

Agreement processing in control and raising structures. Evidence from sentence production in Spanish



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Abstract

We report the results of a study investigating the production of gender and number agreement between head noun and predicative adjective in Spanish using an elicited-error paradigm with preambles that included either Control or Raising verbs. In order to identify if the subjects of the infinitivals selected by these two verb types are syntactically identical (Movement Theory of Control) or distinct (Theory of Control by PRO or anaphora), the following features in the preambles were manipulated: gender of head noun (Feminine–Masculine), gender and number (Singular–Plural) of local noun, and type of verb (Control–Raising). We analyzed the agreement errors and omissions patterns, as well as response times in the production of the target adjective. The error rate was not different across the two syntactic conditions, but the two verb classes were associated with significantly different number of target omissions. Furthermore, omissions in the Control condition were specifically associated with feminine agreeing adjectives. This pattern was also reflected in the adjective production latency. Taken together, these results undermine the Control by Movement explanation and argue for a Control by PRO analysis of Control constructions.

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1. Introduction

The study of empty categories has been an area of long standing debates in both theoretical linguistic and psycholinguistic research. While different theoretical frameworks propose a variety of encoding mechanisms, there is a general consent about a certain typology of empty categories. Thus, most psycholinguistic and theoretical linguistic frameworks (Bresnan, 1978; Chomsky, 1995; Fodor, 1995; Nicol and Swinney, 1989; Pickering and Barry, 1991; Pollard and Sag, 1994; Postal, 1974; Rosenbaum, 1967; Sag and Fodor, 1995; Swinney et al., 1989; Zagana, 2003) distinguish

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between gaps/empty categories which are due to Wh-question formation, relativization or other forms of leftward dislocation (often called A-bar movement) from gaps/empty categories associated with passivation or unaccusative frame formation (aka A-movement). However, there are certain empty categories on whose nature both theoretical and experimental research has not yet converged. One such case is the gap in the subject position of embedded infinitival phrases of Raising (*John seemed to like apples.*) and Control (*John tried to like apples*) verbs. Standard generative theory (Chomsky, 1981; Chomsky and Lasnik, 1993) has postulated two different types of empty categories for these two constructions: NP trace (or copy) in the case of Raising, and a phonologically null pronominal category (PRO) in the case of Control. However, this typology has been challenged by recent Minimalist literature (Boeckx et al., 2010a; Hornstein, 1999, 2001), which proposed to unify the two empty categories (eliminating PRO in favor of NP trace for Control as well). At present, theoretical and experimental research is yet to provide conclusive evidence regarding this question. In this paper we present data from an induced agreement error production experiment in *Rioplatense* (RP) Spanish that was designed to address the issue.

1.1. Control infinitival constructions: theories and experimental evidence

The Control infinitival construction is governed by a specific class of verbs (Control verbs) that select subject-less infinitives as their complement.

Example:

- (1) *María_i prefiere [EC_i vivir tranquila_{fem/sg}]*
 “Mary prefers to live quietly”

In subject-Control verbs, the (overt) subject of the main verb controls the reference of the implicit subject of the subordinate sentence, forcing a relation of identity between the two.

It is common to compare Control infinitival constructions to Raising constructions (*María parece vivir tranquila* “Mary seems to live quietly”), given that both structures contain an explicit subject (see examples 2 and 3: *Juan*) and a covert infinitival subject (an empty category, EC), which is referentially dependent of the subject of the main clause. The standard generative assumption regarding Control and Raising infinitivals is that in the former, subject position is occupied by the phonologically null pronominal object PRO, while in the latter it is occupied by an NP trace (Rosenbaum, 1967). In most versions of the Standard Theory (and then also in the Government-Binding Model or GB), Control is part of Binding Theory, while Raising is considered an instance of A movement.

Examples:

- (2) [*Juan_i intenta [PRO_i besar a María]*]
 “John tries to kiss Mary”
 (3) [*Juan_i parece [_{t_i} besar a María]*]
 “John seems to kiss Mary”

In (2) the reference of PRO is controlled by the subject of the infinitival; however PRO can also be Controlled by a matrix object (*Juan ordenó a María limpiar la mesa* “John ordered Mary to clean the table”) or appear without an explicit controller (*Tener que hacer algo muchas veces es aburrido* “Having to do something repeatedly is boring”). Furthermore, subject-Control constructions are often sub-divided into obligatory and non-obligatory subtypes. Obligatory Control predicates can also be exhaustive when the controller-controllee reference is the same (verbs such as *lograr* “manage”: *El jefe logró reunir el comité a las 6* “The chair managed to gather the committee at 6”) or partial, when the reference of the controllee is taken as a subset of the reference set of the controller (verbs such as *preferir* “prefer”: *El jefe prefirió reunirse a las 6* “The chair preferred to gather at 6”) (Landau, 2000, 2003). The focus of the theoretical debate and of the current experiment is the obligatory Control class.

As mentioned above, since the beginning of generative grammar (Rosenbaum, 1967), the empty categories in Control and Raising structures have been considered to be distinct. The theoretical distinction between the infinitival structures at stake here was originally motivated by differences in their thematic properties. Raising verbs have a single argument (the proposition denoted by the embedded clause) with only one thematic role assigned (internal argument), while Control verbs have more than one argument (the matrix subject and the embedded proposition), and two thematic roles assigned (internal and external argument). As a consequence, the matrix subject in Raising has only one thematic role assigned to it (by the verb of the infinitival clause), while in Control it has pre-theoretically two (one assigned by the infinitival verb and one by the Control verb itself).

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