

# Object drop in Spanish is not island-sensitive

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## Abstract

Campos (1986) argues that object drop in Spanish exhibits island effects. This claim has remained unchallenged up to date and is largely assumed in the literature. In this squib, 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**— Object drop - Islands - Spanish - Movement

As is well-known, Spanish allows object drop when the antecedent is an indefinite bare noun (1), but not when it is a definite DP (2).<sup>1</sup>

- (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.’

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<sup>1</sup>Quiteño Spanish (Suñer & Yépez 1988) and Basque Spanish (Landa 1995, Franco & Landa 2003) constitute exceptions, since they allow null definite objects in certain contexts.

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<sub>*i*</sub> [TP verb *t<sub>i</sub>*]

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 ∅.  
 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 beer to the party  
 ‘Who brought.3SG beer to the party?’  
 B: \*No conozco al muchacho que trajo ∅.  
 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 ∅ 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  $\emptyset$ .  
 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’ analysis, the claim that object drop in (“Standard”) Spanish exhibits island effects has survived unchallenged to the present day<sup>2</sup> and is largely assumed in the literature (see, for instance, Cyrino 2019: 18, Armstrong 2016: 13, Gribanova 2013: 110, Rothman & Iverson 2013: 595, Landau 2010: 383, among many others). However, this characterization is not correct: none of the sentences in (4B)-(7B) is actually ungrammatical.

Campos’ 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 island<sup>3</sup> 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  $\emptyset$ .  
 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  $\emptyset$  (pero sí a gente  
 no not know.1SG DOM nobody that buy.3SG but yes DOM people  
 que vende  $\emptyset$ ).  
 that sell.3SG  
 ‘No, I do not know anyone who buys used books (but I do know people  
 who sells used books).’

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<sup>2</sup>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).

<sup>3</sup>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.

(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, levá, porque acá yo no encuentro ∅.

yes bring.2SG because here I not find.1SG

‘Yes, bring some beer, because I do not find any here.’

- b. A: ¿Llevo pan?

bring.1SG bread

‘Should I bring some bread?’

B: No, no lleves pan porque nosotros ya compramos ∅.

no not bring.2SG bread because we already bought.1PL

‘No, do not bring bread because we have already bought some.’

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 do not 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 the examples (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 relevant<sup>4</sup> answer for the corresponding question. To illustrate, consider again the

<sup>4</sup>I am adopting the standard notion of *Relevance* from Roberts (1996/2012):

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 (bread)* is a relevant answer to the question *do I bring 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 perfect, 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:

- (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 Ø, 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’ example (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.<sup>5</sup> 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.

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(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*.

<sup>5</sup>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.’

- (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 dónde la  
 that need.3SG not me surprise.3SG but not know.1SG of where it  
 conseguirá.  
 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 resulta  
 that buy.3SG not me surprise.3SG but that sell.3SG me result.3SG  
 raro.  
 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 like Greek, in which (indefinite) null objects can appear in island domains (Dimitriadis 1994, Panagiotidis 2002). From a theoretical point of view, this observation 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).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Thanks to Andrés Saab for pointing this out to me.

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