Niklas Wiskandt

Scale-based object marking in Spanish and Portuguese

Leísmo, null objects and DOM

Abstract: The prepositional marking of direct objects in Spanish is a well-known instance of Differential Object Marking (DOM), driven mainly by animacy and specificity. But it is not the only domain where Ibero-Romance object marking varies due to semantic factors: Spanish and Portuguese feature several patterns of heterogeneous object marking. This paper provides a comparative overview of prepositional DOM, also known as *a*-marking, *leísmo* and null objects. All three phenomena are found in both languages, but with considerable differences among their varieties in Europe and Latin America. It is argued that where they are present in a certain variety, they are always based on the same scale that ranks all potential direct objects with respect to specificity, animacy, (pro-)nominality and gender. This Ibero-Romance object marking scale is their most central common denominator, which is why I propose “scale-based object marking” as an umbrella term.

Keywords: Differential Object Marking (DOM), paradigmatic DOM, null object, semantic scale, Spanish, Portuguese

1 Introduction

It is widely accepted that Spanish features Differential Object Marking by means of the preposition *a*, which marks some, but not all, direct objects. The notion of Differential Object Marking was introduced by Bosson (1985), who first described it in Iranian languages and later applied it to Spanish (1991). In (1) we see an example of a direct object marked by *a*.

- (1) *María ve a la amiga.*
María see.3SG OBJ DEF.F.SG friend
‘María sees the friend.’

(Spanish)

Niklas Wiskandt, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, e-mail: wiskandt@phil.hhu.de

The current discussion of the widespread Ibero-Romance languages Spanish and Portuguese will include varieties spoken in Europe and in Latin America.¹ My study cannot, however, address all existing varieties, an impossible task within the limits of a paper like this one. The examples discussed come from various sources. Besides examples cited from previous works, I illustrate my argumentation with new data that have been checked through the grammaticality judgments of native speakers. These speakers were presented with the example sentences and distracting items in written form and were asked to judge them spontaneously as perfect, acceptable, questionable, or impossible. Where speakers did not judge an example to be impossible, they were asked to translate it. However, we cannot guarantee that such judgments would be rendered analogously by all speakers of the respective language or variety.

The paper is structured as follows: After this introductory section, I discuss prepositional object marking in Section 2. Section 3 is concerned with the heterogeneous case marking of direct object pronouns, known as *leísmo* in European Spanish. In Section 4 I explore the contrast between overt and null objects. Section 5 defines a common denominator among the different phenomena of heterogeneous object marking. Some concluding remarks and suggestions for further research are given in Section 6.

2 Prepositional object marking in Spanish and beyond

2.1 Finding and defining Differential Object Marking

Differential Object Marking was identified in Spanish long ago. In works like Comrie (1979; 1981) the phenomenon itself was described even before Bossong (1985) first coined the now widely adopted term. Since then, a large number of studies have been conducted on Spanish DOM, classic among them being Bossong (1991); more recent studies include Fábregas (2013), García García (2014; 2018), Kabatek (2016), López (2012), Melis (2018) and von Heusinger (2018), to name but a few.

¹ I will differentiate mainly between European Spanish (ES), American Spanish (AS), European Portuguese (EP) and Brazilian Portuguese (BP). Whenever one of the languages is mentioned without any specification of the variety, the statement or example is considered valid for all varieties.

When dealing with phenomena of Differential Object Marking, a clear definition of the notion is essential. Adopting the findings of Bossong (1985; 1991; 2008) and Aissen (2003), in the current study I define Differential Object Marking (DOM) as being present in a language if all, or at least a subset of, transitive verbs show the following peculiarity in the marking of their arguments: Some, but not all, direct objects are marked by an overt morphological device, that is, there is a split between marked and unmarked direct objects. As stated by Bossong (2008, 40), the morphological marking of the direct object does not necessarily occur in the form of a case affix; a preposition is also a possible object marker, as well as a marker on the verb or any other morpheme that has the function of marking the grammatical relation of the direct object.

My current object of research here is DOM in a narrow sense, with the following characteristics: it occurs or not within the same syntactic and semantic environment, that is, it is not caused only by word order or by lexical peculiarities of the predicate; and it can be traced back to properties of the respective object referents.

For DOM mechanisms that depend on properties of the object itself, it has been observed that they operate on grammatical scales: All potential direct objects are arranged on a scale that is based on animacy, definiteness/specificity or person hierarchy, or on a combination of such hierarchies. Direct objects that are located above a language-specific cut-off point on that scale bear overt morphological marking; direct objects below that point do not. The scale is implicational in the sense that, if a particular object is overtly marked, all objects that are ranked above it on the scale will also be overtly marked, and vice versa. Typical distinctions relevant for DOM comprise human vs. non-human, animate vs. inanimate, definite vs. indefinite, specific vs. unspecific, 1st/2nd person vs. 3rd person and pronoun vs. noun. Aissen (2003) integrates most of these distinctions in two generalized scales, the animacy scale and the definiteness scale, cited here (4).

(4a) Animacy scale: human > animate > inanimate

(4b) Definiteness scale: personal pronoun > proper name > definite NP > indefinite specific NP > non-specific NP

(Aissen 2003, 437)

The orientation on grammatical scales as described above should not be considered to be a part of the definition of DOM but is a frequently observed characteristic of differential marking phenomena. Assumptions about grammatical scales

has had a significant influence on the description and analysis of Differential Object Marking in Spanish, which will be discussed in the next Subsection.

2.2 Prepositional object marking in Spanish

In Spanish, animacy and specificity have been shown to be the dimensions that are most relevant for the distribution of *a*-marking (Comrie 1979; Bossong 1991, among others). Fábregas (2013) gives a detailed report on the state of the art in investigating Differential Object Marking in Spanish and concludes by naming some fields that require further research. One of those is the “potential correlation between *a*-marking and other phenomena where animacy is relevant” (2013, 75), which is what I will be concerned with here. A recent reflection on the historical and current development of Spanish prepositional object marking is Kabatek (2016). He describes the system of prepositional object marking as transparent and predictable, and differentiates between cases where the marking is obligatory, facultative or impossible. For the sake of concision, this paper will largely disregard the facultative cases, although we might note that these merit more extensive study. Concerning the diachrony of Spanish object marking, Kabatek notes that the frequency of objects marked by *a* is increasing. This is an interesting tendency. It deserves further attention in the future, and the synchronic description in the present study will hopefully be of use in any such work.

The great majority of studies on Spanish DOM exclusively address prepositional object marking, or at least they focus mainly on it. In most varieties of Spanish, the preposition *a* marks all indirect objects, except those in the form of pronominal clitics, and some, but not all, direct objects. Since it does not express any distinction between direct and indirect objects, *a* will be glossed by OBJ in this paper. Differential marking of direct objects by the same morpheme that marks indirect objects is not at all unusual in the world’s languages. In Hindi (< Indo-Aryan < Indo-European), for instance, the postposition *ko* marks the indirect object and is thus identified as dative, but also figures as a differential marker for certain direct objects. For a recent study of DOM in Hindi, cf. Montaut (2018).

I will now offer a sketch of DOM, as defined above, in Spanish, focusing on the influence of the two most relevant dimensions, animacy and specificity. Animacy is probably the most obvious factor that influences Spanish DOM and has been shown to be relevant here in a number of works, among them Comrie (1979), Bossong (1991) and Fábregas (2013). For the sake of clarity, the examples used to illustrate the relevance of animacy all feature definite direct objects. The inanimate object in (5a) does not receive any marking, while the animate object in (5b), repeated from (1), is preceded by *a*:

- (5a) *María ve la mesa.*
 María see.3SG DEF.F.SG table
 ‘María sees the table.’

- (5b) *María ve a la amiga.*
 María see.3SG OBJ DEF.F.SG friend
 ‘María sees the friend.’

(Spanish)

García García (2018) argues that *a*-marking is obligatory for specific human objects but is optional for animals. He illustrates this claim with example (6), which he states is grammatical both with and without *a*.

- (6) *Pepe ve Ø/a la vaca.*
 Pepe see.3SG OBJ DEF.F.SG cow
 ‘Pepe sees the cow.’

(Spanish; García García 2018, 211)

Indeed, this seems to be true at least for most speakers of Spanish. Certainly, there are some speakers who only accept the sentence with *a*, while there are probably a few who only accept it without *a*. Yet García García is right, in that one cannot generalize that *a*-marking is obligatory with animal objects. Animals can seemingly be classed either with humans or with inanimate objects; I hypothesize that this may depend on whether the speaker attributes animacy to them. Admittedly, cases of *a*-marked inanimate objects are also attested; for the current study they are regarded as peripheral. For a detailed investigation of DOM on inanimate direct objects of Spanish, cf. García García (2014).

We have seen that animacy is decisive for DOM in Spanish. So far, we have only looked at definite objects. When turning to indefinite objects, we quickly see that animacy is not the only relevant category. In order to concentrate on the categories that Aissen (2003) includes in her definiteness scale, the following examples will contain only animate direct objects. We know that definite NPs are ranked higher on the scale than indefinite NPs, and indeed all animate definite objects are *a*-marked. However, indefinite specific objects are marked, too. This is illustrated in the examples in (7), which are comparable to the examples presented in Comrie (1979, 15; 1981, 127), but have been revised and extended:

- (7a) *Buscamos al empleado (que nos atendió ayer).*
 look_for.1PL OBJ_DEF.M.SG employee
 ‘We look for the employee (that served us yesterday).’

(7b) *Buscamos a un empleado (que lleva gafas).*

look_for.1PL OBJ INDEF.M.SG employee

‘We look for an employee (that wears glasses).’

(7c) *Buscamos un empleado (cualquiera).*

look_for.1PL INDEF.M.SG employee

‘We look for an (any) employee.’

(Spanish)

The split of *a*-marking is not between definites (7a) and indefinites (7b–c), but between two types of indefinites, as in (7b) and (7c). In line with many previous studies, I argue that the relevant category is specificity:² In (7b) the object looked for is a specific individual who is an employee; in (7c) the object is any member of the set of employees, without further specification as to which individual is being sought. These examples illustrate that, among animate direct objects, the distinction [$\pm$ specific] dictates whether the object is marked by *a*, as it has been shown by Comrie (1979; 1981), Bossong (1991),³ and others. Following García García (2018), *a*-marking is possible with non-specific objects in restricted cases, at least when the non-specific reading of the object is enforced by other means, e.g. marked by a relative clause in the subjunctive mood, as in (8). Subjunctive relative clauses indicate non-specificity in Romance languages.

(8) *Pepe busca Ø/a una actriz que hable arameo.*

Pepe look_for.3SG OBJ INDEF.F.SG actress REL speak.SBJ.3SG Aramaic

‘Pepe is looking for an actress who speaks Aramaic.’

(Spanish; García García 2018, 211)

Yet the default case for non-specific direct objects is still the absence of *a*-marking. The marking is never obligatory with such objects, not even in cases like (8), and not all speakers of Spanish accept it. Although García García’s point

² Specificity as the main factor for the marking of indefinite objects is not wholly uncontroversial. For example, López (2012) explains it by movements of functional elements in an underlying syntactic representation. The claim is based on the theoretical framework of minimalist generative grammar, which I do not adopt here. For the purposes of describing the phenomenon, influenced rather by typology than the aim of the theoretical modelling of the syntax, it seems justifiable to stick to the notion of specificity.

³ Bossong uses the term “referential” instead of “specific”. Although referentiality and specificity are separate concepts in the terminology of some authors, Bossong’s understanding of “referential” is arguably equivalent to what I call “specific” here, and thus I continue to use only the latter term.

is a valuable contribution to the study of the variability of Spanish DOM, it does not pose a problem for the fundamental hypothesis that the distinction [$\pm$ specific] is decisive for *a*-marking.

So far we have looked at the differential marking of nominal direct objects. But since a large number of Spanish objects appear in the form of clitic pronouns, it is necessary to include pronominal object marking in our analysis. Spanish has distinct clitics for direct and indirect objects. The direct object clitics are specified for gender: *lo* for masculine and *la* for feminine objects. The indirect object clitic *le* is not specified for gender. In contrast to *a*-marking, which does not differentiate between direct and indirect objects, the clitic pronouns distinguish between the two syntactic relations. Thus, I consider it unproblematic to stick to the traditional terminology and call them accusative and dative pronouns, glossed as ACC and DAT respectively. Direct object clitics are used for all direct objects, regardless of their position on the animacy scale, for example, which means that all those objects are overtly marked. The human object in (9a) and the inanimate object in (9b) are both referred to by the same object clitic *lo*. Thus, in the pronominal domain, there is no Differential Object Marking in the narrow sense of the definition, i.e. the presence vs. absence of an overt object marker. A cut-off in marking between personal pronouns and nouns is included as a possible DOM split, e.g. on Aissen's definiteness scale (2003).

- (9a) *El empleado? Lo vi.*
 DEF.M.SG employee 3SG.M.ACC see.PST.PF.1SG
 'The employee? I saw him.'

- (9b) *El coche? Lo vi.*
 DEF.M.SG car 3SG.M.ACC see.PST.PF.1SG
 'The car? I saw it.'

(Spanish)

However, there is evidence for something at least closely related to DOM with Spanish pronominal objects. Not all objects can be treated in the same way. The phenomenon of clitic doubling is not possible for all potential objects. Anaphoric direct objects that refer to a human being can be realized in two ways, namely by an object clitic and by a tonic pronoun marked by *a*, these in the same sentence, as in (10a). This is not possible for inanimate referents such as that in (10b), or those without *a*-marking of the tonic pronoun.

- (10a) *Viste a Pedro o a María? – Lo vi*
 see.PST.PF.2SG OBJ Pedro or OBJ María 3SG.M.ACC see.PST.PF.1SG
a él, no a ella.
 OBJ 3SG.M NEG OBJ 3SG.F
 ‘Did you see Pedro or María? – I saw him, not her.’

- (10b) *Viste el pan o la manteca? – *Lo vi*
 see.PST.PF.2SG DEF.M.SG bread or DEF.F.SG butter 3SG.M.ACC
(a) él, no (a) ella.
 see.PST.PF.1SG OBJ 3SG.M NEG OBJ 3SG.F
 ‘Did you see the bread or the butter? – I saw (the bread), not (the butter).’
 [intended]

(Spanish)

The pronouns *él* and *ella* seem to be obligatorily *a*-marked when in the direct object position. However, (10b) is still ungrammatical when the tonic pronouns are *a*-marked. Inanimates are regularly not eligible as antecedents for tonic pronominal objects; see Thun (1986) for a description of the scarce cases of tonic pronouns with inanimate antecedents. Clitic doubling is also possible with full nouns or proper names. Just as in the examples above, it is required that the referent of the object is human, as in (11a). Clitic doubling of inanimate nominal objects, for example in (11b) below, is ungrammatical.

- (11a) *Lo vi a Pedro, no a María.*
 3SG.M.ACC see.PST.PF.1SG OBJ Pedro NEG OBJ María
 ‘I saw Pedro, not María.’

- (11b) **Lo vi el pan, no la manteca.*
 3SG.M.ACC see.PST.PF.1SG DEF.M.SG bread NEG DEF.F.SG butter
 ‘I saw the bread, not the butter.’ [intended]

(Spanish)

What we see here, I argue, is not Differential Object Marking in the narrow sense of the definition, because the clitic pronoun is always an instance of overt object marking. Yet it is evidently the case that not all objects can be marked in the same way; the pattern of pronominal object marking is heterogeneous. Free pronouns can only be used for human, or possibly human-like, specific referents, thus they are always marked by *a* in the object position. In addition to this, nominal objects that are human and specific can be doubled by an object clitic, while inanimate

objects cannot be doubled. Melis (2018) also points out the indexing function of clitic doubling, concluding that the category that is decisive for whether an object can be doubled is its topicworthiness, a notion which is, as she notes, closely linked to both animacy and specificity.

2.3 Prepositional object marking beyond Spanish

Thus far I have described the DOM system of Spanish. Since the focus of this paper is on language comparison, I will now turn to the situation of prepositional object marking in Portuguese. Unlike *a*-marking in Spanish, it has not featured widely in synchronic research.⁴ Schäfer-Prieß/Schöntag (2012, 146), for instance, note that the prepositional accusative⁵ only plays a marginal role. However, it is not wholly absent. It occurs, for example, in cases of clitic doubling, a phenomenon we have just seen in Spanish, where DOM precedes tonic personal pronouns in direct object position:

- (12) *Paulo me vê a mim, não a ti (EP)/você (BP).*

Paulo 1SG.OBJ see.3SG OBJ 1SG.TON NEG OBJ 2SG.TON

‘Paulo sees me, not you.’

(Portuguese)

In contrast to Spanish, nominal direct objects in simple transitive sentences cannot be *a*-marked in Portuguese, even when animate and specific, and regardless of gender.

- (13a) *Maria vê o /*ao homem.*

Maria see.3SG DEF.M.SG /OBJ_DEF.M.SG man

‘Maria sees the man.’

- (13b) *Maria vê a /*a mulher.*

Maria see.3SG DEF.F.SG /OBJ_DEF.F.SG woman

‘Maria sees the woman.’

(Portuguese)

⁴ There are several historical investigations, an early one being Delille (1970). However, the diachrony is not in the focus of this paper.

⁵ “Prepositional accusative” is a term that many older works, as well as contemporary traditionalist ones, use for the function of *a*-marking of direct objects. I will not use this term in the present paper because I consider it imprecise, since Spanish and Portuguese do not have inflectional case on nouns, and since *a* is also the marker of indirect objects.

Yet animacy also plays a role in Portuguese. In the cases of clitic doubling in (12), *a* occurs with personal pronouns that usually refer to humans. But animacy is also decisive for *a*-marking of nominal objects. Cyrino (2017a) shows that the relation between animacy and object marking is relevant for the grammaticality and interpretation of the examples cited in (14).

(14a) *Eu vi o menino e ao professor também.*
 1SG see.PST.PF.1SG DEF.M.SG boy and OBJ_DEF.M.SG professor too
 ‘I saw the boy and (I saw) the professor, too.’

(14b) *Eu vi o livro e o caderno também.*
 1SG see.PST.PF.1SG DEF.M.SG book and DEF.M.SG notebook too
 ‘I saw the book and (I saw) the notebook, too.’

(14c) *Eu vi o livro e *ao caderno também.*
 1SG see.PST.PF.1SG DEF.M.SG book and OBJ_DEF.M.SG notebook too
 ‘I saw the book and (I saw) the notebook, too.’ [intended]

(14d) *Eu vi o menino e o professor também.*
 1SG see.PST.PF.1SG DEF.M.SG boy and DEF.M.SG professor too
 ‘I saw the boy and the professor (saw him), too.’

(Portuguese; Cyrino 2017a, 99)

When two human direct objects appear next to each other due to verb ellipsis, the second one is marked by *a*, as in (14a). In a coordination of inanimate direct objects, like in (14b), there is no *a*-marking. The same sentence with *a* preceding the second object (14c) is ungrammatical. The motivation behind the differential marking of the human object is arguably disambiguation. When the *a*-marking of the human direct object is left out, the reading changes: The construction in (14d) is not understood as a coordination of direct objects, but rather as a case of VP ellipsis with a second subject. The ellipsis reading is not available for the inanimate subject in (14b), probably for semantic reasons: The verb *ver* ‘see’ requires an animate subject. Disambiguation as the background for *a*-marking is also recognized by Schäfer-Prieß (2003). In (15) the *a* makes clearly understandable that the subject treats the objects as if the latter were humans, not as if the subject itself were human.

3 Accusative vs. dative: *leísmo* in Spanish and Portuguese

Prepositional DOM is surely the most prominent instance of heterogeneous object marking in Spanish and Portuguese, but it is not the only one. In this Section I will discuss what is widely known by the Spanish term *leísmo*. Found mainly in some varieties of European Spanish, such as Castilian and Basque Spanish, among others, the use of dative pronouns referring to direct objects has been described in numerous studies and has also been discussed in normative grammars. I will start with a description of *leísmo* in Spanish, before turning to equivalent findings for Portuguese.

In Spanish, the 3rd person dative clitic *le*, not specified for gender, prototypically occurs in the indirect object position. Direct objects are, by default, referred to by the accusative clitics *lo/la*. In ES,⁷ *le* can also be used as a direct object.⁸ However, for most ES speakers, not all direct objects can be referred to by *le*. The examples in (17) hint at the relevance of animacy for *leísmo*.

- (17a) *El criado no trabaja bien. Le/?Lo voy a reemplazar.*
 3SG.DAT/ACC AUX.FUT.1SG FUT replace
 ‘The servant does not work well. I will replace him.’

- (17b) *El escritorio no me gusta más.* *Le/Lo voy a
3SG.DAT/ACC AUX.FUT.1SG FUT
reemplazar.
replace
'I do not like the desk anymore. I will replace it.'

(European Spanish)

The human direct object in (17a) is referred to by the dative clitic, while this is impossible for the inanimate object in (17b); the inanimate object would require the accusative clitic *lo*. The relevance of animacy for object marking reminds us of the scale adopted for *a*-marking in Section 2, and the neutralization of the distinction between direct and indirect objects, that is, the use of the indirect object marker for some direct objects also links *leísmo* to prepositional DOM. Yet there are some significant differences between the two phenomena. When dis-

7 This is a generalization about ES. There may be smaller European varieties that behave differently, but this claim captures the behaviour of the majority of ES speakers.

8 In order to simplify the analysis, I will only consider singular examples in this paper.

cussing *a*-marking in the pronominal domain, I mentioned that all pronominal direct objects are overtly marked. This is also relevant for the classification of *leísmo*: *leísmo* is not DOM in the sense of the presence vs. absence of marking. In the domain where it occurs, all direct objects are marked, but some of them are marked in a different way. This does not fit the definition of DOM given in Section 2. However, it can be classified as a case of paradigmatic Differential Object Marking as understood by de Swart (2014). Paradigmatic DOM, he argues, does not mark the differentiation between subject and object, but rather between different types of objects. Thus, in contrast to DOM in the sense of the definition given in Section 2, which de Swart calls “syntagmatic DOM”, the marking does not happen due to the presence instead of absence of an object marker, but through the choice of one object marker instead of another.

A further difference between *leísmo* and *a*-marking lies in the categories that are available to influence the marking. Both phenomena depend on animacy. For *leísmo*, gender is available as a criterion, demonstrating interesting differences between varieties. In Castilian Spanish, gender conditions the case of the object clitic for human referents. Masculine direct objects are referred to by the dative clitic (18a), while feminine direct objects are referred to by the accusative clitic (18b).

- (18a) Vi *al* *chico*. *Le* *vi*.
 see.PST.PF.1SG OBJ_DEF.M.SG boy 3SG.DAT see.PST.PF.1SG
 ‘I saw the boy. I saw him.’

- (18b) Vi *a* *la* *chica*. *La* *vi*.
 see.PST.PF.1SG OBJ DEF.F.SG girl 3SG.F.ACC see.PST.PF.1SG
 ‘I saw the girl. I saw her.’

(Castilian Spanish; Fábregas 2013, 45)

Basque Spanish is different from Castilian in that gender is not relevant for *leísmo*. For human direct objects, the dative clitic is used regardless of their gender. The masculine object in (19a) and the feminine object in (19b) are reflected by the same pronoun.

- (19a) Vi *al* *chico*. *Le* *vi*.
 see.PST.PF.1SG OBJ_DEF.M.SG boy 3SG.DAT see.PST.PF.1SG
 ‘I saw the boy. I saw him.’

- (19b) *Vi a la chica. Le vi.*
 see.PST.PF.1SG OBJ DEF.F.SG girl 3SG.DAT see.PST.PF.1SG
 ‘I saw the girl. I saw her.’

(Basque Spanish; Fábregas 2013, 45)

According to Fernández-Ordóñez (2012, 88), the Basque type of *leísmo* is also found in some small varieties of AS, such as Paraguayan and Ecuadorian Spanish. These all allow for examples such as (20).

- (20) *Le veo a María.*
 3SG.DAT see.1SG OBJ María
 ‘I see María.’

(Basque/Paraguayan/Ecuadorian Spanish; Fernández-Ordóñez 2012, 88)

Granda (1982) elaborates on the use of *leísmo* in Paraguayan Spanish. He claims that *le* is used as a direct object pronoun regardless of animacy or gender, and without any diatopic differences within the country (loc. cit., 262–263). He mentions that in formal registers *leísmo* occurs preferably for human direct objects, thus resembling European *leísmo*. This might be due to the fact that normative grammars are oriented towards the European standard. But the default in spoken Paraguayan Spanish is a generalized *leísmo*, which Granda explains through contact with Guaraní. The pronominal system of Guaraní does not distinguish between direct and indirect objects; cf. Palacios (1998, 439–440) for a concise description of the pronominal paradigm. This generalized replacement of direct object pronouns by *le* is a totally different phenomenon from *leísmo* in Europe. As the distinction between accusative and dative pronouns is completely lost, no heterogeneous object marking takes place. This pattern is not of interest for us here; cf. Fernández-Ordóñez (2012, 93ss.) for a variationist description of similar behaviour in other varieties of Spanish. For the purpose of the present study, this brief description of the phenomenon and the relevant categories must suffice.

Moreover, we have to separate yet another phenomenon from our primary object of research: García (1975, 307ss.), who is working primarily with data from the variety of Buenos Aires, describes an alternation between *lo/la* and *le* in which the preference for either the accusative or the dative depends on properties of the subject. The dative is favoured for objects in sentences with an inanimate subject, while the accusative is preferred in the presence of an animate subject. As indicated in section 2.1, this paper concentrates on differential marking phenomena which occur within the same syntactic and semantic environment and can be traced back to properties of the respective object referents. This condition does not apply to the phenomenon described by García. The same holds true for

another type of alternation between *lo/la* and *le* (loc. cit., 317ss.) in which the preference for either the dative or the accusative is determined by the role that the object has in the situation referred to. The role that an individual takes in a situation is not a property of that individual, but emerges from the situation.

The situation in Portuguese is just as diverse as in Spanish. There is no valid evidence for a corresponding phenomenon, such as *lheísmo*,⁹ in EP. The 3rd person dative clitic *lhe* only occurs in the indirect object position. Direct objects are referred to by the accusative clitics *o/a*. However, the frequently made claim that *leísmo* does not exist in Portuguese is false. Several studies have shown the existence of a *leísmo* phenomenon in Brazilian Portuguese. Following Nascimento (2010), the function of *lhe* is not restricted to denoting the indirect object in BP, as we can conclude from examples (21) and (22) below; it may denote both 2nd person and 3rd person direct objects:

- (21) *Lucas lhe viu ontem.*
 Lucas 3SG.DAT see.PST.PF.3SG yesterday
 ‘Lucas saw him yesterday.’

- (22) *Eu lhe amo muito.*
 1SG 3SG.DAT love.1SG much
 ‘I love you very much.’

(Brazilian Portuguese; Nascimento 2010, 54)

Almeida (2011, 2406) claims that the use of *lhe* for direct objects is found throughout Brazil, but is most common in the north-eastern states. Marroquim (1934, 182ss.) mentions that it is attested in the dialects of the states of Alagoas and Pernambuco, Nascentes (1953, 127ss.) describes it for Rio de Janeiro and Almeida (2009) analyzes it extensively for the dialect spoken in Salvador da Bahia. Just as in Spanish, the appearance of the dative pronoun instead of the accusative seems to be conditioned by animacy. Citing the dissertation of Conceição de Maria Araújo Ramos,¹⁰ Almeida (2011, 2403) points out that the same tendency is evident in African Portuguese varieties and in Galician.

⁹ The term *lheísmo* is a Portuguese adaptation of the Spanish term *leísmo*, alluding to the dative pronoun *lhe*. Henceforth, the widely-used Spanish term will be used in the description of both languages, in order to allow for a generalization of the findings.

¹⁰ Doctoral dissertation at the Federal University of Alagoas, 1999, entitled *O clítico de 3a pessoa: um estudo comparativo português brasileiro/espanhol peninsular*. The work itself is not accessible, thus not cited in the original.

Pereira/da Silva (2014) describe the diachrony of *lhe* as a direct object clitic; they point out that this use has been present for at least two centuries. As a possible motivation of *leísmo* in both Spanish and Portuguese, they assume an analogy with the use of the pronominal object clitics of the 1st and 2nd person, *me* and *te*, which are used equally for direct and indirect objects. 1st and 2nd person pronouns usually have human referents, and *leísmo* also occurs with human referents. The proposed motivation, then, is plausible.

In contrast to ES *leísmo*, but just like AS *leísmo*, the corresponding phenomenon in BP is still not accepted by normative grammars, a decision which was criticized as early as Nascentes (1960). This is perhaps due to the fact that it has not been studied as extensively as in Spanish. More empirical research is needed to show how widespread it is in BP and in order to argue for its inclusion in normative grammars. Even if it is found that a large proportion of the speakers of Portuguese do not produce *leísmo* themselves, it should be investigated whether they accept it when asked for grammaticality judgments, and if they do, whether they prefer it in certain contexts over others.

4 Total absence of marking: the case of null objects

In the previous Section, we looked at heterogeneous object marking in the domain of clitic pronouns, which consists of the contrast between accusative and dative clitics. Here we turn to the absence of anaphoric pronouns in the direct object position, commonly called null objects. This phenomenon is well-known in Brazilian Portuguese but is also found to a limited extent in EP and in Spanish. The sentence in (23), repeated from (3), which is grammatical in both BP and EP, shows an example of a null object.

- (23) *Comprei* *um* *pãozinho* *e* *comi* *a*
 buy.PST.PF.1SG INDEF.M.SG bun and eat.PST.PF.1SG on
caminho.
 way
 ‘I bought a bun and ate it on the way.’

(Portuguese)

Both verbs *comprei* ‘bought’ and *comi* ‘ate’ are transitive and thus require a direct object. In the first clause, *pãozinho* ‘bun’ is realized as the direct object, while in the second clause there is no overt object. Yet the second clause is neither ungrammat-

ical nor underspecified in terms of its object; *pãozinho* is understood as the object of *comi* without the use of an anaphoric pronoun, which would be obligatory in English ‘[...] ate it [...]’, for example. In BP, such null objects are very frequent. This is favoured by the condition that spoken BP has almost completely lost the direct object clitics in the 3rd person. However, not all anaphoric direct objects are equally eligible to be realized as a null object. 1st and 2nd person objects are inherently animate and specific, thus always require pronominal realization, and there are also restrictions among 3rd person objects. In example (24), the object introduced in the first sentence will usually not be referred to by a null object in the second sentence.

- (24) *Você conhece o Paulo? Eu vi ele/∅*
 2SG know.2SG DEF.M.SG Paulo 1SG see.PST.1SG 3SG.M
ontem.
 yesterday
 ‘Do you know Paulo? I saw him yesterday.’

(Brazilian Portuguese)

Why is it that the null object is possible in (23), but questionable in (24)? The most striking difference between the two objects lies in the dimension of animacy: The direct object in (24), *Paulo*, is human, while *pãozinho* in (23) is inanimate. If a morphological device, a pronoun in this case, is required to mark human direct objects but is unnecessary for inanimate direct objects, then this hints at a relation to DOM: It is an asymmetry between different types of direct objects that has an impact on whether they receive overt marking, and this asymmetry is conditioned by a parameter that has been shown to be relevant for DOM in several languages.

Null objects in BP have been studied extensively (cf. Cyrino 1994; 2016; 2017b; Cyrino/Lopes 2016, among others). Among the interesting illustrations provided by the former author, we find the following example, which is grammatical with either a null object or a pronominal object. The difference in object marking leads to a difference in meaning:

- (25) *Eu nunca vejo o meu pai. Nem me*
 1SG never see.1SG DEF.M.SG POSS.1SG father not_even 1SG.REFL
lembro do rosto dele. Acho que
 remember.1SG of DEF.M.SG face POSS.3SG.M think.1SG that
já esqueci ∅ /ele.
 already forget.PST.1SG 3SG.M

‘I never see my father. I do not even remember his face. I think I already forgot it/him.’

(Brazilian Portuguese; cf. Cyrino 2016, 181)

In the case of the null object, the father's face is understood as the object of *esqueci* 'I forgot'. If the pronoun *ele* is used as the object, the situation is different: Cyrino (2016, 182) states that the pronoun can be understood as referring either to the face, or to the father as a whole. However, speakers prefer the interpretation of *ele* as being coreferent with *o meu pai* 'my father', i.e. referring to the person, not only to a part of his body. This judgment is also argued for by Schwenter/Silva (2002, 582), who analyze a similar example. We can conclude from example (25) that the null object refers to an inanimate entity, while the overt pronoun refers to a human. The impression from examples (23) and (24) above is confirmed: An animate object has to be marked by a morphological device, while an inanimate object does not need overt marking. However, the acceptability of null objects depends on more than just animacy. Examples (26a) and (26b) both feature a human direct object. In (26a) it is taken up by a pronoun. In (26b) there is a null object, despite the referent being human.

- (26a) *O embaixador procura um diplomata*
 DEF.M.SG ambassador look_for.3SG INDEF.M.SG diplomat
que fala alemão, mas não encontra ele.
 REL speak.3SG German but NEG find.3SG 3SG.M
 'The ambassador looks for a diplomat that speaks German, but he does not find him.'

- (26b) *O embaixador procura um diplomata*
 DEF.M.SG ambassador look_for.3SG INDEF.M.SG diplomat
que fale alemão, mas não encontra Ø.
 REL speak.SBJ.3SG German but NEG find.3SG
 'The ambassador looks for a diplomat that speaks German, but he does not find one.'

(Brazilian Portuguese)

When *um diplomata* 'a diplomat' is taken up by the pronoun *ele*, it is understood that it does not refer to any arbitrary diplomat, but to a specific one. The null object in (26b) triggers the interpretation that the ambassador needs a diplomat, but does not have one in mind yet, so he looks for any diplomat that is available, but finds none; it has an unspecific reading. The distinction in specificity is reflected by the mood of the relative clause: indicative in (26a) and subjunctive in (26b). I conclude that the acceptability of null objects in BP depends on animacy and specificity, the same dimensions that are relevant for *a*-marking in Spanish.

So far, all the examples featuring null objects had identical subjects in the sentence introducing the object and in the sentence with the null object. But a

null object is also possible in BP when a new subject is introduced in the same clause:

- (27) *João descascou a banana, mas Pedro não comeu.*
 João peel.PST.3SG DEF.F.SG banana but Pedro NEG eat.PST.3SG
 'João peeled the banana, but Pedro did not eat it.'
 (Brazilian Portuguese; Cyrino 1994, 144)

With respect to this issue, there is an important difference between BP and EP: Example (27) is grammatical in BP, but ungrammatical in EP. In EP, where the 3rd person direct object clitics that have been lost in BP are still in frequent use, the acceptability of null objects is very restricted. Of all the examples of null objects above, only the first one in (23) is grammatical in EP, where two sentences share the same subject and object and only the verb changes. Also, it is important that the two sentences are coordinated; a null object in a subordinated sentence as in (28) is only possible in BP, but not in EP.

- (28) *Comprei o casaco depois que experimentei Ø.*
 buy.PST.1SG DEF.M.SG jacket after that try_on.PST.1SG
 'I bought the jacket after trying it on.'
 (Brazilian Portuguese; Cyrino 2016, 180)

An early study of null objects in EP is offered by Raposo (1986), who describes the phenomenon within the Government and Binding framework and analyzes it as a syntactic variable. While he mentions the acceptability of null objects in Chinese as occurring under almost the same circumstances as in EP, he assumes that within the Romance family, the null object is an exclusive feature of Portuguese which is thus not found in languages such as Spanish and French. Raposo distinguishes null objects from VP ellipsis, in that they occur, for instance, in answers to polar questions. Outlining the narrow limits of null objects in EP, he admits the acceptability of cases like (23), but also gives the following example:

- (29) *A Juana viu Ø na TV ontem.*
 DEF.F.SG Juana see.PST.3SG in_DEF.F.SG TV yesterday
 'Juana saw it on TV yesterday.'
 (European Portuguese; Raposo 1986, 373)

Unfortunately, Raposo does not provide the context for the sentence in (29), thus it is not clear what kind of antecedent the null object has, e.g. whether it is animate or specific. Raposo himself argues that the context is relevant for the

interpretation of null objects. Nevertheless, for many of his examples, the context remains unknown. His analysis is thus rather unsatisfying. Kato (2011) revisits Raposo's work and attempts to integrate null object clitics and null definite articles, which are homonymous in Portuguese, into a single category.

As mentioned above, Raposo (1986) assumed that the null object is an exclusive feature of Portuguese. Later research proved this hypothesis wrong. Portuguese is the Romance language in which null objects are most frequent, but in fact Spanish also displays them under certain conditions. Campos (1986) found a phenomenon resembling a null object in examples like (30) below and named it "indefinite object drop".

- (30) *Compraste café? – Sí, compré Ø.*
 buy.PST.PF.2SG coffee yes buy.PST.PF.1SG
 'Did you buy coffee? – Yes, I bought (some).'

(Spanish; Campos 1986, 354)

As was the case for the Portuguese null object, the second sentence, which in this case was the answer, does not show an overt direct object, but nevertheless is neither ungrammatical nor underspecified for its object; it is unambiguously understood that the object of 'buy' is 'coffee'. In an attempt similar to Raposo's analysis of Portuguese (1986), the same author classifies the dropped object as a variable, which may only substitute indefinite objects. In our terminology, all the examples of dropped direct objects are not only indefinite, but also unspecific, and additionally, all of them are inanimate. This reminds us, at first sight, of what we have seen in Portuguese. However, it is questionable whether the dropped objects as described by Campos are really equivalent to null objects. In all his examples, the subject and verb of the sentence containing the dropped object are identical to those of the sentence containing the antecedent, and the antecedent is always the direct object, too. The dropping of the indefinite object might thus be a simple case of VP ellipsis, common in all Romance languages.

While Campos (1986) looked at ES, recent work on null objects in Spanish concentrates on Latin American varieties. Schwenter (2006) and Cyrino (2016) both compare null objects in AS to those in BP. Regarding the findings of Campos, Cyrino claims that all varieties of AS allow for a sentence like (31).

- (31) *Quería comprar libros pero no encontraba.*
 want.PST.1SG buy books but NEG find.PST.1SG
 'I wanted to buy books but I couldn't find them.'

(American Spanish; Alamillo/Schwenter 2007 *apud* Cyrino 2016, 189)

Unlike (30), and like some of the examples of BP, (31) changes the verb from the first part of the sentence to the second. Thus I assume that it has, indeed, a null object. The object is inanimate and unspecific. The modified versions of this example below, which feature a specific (32a) and a definite (32b) object, are judged ungrammatical:

- (32a) *Quería comprar unos libros pero no* Ø encontraba.*
 want.PST.1SG buy INDEF.M.PL books but NEG find.PST.1SG
 ‘I wanted to buy some (specific) books but I couldn’t find them.’

- (32b) *Quería comprar los libros pero no* Ø encontraba.*
 want.PST.1SG buy DEF.M.PL books but NEG find.PST.1SG
 ‘I wanted to buy the books but I couldn’t find them.’

(American Spanish)

We see in these examples that null objects of AS are possible with unspecific antecedents only. This means that they are more restricted than in BP, but it suits our general assumptions about the relation between specificity and overt object marking.

Even within AS, there is considerable variation with respect to the acceptability of null objects. Paraguayan Spanish allows for definite inanimate antecedents to be taken up by null objects:

- (33) *¿Dónde encontraste esa blusa? – Ø Compré*
 where find.PST.2SG DEM.F.SG blouse – Ø buy.PST.1SG
en el mall.
 in DEF.M.SG mall
 ‘Where did you find that blouse? – I bought it at the mall.’

(Paraguayan Spanish; Schwenter 2006, 30)

In allowing for examples like (33), Paraguayan Spanish is similar to BP. Just as BP, it has seen a loss of 3rd person direct object clitics (cf. Schwenter 2006, 30), which probably favours the extension of null objects to environments where they are not acceptable in other varieties of Spanish. The absence of direct object pronouns when the referent is inanimate has already been observed in Paraguayan Spanish by Palacios (1998). She reports on sporadic occurrences of null objects with animate antecedents (loc. cit., 435), but finds that there is a strong tendency for null objects to be used only for inanimate referents. While she attributes the origin of Paraguayan Spanish null objects to language contact with Guaraní, she also mentions that null objects with inanimate referents occur to a similar extent

in Spanish varieties which are in contact with Quechua, namely those spoken in Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador (loc. cit., 443ss.). I shall not expand on the details of these contact phenomena, which fall outside the scope of the present study. At this point it is sufficient for us to say that where there is a split in the use of null objects in a variety of Spanish, it follows the predictions of the marking scales introduced before. The differences between varieties of Spanish are no problem for my analysis as long as they do not contradict my basic assumptions about marking scales. The exact cut-off point for marking may change from variety to variety, even from speaker to speaker, as long as the order of the elements on the scale is not changed. So far, we have not seen any reason to assume that the scale itself is changed.

Apparently, null objects are possible in the Spanish language. However, our knowledge about the acceptability of null objects in ES is not yet sufficient. Schwenter and Cyrino only worked on American Spanish, and Campos' (1986) study does not provide enough robust evidence. New empirical research is thus needed on null objects in ES. This goes beyond the scope of this paper, but it is noted here as highly relevant. However, at the present state of research we can formulate the generalization that the frequency of null objects varies on two dimensions, namely from Spanish (less) to Portuguese (more) and from Europe (less) to America (more).

5 A common denominator

In the preceding sections, it has become clear that there is a notable common denominator in the object marking patterns described for Spanish and Portuguese. Prepositional DOM, clitic doubling, *leísmo* and null objects share some important properties that I will deal with in this Section. Obviously, all those phenomena essentially consist of heterogeneous marking of direct objects. An animacy scale is relevant for all of them, and for those that occur in a domain where both specific and unspecific objects are possible, a specificity distinction is also evident.

Some existing studies have already investigated similarities among *a*-marking, *leísmo* and null objects, mainly with the aim of subsuming either *leísmo* or null objects under the notion of DOM. Flores/Melis (2007) study *leísmo* from a DOM perspective. They describe the diachronic development of object marking in both the nominal and the pronominal domain, adopting the hypothesis that *leísmo* is a part of Spanish DOM. Fernández-Ordóñez (2012), in her work on the variation of pronominal paradigms in Spanish dialects, also considers *leísmo* to be a

DOM system. What is missing in these accounts is the comparative dimension. Fernández-Ordóñez at least includes the Basque language, but neither of these two studies offers a proper perspective on Portuguese. A comparative view on Spanish and Portuguese is, however, available in the works of Schwenter (2006; 2014, among others). Schwenter (2006) compares null objects in BP and AS to Spanish *a*-marking. He makes the important point that the null object, especially in the case of BP, is not an anomaly, but rather the standard unmarked case for anaphoric direct objects. Null objects, he argues, show several DOM properties, but are not ultimately classified as DOM. The step taken in Schwenter (2014) is that he names null objects and *a*-marking as “two kinds of differential object marking”. *Leísmo* is mentioned very briefly in this latter work, but not included properly in the classification of the object marking patterns. Clitic doubling is discussed as a DOM phenomenon in Melis (2018).

Thus far, existing studies only adequately included two of the four phenomena. What has been missing is the integration of all four in a single work. This has been done in the current paper. The most important question that has to be answered now is: Should we consider all those patterns of heterogeneous object marking instances of DOM, as has been done separately for *leísmo*, clitic doubling and null objects? If we want to stick to the narrow definition of Differential Object Marking as set out in Section 2, which essentially states that DOM consists of a contrast between direct objects with and without a morphological object marker, then we cannot subsume all phenomena described in this paper under the term of DOM. The only clear case is that of *a*-marking; there is no reason to doubt that the classification of Spanish and Portuguese prepositional object marking as DOM, which has been confirmed in many works, is correct. Clitic doubling, however, does not match the definition. There is a split between the presence and absence of a morphological marker, but all direct objects eligible for clitic doubling are already overtly marked by another means – either by *a* or by an object pronoun. *Leísmo* is not DOM in the sense of our definition, either. There is no alternation between overt object marking and no object marking, but rather between two different object markers: All pronominal direct objects are overtly marked, but some are marked like indirect objects. In the latter point there is a parallel to prepositional DOM: The *a*-marked direct objects are marked in the same way as indirect objects as well. In the sense of de Swart (2014), *leísmo* is a case of paradigmatic DOM. However, finding a functional explanation for the relevance of gender remains difficult. And finally, null objects are also not DOM in the sense of the classical definition: The essential opposition is one between marking and no marking, but not in the sense of presence or absence of an object marker. What is present or absent is not only the object marking, but the entire pronoun.

We see that clitic doubling, *leísmo*, null objects and *a*-marking differ in terms of important properties, and that they cannot be subsumed under the definition of DOM as given in Section 2. Yet there is still a common denominator here. Whenever the heterogeneous marking depends on the object itself, it can be predicted on the base of the same essential scale, represented in (34). The cut-off point for overt marking differs from variety to variety and from mechanism to mechanism, but the scale remains unchanged. The higher a direct object is ranked, the more atypical it is as an object, and the more likely it is to be overtly marked. Gender is only relevant with pronominal objects, (pro-)nominality is only relevant with animate objects, and animacy is only relevant with specific objects. The result is the following object marking scale for Ibero-Romance languages:

- (34) Ibero-Romance object marking scale:
- specific, animate, pronominal, masculine
 - > specific, animate, pronominal, feminine
 - > specific, animate, nominal
 - > specific, inanimate
 - > unspecific

The remaining question is: Does the uniform analysis of Spanish and Portuguese object marking phenomena, as presented in this paper, allow us to subsume all of these under the same notion? Classifying all of them as DOM would require changes to the well-grounded and widely recognized definition of this term, which I regard as undesirable. Thus, we need a new term to generalize about *leísmo*, null objects, clitic doubling and prepositional DOM. In the previous paragraphs I spoke about patterns of “heterogeneous object marking”. This term, however, is not accurate enough, as the adjective “heterogeneous” does not imply that there is a predictable system behind the object marking mechanisms. The most central common denominator among the different phenomena, I argue, is the shared scale in (34). Thus, tentatively, I propose the term “scale-based object marking”.

It cannot be claimed, though, that the object marking scale presented above accounts for all direct object marking asymmetries in Spanish and Portuguese. Verbal factors, such as aspectual properties and lexical peculiarities, also influence object marking in the two languages. My proposal does not deny these effects, and neither does it exclude further linguistic mechanisms potentially impacting the presence or choice of an object marker, occasionally overriding the object marking scale. Yet for the cases occurring under the terms that were assumed as characteristic of DOM in the narrow sense in Section 2.1 – differential marking occurs within the same syntactic and semantic environment, that is, it is not caused only by word order or by lexical peculiarities of the predicate; and

it can be traced back to properties of the respective object referents – the scale makes valid predictions.

6 Conclusions

In the present paper I have presented a comparative analysis of prepositional DOM, clitic doubling, *leísmo* and null objects in Spanish and Portuguese. All four phenomena are found in both languages, although not necessarily in all varieties. Prepositional DOM is more frequent in Spanish than in Portuguese. *Leísmo* is common in European Spanish, found less frequently in American Spanish,¹¹ attested to a small extent in Brazilian Portuguese and not found in European Portuguese. Null objects are more frequent in Portuguese than in Spanish, and more frequent in America than in Europe. The exact marking patterns differ not only from language to language and from continent to continent; even local varieties within a country may show their own peculiarities in object marking. Yet all those patterns are based on the same scale presented in (34), in Section 5, which is decisive whenever the marking depends on the properties of the object itself.

As a generalization deriving from all those phenomena I have proposed the notion “scale-based object marking”. Whether the direct object of a transitive verb in the Ibero-Romance languages is marked more intensively than the default, be it by the presence of a morphological object marker, by choice of a different case form, or by overt realization of a pronoun, is determined by its position on a scale which ranks all potential objects with respect to the criteria of gender, (pro-)nominality, animacy and specificity. Scale-based object marking as described in this study is, then, a property of all Ibero-Romance languages.

As a next step in research on scale-based object marking in Spanish and Portuguese, broadly based empirical studies are needed to prove or disprove the generalization proposed in this paper. Corpus studies might be a useful start here, but will probably not be sufficient, since there is a lack of data on the spoken language for many varieties that would need to be included in any study. Fur-

¹¹ As an anonymous reviewer notes, the impression that *leísmo* is far less frequent in AS than in ES might be a result of data bias: In ES it is accepted within the rules of the language, which leads to high frequencies in written data as well as positive judgments by speakers. In AS, by contrast, it is not an accepted norm. Thus, it is hardly used in written texts, and speakers are less likely to judge it to be acceptable. An extensive empirical study would be necessary to avoid any such bias, but is not feasible within the scope of the present study.

thermore, acceptability judgments of speakers of different varieties seem to be an advisable means of verifying the relevance of the object marking scale.

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