

SQUIB

Object drop in Spanish is not island-sensitive

MATÍAS VERDECCHIA

IIF (SADAF-CONICET) & University of Buenos Aires

(Received 15 June 2021; revised 13 April 2022)

Campos (1986) argues that object drop in Spanish exhibits island effects. This claim has remained unchallenged up to today and is largely assumed in the literature. In this paper, I show that this characterization is not empirically correct: given a proper discourse context, null objects can easily appear within a syntactic island in Spanish. This observation constitutes a non-trivial problem for object drop analyses based on movement.

KEYWORDS: islands, movement, object drop, Spanish

As is well known, Spanish allows object drop when the antecedent is an indefinite bare noun (1), but not when it is a definite determiner phrase (DP) (2).¹

- (1) A: ¿Compraste manzanas?
bought.2SG apples
'Did you buy apples?'
B: Sí, compré \emptyset .
yes bought.1SG
'Yes, I did.'
- (2) A: ¿Compraste las manzanas?
bought.2SG the apples
'Did you buy the apples?'
B: *Sí, compré \emptyset .
yes bought.1SG
'Yes, I did.'

Following Huang (1982) and Raposo (1984), Campos (1986) proposes that in sentences like (1B) the argument position is occupied by a *wh*-trace of an operator OP that moves in the syntax.

- (3) OP_{*i*} [_{TP} verb *t_i*]

[1] Quiteño Spanish (Suñer & Yépez 1988) and Basque Spanish (Landa 1995; Franco & Landa 2003) constitute exceptions as they allow null definite objects in certain contexts.

As evidence for this analysis, Campos argues that object drop in Spanish is subject to the same locality constraints that hold for *wh*-movement. Concretely, he claims that object drop is island-sensitive. Campos offers the following examples and grammatical judgments:

(4) Complex NP island (Campos 1986: 355)

A: ¿Juan traerá cerveza a la fiesta?
 Juan bring.FUT.3SG beer to the party
 ‘Will Juan bring beer to the party?’

B: *Existe el rumor de que traerá Ø.
 exists the rumor of that bring.FUT.3SG
 ‘There exists the rumor that he will bring (some).’

(5) Relative clause island (Campos 1986: 355)

A: ¿Quién trajo cerveza a la fiesta?
 who brought.3SG beer to the party
 ‘Who brought beer to the party?’

B: *No conozco al muchacho que trajo Ø.
 not know.1SG DOM.the boy that brought.3SG
 ‘I don’t know the boy that brought (some).’

(6) Preverbal subject island (Campos 1986: 356)

A: ¿Pepe necesita gafas?
 Pepe need.3SG glasses
 ‘Does Pepe need glasses?’

B: *Que necesita Ø es obvio.
 that need.3SG is obvious
 ‘That he needs is obvious.’

(7) Adjunct island (Campos 1986: 358)

A: ¿Encontraron entradas para la película?
 found.2PL tickets for the movie
 ‘Did you find tickets for the movie?’

B: *Sí, pudimos entrar al cine porque encontramos Ø.
 yes could.1PL enter to.the cinema because found.1PL
 ‘Yes, we were able to go into the cinema because we found (some).’

Besides the theoretical validity of Campos’s analysis, the claim that object drop in (‘Standard’) Spanish exhibits island effects has survived unchallenged to the present day² and is largely assumed in the literature (see, for instance, Landau 2010: 383; Gribanova 2013: 110; Rothman & Iverson 2013: 595; Armstrong 2016: 13; Cyrino 2019: 18, among many others). However, this characterization is not correct: none of the sentences in (4B)–(7B) is actually ungrammatical.

[2] Once again, this does not hold for Quiteño Spanish: as Suñer & Yépez (1988) argue, in this variety object drop is insensitive to island constraints. The same pattern has been observed in other Romance languages, e.g. Brazilian Portuguese (Farrell 1990).

Campos's examples are problematic for two different reasons. On the one hand, some of them contain dialogues that are pragmatically odd. This is the case of (5) and (7), which include a relative clause island and an adjunct island³ respectively. As can be observed in the following examples, given a proper discourse context, null objects can easily occur within these domains:

(8) Relative clause island

(a) A: ¿Alguien traerá cerveza a la fiesta?
 someone bring.FUT.3SG beer to the party
 'Will anyone bring beer to the party?'

B: Sí, conozco a alguien que va a traer Ø.
 yes know.1SG DOM someone that go.3SG to bring
 'Yes, I know someone who will.'

(b) A: ¿Conoces a alguien que compre libros usados?
 know.2SG DOM someone that buy.3SG books used
 'Do you know anyone who buys used books?'

B: No, no conozco a nadie que compre Ø (pero sí
 no not know.1SG DOM nobody that buy.3SG (but yes
 a gente que vende Ø).
 DOM people that sell.3SG
 'No, I do not know anyone who buys used books (but I do know
 people who sells used books).'

(9) Adjunct island

(a) *Context: speaker B is at the supermarket talking on the phone with speaker A about what they should bring to the party tonight.*

A: ¿Llevo cerveza?
 bring.1SG cerveza
 'Should I bring some beer?'

B: Sí, llevá, porque acá yo no encuentro Ø.
 yes bring.2SG because here I not find.1SG
 'Yes, bring some, because I do not find any here.'

(b) A: ¿Llevo pan?
 bring.1SG bread
 'Should I bring some bread?'

B: No, no llesves pan porque nosotros ya
 no not bring.2SG bread because we already
 compramos Ø.
 bought.1PL
 'No, do not bring bread because we have already bought some.'

[3] Some informants even point out that the answer in (7) can be accommodated. The intended interpretation is that it is evident for the speaker that they could go to the cinema precisely because they found the tickets.

Furthermore, note that the answers in (5B) and (7B) are still anomalous even if they contain an overt accusative clitic referring to a definite antecedent, as in (10B) and (11B).

- (10) A: ¿Quién trajo la cerveza?
 who brought.3SG the beer
 ‘Who brought the beer?’
 B: #No conozco al muchacho que la trajo.
 not know.1SG DOM.the boy that it brought.3SG
 ‘I don’t know the boy that brought it.’
- (11) A: ¿Encontraron las entradas para la película?
 found.2PL the tickets for the movie
 ‘Did you find the tickets for the movie?’
 B: #Sí, pudimos entrar al cine porque las encontramos.
 yes could.1PL go.into to.the cinema because them found.1PL
 ‘Yes, we were able to go into the cinema because we found them.’

These cases severely weaken the claim that the oddness of (5) and (7) is related to object drop phenomenon or to syntactic constraints (i.e. islands). As said before, the unacceptability of these sentences and the ones above seems to be due to general discourse factors, namely, to the fact that none of these utterances constitutes a relevant⁴ answer for the corresponding question. To illustrate, consider again the dialogue in (7) or its variant with a definite object in (11). In both cases, the assertion *we were able to go into the cinema because we found (the) tickets* clearly cannot be taken as a felicitous answer to the question *did you find (the) tickets for the movie?* Now, compare these dialogues to the one in (9a). In this case, this problem is avoided: the assertion *do not bring bread because we have already bought some* is a relevant answer to the question *should I bring some bread?* Thus, once pragmatic factors like relevance are properly controlled for, object drop can occur within an island domain without difficulty.

On the other hand, other examples proposed by Campos are not only grammatical, but also pragmatically acceptable. Consider first (4), which includes a complex NP island. According to my informants and to my own native judgment, the answer by speaker B is totally correct, especially if the main predicate *existe el rumor de que* ‘there exists the rumor that’ is interpreted parenthetically, i.e. if it functions as a kind of evidential which signals the source and reliability of the embedded claim (Simons 2007). Once again, it is relatively easy to find similar and even more natural cases:

[4] I am adopting the standard notion of RELEVANCE from Roberts (1996, 2012):

- (i) Relevance (adapted from Roberts 2012: 21)
 An assertion is *relevant* to a Question Under Discussion *q* iff it introduces a partial or a complete answer to *q*.

- (12) A: ¿Sabes si Juan vende diamantes?
 know.2SG whether Juan sell.3SG diamonds
 ‘Do you know if Juan sells diamonds?’
 B: Escuché el rumor de que vende \emptyset , pero no estoy seguro.
 heard.1SG the rumor of that sell.3SG but not am sure
 ‘I heard the rumor that he does, but I am not sure.’

Finally, Campos’s example in (6), which includes a subject island, can be considered an analogous case: besides being grammatical, the answer in this dialogue is also felicitous. What makes this case a bit more tricky than the previous one is that here the assertion by speaker B requires a very particular interpretation, given that the anteposition of the clausal subject in Spanish typically triggers a contrastive topic reading.⁵ Therefore, in order to make the utterance more natural, the example should contain a continuation that explicitly contrasts with the clausal subject, as in (14). Again, object drop can clearly occur within this strong island.

- (13) A: ¿Qué piensas de que Juan necesite plata?
 what think.2SG of that Juan need.3SG money
 ‘What do you think about the fact that Juan needs money?’
 B: Que necesite \emptyset no me sorprende, pero no sé de
 that need.3SG not me surprise.3SG but not know.1SG of
 dónde la conseguirá.
 where it get.FUT.3G
 ‘That he needs money does not surprise me, but I do not know where he will get it.’
- (14) A: ¿Qué piensas de que Juan compre y venda cuadros?
 what think.2SG of that Juan buy.3SG and sell.3SG paintings
 ‘What do you think about the fact that Juan buys and sells paintings?’
 B: Que compre \emptyset no me sorprende, pero que venda me
 that buy.3SG not me surprise.3SG but that sell.3SG me
 resulta raro.
 result.3SG odd
 ‘That Juan buys paintings does not surprise me, but it seems odd to me that he sells paintings.’

In sum, it can be concluded that object drop in Spanish is not island-sensitive. This means that Spanish behaves just like other well-studied languages, such as Greek, in which (indefinite) null objects can appear in island domains (Dimitriadis 1994; Panagiotidis 2002). From a theoretical point of view, this observation

[5] Note that clausal subjects in Spanish canonically appear in postverbal position.

(i) Es obvio que necesita (gafas).
 is obvious that need.3SG glasses
 ‘It is obvious that he needs glasses.’

constitutes a non-trivial problem for an analysis of object drop in Spanish based on movement, and opens the possibility for a null pronoun approach (e.g. Giannakidou & Merchant 1997) or a verb-stranding vP-ellipsis account (e.g. Merchant 2018).⁶

REFERENCES

- Armstrong, Grant. 2016. Spanish unspecified objects as null incorporated nouns. *Probus* 28.2, 165–229.
- Campos, Héctor. 1986. Indefinite object drop. *Linguistic Inquiry* 17.2, 354–359.
- Cyrino, Sonia. 2019. Indefinite null objects in Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese. *Caderno de Squibs: Temas em estudos formais da linguagem* 5.2, 14–26.
- Dimitriadis, Alexis. 1994. Clitics and island-insensitive object drop. *Studies in the Linguistic Sciences* 24.2, 153–170.
- Farrell, Patrick. 1990. Null objects in Brazilian Portuguese. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 8.3, 325–346.
- Franco, Jon & Alazne Landa. 2003. Null objects revisited. In Rafael Núñez-Cedeño, Luis López & Richard Cameron (eds.), *A Romance perspective on language knowledge and use*, 311–326. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Giannakidou, Anastasia & Jason Merchant. 1997. On the interpretation of null indefinite objects in Greek. *Studies in Greek Linguistics* 17, 141–155.
- Gribanova, Vera. 2013. Verb-stranding verb phrase ellipsis and the structure of the Russian verbal complex. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 31.1, 91–136.
- Huang, C. T. James. 1982. *Logical relations in Chinese and the theory of grammar*. Ph.D. dissertation, MIT.
- Landa, Alazne. 1995. *Conditions on null objects in Basque Spanish and their relation to léísmo and clitic doubling*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California.
- Landau, Idan. 2010. The explicit syntax of implicit arguments. *Linguistic Inquiry* 41.3, 357–388.
- Merchant, Jason. 2018. Verb-stranding predicate ellipsis in Greek, implicit arguments, and ellipsis-internal focus. In Jason Merchant, Line Mikkelsen, Deniz Rudin & Kelsey Sasaki (eds.), *A reasonable way to proceed: Essays in honor of Jim McCloskey*, 229–269. Santa Cruz: Linguistics Research Center, University of California.
- Panagiotidis, Phoivos. 2002. *Pronouns, clitics and empty nouns*, vol. 46. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Raposo, Eduardo. 1984. The null object in Portuguese. Paper presented at the 14th Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.
- Roberts, Craige. 1996. Information structure: Towards an integrated formal theory of pragmatics. In Je Hak Yoon & A. Kathol (eds.), *Ohio State University working papers in linguistics (OSUWPL)*. Vol. 49: *Papers in semantics*, 35–57. Columbus: The Ohio State University Department of Linguistics.
- Roberts, Craige. 2012. Information structure: Towards an integrated formal theory of pragmatics. *Semantics and Pragmatics* 5, 1–69.
- Rothman, Jason & Michael Iverson. 2013. Islands and objects in L2 Spanish: Do you know the learners who drop ___? *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 35.4, 589–618.
- Simons, Mandy. 2007. Observations on embedding verbs, evidentiality, and presupposition. *Lingua* 117.6, 1034–1056.
- Suñer, Margarita & Mara Yépez. 1988. Null definite objects in Quiteño. *Linguistic Inquiry* 19.3, 511–519.
- Author's address:* IIF (SADAF-CONICET) & University of Buenos Aires, Argentina, Bulnes 642, C1176, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Argentina
mverdecchia@filo.uba.ar

[6] Thanks to Andrés Saab for pointing this out to me.