

The role of variation in the processing of Spanish Differential Object Marking
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Abstract

In the psycholinguistic literature, it is implicitly assumed that the presence or absence of Spanish Differential Object Marking (DOM) is a categorical syntactic reflex of the grammar related to (in)animacy (e.g. Nieuwland et al. 2013). In this poster, I challenge this view and propose a different interpretation of the reported effects based on a variational approach to DOM. As additional evidence, I present an Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT), in which I compare the behavior of the presumably “categorical” mismatches discussed in the literature with cases of variation.

In an EEG study, Nieuwland et al. (2013) explore the contrasts in (1) and (2) in order to shed light on the association between neurophysiological components and syntactic and semantic violations. In line with the traditional view, they expect both, an N400 and a P600 effect for the mismatch in (1) since the lack of DOM leads to a conflict regarding the assignment of thematic roles, followed by some sort of case reanalysis. For the contrast in (2), they expect only a P600 because there is no potential conflict with respect to thematic roles.

(1) El papa besó al / *el obispo.

the pope kissed DOM+the / the bishop

(2) El papa besó el / *al suelo.

the pope kissed the / DOM+the floor

While their prediction for (2) is borne out, Nieuwland et al. (2013: 153) only report an N400 effect for (1). They interpret this unexpected “syntactic” N400 as a “mirror image” of the “semantic” P600s reported in the previous literature and discuss a number of possible explanations for it. Crucially, these explanations take the mismatch condition in (2) as the result of some sort of syntactic violation. However, the fact that Spanish does allow DOM to occur with inanimate objects in certain cases (Balasch 2011, García García 2014) casts doubt on taking the reported P600 as an indicator of syntactic violation here:

(3) El papa besó la / a la imagen (del santo).

the pope kissed the / DOM the image of+the saint

I suggest that late positive effects, such as the one reported for (2), should rather be interpreted as “irresolvable sentence-level interpretation conflicts” (Frenzel et al. 2011): While DOM with inanimate objects allows for different animacy-related reinterpretations in (3), this is not possible for (2). On a more general level, I argue that this view predicts that the conflict in (1) is less “irresolvable” than (2). This is supported by the results of the AJT (66 participants, 3X2 Latin square design according to (1)-(3), implemented with OnExp), in which judgments for the ungrammatical condition in (1) are significantly lower than those for the ungrammatical condition in (2). Additionally, the results of this AJT, in which I compare the contrasts in (1) and (2) with the one in (3), also provide further insights into the range of variability of DOM that need to be taken into account for a better understanding of the processing of Spanish DOM.

References

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