

The importance of the variable context in analyzing Differential Object Marking (DOM) in contemporary Spanish

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The Spanish manifestation of DOM involves the use of the preposition *a* before some direct objects (DO) (1) but not others (2).

- (1) *ves a todo el mundo*
You see everybody
(2) *vi Ø un aviso*
I saw a sign

A widespread goal has been the identification of factors that explain the variation *a*+DO vs. Ø+DO. Little attention, however, has been paid to circumscribing its envelope of variation (cf. Pensado 1995:40).

From the variationist perspective, Tippets and Schwenter (T&S 2007) offer a comprehensive analysis of Spanish DOM in Buenos Aires and Madrid. They analyzed the variation on all clauses occurred with verbs overtly *a*-marked, regardless of their variability. Therefore, in the variable rules analysis (VA), T&S included non-variable contexts. In studying the variation *a*+DO vs. Ø+DO, how accurate can the analysis be with this kind of data collection?

In a speech sample ($\pm 50,000$ words) of *Corpus de Mérida* (Domínguez y Mora 1995): 1. I replicated the T&S data collection, obtaining 204 clauses or DATA 1, of which 107/204 (52%) clauses have variable contexts, and 2. Exhaustively I extracted all S-V(*a*)DO constructions, yielding 917 clauses, of which 447/917 (49%) clauses or DATA 2 have variable contexts.

I analyzed the effects of definiteness, anaphoric and cataphoric topicality (Givón 1995:78-9), number and specificity (Ashby and Bentivoglio 1993:69-70) on DO variation. The novel aspect of this study is that I compare the VA in two sets of tokens: DATA 1 and DATA 2, respectively. While in DATA 1 three factors are statistically relevant (specificity, definiteness and anaphoric topicality), in DATA 2 specificity is the only statistically relevant factor. I conclude that the choice of definiteness and anaphoric topicality is an artifact of including the non-variable contexts in DATA 1. These results illustrate the value of analyzing the variation *a*+DO vs. Ø+DO limited only to the variable context.

References

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