

## GENERIC NULL OBJECTS IN SPANISH

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### Abstract

This paper explores the grammatical constraints operating on Spanish generic null objects (e.g. *Esta película sorprende Ø* 'this film surprises'), as well as their syntactic representation. Regarding the grammatical constraints, it is claimed in this paper that generic null objects in Spanish do not obtain their interpretation from an antecedent (i.e., they are non-anaphoric), must occur in generic sentences, be affected by the event denoted by the verb and receive a human reading. Also, their occurrence is lexically constrained: they only occur with predicates that allow human objects. Regarding their syntactic properties, generic null objects are not only semantically interpreted, but also syntactically represented, since they are sensitive to syntactic operations such as control, binding and secondary predication. Specifically, generic null objects are syntactically a set of D and  $\phi$ -features (i.e., they display D, gender and number features). Thus, they are DPs. Regarding their analysis, it is proposed in this paper that generic null objects behave as variables bound by an operator in Spanish. This explains the different interpretations they receive depending on the operator in the sentence. **Keywords:** animacy; generic null objects; genericity; *pro*; Spanish; variables.

## LOS OBJETOS TÁCITOS GENÉRICOS EN ESPAÑOL

### Resumen

Este trabajo explora las restricciones gramaticales que operan sobre los objetos tácitos genéricos del español (p. ej., *Esta película sorprende Ø*), así como su representación sintáctica. En cuanto a las restricciones gramaticales, en este trabajo se afirma que los objetos tácitos genéricos del español no obtienen su interpretación de un antecedente (es decir, no son anafóricos), deben aparecer en oraciones genéricas, estar afectados por el evento denotado por el verbo y recibir una lectura humana. Además, su aparición está restringida léxicamente: solo aparecen con predicados que legitiman objetos humanos. En cuanto a sus propiedades sintácticas, los objetos tácitos genéricos no solo se interpretan semánticamente, sino que

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también se representan sintácticamente, ya que son sensibles a operaciones sintácticas como el control, el ligamiento y la predicación secundaria. En concreto, los objetos tácitos genéricos son sintácticamente un conjunto de rasgos  $D$  y  $\varphi$  (es decir, presentan rasgos  $D$ , de género y de número). Por tanto, se trata de SSDD. En cuanto a su análisis, en este artículo se propone que los objetos tácitos genéricos del español se comportan como variables ligadas por un operador. Este análisis explica las diferentes interpretaciones que pueden recibir según el operador que aparezca en la oración.

*Palabras clave:* animacidad; objetos tácitos genéricos; genericidad; *pro*; español; variables.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Spanish it is common to find examples like (1), where the transitive verbs *ayudar* ‘help’ and *emborrachar* ‘get drunk’ lack explicit objects. Contrary to Spanish indefinite null objects (see Campos, 1986; Brucart, 1999; Martínez-García, 2023 for information), the null objects in (1) do not require an antecedent to be interpreted (i.e., they are non-anaphoric). In this paper we discuss the grammatical conditions that allow null objects like those in (1).

### (1) *Non-anaphoric null objects in Spanish*

- a. Un libro ayuda  $\emptyset_i$   
 a.MASC.SG book help.IND.PRS.3SG  
 a [PRO<sub>i</sub> pasar la tarde].  
 to spend.INF the.FEM.SG afternoon  
 ‘A book helps one to spend the afternoon.’
- b. El buen vino emborracha  $\emptyset$  poco.  
 the.MASC.SG good.MASC.SG wine make-drunk.IND.PRS.3SG a-bit  
 ‘Good wine gets one drunk just a bit.’

Although unnoticed in previous literature, null objects like those in (1) are possible in three syntactic contexts. In the first context, which appears in (2), they occur with psychological predicates. In this case, the object is affected and undergoes a change of state (it is an Experiencer).

### (2) *Psychological predicates*

- a. La música clásica relaja  $\emptyset$ .  
 the.FEM.SG music classic.FEM.SG relax.IND.PRS.3SG  
 ‘Classical music relaxes one.’

- b. Los            sonidos    de la            naturaleza    calman Ø.  
       the.MASC.PL    sound.PL    of    the.FEM.SG    nature        calm.IND.PRS.3PL  
 ‘Sounds of nature soothe one.’
- c. Las            vacunas    sanan Ø.  
       the.FEM.PL    vaccine.PL    heal.IND.PRS.3PL  
 ‘Vaccines heal one.’

The second context appears in (3), where the sentences are causative constructions in which the predicate selects an argumental small clause (see Gumiel Molina, 2005, 2007; Landau, 2010 on this issue). This context shows more syntactic complexity than the one in (2).

(3) *Causative verbs*

- a. El            dinero    no    hace Ø            feliz.  
       the.MASC.SG    money    not    make.IND.PRS.3SG    happy.SG  
 ‘Money does not make one happy.’
- b. Su            inteligencia    deja Ø            atónito.  
       his/her    intelligence    leave.IND.PRS.3SG    astonished.MASC.SG  
 ‘{His/her} intelligence leaves one astonished.’
- c. Esta            música    pone Ø            contento.  
       this.FEM.SG    music    make.IND.PRS.3SG    happy.MASC.SG  
 ‘This music makes one happy.’

In the last context, which appears in (4), the null object controls the null subject of the subordinate clause. These are transitive structures with prepositional complements (Lebeaux, 1984; Rizzi, 1986; Authier, 1989, 1992; see Wurmbrand, 2002 for criticism). In (4), the null object controls PRO, as in versions with explicit objects (e.g., *La ambición conduce a uno a cometer errores* ‘ambition leads one to make mistakes’).

(4) *Control verbs*

- a. Esto            lleva Ø<sub>i</sub>            a [PRO<sub>i</sub> pensar    lo            siguiente].  
       this.NEUT    lead.IND.PRS.3SG    to        think.INF    the.NEUT    following  
 ‘This leads one to think the following.’
- b. La            ambición    conduce Ø<sub>i</sub>  
       the.FEM.SG    ambition    lead.IND.PRS.3SG  
       a [PRO<sub>i</sub> cometer    errores].  
       to            commit.INF    error.PL  
 ‘Ambition leads one to make mistakes.’

- c. Un libro ayuda  $\emptyset_i$   
 a.MASC.SG book help.IND.PRS.3SG  
 a [ $\text{PRO}_i$  pasar la tarde].  
 to spend.INF the.FEM.SG afternoon  
 ‘A book helps one to spend the afternoon.’

As far as we are concerned, no description of the data in Spanish has been proposed in the literature (see Bosque & Gutiérrez-Rexach, 2009, pp. 359–363; Fábregas, 2023, pp. 25–28 for intuitions), but there is research on Italian and French, among other languages (see Kim, 1999 on Korean; Dvořák, 2017 on Czech).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the central goal of this paper is to explore the grammatical constraints operating on non-anaphoric null objects in Spanish and to describe their properties. Additionally, as a secondary goal, a preliminary analysis will be proposed. The description and the tentative analysis will rely on introspective data. Although it is true that the paper would benefit from further validation via corpus data or experimental methods, due to the novelty of the topic in Spanish, we consider that the incorporation of corpus data could be done in future research. For now, introspective data are enough to identify the basic grammatical properties of non-anaphoric null objects in Spanish.

This paper is organized as follows. First, we describe the previous analyses for non-anaphoric null objects in Romance, specifically for Italian and French (ch. 2). Second, we investigate the constraints on non-anaphoric null objects in Spanish (ch. 3). Third, given that non-anaphoric null objects are interpreted, but not pronounced, we discuss their syntactic representation and their grammatical properties (ch. 4). Next, we propose a tentative analysis relying on variables (ch. 5). Finally, we conclude with some final remarks (ch. 6).

## 2. PREVIOUS ACCOUNTS ON ROMANCE

Previous accounts for Romance non-anaphoric null objects are presented in this chapter. Specifically, we present the analysis in Rizzi (1986), which relies on  $pro_{arb}$  (sec. 2.1), and the analysis in Authier (1989, 1992), which relies on variables (sec. 2.2).

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2. Other types of null objects (specifically, definite and indefinite ones) have received more attention in the literature, specially in Portuguese (see Barbosa, 2019, 2024) and Spanish (Campos, 1986; Clements, 2006; Laca, 2013; Verdecchia, 2022; Martínez-García, 2023, 2025), but, as they do not share basic properties with the ones studied in this paper (for instance, the former are anaphoric, while the latter are non-anaphoric), we leave them aside and treat the ones in this paper as an independent type of null object.

## 2.1. Rizzi (1986)

The first work on Romance non-anaphoric null objects is that of Rizzi (1986), which focuses on data from Italian. According to Rizzi (1986), the null objects in (5) are interpreted as ‘people, in general’ (i.e., they receive a generic, human interpretation). Additionally, they are said to be affected by the event denoted by the predicate. That is why they cannot occur as (affected) Themes, as explained in Rizzi (1986) (e.g., \**Gianni vede felici* ‘Gianni sees happy’; see Rizzi, 1986, p. 539).

### (5) Italian

Questo	conduce Ø	alla	seguinte	conclusione.
this.MASC.SG	lead.IND.PRS.3SG	to-the.FEM.SG	following	conclusion
‘This leads one to the following conclusion.’				

(Rizzi, 1986, pp. 503–507)

In Rizzi (1986), it is postulated that non-anaphoric null objects display the features [+GENERIC, +HUMAN]. These features attempt to explain the fact that they are interpreted as generic and human. That is why the null objects in (5) have been labelled as *generic null objects* (henceforth, GNOs) in the literature (Cummins & Roberge, 2004; Dvořák, 2017). Also, in Rizzi (1986), non-anaphoric null objects have been labelled as *arbitrary null objects*, where the term *arbitrary* refers to arguments displaying human interpretations (see Jaeggli, 1982, 1986; Suñer, 1983; Hernanz, 1989; Kim, 1991; Masullo, 2015 for discussion). The arbitrary label corresponds to a human variant of genericity, so that «arbitrary interpretations are a general indefinite referring to persons» (Krifka et al., 1995, p. 124).

In Rizzi (1986), the question is raised as to which empty category the GNO in (5) is. The options in Government and Binding are *pro*, PRO, the variables and the traces (Chomsky, 1981). Since GNOs are non-anaphoric, PRO and the traces are ruled out (they are anaphoric by hypothesis). Thus, according to Rizzi (1986), GNOs display the feature [–ANAPHORIC]. Additionally, GNOs cannot behave as variables, since variables are [–PRONOMINAL]. According to Rizzi (1986), Italian GNOs are subject to pronominal constraints like Principle B, since any GNO allows to be referentially linked to a phrase that c-commands the GNO and that is outside the category governing the GNO. As shown in (6), the first PRO is outside the category governing the GNO.

(6) *Italian*

È difficile [PRO' sperare [che il  
 be.IND.PRS.3SG difficult expect.INF that the.MASC.SG  
 governo possa autorizzare Ø  
 government AUX.SBJV.PRS.3SG authorize.INF  
 a [PRO" vivere così]].  
 to live.INF like-this

'It is difficult to expect that the government can authorize one living like this.'

(Rizzi, 1986, p. 512)

This type of propositions can receive two readings. Specifically, (6) can mean 'it is difficult for  $x$  to hope that the government can authorize  $x$  to live like this' (i.e. PRO' = PRO") or 'it is difficult for  $x$  to hope that the government can authorize  $y$  to live like this' (i.e. PRO' ≠ PRO"). That is, GNOs can be ambiguous between two interpretations because, according to Rizzi (1986), they behave as *pro*. This implies that, in a context where a phrase falls within the category governing the GNO, the example should not allow the reading of the phrase governing the GNO and the reading of GNO to coincide referentially. In (7), where the first PRO is within the category governing GNO, only the reading 'in this department, it is difficult for  $x$  to force  $y$  to work' (i.e., arb' ≠ arb") is available. This is the behavior expected of a pronominal element, according to Rizzi (1986).

(7) *Italian*

In questo dipartimento, [PRO<sub>arb'</sub> costringere Ø<sub>arb'</sub>  
 in this.MASC.SG department force.INF  
 a [PRO" lavorare]] è difficile.  
 to work.INF be.IND.PRS.3SG difficult

'In this department, forcing one to work is difficult.'

(Rizzi, 1986, p. 512)

In conclusion, according to Rizzi (1986), the features of GNOs in Italian are [+PRONOMINAL, −ANAPHORIC], which are those of *pro*. Additionally, GNOs display the features [+GENERIC, +HUMAN], contrary to classic *pro*. This difference is captured by the feature *arbitrary* ( $pro_{arb'}$ ) in Rizzi (1986). In essence, the label *arbitrary* adds the features [+GENERIC, +HUMAN] to the features that characterize *pro*. Rizzi's (1986) analysis appears in (8).

## (8) Rizzi's (1986) analysis

$$[_{VP} [_{V} \text{costringere}] [_{DP} \text{pro}_{arb}]]$$

In the following section we explore the analysis in Authier (1989, 1992), which, contrary to that in Rizzi (1986), relies on variables.

## 2.2. Authier (1989, 1992)

Contrary to Rizzi (1986), Authier (1989, 1992) points out that GNOs in French, as those in (9), do not display pronominal behavior. To illustrate that, two tests are presented in Authier (1989, 1992): the quantificational force of GNOs and the so-called 'equative structures' (i.e., sentences where two entities are equated with each other; see Lebeaux, 1984; Authier, 1992 for an overview).

## (9) French

L'                    ambition   amène Ø                    à   commettre   des   erreurs.  
 the.FEM.SG   ambition   lead.IND.PRS.3SG   to   commit.INF   PART   error.PL  
 'Ambition leads one to commit errors.'

(Authier, 1989, pp. 46–47)

According to Authier (1989, 1992), in languages like Spanish, the interpretation of null subjects can be ambiguous between a definite and an arbitrary reading. As shown in (10), *Llaman a la puerta* can mean 'they knock at the door' (definite reading), where the null subject is interpreted as a definite pronominal, as in (10a), and 'someone knocks at the door' (arbitrary reading), as in (10b), where the null subject is interpreted as an arbitrary pronominal (see Jaeggli, 1986; Hernanz, 1988 on this point). Thus, the arbitrary reading is related to some kind of 'existential' quantification.

## (10) Definite and arbitrary readings of null subjects

- a. *pro* Llaman            a   la                    puerta.  
    knock.IND.PRS.3PL   to   the.FEM.SG   door  
    'They knock at the door.'
- b. *pro*<sub>arb</sub> Llaman            a   la                    puerta.  
    knock.IND.PRS.3PL   to   the.FEM.SG   door  
    'Someone knocks at the door.'

According to Authier (1989, 1992), while the proposition in (9), instead of receiving the existential reading in (11a), receives the reading in (11b), the reading of the proposition in (10b) is close to an existential one, like the one in (11a) (see Dobrovie-Sorin, 1997 on this issue). In other words, GNOs receive generic readings, while arbitrary null subjects only receive an existential reading. This asymmetry regarding the quantificational force between GNOs and arbitrary null subjects in Spanish leads Authier (1989, 1992) to conclude that the empty categories in (9) and (10) are not the same (i.e., GNOs cannot be analyzed as an arbitrary pronominal element). Hence, French GNOs do not display pronominal behavior (pace Rizzi, 1986).

(11) *Existential and generic readings*

a. *Existential*

‘There is some  $x$ ,  $x$  is a person, such that the ambition leads  $x$  to  $x$  commit errors.’

b. *Generic*

‘For any  $x$ ,  $x$  is a person, such that the ambition leads  $x$  to  $x$  commit errors.’

The second argument in Authier (1989, 1992) relies on equative structures (see Lebeaux, 1984 on this point). Authier (1989) follows Jaeggli (1982, 1986) explaining that, when two arbitrary subjects converge in Spanish, both can have a different reference, as in (12), where the people who earn money are different from those who control drug trafficking.

(12) *Arbitrary readings of null subjects*

Para	que	<i>pro</i> <sub>arb</sub>	puedan	ganar	tanto	dinero
for	that		AUX.SBJ.PRS.3PL	earn.INF	so-much	money
vendiendo	drogas	debe	ser	que	<i>pro</i> <sub>arb</sub>	
sell.GER	drug.PL		AUX.IND.PRS.3SG	be.INF	that	
controlan	muy	poco	estrictamente	el		tráfico
control.INF	very	little	strictly	the.MASC.SG		trade
de	drogas	en	este			país.
of	drug.PL	in	this.MASC.SG			country

‘For them to be able to make so much money selling drugs, they must have very little control over the drug trade in this country.’

(Authier, 1989, p. 49)

This leads Authier (1989) to conclude that, if the empty category in (13) is the same as that of French GNOs, GNOs should be able to refer to different entities, such as



Spanish arbitrary subjects (which display pronominal behavior). However, if a sentence displays two GNOs in French, the reference of the GNOs must be the same. This is clear when considering the equative structure in (13), which is contradictory: the same person cannot be intelligent and stupid at the same time. Consequently, Authier (1989, 1992) proposes that French GNOs should not be analyzed as *pro* (*pace* Rizzi, 1986).<sup>3</sup>

(13) *French*

#Une	thérapeutique	qui	rend Ø	intelligent
a.FEM.SG	therapy	that	make.IND.PRS.3SG	intelligent.MASC.SG
est	une	thérapeutique		
be.IND.PRS.3SG	a.FEM.SG	therapy		
qui	rend Ø	stupide.		
that	make.IND.PRS.3SG	stupid.MASC.SG		

‘A therapy that makes one smart is a therapy that makes one stupid.’

(Authier, 1989, pp. 49–50)

Having shown that French GNOs do not display pronominal behavior, Authier (1989, 1992) proposes that GNOs are analyzed as variables. The first argument has to do with the idea that French GNOs are subject to weak crossover effects. In (14a), the possessive pronoun and the GNO share the arbitrary reference. However, if the pronoun appears to the left of the sentence, as in (14b), both elements cannot share reference (the possessive can only be co-referential with an ostensibly accessible referent). This evidence suggests that French GNOs violate weak crossover effects, implying that French GNOs are variables, akin to traces bound by an operator, which can only bind what lies to its ‘right’ in the structure.

(14) *French*

a. La	chase	rend	Ø <sub>arb</sub>
the.FEM.SG	hunting	make.IND.PRS.3SG	

3. Interestingly, as correctly pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, modality could play an important role in sentences with GNOs. Specifically, while the sentence *#Una terapia que pone triste es una terapia que pone alegre* ‘A therapy that makes one sad is a therapy that makes one happy’ is odd, a sentence with a different modality, such as *Una terapia que pone triste puede ser una terapia que pone alegre* ‘A therapy that makes one sad could be a therapy that makes one happy’, seems somewhat less odd. The asymmetry between these sentences has to do with the fact that, while the former is a true equative structure, the latter is not, as it introduces the modality verb *poder* ‘can’. Hence, the former introduces an assertion about a concrete state of affairs in the world (thus entailing the contradiction), while the latter only introduces an assertion about the possibility of a concrete state of affairs in a possible world (thus not entailing a real contradiction).

- amoureux de son<sub>arb/i</sub> chien.  
 in-love of one's dog  
 'Hunting leaves one in love with one's dog.'
- b. Son<sub>arb/i</sub> chien rend Ø<sub>arb</sub> amoureux de la chasse.  
 one's dog make.IND.PRS.3SG in-love of the.FEM.SG hunting  
 'His dog leaves one in love with hunting.'
- (Authier, 1989, p. 50)

The second argument has to do with scope ambiguities. It has been considered that in sentences with two or more quantified phrases, ambiguities of scope can arise, depending on whether one quantifier is 'above' or 'below' the other one. Since May (1977), it is known that this phenomenon arises as an effect of quantifier raising, which operates in LF.

Given that quantified sentences leave variables where they were generated, this leads Authier (1989) to think that, if GNOs are variables, their occurrence in quantified sentences should entail scope ambiguities. Authier (1989) explains that two interpretations are possible in (15): it can be interpreted as 'for some  $x$ ,  $x$  is a thing, and for all  $y$ ,  $y$  is a person,  $x$  leads  $y$  to break the rules if  $y$  is cunning' (i.e., the existential quantifier is 'above' the universal one) and as 'for all  $y$ , if  $y$  is a person, there exists some  $x$ , such that  $x$  is a thing and  $x$  leads  $y$  to break the rules if  $y$  is cunning' (i.e., the universal quantifier is 'above' the existential one).

(15) *French*

- Dans ce camp militaire, quelque chose  
 in this.MASC.SG camp military any thing  
 pousse Ø à [PRO enfreindre le règlement]  
 make.IND.PRS.3SG to break.INF the.MASC.SG rules  
 quand on est faux-jeton.  
 when one be.IND.PRS.3SG cunning  
 'In this military camp, something induces one to break the rules when one is cunning.'
- (Authier, 1989, p. 53)

According to Authier (1989), this is a compelling reason to conclude that GNOs behave as variables, since variables are bound by an operator. The different ways in which the variable can be bound by the operator gives rise to the two interpretations in (16).

(16) *Scope ambiguity*

- a.  $\exists x$ ,  $x$  is a thing, such as  $x$  induces  $\forall y$ ,  $y$  is a person, to break the rules if  $y$  is cunning.  
 b.  $\forall y$ ,  $y$  is a person,  $\exists x$ ,  $x$  is a thing, such as  $x$  induces  $y$  to break the rules if  $y$  is cunning.

(Authier, 1989, p. 53)

The quantificational force of GNOs depends on the quantificational force of the quantifier in the sentence. According to Authier (1989), (17a) is interpreted as ‘normally, fear makes many people to run away’, while (17b) reads as ‘this medicine never makes anyone sick’.

(17) *French*

- a. Souvent, la peur pousse Ø à fuir.  
     normally the.FEM.SG feare make.IND.PRS.3SG to run-away.INF  
     ‘Normally, fear forces one to run away.’  
 b. Ce médicament ne rend Ø jamais malade.  
     this.MASC.SG medicine not make.IND.PRS.3SG never sick  
     ‘This medicine never makes one sick.’

(Authier, 1989, p. 55)

Specifically, the interpretation of the GNOs in (17) depends on the type of quantifier that has scope over them. Since the quantifier in (17a) is *souvent* ‘normally’, the GNO is interpreted as ‘many people’, and, since the quantifier of (17b) is *jamais* ‘never’, the GNO is interpreted as ‘anyone’. Thus, Authier’s (1989) analysis relies on representing the GNOs as free variables, as in (18), where  $e$  represents the variable. Thus, GNOs are generated as free variables bound in LF by an operator. This operator can be explicit, as *souvent* ‘always’ in (18a), or implicit, as in (18b) (see Lewis, 1975 on this point).

(18) *Authier’s (1989) analysis*

- a.  $\text{Souvent}_i [\text{VP} [\text{V pousse} \llbracket_{\text{DP}} e_i \rrbracket]]$   
 b.  $\text{OP}_i [\text{VP} [\text{V pousse} \llbracket_{\text{DP}} e_i \rrbracket]]$

In the following chapter we present the grammatical constraints on GNOs in Spanish so that we can propose which analysis better explains the facts.

### 3. GRAMMATICAL CONSTRAINTS

In this chapter we present the grammatical conditions that allow GNOs in Spanish. They are related to genericity (sec. 3.1), animacy (sec. 3.2), and affectedness (sec. 3.3).

#### 3.1. *Genericity*

It has been pointed out in the literature that the licensing of GNOs is related to genericity (see Rizzi, 1986 on Italian; Authier, 1989, 1992 on French; Dvořák, 2017 on Czech). In this section we test whether this holds for Spanish GNOs.

Genericity is understood as a semantic property that characterizes sentences that do not refer to concrete instances of states of affairs in precise spatio-temporal coordinates. A *generic sentence* is a sentence in which «the property described by the verbal predicate is an ‘essential’ property of some entity mentioned in the sentence» (Krifka et al., 1995, p. 19). In (19a), the property of the subject is interpreted as ‘render deaf’, that is, ‘for every  $x$  who hears this noise  $y$ , every  $x$  will become deaf’. The same can be said of (19b), where definite articles appear, given that they enhance the genericity of the sentence (Leonetti, 1990, 1999).

##### (19) *Genericity and GNOs*

- a. Este            ruido    deja Ø                    sordo.  
       this.MASC.SG   noise    make.IND.PRS.3SG   deaf.MASC.SG  
       ‘This noise deafens one.’
- b. En            aquel            país            los            monarcas  
       in            that.MASC.SG   country    the.MASC.PL   king.PL  
       castigan Ø            con            dureza.  
       punish.IND.PRS.3PL   with            harshness  
       ‘In that country, the kings punish one severely.’

A similar reading is obtained with the second person clitic *te* ‘(to) you’, which in Spanish is the person that can also mark genericity, as in (20) (Hernanz, 1988).

##### (20) *Genericity and clitics*

- a. Este            ruido    te            deja                    sordo.  
       this.MASC.SG   noise    to-you    make.IND.PRS.3SG   deaf.MASC.SG  
       ‘This noise deafens you.’
- b. En            aquel            país            los            monarcas  
       in            that.MASC.SG   country    the.MASC.PL   king.PL

te castigan con dureza.  
 to-you punish.IND.PRS.3PL with harshness  
 ‘In that country, the monarchs punish you harshly.’

One of the factors favoring sentential genericity is that the inflection of the matrix verb is imperfective (Krifka et al., 1995). If the sentences in (20) appear in perfective tense, they are unnatural, as in (21), where the verbs are inflected in perfective tenses.

(21) *Grammatical aspect and GNOs*

- a. \*Este ruido dejó Ø sordo.  
 this.MASC.SG noise make.IND.PRF.3SG deaf.MASC.SG
- b. ??En aquel país los monarcas  
 in that.MASC.SG country the.MASC.PL king.PL  
 han castigado Ø con dureza.  
 AUX.IND.PRF.3PL punish.IND.PRS.3PL with harshness

The ungrammaticality of (21) is due to the fact that GNOs must occur in generic sentences, typically sentences with imperfective verbs. This also favors the habitual reading of propositions with GNOs. The habitual reading consists of linking a property to all situations in which the event designated by the proposition occurs. (21b) links the property ‘punish severely’ to a situation, which is ‘in this country’. In Krifka et al. (1995), habituals consist of generic operators that bind variables. The reading in (20b) is represented in (22).

(22) *Semantics of generics*

... Gen<sub>s,x</sub> [los monarcas castigan a x en s] [en aquel país x en s]

Genericity is not encoded in a single element, but is given by the confluence of different ‘ingredients’. GNOs are one of such ingredients, but so are determiners, subject characterizing readings, and imperfective tenses (see Krifka et al., 1995 for discussion). Thus, what is generically interpreted in (20a) is the GNO, whereas in (20b) it is the GNO and the sentence. This suggests that GNOs are possible as long as the object is interpreted generically. In fact, it is possible to find cases where the sentence is not generic, but the null object is (e.g., *Esta película sorprendió Ø en su época* ‘this film surprised at its time’, where, despite having a verb in perfective tense, it is denoted that the action of surprising took place several times in the

space-time denoted by *en su época* ‘at its time’). Spanish shares these restrictions with Italian (Rizzi, 1986) and French (Authier, 1989, 1992).

As is explained in Chierchia (1998) and Krifka et al. (1995), genericity can be linked to a sentence or to a phrase. (23) means ‘the noise of the accordion deafens people, in general’ (i.e., the object is interpreted generically). Likewise, the subject is also interpreted generically, in the sense that any noise emitted by any accordion leaves people deaf. Furthermore, *el ruido del acordeón* ‘accordion noise’ does not refer to a particular entity, but to all entities that can be understood as ‘accordion noise’. That is, the generic reading is obtained by the combination of subject genericity and object genericity. However, in (20a), *este ruido* ‘this noise’ refers to a particular noise.

(23) *Subject and object genericity*

El            ruido    del            acordeón    deja Ø            sordo.  
the.MASC.SG noise    of-the.MASC.SG accordion make.IND.PRS.3SG deaf.MASC.SG  
‘Accordion noise deafens one.’

This generic reading is not possible with a third person clitic. If this clitic occurs, a reading that particularizes the event denoted by the predicate in an individual appears (e.g., *El ruido del acordeón lo deja sordo* ‘accordion noise deafens him’). The alternation between a GNO and a third person clitic is not possible (two interpretations are obtained). Thus, the generic reading is not obtained through sentential genericity nor through subject genericity: it is also necessary that the predicate selects a null object that favors this reading.

So far, it has been explained that GNOs in Spanish receive generic readings. That is, sentences with GNO seem to be universally quantified. The data in (24), with explicit objects, denote events particularized to an individual or set of individuals, whereas the events designated by the predicates in (25) are applicable to any individual.

(24) *Object particularizing readings*

a. La            música    clásica            relaja            a    Juan.  
the.FEM.SG music    classic.FEM.SG relax.IND.PRS.3SG DOM Juan  
‘Classical music relaxes Juan.’  
b. Las            vacunas    sanan  
the.FEM.PL vaccine.PL heal.IND.PRS.3PL  
a    la            mujer    de    mi    primo.  
DOM the.FEM.SG wife    of    my    cousin.MASC.SG  
‘Vaccines heal my cousin’s wife.’

(25) *Object generic readings*

- a. La            música    clásica            relaja Ø.  
      the.FEM.SG   music    classic.FEM.SG   relax.IND.PRS.3SG  
 ‘Classical music relaxes one.’
- b. Las            vacunas    sanan Ø.  
      the.FEM.PL   vaccine.PL   heal.IND.PRS.3PL  
 ‘Vaccines heal one.’

In (24a) it is interpreted that music relaxes only Juan, while in (25a) it follows that music relaxes everyone who listens to it. The same can be applied to the other contrasts. Thus, it seems that the propositions with GNOs are universally quantified (Authier, 1989, 1992). The interpretations of each of them correspond to the paraphrases of (26).

(26) *Universal readings*

- a. For any *x*, if *x* is a person, classical music relaxes *x*.  
 b. For any *x*, if *x* is a person, vaccinations heal *x*.

However, there are reasons to believe that universal quantification is not involved in generic sentences with GNOs. If the sentences in (25) were universally quantified, they would behave similar to the versions with the universal quantifier *todo* ‘all’ in (27). Specifically, if universal quantification were involved, predicates with GNOs should not allow exceptions (Krifka et al., 1995). However, propositions with GNOs can allow exceptions, whereas universally quantified propositions do not allow exceptions, according to Krifka et al. (1995): if classical music does not relax only one person in the world, the proposition in (27a) is still true, but the proposition in (25a) is not.

(27) *Universal quantification*

- a. La            música    clásica            relaja  
      he.FEM.SG   music    classic.FEM.SG   relax.IND.PRS.3SG  
 a       todo            el                    mundo.  
      DOM   all.MASC.SG   the.MASC.SG   world  
 ‘Classical music relaxes everyone.’
- b. Las            vacunas    sanan  
      the.FEM.PL   vaccine.PL   heal.IND.PRS.3PL  
 a       todo            el                    mundo.  
      DOM   all.MASC.SG   the.MASC.SG   world  
 ‘Vaccines heal everyone.’

However, this difference does not seem to be definitive, since the propositions in (27) admit exceptional clauses, as in (28a), while the propositions in (25) do not, as in (28b). This is due to the fact that, while the speaker is not part of the set of individuals designated by universal quantification in (27), it is part of the set of individuals designated by the GNO in (25). That is, the judgment in (27) applies to all humans, with the possibility of excepting the speaker, but the judgment in (25) includes all humans, including the speaker. This prevents the speaker from being ‘excepted’.<sup>4</sup>

(28) *Exceptive clauses*

- a. La            música    clásica            relaja  
      the.FEM.SG   music    classic.FEM.SG   relax.IND.PRS.3SG  
      a        todo        el                    mundo,    excepto    a        mí.  
      DOM   all.MASC.SG   the.MASC.SG   world    except    DOM   me  
      ‘Classical music relaxes everyone, except me.’
- b. \*La            música    clásica            relaja Ø,            excepto    a        mí.  
      the.FEM.SG   music    classic.FEM.SG   relax.IND.PRS.3SG   except    DOM   me

Another difference has to do with the ability of (25) and (26) to allow restrictions on the domain of predication. These restrictions consist in reducing the set of entities to which the generalization denoted by the proposition applies. If the domain of predication is restricted, GNO structures do not express adequate generalizations with respect to that domain restriction, but universally quantified sentences do, as pointed out in Krifka et al. (1995). In a situation where, in the results of a vaccine experiment, tests of one hundred vaccines have been found to be 100% positive for healing the people on whom the doses have been tested, only one hundred vaccines are involved, not all the existing vaccines in the world. That is, there is a restriction of the domain of application of the generalization in (25b) and (27b). In this interpretation, the proposition in (25b) is true, but the proposition in (27b) is not. The same can be applied to the other contrasts. It follows that universally quantified propositions can fit domain reductions, whereas propositions with GNOs cannot. Thus, genericity should not be confused with universal quantification in these cases.

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4. Interestingly, as correctly pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, it is not only the case that the speaker cannot be excluded in sentences with GNOs in Spanish; other participants cannot not be excluded either (e.g., \**La música clásica relaja Ø, excepto a mis hijos* ‘Classical music relaxes everyone, except me’). This reveals a clear syntactic asymmetry between universal quantified sentences and sentences with GNOs: while the former allow for exceptive clauses, the latter do not.



### 3.2. *Animacy*

Another property of GNOs is their human interpretation, which they share with generic subjects (Jaeggli, 1982, 1986; Hernanz, 1989; Masullo, 2015). The GNOs in (29) are interpreted as human generic entities. As said above (see ch. 2), the same interpretation has been described for GNOs in French (Authier, 1989, 1992) and Italian (Rizzi, 1986).

#### (29) *Animacy and GNOs*

- a. La            música    clásica            relaja Ø.  
      the.FEM.SG   music    classic.FEM.SG   relax.IND.PRS.3SG  
 ‘Classical music relaxes one.’
- b. Las            vacunas    sanan Ø.  
      the.FEM.PL   vaccine.PL   heal.IND.PRS.3PL  
 ‘Vaccines heal one.’

The human interpretation of GNOs is evidenced by control (Lebeaux, 1984; Roberge, 1991). In (30a), the GNO controls the interpretation of the null subject (PRO) of the non-finite sentence *abandonar la ciudad* ‘leave the city’. If the object denotes a non-human entity, as in (30b), PRO is interpreted as non-human too. This restriction explains why they cannot occur with predicates that do not select human objects (e.g., \**Aquí fabrican Ø bien* ‘here they manufacture well’).

#### (30) *Control verbs and GNOs*

- a. La            lluvia    obligaba Ø  
      the.FEM.SG   rain    force.IND.IPFV.3SG  
 a [PRO abandonar    la            ciudad].  
 to    abandon.INF   the.FEM.SG   city  
 ‘The rain forced people to leave the city.’
- b. La            lluvia    hizo                    a    los            perros  
      the.FEM.SG   rain    make.IND.PRS.3SG   to   the.MASC.PL   dog.MASC.PL  
 [PRO abandonar    la            ciudad].  
 abandon.INF            the.FEM.SG   city  
 ‘The rain made the dogs leave the city.’

Due to the human interpretation of the GNO in (30a), the null subject (PRO) of the sentence *abandonar la ciudad* ‘leave the city’ must be interpreted as human. That is, the null subject of the subordinate sentence gets its interpretation from the GNO.

As animacy is involved, another factor for licensing GNOs is related to the selectional properties of the verb. Given that GNOs receive a human interpretation, verbs such as *preocupar* ‘worry’, *insultar* ‘insult’, *premiar* ‘reward’, or *castigar* ‘punish’ have in common the need for the object to be human (Martínez-García & Romero Heredero 2024). It is common to find verbs that (typically) select human objects. This would explain the contrast in (31). While *pegar* ‘hit’ selects only human objects (e.g., *Pegar a un compañero* ‘hit a partner’, but \**Pegar (a) una mesa* ‘hit a table’), *golpear* ‘hit’ can select animate (e.g., *Golpear a un amigo* ‘hit a friend’; *golpear (a) una vaca* ‘hit a cow’) and inanimate (e.g., *Golpear la mesa* ‘hit the table’) objects. Hence, GNOs are allowed in (31a), but not in (31b).

(31) *Lexical constraints on GNOs*

a. Siempre pegaban Ø a la salida de ese colegio.

always hit.IND.IPFV.3PL at the.FEM.SG exit of that.MASC.SG school

‘They always hit one at the exit of that school.’

b. ??Siempre golpeaban Ø a la salida de ese colegio.

always hit.IND.IPFV.3PL at the.FEM.SG exit of that.MASC.SG school

‘They always hit one at the exit of that school.’

(Martínez-García & Romero Heredero, 2024, p. 271)

The selectional properties of the predicate ‘make it easier’ to obtain the human interpretation of the object in the first case than in the second. Thus, the GNO is acceptable in (31a), but not in (31b), since the predicate in (31b) does not select only human objects, unlike the predicate in (31a).

### 3.3. *Affectedness*

Finally, GNOs in Spanish are affected by the event denoted by the predicate. Intuitively, a participant of an event is considered to be affected when it suffers or experiences some change of state (physical or mental) as a result of the event (see Beavers, 2008 for discussion). The object is affected when it receives a thematic role other than (affected) Theme (see Rizzi, 1986 on this issue). Examples (32a–b), where GNOs present thematic roles as Experiencer, Beneficiary, and Goal (Dowty, 1991), are possible, Themes such as the ones in (32c–d) are excluded.<sup>5</sup>

5. As correctly pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, a potential contrast that would support the claim that Spanish GNOs are human and affected could be *A veces el dolor rompe* ‘Sometimes pain

(32) *Affectedness and GNOs*

- a. A veces Mario {impresiona / preocupa} Ø.  
 sometimes Mario impress.IND.PRS.3SG worry.IND.PRS.3SG  
 ‘Sometimes Mario {impresses / worries} people.’
- b. A veces el director {castiga / premia} Ø.  
 sometimes the.MASC.SG director punish.IND.PRS.3SG reward.IND.PRS.3SG  
 Ø sin razón aparente.  
 without reason apparent  
 ‘Sometimes the director {punishes / rewards} people for no apparent reason.’
- c. \*A veces Mario {conoce / sabe / contempla} Ø.  
 sometimes Mario know.IND.PRS.3SG contemplate.IND.PRS.3SG
- d. \*Mi hermano {admira / aprecia} Ø.  
 my brother.MASC.SG admire.IND.PRS.3SG appreciate.IND.PRS.3SG

Consequently, the verb that allows for a GNO must impose on it a change, whereby the object becomes affected by the action. The assignment of a thematic role different from Theme, together with the affected character of the object, explains the ungrammaticality of (32c–d), where the action denoted by the verbs cannot affect the objects. In short, GNOs must be affected by the action denoted by the verb.

## 4. SYNTACTIC REPRESENTATION

The aim of this chapter is to investigate whether GNOs are syntactically represented. The (syntactic) tests to show that a null argument is syntactically represented are related to control (sec. 4.1), binding (sec. 4.2) and secondary predication (sec. 4.3).

4.1. *Control*

GNOs are not syntactically represented cross-linguistically. In English, they cannot control. In (33), only the explicit object can control the interpretation of the null subject in the subordinate clause, as in (33a), while the same is not true with the null object, as in (33b) (Bach, 1979; Bresnan, 1982; Manzini, 1983; Lebeaux, 1984; Roberge, 1991; Landau, 1999; see Hornstein, 1999 and Wurmbrand, 2002 for discussion).

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breaks one’, which seems acceptable, versus *A veces los terremotos rompen* ‘Sometimes earthquakes break one’, which is completely out.

(33) *English*

- a. This leads people<sub>i</sub> [PRO<sub>i</sub> to conclude what follows].  
 b. \*This leads Ø<sub>i</sub> [PRO<sub>i</sub> to conclude what follows].

(Rizzi, 1986, p. 503)

Due to the contrast in (33), Bach (1979) proposed that, in object control structures, the object must be structurally represented. Because in English GNOs are not syntactically represented, the object must be made explicit in object control structures. This idea led Bach (1979) to establish the generalization in (34).

(34) *Bach's (1979) generalization*

In object control structures, the object must be structurally represented.

As opposed to English, Spanish GNOs can control the interpretation of null subjects. As shown in (35), the GNOs control the reference and interpretation of PROs. That is, GNOs follow the generalization of (34). (35b) means 'ambition leads people to (those same people) make mistakes'. The same can be applied to (35a). That is, the GNO and PRO refer to the same entity (i.e., they coincide in their reference) (Lebeaux, 1984).

(35) *Control and GNOs*

- a. Esto            lleva Ø<sub>i</sub>            a [PRO<sub>i</sub> pensar    lo            siguiente].  
     this.NEUT    lead.IND.PRS.3SG    to        think.INF    the.NEUT    following.  
     'This leads one to think the following.'  
 b. La            ambición    conduce Ø<sub>i</sub>            a [PRO<sub>i</sub> cometer    errores].  
     the.FEM.SG    ambition    lead.IND.PRS.3SG    o            commit.INF    error.PL.  
     'Ambition leads one to make mistakes.'

One (apparent) problem might have to do with the idea that the constructions in (35) are not transitive, but some kind of 'complex' predicates (i.e., *llevar a pensar* 'lead one to think' is a 'complex' predicate rather than a construction with two independent predicates, thus *llevar* 'lead' would lack an object). However, the data in (35) show transitive structures, because explicit counterparts of (35) can be found in (36).

(36) *Control and explicit objects*

- a. Esto            lleva            a    la            gente<sub>i</sub>  
     this.NEUT    lead.IND.PRS.3SG    DOM    the.FEM.SG    people  
     a [PRO<sub>i</sub> pensar    lo            siguiente].  
     to        think.INF    the.NEUT    following

‘This leads people to think the following.’

- b. La                    ambición    conduce                    a    la                    gente<sub>i</sub>  
      the.FEM.SG   ambition    lead.IND.PRS.3SG   DOM the.FEM.SG   people  
      a [PRO<sub>i</sub>   cometer           errores].  
      to                    commit.INF   error.PL

‘Ambition leads people to make mistakes.’

Another (apparent) counterexample to the generalization that Spanish GNOs are syntactically represented because they can participate in object control might be that GNOs in psychological predicates cannot control PRO. For instance, as opposed to (35), the sentences with psychological predicates in (37) do not display PRO.

(37) *Psychological predicates and GNOs*

- a. La                    música    clásica                    relaja Ø.  
      the.FEM.SG   music    classic.FEM.SG   relax.IND.PRS.3SG  
      ‘Classical music relaxes one.’  
      b. Los                    sonidos    de    la                    naturaleza    calman Ø.  
      the.MASC.PL   sound.PL   of    the.FEM.SG   nature            calm.IND.PRS.3PL  
      ‘Sounds of nature soothe one.’

However, this restriction on PRO does not derive from the idea that GNOs are not syntactically represented in (37), but from the fact that psychological predicates (e.g., *preocupar* ‘worry’, *impresionar* ‘impress’, etc.) do not control PRO because they do not allow for non-finite sentences (i.e., they are lexically constrained in this sense).

## 4.2. Binding

As said above (see ch. 1), GNOs are not anaphoric in Spanish, which means that, in principle, they cannot be bound (Chomsky, 1981; Büring, 2005). Even in contexts where referents are introduced in preceding sentences, the GNO cannot refer to them, as in (38).

(38) *Anaphoric relations with GNOs*

- a. #[Virginia y    su    pareja]<sub>i</sub>    no    pueden                    oír  
      Virginia    and   her   couple   not   AUX.IND.PRS.3PL   hear.INF  
      nada    en    el                    bar.  
      nothing   in   the.masc.sg   bar

- Tanto ruido deja  $\emptyset_i$  sordo.  
 so-much.MASC.SG noise make.IND.PRS.3SG deaf.MASC.SG  
 #‘Virginia and her partner cannot hear anything in the bar. So much noise deafens one.’
- b. #[Juan]<sub>i</sub> sale siempre a correr.  
 Juan go.IND.PRS.3SG always to run.INF  
 Una rutina de ejercicio mantiene  $\emptyset_i$  sano.  
 a.FEM.SG routine of exercise keep.IND.PRS.3SG healthy.MASC.SG  
 #‘Juan always goes for a run. An exercise routine keeps one healthy.’

In (38a), the GNO cannot refer to Virginia or her partner, nor to Juan in (38b). Although Virginia and her partner are in (38a) within the set of individuals whom so much noise deafens, just as John is within the set of individuals whom a routine of exercise keeps healthy, the GNOs do not refer exclusively to Virginia and her partner in (38a) or to John in (38b) (i.e., co-reference is not involved). To refer to them, a definite clitic must be used. In (39a), *los* ‘them’ refers to Virginia and her partner, and in (39b), *lo* ‘him’ refers to Juan.

(39) *Anaphoric relations with clitics*

- a. Virginia y su pareja no pueden oír  
 Virginia and her couple not AUX.IND.PRS.3PL hear.INF  
 nada en el bar.  
 nothing in the.masc.sg bar  
 Tanto ruido los deja sordos.  
 so-much noise them.MASC.PL make.IND.PRS.3SG deaf.MASC.PL  
 ‘Virginia and her partner cannot hear anything in the bar. So much noise deafens them.’
- b. Juan sale siempre a correr.  
 Juan go.IND.PRS.3SG always to run.INF  
 Una rutina de ejercicio  
 a.FEM.SG routine of exercise  
 lo mantiene sano.  
 him.MASC.SG keep.IND.PRS.3SG healthy.MASC.SG  
 ‘Juan always goes jogging. An exercise routine keeps him healthy.’

Also, the GNO does not seem to introduce a discourse referent, since, apart from cases of control, it cannot be retrieved by null subjects, as in (40a), or clitics, as in (40b). Null subjects and clitics obtain their interpretation from an antecedent, with which they are coreferent. However, in (40) they cannot refer to the GNOs:

they obtain their interpretation deictically, right from the context in which they are uttered (see Bosque 2015 for a detailed discussion). In this case, definite readings would be obtained, and no reference to GNOs would be made, contrary to what is intended.

(40) *Anaphoric relations with GNOs*

- a. ??Su inteligencia deja  $\emptyset_i$  atónito.  
 his/her intelligence leave.IND.PRS.3SG astonished.MASC.SG  
 $\emptyset_i$  Se quedaron boquiabiertos.  
 SE leave.IND.PRF.3PL dumbfounded.MASC.SG  
 ??His/her intelligence leaves one astonished. They were dumbfounded.'
- b. ??Su inteligencia deja  $\emptyset_i$  atónito.  
 his/her intelligence leave.IND.PRS.3SG astonished.MASC.SG  
 Lo(s)<sub>i</sub> dejó boquiabierto(s).  
 him(them).MASC.SG(PL) leave.IND.PRS.3SG speechless.MASC.SG(PL)  
 ??His/her intelligence astounds. It left {him/them} dumbfounded.'

In principle, this suggests that GNOs do not introduce discourse referents (i.e., they are not phrases that can be referred to by an anaphoric expression). However, clitics can retrieve generic expressions. In (41), a clitic can refer to a generic antecedent such as *uno* 'one', which shares with GNOs a human, generic reading (see Gutiérrez-Rodríguez & Pérez Ocón, 2024 on Spanish *uno* 'one').

(41) *Anaphoric relations and generic uno 'one'*

- Su inteligencia deja a uno  
 his/her intelligence leave.IND.PRS.3SG DOM one.MASC.SG  
 sorprendido. ¡Lo deja boquiabierto!  
 surprised.MASC.SG him.MASC.SG leave.IND.PRS.3SG speechless.MASC.SG  
 'His/her intelligence leaves one amazed. It leaves him speechless!'

Specifically, in (41) the clitic refers to the generic reading of the antecedent. In (41), the interpretation is 'leaves dumbfounded that same person who has been surprised by his intelligence'. Thus, the oddity of (40) is not due to the fact that GNOs do not introduce discourse referents, but because the clitic and the null subject cannot retrieve the generic interpretation of the antecedent, since they behave as pronouns (i.e., definite interpretations appear). As for null versions in (42), the arbitrary PROs must be linked in reference.

(42) *English*

PRO turning in one's tax forms on time requires PRO hiring an accountant.

(Authier, 1989, p. 48)

Although the reference of each PRO encompasses a generic set of individuals, the interpretation of the second PRO depends on that of the first PRO in (42). That is, (42) means 'for an individual  $x$  to turn in tax forms on time, it is necessary for that same individual  $x$  to hire an accountant' (see Lebeaux 1984; Authier 1989 for English and French data). That is, the PROs must coincide in their reference. This led Hernanz (1988) to think that PROs are variables linked to generic operators that make them have the same reference.

As far as Spanish GNOs are concerned, in (43) the reference of the second GNO is linked to the reference of the first one, as is the case with PRO in (42). That is, in (43) only the interpretation 'a medicine that heals a generic set of people is a medicine that benefits that same generic set of people' is obtained. These readings appear in equative structures (see Authier 1989 on this point), although it also appears with arbitrary null subjects and GNOs.

(43) *Equative structures and GNOs*

Una	medicina	que	sana $\emptyset$	es
a.FEM.SG	medicine	that	heal.IND.PRS.3SG	be.IND.PRS.3SG
una	medicina	que	beneficia $\emptyset$ .	
a.FEM.SG	medicine	that	benefit.IND.PRS.3SG	

'A medicine that heals one is a medicine that benefits one.'

In (43), the interpretation by which a medicine that heals any person is a medicine that benefits another person is inadequate. This is because both GNOs have to be linked in some interpretative sense. That is, the readings of both GNOs must be coincident. To illustrate this more clearly, see the contrast in (44).

(44) *Equative structures and GNOs*

a. La	música	clásica	que	entretiene $\emptyset$
the.FEM.SG	music	classic.FEM.SG	that	entertain.IND.PRS.3SG
es	la	que	relaja $\emptyset$ .	
be.IND.PRS.3SG	the.FEM.SG	that	relax.IND.PRS.3SG	

'The classical music that entertains one is the one that relaxes one.'



- b. #La música clásica que relaja Ø  
 the.FEM.SG music classic.FEM.SG that relax.IND.PRS.3SG  
 es la que pone nervioso Ø.  
 be.IND.PRS.3SG the.FEM.SG that make.IND.PRS.3SG nervous.MASC.SG  
 #‘The classical music that relaxes one is the one that makes one nervous.’

In (44a), the classical music that entertains any person is the music that relaxes the same person. This is the only reading available. If each GNO referred to different individuals, (44b) would not be anomalous, since the people who are relaxed by classical music do not coincide with the people who are made nervous by classical music. However, since both GNOs must be referentially linked, it is not clear why in (44b) the classical music that relaxes any person is the one that makes that same person nervous. This is a contradiction.

It might be thought that the oddity of (44b) is related to the contradiction caused by the predicates *relajar* ‘relax’ and *poner nervioso* ‘make nervous’, which are related by a copulative structure. However, if this were so, one would expect that a sentence with the same predicates, but with explicit objects, would be anomalous. However, (45), where objects referring to different individuals have been introduced, and the predicates in (44b) have been maintained, is grammatical. Thus, the oddity of (44b) is not due to a contradiction by the predicates, but to the fact that the GNOs must display the same interpretation.

(45) *Equative structures and explicit objects*

- La música clásica que relaja  
 the.FEM.SG music classic.FEM.SG that relax.IND.PRS.3SG  
 a Juan es la que pone  
 DOM Juan be.IND.PRS.3SG the.FEM.SG that make.IND.PRS.3SG  
 nervioso a José.  
 nervous.MASC.SG DOM José  
 ‘The classical music that relaxes Juan is the one that makes José nervous.’

As for binding with reflexive pronouns, in Spanish the clitic *te* ‘(to) you’ and the reflexive pronoun *contigo mismo* ‘with yourself’ can be linked, as in (46a), as well as the generic pronoun *uno* ‘one’ and the reflexive pronoun *consigo mismo* ‘with oneself’, as in (46b). This is so because, in the former case, both elements ‘agree’ in second person, and, in the latter case, they ‘agree’ in third person.

(46) *Binding and pronouns*

- a. La buena música te reconcilia  
 the.FEM.SG good.FEM.SG music you reconcile.IND.PRS.3SG  
 contigo mismo.  
 with-you yourself.MASC.SG  
 ‘Good music reconciles you with yourself.’
- b. La buena música reconcilia  
 the.FEM.SG good.FEM.SG music reconcile.IND.PRS.3SG  
 a uno consigo mismo.  
 DOM one with-him himself.MASC.SG  
 ‘Good music reconciles one with oneself.’

This anaphoric relation is only possible with explicit objects such as those in (46). In contrast, GNOs cannot function as antecedents of these same reflexive pronouns, as in (47). This is so because, as opposed to the cases in (46), the GNO and the pronoun do not share person features.

(47) *Binding, pronouns and GNOs*

- a. ??La buena música reconcilia Ø  
 the.FEM.SG good.FEM.SG music reconcile.IND.PRS.3SG  
 contigo mismo.  
 with-you yourself.MASC.SG
- b. \*La buena música reconcilia Ø  
 the.FEM.SG good.FEM.SG music reconcile.IND.PRS.3SG  
 consigo mismo.  
 with-him himself.MASC.SG

These sentences are only grammatical with *uno mismo* ‘oneself’. In (48), the reference of *uno mismo* ‘oneself’ coincides with that of the GNO (i.e., the interpretation of the proposition in (48) is ‘good music reconciles one to oneself’). As the GNO and the pronoun *uno mismo* ‘oneself’ display third person, the sentence is well-formed. In fact, GNOs cannot be interpreted as a first or second person.

(48) *Anaphoric relation between uno and GNOs*

- La buena música reconcilia Ø  
 the.FEM.SG good.FEM.SG music reconcile.IND.PRS.3SG  
 con uno mismo.

with one.MASC.SG self.MASC.SG  
 ‘Good music reconciles one with oneself.’

This evidence indicates that GNOs introduce discourse referents. This leads us to think that GNOs are not only semantically interpreted, but also syntactically represented.

#### 4.3. *Secondary predication*

If a GNO is visible as a subject of predication, it is syntactically represented. If it were not, the sentence would be ungrammatical, since the secondary predicate could not be predicated of any syntactic element (see Gumiel, 2005, 2007; Landau, 2010 on secondary predication). As explained above for Italian and French (see ch. 2), Spanish GNOs are also visible as subject of secondary predication, as in (49).

##### (49) *Secondary predication and GNOs*

- a. El dinero no hace Ø feliz.  
 the.MASC.SG money not make.IND.PRS.3SG happy  
 ‘Money does not make one happy.’
- b. Su inteligencia deja Ø atónito.  
 his/her intelligence leave.IND.PRS.3SG astonished.MASC.SG  
 ‘His/her intelligence leaves one astonished.’

In (49), the secondary predicate must be predicated of the GNO. The reading of (49a) is ‘money does not make anyone happy’. The same can be applied in (49b). Similarly, with explicit objects, as in (50a), the secondary predicate can only be predicated of the object. (49) and (50) behave the same way, but they receive different interpretations: the null objects in (49) receive generic readings, while the explicit objects in (50) receive particularizing ones.

##### (50) *Secondary predication and explicit objects*

- a. El dinero no hace feliz a Pedro.  
 the.MASC.SG money not make.IND.PRS.3SG happy DOM Peter  
 ‘Money does not make Peter happy.’
- b. Su inteligencia deja atónito a Pedro.  
 his/her intelligence leave.IND.PRS.3SG astonished.MASC.SG DOM Peter  
 ‘{His/her} intelligence leaves Peter astonished.’

However, in (51), the secondary predicate cannot be predicated of the GNO, contrary to (49). The proposition in (51) can only be interpreted in such a way that the subject functions as the subject of the secondary predicate, but not the GNO.

(51) *Secondary predication and GNOs*

El doctor ausculta Ø desnudo.  
 the.MASC.SG doctor.MASC.SG auscultate.IND.PRS.3SG naked.MASC.SG  
 ‘The doctor auscultates naked people.’  
 - *Subject predication*: ‘The doctor auscultates people naked.’  
 - *Object predication*: #‘The doctor auscultates naked people.’

Interestingly, if the object is explicit, (51) is ambiguous between an interpretation in which the secondary predicate is predicated of the subject and one in which the secondary predicate is predicated of the object, as in (52).

(52) *Secondary predication and explicit objects*

El doctor ausculta a Pedro desnudo.  
 the.MASC.SG doctor.MASC.SG auscultate.IND.PRS.3SG DOM Peter naked.MASC.SG  
 ‘The doctor auscultates Peter naked.’  
 - *Subject predication*: ‘The doctor auscultates Peter naked.’  
 - *Object predication*: ‘The doctor auscultates Peter when Peter is naked.’

Two questions arise from these contrasts. The first question is why the secondary predicate is predicated of the GNO in (49), but not in (51). This question leads to the second question: why ambiguity between two readings is possible in (52), but not in (51).

The answer has to do with syntactic structure. While (49) shows causative structures, by which the object undergoes a change of state (whose resulting state is denoted by the secondary predicate), in (51) there is no causative structure. Thus, the small clause composed of GNOs and secondary predicates in (51) is not argumental, as opposed to those in (49). In causative structures, the only available reading is the one in which the secondary predicate is predicated of the object (whether explicit or implicit). Hence, the examples of (49)–(50) are not ambiguous between subject and object predication, and in (51) the secondary predicate can only be predicated of the subject, since they are not causative structures. This restriction explains why the secondary predicates of (49) are predicated of the GNO, but cannot do the same in (52). Thus, the absence of object predication in

(51) is not related to the fact that there is no syntactic entity projected in object position (i.e., GNOs in Spanish are not only semantically interpreted, but also syntactically represented).

Secondary predicates also reveal the features of GNOs in Spanish. Specifically, secondary predicates usually display masculine gender, as in (53). The fact that the default gender of GNO is masculine is coherent with the generic reading of the object and sentence. Since the property designated by the subject must apply to the arbitrary persons designated by the GNO, the unmarked gender appears, which in Spanish is masculine. This indicates that the gender of GNOs coincides with the default gender in Spanish.

(53) *Gender and GNOs*

Tanto	ruido	deja	Ø	sordo.
so-much	noise	leave.IND.PRS.3SG		deaf.MASC.SG

‘So much noise deafens one.’

However, in contexts where the generalization applies exclusively to women, the GNO may display feminine gender. In a bachelor’s party where only women are present, it might be the case that (54), where the adjective shows feminine gender (i.e., marked gender), is uttered. That GNOs show feminine gender does not prevent either the generic reading of the sentence or the object to be possible. In fact, the characteristic ‘make deaf’ of the noise in (54a) still applies to any individual hearing such a noise. The difference is that the scope is restricted to all *x* that meet the condition of being female.

(54) *Gender variation and GNOs*

Tanto	ruido	deja	Ø	sorda.
so-much	noise	leave.IND.PRS.3SG		deaf.FEM.SG

‘So much noise leaves one deaf.’

Secondary predication also shows that GNOs display number. In Spanish, GNOs cannot show plural number, as in (55). Even if the interlocutors were in a situation where only men were present, it could not be the case that the utterances of (55) are uttered. The number features must therefore correspond to the default forms, that is, to the singular forms.

(55) *Number variation and GNOs*

- a. \*El            dinero   no   hace Ø            felices.  
          the.MASC.SG   money   not   make.IND.PRS.3SG   happy.PL
- b. \*Su            inteligencia   deja Ø            atónitos.  
          his/her   intelligence   leave.IND.PRS.3SG   astonished.MASC.PL

These data contrast with their explicit counterparts, where the object agrees in plural with the secondary predicate, as in (56).

(56) *Number variation and explicit objects*

- Su            inteligencia   deja            a   todos            atónitos.  
 his/her   intelligence   leave.IND.PRS.3SG   DOM   all.MASC.PL   astonished.MASC.PL
- ‘[His/her] intelligence leaves everyone astonished.’

Secondary predication also shows that GNOs display a syntactically projected D. Secondary predication readings are only obtained with definite arguments (Demonte & Masullo, 1999). According to Landau (2010), null arguments that are visible as the subject of secondary predication have syntactically projected D. This is consistent with the idea that bare nouns lack D, given that they are syntactically projected NPs (see Dobrovie-Sorin & Laca, 2003 for a detailed discussion). In contrast, Spanish GNOs show a syntactically represented D feature (i.e., they are projected as full DPs). Note that, from a theoretical point of view, it makes sense to make this move, since only DPs (not NPs) can receive generic interpretations in Spanish (see Dobrovie-Sorin & Laca, 2003 on this point).

## 5. A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

In this chapter it is proposed a tentative analysis that attempts to explain the above-mentioned grammatical properties of GNOs in Spanish. The analysis, in the spirit of Authier (1989, 1992), relies on variables.

As explained above (see sec. 2), quantified phrases may interact to give rise to scope ambiguities. (57) is ambiguous in two ways: as shown below, it can either mean ‘in this paradise, there is something that relaxes all the new visitors’ or ‘for all the new visitors, there is something that relaxes each one’. Following May (1977) and Authier (1989), we assign the sentence in (57) the representations in (58) at LF. Thus, in the first reading the existential quantifier is ‘above’ the universal one, as shown in (58a), while in the second reading the universal quantifier is ‘above’ the existential one, as shown in (58b).

(57) *Scope ambiguities*

En este paraíso, alguna cosa relaja  
 in this.MASC.SG paradise some.FEM.SG think relax.IND.PRS.3SG  
 a todos los nuevos visitantes.  
 DOM all.MASC.PL the.MASC.PL new.MASC.PL visitor.PL

‘In this paradise, something relaxes all the new visitors.’

- 1st reading:  $\exists x$ ,  $x$  is a thing, such as  $x$  relaxes  $\forall y$ ,  $y$  is a person.
- 2nd reading:  $\forall y$ ,  $y$  is a person,  $\exists x$ ,  $x$  is a thing, such as  $x$  relaxes  $y$ .

(58) *Representation at LF*

a. 1st reading

... [alguna cosa]<sub>*i*</sub> [todos los nuevos visitantes]<sub>*j*</sub> [ $x_i$  relaja  $x_j$ ]

b. 2nd reading

... [todos los nuevos visitantes]<sub>*j*</sub> [alguna cosa]<sub>*i*</sub> [ $x_i$  relaja  $x_j$ ]

Consider next (59), which contains a GNO and an existentially quantified phrase. This example is (again) two ways ambiguous: as shown below, it can either mean ‘in this paradise, there is something that relaxes people’ (i.e., the existential quantifier is ‘above’ the universal one, giving rise to the first reading) or ‘for all people visiting this paradise, there is something that relaxes each one’ (i.e., the universal quantifier is ‘above’ the existential one, giving rise to the second reading).

(59) *Scope ambiguities*

En este paraíso, alguna cosa relaja  $\emptyset$ .  
 in this.MASC.SG paradise some.FEM.SG think relax.IND.PRS.3SG

‘In this paradise, something relaxes one.’

- 1st reading:  $\exists x$ ,  $x$  is a thing, such as  $x$  relaxes  $\forall y$ ,  $y$  is a person.
- 2nd reading:  $\forall y$ ,  $y$  is a person,  $\exists x$ ,  $x$  is a thing, such as  $x$  relaxes  $y$ .

Note that the readings in (59) nicely parallel those in (57). This is so because the GNO in (59) interacts with the existentially quantified subject in the same fashion as the universal quantifier phrase in (57). Thus, assuming that GNOs are variables bound by an operator explains the interpretive similarity between (57) and (59). The remaining question is what kind of operator binds the variable. In answering this question, Authier (1989) makes use of unselective binding. Consider the examples in (60).

(60) *Unselective binders and GNOs*

- a. Normalmente, este paraíso relaja Ø.  
 normally this.MASC.SG paradise relax.IND.PRS.3SG  
 ‘Normally, this paradise relaxes one.’
- b. Este paraíso jamás relaja Ø.  
 this.MASC.S paradise never relax.IND.PRS.3SG  
 ‘This paradise never relaxes one.’

The GNOs do not seem to have quantificational force of their own. Rather, they reflect the quantificational force of the quantified phrase in the sentence. Thus, the examples in (60) seem amenable to the paraphrases in (61). Specifically, as the quantified phrase in (60a) is *normalmente* ‘typically’, the GNO is interpreted as ‘people’, in general, as shown in (61a); conversely, as the quantified phrase in (60b) is *jamás* ‘never’, the GNO is interpreted as ‘anyone’, as shown in (61b).

(61) *Unselective binders and explicit objects*

- a. Este paraíso relaja a mucha gente.  
 this.MASC.SG paradise relax.IND.PRS.3SG DOM much.FEM.SG people  
 ‘This paradise relaxes many people.’
- b. Este paraíso no relaja a nadie.  
 this.MASC.SG paradise not relax.IND.PRS.3SG DOM anyone  
 ‘This paradise does not relax anyone.’

Crucially, the GNO in the version of (60a) without the quantifier phrase (e.g., *Este paraíso relaja Ø* ‘this paradise relaxes’) seems to have the force of universal quantification too, but there is no overt binder for the variable in this case. As explained above (see sec. 3), the distribution of GNOs is restricted by genericity. Thus, in these cases there is a non-overt adverb of quantification which is induced «by making reference to the properties of Infl and in particular to tense» (Authier, 1989, p. 56). This non-overt adverb is close in interpretation to *normalmente* ‘normally’ in Spanish. In other words, when there is no overt quantified phrase like *normalmente* ‘typically’, *nunca* ‘never’, etc., the sentence displays a default interpretation with *normalmente* ‘typically’.

These facts suggest that GNOs are generated as free variables which get bound at LF (Lewis, 1975). Thus, in line with Authier (1989, 1992), the analysis relies on representing the GNOs as free variables, as in (62), where *e* represents the variable.



The operator can be explicit, as *jamás* ‘never’ in (62a), or implicit, as in (62b) (see Lewis, 1975 on this point).<sup>6</sup>

- (62) Tentative analysis
- a. Jamás<sub>i</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> [<sub>V</sub> relaja] [<sub>DP</sub> e<sub>i</sub>]]
  - b. OP<sub>i</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> [<sub>V</sub> relaja] [<sub>DP</sub> e<sub>i</sub>]]

Thus, analyzing GNOs as free variables whose interpretation depends on the operator of the sentence correctly explains the above-mentioned properties of GNOs. However, this is just a preliminary analysis: further research is needed in order to confirm its shortcomings and predictions.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has explored the constraints on the occurrence of non-anaphoric null objects, their syntactic representation and their grammatical properties in Spanish (e.g., *Esta película sorprende* Ø ‘this film surprises’).

Regarding the constraints on GNOs in Spanish, they must be non-anaphoric (i.e., they are interpreted without an antecedent). Additionally, they must occur in generic sentences and receive generic interpretations. That is why they cannot occur with imperfective tenses (e.g., \**Esta película sorprendió* Ø ‘this film surprised’), but are natural with imperfective ones (e.g., *Esta película sorprende* Ø ‘this film surprises’). Furthermore, GNOs must receive a human reading. This restriction explains why GNOs are impossible with predicates that only allow inanimate objects, such as *haber* ‘there is’ or *fabricar* ‘manufacture’ (e.g., \**En esta fábrica fabrican* Ø *rápido* ‘in this factory they manufacture quickly’; \**En esta tienda había* Ø ‘in this there was someone’). In other words, their licensing is lexically restricted. Additionally, GNOs must be affected by the event denoted

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6. As correctly pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, while the analysis favors a variable-based interpretation, some properties of GNOs (such as syntactic projection, participation in predication, and interaction with reflexives) resemble those of pronominal expressions. In fact, as pointed out above, secondary predicates are only possible with full DPs. Since GNOs can be combined with secondary predicates, GNOs must be projected as full DPs (as opposed to indefinite null objects, which behave as bare NPs; see Martínez-García, 2023, 2025 for further details). Provided they are null DPs, and that they can interact with reflexives, it seems reasonable to propose that they behave as null pronominals (i.e., *pro*; Chomsky 1981). This means that, from a semantic point of view, GNOs seem to behave as variables, but from a syntactic point of view, they seem to behave as empty pronominals. Although this is a very interesting issue to address, due to the fact that we are mostly concerned about how Spanish GNOs could related to French and Italian GNOs and to limitations of space, the potential hybrid status of GNOs (as DPs with variable-like content but pronominal syntax) should be explored more thoroughly in future research.

by the verb. Specifically, they must receive a thematic role different from Theme. This explains why they cannot occur with predicates that do not denote any affectedness of the object (e.g., \**Juan admira* Ø ‘Juan admires’), but are natural with causative predicates, which entail affected objects (e.g., *Este sonido deja* Ø *sordo* ‘this noise deafens’).

Once the conditions of occurrence and interpretation of GNOs have been described, their syntactic structure has been explored. GNOs are not only semantically interpreted, but also syntactically represented, since they are sensitive to syntactic operations such as control, binding and secondary predication. These syntactic operations show that GNOs display gender features (typically masculine gender, but also feminine under specific situations), and number features, specifically singular (i.e., the non-marked form in Spanish). Additionally, GNOs show D features, given that they are visible as subject of secondary predication, contrary to NPs. Specifically, they are syntactically a set of D and  $\phi$ -features (gender and number). Thus, it has been proposed in this paper that GNOs are full DPs in Spanish. Note that, from a theoretical point of view, it makes sense to make this move, since only DPs (not NPs) can receive generic interpretations in Spanish.

Finally, based on previous accounts on GNOs in Italian and French, a tentative analysis for GNOs in Spanish has been proposed. Specifically, the analysis relies on representing the GNOs as free variables. Thus, GNOs are generated as free variables bound in LF by an (explicit or implicit) operator. This analysis explains the different interpretations that GNOs can receive in Spanish.

Nonetheless, there are some remaining issues worth addressing in future research. First, it seems to be true that most languages display some kind of GNOs, but it is unclear whether their features are the same regarding animacy, genericity and affectedness, and whether the proposed analysis could be extended cross-linguistically. It seems that the analysis is predictive enough for Italian, French and Spanish GNOs, but further research is needed regarding other (Romance) languages (e.g., it would be interesting to have a look at Portuguese GNOs, which have never been studied before, as far as I am concerned). If GNOs behave the same way cross-linguistically, we would discover a very interesting pattern across languages that would suggest core cross-linguistic grammatical features. Second, even though Italian, French and Spanish GNOs have now received attention in the literature, it would be interesting to study how the variety affects the licensing of GNOs in each language. Regarding Spanish, it is expected that the use of GNOs is dependent on the type of predicates each variety uses, but further research is needed in this regard.

Third, as explained above, while the analysis favors a variable-based interpretation, some properties of GNOs (such as syntactic projection, participation in predication, and interaction with reflexives) resemble those of pronominal expressions. This means that, from a semantic point of view, GNOs seem to behave as variables, but from a syntactic point of view, they seem to behave as empty pronominals. Although this is a very interesting issue to address, the potential hybrid status of GNOs should be explored more thoroughly in future research.

In sum, this paper has pointed out the existence of Spanish generic object drop, and has identified the grammatical properties of GNOs and the conditions that must be met to allow generic object drop. Future research might shed light on new data that strengthen the predictive capability of the analysis.

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