

## Variable propositional objects in Mexican and Peninsular Spanish

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Null direct objects in Spanish have been much analyzed as the result of language contact in several regions (e.g., Paraguay [Choi 1998, 2000] and Quito [Yépez 1986; Suñer and Yépez 1988]) but this same research has revealed that null objects are also characteristic of monolingual speech in the same regions (cf. Schwenter 2006) and, at least, in some monolingual dialects (Masullo 2003, for monolingual Buenos Aires Spanish). Despite the interest in this phenomenon, the case of null direct objects with propositional antecedents, which refer anaphorically to clausal complements of cognition and communication verbs, remains mostly uninvestigated. These anaphoric direct objects are variably coded by “neuter *lo*” in Spanish, as in e.g. *Se lo dije* or *lo sé*, where *lo* refers to the “said” and the “known” propositions, respectively.

This paper investigates the occurrence of the propositional null pronoun and the neuter clitic *lo* from a comparative variationist perspective. Using data from the CREA, COREC, México Habla Culta and México Habla Popular corpora, the study shows that there is an important -but heretofore wholly uninvestigated- distinction between different monolingual Spanish dialects with respect to presence/absence of neuter *lo* with these classes of verbs.

The distribution of anaphoric forms referring to entities introduced by a noun phrase has been shown to be mostly determined by linguistic factors that constrain the accessibility of the antecedent (Ariel 1994, 1996; Givon 1983; Gundel et al. 1993). The logical hypothesis to be tested, therefore, is whether the accessibility of the antecedent would also determine the distribution of propositional anaphoric forms. This paper tests this hypothesis by means of a variable rule analysis, in which the role of structural, pragmatic and social factors in the distribution of the two variants under consideration is analyzed.

The results reveal a highly significant overall difference between the two dialects regarding the frequency of overt vs. null neuter *lo*: in Mexico the use or non-use of neuter *lo* with verbs like *saber*, *decir*, *agradecer*, *contar*, *platicar*, *explicar*, *imaginar*, *preguntar* and *entender* is equally likely (e.g. *ya lo sé* vs. *ya sé*), but in Spain, overt *lo* is heavily preferred over the null variant.

Variable rule analysis of our data shows that, in both dialects, internal factors such as the presence/absence of a dative clitic, the change of speaker, the presence of a modal complement and the type of antecedent (interrogative vs. declarative sentence) all conspire to constrain the variation, suggesting that accessibility determines the choice of the null pronoun vs. the neuter clitic *lo*. In addition, where social and stylistic information is available, null direct objects are favored by both informal styles and by speakers of lower socioeconomic status.

This analysis addresses a greatly unexplored field of research, propositional anaphora in Spanish, and, in broader perspective, our results contribute to the description of the use of null objects in Spanish, a phenomenon of great interest from a dialectological perspective.

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