

OPTIONALITY IN SPANISH PREPOSITIONAL RELATIVE CLAUSES

INTRODUCTION: In Spanish, prepositional relative clauses often contain a nominal particle that matches the ϕ -features of the clause's antecedent (*las* in (1)).

- (1) El perezoso rompió **las ramas** [CP de **las** que se colgaba]
 The sloth broke **the.F.PL branches.F.PL** from **the.F.PL** which it-was hanging
 'The sloth broke the branches from which it was hanging.'

This particle is characterized as an optional article in traditional grammars and other prescriptive sources. However, there are contexts where the absence of the article is clearly ungrammatical, e.g., when the preposition has more than one syllable. Properties of the antecedent such as definiteness and animacy have also been associated with the presence of the article (Brucart, 1999). The factors that potentially license the absence of the article have not been studied in a systematic way, with the exception of Santana Marrero (2004), a corpus study analysing dialectal variation across high-prestige varieties of Spanish. The study found that the use of sentences without the article was prevalent throughout Latin America, concluding that there is a language change in progress towards losing the article. However, the behaviour of the article is different between prepositions, suggesting that the conclusions in Santana Marrero (2004) might be overgeneralized.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PREDICTIONS: My research aims to answer (i) what are the factors that influence the presence/absence of the article and (ii) what this can tell us about the syntactic structure of prepositional relative clauses in Spanish. I ran a corpus study, selecting and annotating prepositional relative clauses from a corpus of Spanish online sources (Davies, 2004). I found that the head of the prepositional phrase is itself a significant predictor of the article's behaviour. I posit that the different prepositions reflect whether the PP is an argument or an adjunct of the embedded verb, and that this structural distinction manifests through the presence/absence of the article.

METHODOLOGY: The stimuli of the experimental study test the influence of the PP's syntactic position (argument vs. adjunct) on the acceptability judgements of sentences with and without the article. Target items were counterbalanced between the preposition that had the most no-article sentences in the corpus (*en* 'in/on/at') and the one that had the least (*de* 'of/from/about'). An additional variable of antecedent definiteness was added, creating a 2x2x2 design. Eighty-eight L1 speakers of Mexican Spanish completed an online task through Pavlovia, the web interface of PsychoPy3 (Pierce et al., 2019). They were instructed to rate the acceptability of the sentences on a 7-point Likert scale.

RESULTS: Results were analysed using linear mixed-effects model comparisons (Bates et al., 2015), finding (2) to be the best fit. Crucially, syntactic position was not predictive in any model. Sentences with the article were rated significantly higher than those without (**6.13 vs. 3.86**). Within no-article sentences, those where the article was in an *en* PP were rated significantly higher than those in a *de* one (**4.74 vs. 2.97**). Sentences with definite antecedents were rated higher than those with indefinite ones, but this was only significant for no-article *de* sentences (**5.09 vs. 4.38**).

- (2) Rating ~ Article * Preposition + Definiteness + (1 + Article * Preposition + Definiteness | ParticipantID) + (1 | ItemID)

SIGNIFICANCE & CONTRIBUTIONS: This research brings attention to an under-studied structure and particle and provides experimental evidence showing that the presence/absence of the article is systematically predictable. Article-less sentences with *en* are more widely accepted than those with other monosyllabic prepositions; this difference in distribution is not a reflection of syntactic position. While there is variation in whether a given speaker accepts the absence of the article and in which contexts, this appears to be a constant of their grammar, rather than truly optional.

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