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Specificity and Differential Object Marking in Spanish

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Abstract: The use of the preposition a with direct objects in Spanish is a well known instance of the general phenomenon of Differential Object Marking (DOM). In Spanish grammars the insertion of a is usually presented as dependent on two basic factors: animacy and referentiality/specificity. The correlation between the object marker and specificity is not systematic, basically because animacy -and not specificity- is the dominant trigger for DOM in Spanish, but a number of facts still indicate that the presence of a tends to be associated with specific readings. In order to account for these facts without positing any [+specific] feature in the linguistic meaning of a, I try to show that it contributes to utterance interpretation as an internal topic marker. This seems to be the simplest way to derive «specificity effects», and to account for the crosslinguistic similarities between DOM and other grammatical phenomena (topicalization, clitic doubling, scrambling).

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