

# Propositional clitic omission in Spanish and lack of knowledge<sup>☆</sup>



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## Abstract

This article addresses anaphoric reference to clausally introduced propositions in Spanish. Although Spanish “canonically” uses the clitic *lo* as the direct object pronoun referring to these kinds of entities, its omission is also possible. This paper offers evidence showing that (lack of) knowledge on the part of the speaker about the full content of the proposition plays a role in the choice between the clitic *lo* and its omission: omission is possible (although not necessary) when the speaker lacks knowledge of the complete content of the proposition, whereas the opposite situation favors the use of the clitic *lo*. Quantitative and qualitative data supporting this idea come from the distribution of *lo* and its omission in the *no (lo) sé* (‘I don’t know’) expression, the constructions *no poder decir* and *no saber decir* (‘can’t say’) and the expression *quién (lo) sabe* (‘who knows’).

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## 1. Introduction

The alternation between the presence and the absence of the direct object clitic is a well documented phenomenon of several varieties of Spanish. However, the omission of the invariable direct object clitic *lo* (neuter *lo*, etc.), where *lo* refers anaphorically to a proposition and is used as the direct object of some cognition and communication verbs, has received less scholarly attention (but see Schwenter, 2006; Reig and Schwenter, 2007; Reig, 2009, 2015). Anaphoric propositional direct objects can be encoded in Spanish with the canonical clitic pronoun *lo*, as in (1), or without it, as in (2).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) A: Es que yo quiero que venga un maestro  
B: ¿Y hasta ahorita me lo dices? (Mex Cult)  
A: ‘I want a teacher to come  
B: And you tell me LO now?’

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<sup>1</sup> In examples extracted from corpora, the corpus is given in parentheses (see Methodology for the corpora and their abbreviations). Examples without reference to a corpus are constructed examples.

- (2) - ¿Cuál es el [nombre] del calendario? ¿No me  $\emptyset$  dices? (Mex Pop)  
 - 'What is the name from the calendar? Won't you tell me  $\emptyset$ ?'

In (1), the direct object clitic *lo* refers to the content of the clause introduced by A in the previous speech turn (*yo quiero que venga un maestro* 'I want a teacher to come'). Likewise, the direct object of *dices* in (2), not explicitly coded as a *lo* pronoun, is interpreted as referring to the previously introduced clause, *cuál es el nombre del calendario*, which could have been coded with the clitic *lo* (*No me lo dices*).

The alternation between *lo* and its omission is found in every variety of Spanish and has been analyzed as a case of syntactic variation (Reig, 2009) in which, as in all variation phenomena, several factors, both intra and extralinguistic, affect the speaker's choice (see Section 2.2).

This article adds to the scarce literature on this subject by arguing that the propositional object clitic omission is linked to the speaker's lack of knowledge of the proposition, a feature that was not included in the previous variationist study because it could not be systematically coded for (see below). I posit that the omission of *lo* is more likely when the full content of the proposition is not only unavailable in the discourse, but also unknown to the speaker. In other words, when the speaker does not know the content of the proposition, she is more likely to omit the pronoun than when she does know it. Based on this, we expect to find a higher frequency of omissions with expressions that convey lack of knowledge. Moreover, the choice between *lo* and its omission, at least in some cases, should give rise to interpretations that differ in terms of knowledge or lack of knowledge by the speaker.

Quantitative and qualitative evidence supporting this idea comes from the distribution of *lo* and its omission in the Spanish expressions *no (lo) sé* ('I don't know') (Section 4), the constructions *no poder decir* and *no saber decir* ('can't say') (Section 5) and the expression *quién (lo) sabe* ('who knows') (Section 6). Before presenting the data, a brief review of the background literature relevant to the topic is presented in Section 2. Section 3 describes the methodology of the present analysis. The article ends with a discussion of how the analysis of *lo* and its omission relates to our general understanding of anaphoric reference to abstract entities and, in general, to previous descriptions of the distribution of anaphoric expressions (Section 7). Section 8 summarizes the conclusions reached from the present study.

## 2. Spanish clitic omission and the choice of anaphoric expressions

Spanish has been traditionally described as accepting the omission of direct object clitics only for mass nouns (3) and bare plurals (4) (Campos, 1986; Clements, 1994, 2006). The remaining direct objects are, in principle, encoded by means of overt pronominal elements such as the clitics *lo(s)/la(s)* (5) or the demonstrative pronouns.

- (3) - ¿Compraste café?  
 - Sí, compré  $\emptyset$ .  
 - 'Did you buy any coffee?'  
 - Yes, I bought some.'
- (4) Quería comprar libros pero no  $\emptyset$  encontré.  
 'I wanted to buy (some) books but I didn't find (any)'
- (5) a. \*Quería comprar el libro pero no  $\emptyset$  encontré.  
 'I wanted to buy the book but I could not find.'  
 b. Quería comprar el libro pero no lo encontré.  
 'I wanted to buy the book but I could not find it.'

Despite the agrammaticality of (5a) in most varieties of Spanish, omission of the direct object clitic has been extensively reported in several contact Spanish varieties [e.g., Paraguay (Choi, 1998, 2000), Ecuador (Yépez, 1986; Suñer and Yépez, 1988), Basque Spanish (Landa, 1995)], as well as in at least one monolingual variety of Spanish (Buenos Aires, Masullo, 2003). In these varieties, bilinguals as well as some monolingual Spanish speakers accept the null pronoun for reference to definite noun phrases. With differences among varieties, the general findings indicate that omission of direct object clitic pronouns is favored by semantic features of the referent such as animacy and specificity; the omission is restricted to [in Quiteño (Suñer and Yépez, 1988) and Paraguayan Spanish (Choi, 1998; Palacios Alcaine, 1998)] or highly preferred [Basque Spanish (Landa, 1995) and Peruvian Spanish (Paredes, 1996)] for inanimate entities, and animate/human objects are preferably referred to with an overt clitic pronoun. These studies, nevertheless, do not distinguish between inanimate propositional and inanimate non-propositional referents.

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