A denotation-driven reanalysis of the Spanish neuter pronominal system

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Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of the Spanish neuter pronominal system that complements the system found in traditional Spanish grammars. A more descriptively and heuristically adequate analysis is proposed that includes pro-forms widely ignored in previous accounts such as phonetically null pronouns and explains a wider range of neuter reference uses, denotations and constructions. I base my analysis on two main basic assumptions. First, I claim that some neuter pronouns can be used either referentially or non-referentially. Following Moltmann's (2013) semantic analysis of presentational pronouns, I argue that the pronoun 'lo' that we find in free relative constructions does not have a referential denotation but only a presentational denotation. Second, all neuter pronouns share a common semantic specification as [−individual] expressions in contrast with non-neuter pronouns, which are unspecified for the same feature. This specification allows us to establish a clear division of labor between the so-called neuter and non-neuter reference in Spanish at the pronominal level. I also claim that neuter pronouns have the ability to shift the type of the entity referred to from individuals to properties or sets of properties. This is particularly evident with neuter demonstrative pronouns in uses such as 'eso es mi coche' (that is my car) or 'eso es una mujer' (that is a woman), which are fairly common in natural discourse. The proposed analysis is framed within a general theory of definiteness (Roberts, 2003) and aligns with the theories of referent accessibility such as the Givenness Hierarchy (Gundel et al., 1993), which allows an explanation for how semantically similar neuter forms encode the cognitive status of their referents differently.
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1. Introduction

Modern Spanish does not have a grammatically neuter gender or a category of neuter forms that can be defined in terms of their morphology, and clearly separated from masculine and feminine forms. The strongest evidence supporting this statement is that there are no neuter nouns in Spanish, although they do exist in other languages such as German and Russian. However, the label 'neuter' is commonly used in traditional Spanish grammars for the pronouns *lo*, *ello*, *esto*, *eso*, *aquello*. These pronouns are commonly used to refer to clausal entities, which denote ideas, and concepts characterized vaguely as abstract, unspecific, and not reducible to a single noun. Typical uses of neuter pronouns are shown in (1), where different neuter pro-forms (null-pro, *eso*, *lo*) co-refer with the proposition denoted by A's utterance.

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(1) A: Juan   ha   rechazado   el   premio.
          John   has   rejected   the   prize
          'John rejected the prize.'
     B': **null-pro** es   increíble.
          it   is   unbelievable
          'It/that is unbelievable.'
     B'': ¿Quién   te   ha   dicho   **eso**?
          Who   to-you   has   said   that
          'Who told you that?'
     B''': ¡No   me   **lo**   puedo   creer!
          Not   me   it   I-can   to-believe
          'I can't believe it/that!'

Previous accounts of the Spanish neuter (Bello, 1860[1981]; Fernández-Ramírez, 1951) have claimed that neuter pronouns, unlike masculine/feminine pronouns, cannot co-refer with noun phrases. However, this statement is problematic for an account of co-reference based on strict morphosyntactic agreement between the anaphor and its antecedent. Examples (2) and (3) illustrate strict anaphoric co-reference in Spanish. Note that the antecedent and the anaphor, both marked with a subscript, must agree in gender and number for the sentences to be grammatical.

(2) [Un   hombre]$_i$ entró,   pero no lo$_i$ vi.
     a-masc.sg.   man-masc.sg.   entered but   not him-masc.sg.   saw-I
     'A man entered, but I did not see him.'

(3) [Dos mujeres]$_i$ entraron, pero no las$_i$ vi.
     two   women-fem.pl.   entered   but   not them-fem.pl.   saw-I
     'Two women entered, but I did not see them.'

Surprisingly, co-reference is possible between a neuter demonstrative anaphor and a left-dislocated nominal antecedent marked for gender, as shown in (4).

(4) [Una   casa   nueva]$_i$,   **eso**$_i$ quiero   (yo).
     a-fem.sg. house   new-fem.sg. that-neut.   want-I
     'A new house. That is what I want.'

The neuter pronoun *lo* can also be found co-referring with noun phrases marked for gender in pseudo-cleft constructions, as in (5).[1]

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[1] An anonymous reviewer raises doubts about the coreferential status of *lo* in pseudo-clefts such as (5). I believe this entirely depends on the approach to coreference one is willing to adopt. Under a strict account of anaphoric coreference, which prescribes agreement in gender and number between the antecedent and the anaphor, neuter pronouns can never be coreferential in Spanish since Spanish does not have neuter nouns. In a broader sense, however, any two expressions are coreferential if they refer to the same entity in the world, or in the discourse. In (i), for example, the antecedent expression 'los estudiantes de español' and the anaphor 'el grupo' in the second utterance refer to the same entity, but they do not strictly co-refer.

(i) Los estudiantes de español querían visitar Barcelona. Esa misma tarde, el grupo entero compró los billetes de tren.
     'The students of Spanish wanted to visit Barcelona. The entire group bought the train tickets that evening.'

This is the approach to coreference that I adopt in this paper. In any case, the status of *lo* in free relative and pseudo-clefts constructions is still controversial. There are two main approaches to the syntactic nature of *lo* in the literature: (i) *lo* is a pronoun, (ii) *lo* is a determiner with a null noun. If one assumes that *lo* is a pronoun then it is safe to assume (at least in principle), that *lo*, as a head, is a referring expression like any other pronoun. Conversely, if one assumes that *lo* is a determiner with a silent nominal head, then it is also safe to assume that the complex [lo + silent noun] is a referring expression. Most authors who argue that *lo* is a determiner assume that its null or silent noun should be conceived of as something like *cosa* ('thing') given the neuter nature of the determiner. Under this view, a sentence such as *lo que quiero es una casa nueva* 'what I want is a new house' would be interpreted as *la cosa que quiero es una casa nueva* 'the thing I want is a new house'. But still in this case the silent noun 'cosa' and the NP 'una casa nueva' refer to the same entity. There are solid arguments in favor and against these two approaches, but a detailed discussion on the true syntactic nature of *lo* is beyond the scope of this paper. For the remainder of this paper, I assume that *lo* is always a pronoun.