

Spanish DOM in impersonal constructions and the subject-object disambiguation hypothesis

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A long line of research has equated the special morphology in differential object marking (DOM) with a strategy to disambiguate objects from subjects: for example, the functionalist tradition stemming from Comrie (1989); licensing competition under Dependent Case (Baker 2015, a.o.); avoiding problematic linearization sequences of identical elements in an asymmetric c-command relation (Richards 2010), etc.

Here we address less discussed contexts with Spanish SE-passives and impersonals indicating that DOM is possible not only in the absence of E(xternal) A(rgument)s but also in the absence of a syntactically projected implicit argument in Spec, VoiceP. The conclusion is that DOM is independent of the presence of a higher argument, and is thus not a means to disambiguate objects from subjects.

1. Spanish DOM. In Spanish, animate objects which are also definite need a preposition which is homophonous with the dative one (1); inanimates, in turn, cannot take the same marker and must instead stay unmarked (Laca 1995, 2006, Pensado ed. 1995, Torrego 1998, Rodríguez-Mondoñedo 2007, López 2012, Ormazabal and Romero 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, a.o.).

- (1) Encontré *(a) las alumnas/*(a) los libros.
found.1SG DAT=DOM the.F.PL student.F.PL/DAT=DOM the.M.PL book.M.PL

‘I found the female students/the books.’

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2. Definite animates, medio-passive and impersonal SE in Spanish. Crucially, Spanish DOM is possible under the medio-passive (MP)/impersonal SE, normally if the verb shows default (3rd, singular) agreement, as in (2) - see especially Ormazabal and Romero (2013b), or Mendikoetxea (2008), a.o.

- (2) Se felicitó a las alumnas (por el profesor).
SE_{MP} congratulate.PST.3SG DAT=DOM the.F.PL student.F.PL (by the.M.SG professor)

‘The female students were congratulated (by the professor).’

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- (3) ...[TP *pro* T...[VoiceP Voice ...[α P α ...[ν P ν _[Case]...[VP V DO]]]]

- (4) ...[TP T...[VoiceP Implicit-Agent Voice ...[α P α ...[ν P ν _[Case]...[VP VP DO]]]]

3. Subject-object disambiguation? As the overt EA/subject is missing in examples like (2), one would have to assume that SE_{MP/IMPERS} contains a reduced pronominal in Spec, TP (3), or an implicit agent in Spec, VoiceP (4). This element could trigger competition with the object, such that the latter must be differentially marked, if it contains special features. That this is not the right path is demonstrated by examples such as (5). Ormazabal and Romero (2021) have shown recently that Spanish SE_{MP/IMPERS} gives rise to important patterns of variation, most of which generally ignored in work based on standard normative grammars. One case at hand is (5), where SE_{MP/IMPERS} co-occurs with an unmarked definite animate; given what we have seen in (1), and given putative structures as in (3) or (4) for (5), the subject-object disambiguation hypothesis would predict examples like (5) to be ungrammatical under a SE_{MP/IMPERS} reading - the definite animate is the lower argument and thus must be differentially marked.

- (5) Se felicitaron las alumnas (por el profesor).
SE_{MP} congratulate.PST.3PL the.F.PL student.F.PL (by the.M.SG professor)

‘The female students were congratulated (by the professor).’

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4. An Implicit Agent in SE_{MP/IMPERS}? That both (2) and (5) are possible under SE_{MP/IMPERS} indicates that Spanish DOM is not a matter of competition with a higher c-commanding category. Assuming that only (2) contains an implicit agent cannot be independently motivated: in fact, both (2) and (5) fail all diagnostics that could demonstrate the syntactic presence of a higher implicit agent. For example, a depictive tracking the implicit agent, as in (6), is completely ungrammatical. Instead, a better hypothesis to make is that ν in (5) is defective - it lacks a Case feature and cannot license the nominal. The latter will thus be licensed by T, explaining agreement. Moreover, as T in SE_{MP/IMPERS} has only an ARB(itrary) value, pronouns are correctly predicted to be ungrammatical in structures like (5) - **se felicita(mos) nosotros* (Intended: we are(.1PL) congratulated). T cannot license the PERSON feature in pronouns, and ν is defective too, hence no licensing via differential marking (accusative Case) either.

- (6) *Se felicitó (a) la alumna_i orgulloso/orgullosos_j.
SE_{MP} congratulate.PST.3SG DAT=DOM the.F.SG student.F.SG (proud.M.SG/M.PL)
Intended: ‘The female student_i was congratulated (by an agent who was/were) proud_j.’

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