (11/29)	37,2% (306/823)	71,3% (587/823)

Table 1: Next mention bias of Ref1 and Ref2 in the corpus study and the experiment

	Experiment	
	AddRef	NoAddRef
DOM	73,3% (313/427)	75,5% (318/421)
No DOM	67,0% (276/412)	75,7% (311/411)

Table 2: Next mention bias of Ref2 with [±Additional Referent]

Corpus

REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA: Banco de datos (CORPES XXI) [en línea]. *Corpus del Español del Siglo XXI (CORPES)*. <<http://www.rae.es>> [last access: 06.01.2022]

References

- Chiriacescu, Sofiana & Klaus von Heusinger (2010). "Discourse Prominence and Pe-marking in Romanian". *International Review of Pragmatics* 2. 298–332.
- Fábregas, Antonio (2013). "Differential Object Marking in Spanish: State of the art". *Borealis: An International Journal of Hispanic Linguistics* 2(2). 1–80.
- Givón, Talmy (1983). "Topic continuity in discourse: an introduction". In T. Givón (ed.), *Topic Continuity in Discourse. A Quantitative Cross-Language Study*, 1–41. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Iemmolo, Giorgio (2010). "Topicality and differential object marking. Evidence from Romance and beyond". *Studies in Language* 34(2). 239–272.
- Leonetti, Manuel (2004). Specificity and differential object marking in Spanish. *Catalan Journal of Linguistics* 3. 75–114.