

Relative Animacy and Differential Object Marking in Spanish

Ian Tippetts and Scott Schwenter
The Ohio State University

Differential Object Marking (DOM) has seen a surge of cross-linguistic interest in recent years, in large part due to Aissen's (2003) seminal study. DOM denotes a morphosyntactic distinction between overtly marked and non-marked direct objects, where the variation between marking and non-marking is largely based in semantic, pragmatic and discourse features. In what is probably the most well-known case of DOM, Spanish accusative *a* occurs variably before some direct objects, creating a paradigmatic contrast between overt *a*-marking and zero marking of objects.

Numerous studies have addressed the inherent and contextual features that motivate DOM in Spanish. The animacy of the object remains the most prominent and frequently-discussed factor in *a*-marking (Pensado 1995). Other central features include the semantic/pragmatic notions of specificity and definiteness of the accusative object (Leonetti 2004; von Heusinger & Kaiser 2003), and the discourse-pragmatic concepts of discourse prominence (Dumitrescu 1997), and "saliency" (Weissenrieder 1990, 1991). However, the distribution of *a* in Spanish shows that there is widespread variability between marking and non-marking, even in the purportedly stable realm of animacy, where non-human and even inanimate accusative tokens may be overtly marked at times.

The purpose of this paper is to present what is to our knowledge the first quantitative variationist study of DOM using naturally-occurring data from two dialects of Spanish, Buenos Aires and Madrid. We operationalize in our varbrul analysis the semantic and pragmatic factors that have been frequently attributed as motivating overt marking of the direct object, in order to identify the relative ranking of factors influencing DOM in Spanish. Included in the analysis are the following factor groups: specificity, animacy, relative animacy (of subject and direct object), form of accusative object (lexical noun, pronoun, proper noun) and presence/absence of pronominal clitic doubling. The results reveal that while animacy of the direct object does indeed strongly favor overt *a* marking, the strongest factor favoring DOM in both dialects is actually the **relative animacy** of the subject and direct object. By situating subjects and objects on an animacy scale <human, animate, inanimate> (Aissen 2003; Comrie 1989), it is shown that when the object exceeds the subject on the animacy scale, *a*-marking is highly favored. By contrast, *a*-marking is disfavored when subjects are more animate than direct objects. When subjects and direct objects are of equal animacy, *a*-marking is again favored. Beyond relative animacy, the two dialects differ in their relative ranking of other factor groups, and also show significant differences in overall frequency of DOM.

The strong effect of relative animacy provides clear support for the view from typological research (e.g. Comrie 1989) that DOM is motivated primarily by deviations from the prototypical transitive situation, where subjects display greater animacy than direct objects. From a more general perspective, our study illustrates that the debates in the literature on DOM—both in Spanish and cross-linguistically—surrounding the factors contributing to its (non-)occurrence need to be tempered with quantitative results from naturally-occurring speech data.