

Towards an Understanding of Null and Overt Object Variation in Basque Spanish

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Variationist research on the phenomenon of null objects across Spanish varieties is limited. A handful of qualitative studies devoted to the study of this phenomenon in varieties such as Quiteño Spanish, Paraguayan Spanish or Basque Spanish have noted that animacy, definiteness and specificity seem to be relevant semantic features in the variability between overt and null pronominal object expression (Suñer & Yépez 1988, Landa 1995, Choi 2000, Schwenter 2006, Gómez-Seibane 2013, *inter alia*). However, whether these linguistic factors are actually strong predictors of the variation is, if anything, an open question. Therefore, the present study provides a comprehensive quantitative examination of the attested, yet poorly-understood, variation between null and overt Anaphoric Direct Objects (ADO) in Basque Spanish.

It has been repeatedly observed, primarily among Spanish varieties in contact with other non-Indo-European languages, that null objects frequently occur with definite/specific referents as well as inanimate ones, but rarely with animate or human entities (Gómez-Seibane 2011, Yépez 1986, Paredes 1996). In pursuing confirmation that these are significant constraints promoting the variation, the present study analyzes approximately 600 tokens extracted from the Corpus Oral y Sonoro del Español Rural (COSER) as well as interviews recorded by the author. A multivariate analysis was developed in GoldVarb X (Sankoff et al. 2005) and, subsequent to this, a generalized linear mixed effect model, using Speaker as a random effect, was developed in R (R Development Core Team 2007).

Results from both the multivariate analysis and the mixed effects model reveal that animacy is the strongest constraint conditioning null and overt ADO expression. Whereas human referents disfavor null ADOs, non-human animates pattern together with inanimates, displaying high rates of the null variant. Findings from crosstabulations suggest that non-human animates and inanimates pattern alike due to the existing interaction between [animate & non-specific] referents (70% null). Interestingly, however, [animate & specific] referents resemble human referents and show very low rates of null object usage (18% null). In addition, neither definiteness nor specificity were chosen as significant predictors of the variation; instead, number was chosen as the second strongest constraint. The data show that plural referents display significantly decreased probabilities of appearing with overt ADOs than singular and mass nouns. A Conditional Inference Tree suggests that it is the increased null rates among [plural & inanimate] referents that might explain the effect observed for plural entities.

The present study constitutes the first multivariate analysis and fine-grained exploration of null objects in Spanish. Most importantly, the results reported for animacy in this study closely correlate with those documented for non-contact varieties of Portuguese (Schwenter 2014), wherein animate referents also seem to come in two flavors: [animate & specific] referents mirror the behavior of human referents and, conversely, [animate & non-specific] referents pattern like inanimates. In more general perspective, such parallelisms between Basque Spanish and Portuguese are suggestive of the existence of cross-linguistic principles constraining the variation between null and overt ADOs.

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