

# Null Objects and Neuter *lo*: A Cross-Dialectal Variationist Analysis

Assela Reig Alamillo and Scott A. Schwenter  
The Ohio State University

## 1. Introduction

This article examines a case of syntactic variation that has not been previously noted and studied: the Spanish neuter clitic *lo* and the null direct object (DO) in two dialects of the language, Mexican and Peninsular.

The phenomenon of null DOs (a.k.a. “object drop” or “null direct object pronominalization”) in Spanish has been traditionally considered to be highly restricted: null DOs are only permissible when the noun in question is non-referential and non-countable, i.e. mass nouns as in (1a) and bare plurals (1b) (Campos 1986; Clements 1994, 2006):

- (1a) -¿Compraste café?  
-Sí, compré Ø.
- (1b) Quería comprar libros pero no encontraba Ø.
- (1c) \*Quería comprar el libro pero no encontraba Ø.

A different and more complex situation has been noted in dialects of Spanish that either are or have been in close contact with other languages: several studies of Basque Spanish (Landa 1995; Eguía 2002), Quiteño Spanish (Yépez 1986; Suñer and Yépez 1988) and Paraguayan Spanish (Choi 1998, 2000) have shown that null DOs with different types of antecedents are possible in these contact dialects. In both Quiteño and Paraguayan Spanish, null DOs are now a typical feature of the speech of monolinguals as well (Yépez 1986; Choi 1998, 2000). Both dialects are also heavily *leísta*, thus creating a maximally differentiated system for DO marking (*le* for humans vs. Ø for non-humans).

Schwenter (2006) pointed out a clear parallelism between these cases and the well-known case of null DOs in Brazilian Portuguese (cf. Schwenter and Silva 2003): all of these varieties exhibit widespread variation between null and overt DOs, which in each case is regulated by the same factors as found in familiar differential object marking, or DOM (cf. Aissen 2003), systems, such as that of pan-Spanish accusative *a*.

The phenomenon of null DOs has been considered, almost exclusively, to be a characteristic of the Spanish spoken in contact areas. Indeed, as far as we know, Masullo (2003) is the only study of null DOs (what he calls “definite object drop”) in a non-contact dialect of Spanish, the Spanish of the River Plate region of Argentina. The phenomenon of null DOs, however, does not seem to be so geographically restricted. The possibility for null DOs appears to exist in ALL dialects of Spanish when a referential and countable DO referent is salient in the immediate discourse situation, or in Masullo’s terms, when “the referent [is] recoverable from the immediate context of utterance”:

[Two persons leaving a room, one says to the other]

- (2) Apaga Ø [i.e. la luz, la televisión, etc.]

Note that this possibility does not seem to exist in English:

- (3) ??Turn off Ø (cf. Turn **it** off/Turn off **the light/the TV**)

As shown in (4) and (5a, b), it appears that the impossibility of the null object in English is generalized (unrestricted lexically), but that the null object is generally permissible in Spanish when the DO referent is discourse-salient:

[Two persons leaving a room, one says to the other]

- (4) Cierra Ø [la puerta]  
 (5a) ??Shut Ø (**it/the door**)  
 (5b) ??Close Ø (**it/the door**)

The permissibility of null DOs in spoken Spanish also affects a different class of null DOs, which constitutes the focus of the present research: DOs with propositional referents, which are usually, and normatively, encoded with the neuter clitic *lo*. Our decision to focus on this class of DOs stems from our own informal observations of native Spanish speakers, leading to the hypothesis that the realization of neuter *lo* with propositional referents is variable in nature. While we also believe that there is variability across dialects, including non-contact dialects, in the realization of DO clitic pronouns referring to concrete entities (such as the door in [4]), a preliminary search for such examples in corpus data has proven exceedingly difficult to delimit. In addition, informal querying of native speakers has revealed greater acceptability of null DOs for propositional referents. Therefore, as a first approximation to the study of null DOs in non-contact dialects, we have decided to restrict our investigation to this one particular class of DOs.

Neuter *lo* in Spanish may occur in a range of functions and syntactic positions. For instance, it may surface as a DO pronoun (6), as a pronoun in cleft constructions (7), and as an article (8):

- (6) Juan cree que son buenos pero yo no **lo** creo.  
 (7) **Lo** que yo quiero es paz en el mundo.  
 (8) **Lo** triste de esta situación es...

As Butt & Benjamin (2004: 88) state, “*Lo* as a neuter pronoun does not refer to any specific noun, but to an idea, clause or sentence, to some unspecified thing that has no gender, or to something not mentioned before”. In this study we will focus on cases like (6) in which the DO pronoun has a propositional antecedent; here, specifically, the *lo* refers to the sentential complement of the verb *creer*. These cases of DOs have been shown in prior research on other languages to be a strong favoring context for null pronominalization (cf. Meyerhoff 2002 for Bislama), and also to be the diachronic starting point for the evolution of null DO systems (cf. Cyrino 1997 and Tarallo 1996 for Brazilian Portuguese).

In this paper, we will center particular attention on the DO pronoun with propositional referents in order to analyze the variation between the neuter clitic *lo* as in (6) above and the null object exemplified in the naturally-occurring example from Mexican Spanish in (9):

- (9) Enc. -Ahí es mi casa; y tu casa también, cuando vayas  
 Inf. -No, pues **yo no Ø sabía**. Pero ahora **ya Ø sé**  
 (Corpus de Habla Popular de México)

## 2. Methodology

The analysis to be presented below results from a corpus-based investigation of two Spanish dialects, Mexico City and Madrid, using the Habla Culta (Mexico, Madrid), Habla Popular (Mexico), and COREC (Madrid) corpora. The data culled from these corpora are also supplemented by additional examples from the online CREA corpus (www.rae.es) for Mexico City, in order to have a comparable number of tokens from the two dialects. The two dialects were chosen in order to test one of our principal working hypotheses: that the Mexico City dialect would show a significantly greater number of null DOs for propositional referents than would the Madrid dialect.

The corpus is comprised of approximately 500 tokens per dialect, each of which was extracted and coded for the dependent variable (i.e. the presence or absence of the DO clitic pronoun *lo*) as well as for 10 independent variables (Polarity; Sentence type; Dative pronoun; Turn change; Adverb “ya”; Person of the verb; Tense of the verb; Modal adverbial; Corpus; Verbal semantics). The coded data

were then analyzed using the variable rule program Goldvarb X (Sankoff, Tagliamonte, and Smith 2005).

Because of the extreme difficulty of determining particular cases of the presence or absence of DO pronoun, coding was done conservatively throughout. Thus, to offer just one frequent example (see more below), we did not discard examples such as “No sé” as being discourse markers, since without further recourse to prosody and gesture (unavailable in the corpora utilized) it is impossible to tell whether these tokens were fixed expressions or not, as shown in examples (10), (11) and (12). Thus, we coded all instances of DOs with propositional referents in a consistent fashion across the two dialects and the different corpora analyzed.

- (10) Pero que yo no - O sea, me lo propuso él, ¿eh?, yo a mí no se me pasó por la imaginación; dijo que sí - realmente me molestaba mucho - que me lo hiciera. A mí la verdad es que - es - **no sé**; eso, a lo mejor más adelante - **no lo sé**, ¿no? (COREC)
- (11) Ya. ¡Ah - ! No, porque estaba pensando en alguna otra tienda que hubiera por aquí pero no se me ocurre ahora mismo. Vamos a ver. O en una tienda por aquí cerca, **no lo sé**, que vendan jarras. No se me ocurre. (COREC)
- (12) Entonces, parece que... mi futuro ya lo veo un poco más por la línea de la empresa, y entonces, en este caso, como creo que la Filosofía no me capacita empresarialmente, pues tendré que buscar algo que en los próximos tiempos, pues, **no sé**, me dé una cierta preparación con la que yo me pueda enfrentar al mundo de la empresa ¿no? (Corpus de Habla Culta de Madrid).

The analysis includes the DOs of a limited group of cognition and communication verbs which take sentential complements: *decir*, *entender*, *saber*, *contar*, *explicar*, *imaginar*, *platicar*, *preguntar*, *agradecer*. While other verbs were also considered for the analysis, it is this class of verbs that displayed the requisite frequency needed for the quantitative analysis.

### 3. Results

Table 1 below presents the overall frequency of both neuter *lo* and null DOs in the two dialects. The difference between the two dialects reaches statistical significance at the  $p \leq 0.025$  level. Nevertheless, the results do seem somewhat counter to our hypothesis, previously stated above, that the Mexican dialect would show a significantly higher rate of null DOs than the Peninsular Spanish, inasmuch as we expected the difference between the dialects to be even greater. In addition, we did not expect the rate of null DOs in Madrid Spanish to be as high as it was (42%), and we expected the frequency of null DOs in Mexico City to be higher than 50%. Still, the fact that the phenomenon of null DOs with propositional antecedents in Mexico City, Madrid or other dialect regions is not mentioned in previous dialect studies, with the sole exception of Kany (1945), makes the relatively high overall frequency of null DOs in BOTH dialects rather surprising.

**Table 1. Overall frequency of “lo” and null DO.**

|             | Overt lo     | Null DO      |
|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| Mexico City | 50%<br>(277) | 50%<br>(276) |
| Madrid      | 58%<br>(273) | 42%<br>(198) |

Chi-square = 6.34,  $p \leq 0.025$ ,  $df = 1$

Looking at the results through a more qualitative lens, we find that, as (13) through (16) show, the same verb (here, *decir*) can be found with both null and overt DO marking. All the verbs examined can be found with both null and overt DO, as (13) through (16) show for *decir*.

- (13) -Bueno, mi trabajo consiste en arreglar za... en... reparación de zapatos; **ya le dije anteriormente.** Este... ps hago mucho trabajo en cuestión de... no únicamente de zapato: yo he trabajado en talleres, he trabajado en fábricas de zapato.  
(Corpus de Habla Popular de México)
- (14) -Yo creo que a las cuatro, yo es que a las cuatro me es imposible venir. **Ya se lo dije a él;** que me era imposible.  
(Corpus de Habla Culta de Madrid)
- (15) Enc. -No, Francisco me da total libertad de que yo haga lo que yo quiera.  
Inf. -Pero desde luego que te la da. Pues a mí me la dio Javier; Él me dijo: "Mira, ¿ese parto quieres? O. Key, a mí también me parece que es el mejor; ve." No se opuso ¿ves? Pero él no conocía el sistema... Lo ha conocido... a través de lo que yo le he podido dar a conocer. **Pero si tú no tienes ese interés, y no te empeñas, y no les dices, y no les explicas... pues ellos nunca llegan a comprender.** Y además el apoyo del marido es muy importante. Si lo ideal, lo ideal sería que el marido... estuviera en la sala de partos.  
(Corpus de Habla Culta de México)
- (16) Inf. A.--No, no estabas hablando, ¡qué va! Tú estabas así, y te llamó y todo, así, en voz alta. Te llamó una vez o dos. Y no sé qué estabas haciendo tú así. Dice: <<Bueno, no me oye; **tú se lo dices** después a ella>>. Y digo: <<Sí, sí, ya **se lo diré**>>.  
(Corpus de Habla Culta de Madrid)

It is worth noting that this variability in DO marking is not restricted to ditransitives, a restriction suggested by the data presented by both Kany (1945) and Masullo (2003). In fact, variation between null DOs and overt *lo* can also occur with monotransitive verbs like *saber*, as in (17) where there is no DO clitic, and (18) where there is.

- (17) Enc. - ¿Por dónde dice que estaba el río?  
Inf. - Donde está el... este... donde está la gasolinera esta de Villanueva, esta de...  
Enc. - ¡Ah, sí! Ya se dónde.  
Inf. - Bueno, pues todo eso desde arriba, toda esa calzada, es... hasta ese...jardín que está ahí, está abajo el río.  
Enc. - **Yo no sabía.**  
(Corpus de Habla Popular de México)
- (18)- Ah, pero ¿ya es - ? ¿Ya ha venido Javi?  
- Javi vino ayer.  
- ¿Fernández?  
- ¿Ah, sí? Anda. **No lo sabía.**  
(COREC)

Returning now to the quantitative examination of our data, the results of the VARBRUL analyses for each dialect are displayed in Tables 2 (Mexico City) and 3 (Madrid) below. Each factor group is presented in the leftmost column in small caps, and the individual factor values for each group are presented immediately below. The factor groups are presented in decreasing order of significance (as indicated by the Range between the highest and lowest factor values for each group). Also included are the percentages of null DOs for each factor value, the total number of tokens per factor value, and the percentage of the data represented by each value. Statistically insignificant factor groups are not included in the tables.

**Table 2. Factors contributing to the choice of the null DO in Mexico City Spanish**

Total N = 553, p = 0.00, Input: 0.50 (49% null)

|                        | <b>Probability</b> | <b>%Ø</b> | <b>Total N</b> | <b>%of data</b> |
|------------------------|--------------------|-----------|----------------|-----------------|
| <b>YA</b>              |                    |           |                |                 |
| Present                | 0.78               | 81%       | 53             | 9%              |
| Absent                 | 0.47               | 46%       | 500            | 90%             |
|                        | <i>Range 31</i>    |           |                |                 |
| <b>MODAL ADVERBIAL</b> |                    |           |                |                 |
| Absent                 | 0.55               | 55%       | 467            | 84%             |
| Present                | 0.27               | 19%       | 86             | 15%             |
|                        | <i>Range 28</i>    |           |                |                 |
| <b>PERSON</b>          |                    |           |                |                 |
| 1st/2nd                | 0.58               | 60%       | 368            | 66%             |
| 3rd                    | 0.34               | 28%       | 184            | 33%             |
|                        | <i>Range 24</i>    |           |                |                 |
| <b>POLARITY</b>        |                    |           |                |                 |
| Negative               | 0.64               | 65%       | 206            | 37%             |
| Affirmative            | 0.41               | 40%       | 347            | 62%             |
|                        | <i>Range 23</i>    |           |                |                 |
| <b>TURN CHANGE</b>     |                    |           |                |                 |
| Turn change            | 0.63               | 65%       | 192            | 34%             |
| Same speaker           | 0.43               | 41%       | 361            | 65%             |
|                        | <i>Range 20</i>    |           |                |                 |

**Table 3. Factors contributing to the choice of the null DO in Madrid Spanish**

Total N = 471, p = .005, Input: 0.38 (42% null)

|                         | <b>Weight</b>   | <b>%Ø</b> | <b>Total N</b> | <b>% of data</b> |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------|----------------|------------------|
| <b>PERSON</b>           |                 |           |                |                  |
| 1st/2nd                 | 0.58            | 51%       | 364            | 77%              |
| 3rd                     | 0.26            | 12%       | 107            | 22%              |
|                         | <i>Range 32</i> |           |                |                  |
| <b>SENTENCE TYPE</b>    |                 |           |                |                  |
| Non-declarative         | 0.73            | 49%       | 53             | 11%              |
| Declarative             | 0.47            | 41%       | 418            | 89%              |
|                         | <i>Range 26</i> |           |                |                  |
| <b>POLARITY</b>         |                 |           |                |                  |
| Negative                | 0.64            | 59%       | 205            | 44%              |
| Affirmative             | 0.39            | 29%       | 266            | 56%              |
|                         | <i>Range 25</i> |           |                |                  |
| <b>CORPUS</b>           |                 |           |                |                  |
| Habla Culta             | 0.65            | 60%       | 178            | 38%              |
| COREC                   | 0.41            | 31%       | 293            | 62%              |
|                         | <i>Range 24</i> |           |                |                  |
| <b>YA</b>               |                 |           |                |                  |
| Present                 | 0.70            | 51%       | 72             | 15%              |
| Absent                  | 0.46            | 40%       | 399            | 84%              |
|                         | <i>Range 24</i> |           |                |                  |
| <b>VERBAL SEMANTICS</b> |                 |           |                |                  |
| Cognition               | 0.59            | 57%       | 243            | 52%              |
| Communication           | 0.41            | 26%       | 228            | 48%              |
|                         | <i>Range 18</i> |           |                |                  |

#### 4. Discussion

A first look at the tables suggests that the phenomenon under study responds to very similar patterns in both dialects: three of the factor groups selected as significant to the variation coincide in the two dialects (presence/absence of the adverb *ya*; person; polarity). However, a closer analysis of the data indicates that the similar results implied by these tables is only an APPARENT similarity. The results in Table 3 from Madrid are actually the outcome of what we will term the “no (lo) sé” effect.

Table 4 illustrates that the frequency of the null DO construction “no sé” and the neuter *lo* construction “no lo sé” is notably different in both dialects, and furthermore that both these forms are overall much more frequent in the Madrid data. Indeed, the null DOs found in the “no sé” construction make up 53% (105/198) of ALL the null DOs in the Madrid data. In Mexico City, by contrast, “no sé” comprises only 4% (11/276) of the null DOs, and the overt *lo* form “no lo sé” does not occur at all.

**Table 4. Presence of “no sé” and “no lo sé” in Mexico City and Madrid.**

|             | <i>No sé</i> | <i>No lo sé</i> |
|-------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Mexico City | 11           | 0               |
| Madrid      | 105          | 23              |

The selection of the factor groups “person” (1st favoring null DOs), “polarity” (negative favoring null DOs) and “verbal semantics” (cognition verbs favoring null DOs) as statistically significant for Madrid in Table 3 is most likely a consequence of a skewing effect in terms of this one construction and its two variants. In order to determine the “no lo sé” effect on the results, a new Varbrul analysis of the Madrid data, this time excluding all the cases of “no (lo) sé” from the analysis, is presented in Table 5:

**Table 5. Factors contributing to the choice of the null DO in Madrid Spanish. “No (lo) sé” excluded.**

Total N = 343, p = .018, Input: 0.23 (27% null)

|                 | Weight          | %Ø  | Total N | % of data |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----|---------|-----------|
| SENTENCE TYPE   |                 |     |         |           |
| Non-declarative | 0.79            | 48% | 52      | 15%       |
| Declarative     | 0.44            | 23% | 291     | 84%       |
|                 | <i>Range 35</i> |     |         |           |
| YA              |                 |     |         |           |
| Present         | 0.77            | 52% | 71      | 20%       |
| Absent          | 0.42            | 20% | 272     | 79%       |
|                 | <i>Range 33</i> |     |         |           |
| PERSON          |                 |     |         |           |
| 1st/2nd         | 0.56            | 33% | 236     | 69%       |
| 3rd             | 0.36            | 12% | 107     | 30%       |
|                 | <i>Range 20</i> |     |         |           |
| CORPUS          |                 |     |         |           |
| Habla Culta     | 0.62            | 40% | 99      | 28%       |
| COREC           | 0.45            | 21% | 244     | 71%       |
|                 | <i>Range 17</i> |     |         |           |

Table 5 shows that the high frequency of the construction “no (lo) sé” is creating a clear constructional bias effect in the Madrid data and that the null DO is, in fact, much less frequent overall (27%) than it is in Mexico City Spanish (49% null). The biggest difference between the two dialects, therefore, is the productivity of this process: since there are no constructions found in the Mexico City data with a similar skewing effect, it seems reasonable to conclude that null DOs with propositional

referents (and possibly with other referent-types) are considerably more productive in Mexico City than in Madrid.

As can be seen in Table 5, “Corpus” is a significant factor group in the Madrid analysis. The corpora used in this research, Habla Culta and COREC, have rather distinct characteristics and this fact keeps us from drawing further conclusions from the result. However, the fact that Habla Culta is selected as favoring the null object could suggest that null DOs are more favored in conversation and less frequent in more formal spoken-language situations (e.g. lectures), like those included in COREC.

The Varbrul results reveal that the factor group “person” is significant. In both dialects, first and second person subjects favor the null pronoun and third person subjects strongly disfavor the null DO and favor neuter *lo*. Salience in the context of utterance has been pointed out before as one of the pragmatic features that explain null objects (with different referent-types) in other languages and dialects (Masullo 2003; Meyerhoff 2002). The opposition between first/second person and third person is related to this finding, since salience in the discourse context will be dependent on and interact with the speaker and the interlocutor, i.e. 1st and 2nd person.

Another factor selected in both dialects is the presence or absence of the adverb “ya” (‘already’). In both Mexican and Peninsular Spanish, the presence of “ya” in the same sentence favors the null pronoun. In (19), neuter *lo* is overt with the verb *entender* in the sentence without *ya*, but a null DO occurs in the sentence where *ya* appears:

- (19) - ¿Por qué te enojas tanto? -resistió Leonor.  
 - Te lo voy a repetir a ver si **lo entiendes** -dijo Cordelia, respirando hondo para contener la rabia. Estamos hablando del tipo que engañó y lastimó a tu tía Mariana. La lastimó a tal punto, que es uno de los causantes de su muerte. ¿Tan preocupada estás por la muerte de tu tía? Bueno, pues la depresión y la locura que le quedó de su "romance" con Carrasco fueron las causas de su muerte. Por eso se abandonó después. Porque no pudo recuperarse de su trato con el miserable de Carrasco. **¿Ya entendiste?**  
 (CREA, Mexico, Héctor Aguilar Camín, *El error de la luna*, 1995)

A potential explanation for this result is that the adverb “ya” foregrounds the aspectual interpretation of the verb, specifically a change of state, and backgrounds the DO referent; this would explain that when the adverb is present in the sentence, the null pronoun, rather than “lo”, is preferred.

Table 2 shows that the presence of a modal adverbial strongly disfavors the null DO in Mexico City. When a modal adverbial is present, there is a strong tendency to employ “lo”, but when no adverbial occurs, there is little affect on the variation. Examples (20) and (21) are illustrative of this tendency.

- (20) Enc. - ¿Ya es grande?  
 Inf. -Ya, mano, ya tiene... ya tiene... pus andará cerca de los... cerca de los cincuenta.  
 Enc. -Pero ya no tiene trazas de casarse, ¿verdad? Ya ves, ahora...  
 Inf. - ¡Pus quién sabe, quién sabe! Vieras que... Ahí, de broma, **lo** dijo, ¿no? Dice que piensa vender la casa...  
 (Mexico City, Habla Culta)
- (21) Cortés, como era su costumbre, dictó órdenes precisas para sobrevolar toda duda u obstáculo. Me mandó dar de vestir camisa y jubón, zaragüelles, caperuza y alpargatas, y me mandó decir cómo había llegado hasta aquí. Se **lo** conté lo más sencillamente posible.  
 (Mexico City, Habla Culta)

The disfavoring effect of a modal adverbial on null DOs can be explained by the need of a modifying element to have some overt linguistic material to modify (here, the DO). Indeed, we see this same tendency with non-referential null DOs, as in (22), where the presence of a modal adverbial requires an overt pronoun.

- (22) -¿Compraste café?  
 -Sí, compré  
 -Sí, **lo** compré muy barato/de oferta  
 -??Sí, compré muy barato/de oferta

Relatedly, the favoring effect of negative polarity on null DOs can be understood as the inverse of the modal adverbial effect. Negating a predicate may have the effect of denying the existence of a referent, or at least manifesting the speaker's uncertainty about its status. As a result, "lo" is disfavored in this context, but favored in affirmatives, which commit a speaker to the existence or even truth of the propositional DO.

In the Mexico City corpus, a change of speaker appears to have the same effect that Clements (2006) observes for non-referential DOs in Spanish: the change of speaker favors the null pronoun. This could be considered an interactional function whereby second speakers continue the topic of their interlocutor.

It is worth mentioning that, although the co occurrence of a dative pronoun has been cited in passing as significant for the occurrence of null DOs, and indeed is the only factor referred to in the few mentions of this phenomenon in the literature (Kany 1969; Landa 1995), this factor was not found to be significant in the Varbrul analysis of our data.

## 5. Conclusion

Although they represent a phenomenon that has not been previously noted or studied, we have shown that null DOs with propositional antecedents (i.e. those normatively encoded by "neuter" *lo*) are a surprisingly frequent feature in two MONOLINGUAL varieties of Spanish. The frequency of null DOs, and the factors significant to their occurrence, are however not the same in Mexico City and Madrid.

In Madrid null DOs are subject to lexical and constructional restrictions, e.g. to collocations like *no sé* and to non-declarative sentence types. Null DOs in Mexico City, by contrast, do not seem to display such lexical-constructional restrictions, and thus appear more dependent on contextual factors such as the factor groups in Table 2.

In broader perspective, the present study expands considerably our understanding of null direct objects in Spanish. It is clearly a phenomenon that is turning out to be much more widespread and complex than traditionally believed, and one that now requires further studies of different Spanish dialects.

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edited by Jonathan Holmquist,  
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