

## When overt definites (can) go missing: surface obliques, multi-layering and licensing restrictions

Monica Alexandrina Irimia

University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

**Goals.** This work examines two interrelated issues in the realm of differential object marking (DOM) in Romance: i) oblique morphology, as in (1) - (5), cf. the traditional ‘prepositional accusative’ (Rohlf 1971; Roegiest 1979; Bossong 1991, 1998, a.o.); ii) its interactions with overt definiteness.

- (1) Aman a \**(los)* niños. (2) Vitti a *(\*-glia)* Maria.  
love.3PL DAT/LOC=DOM DEF child.PL see.PST.1 SG DOM-DEF.F.SG Maria  
‘They love the children.’ (*Spanish*) ‘I saw Maria.’ (*SLuca*; Ledgeway et al. ‘19)
- (3) O chem pe fată / \*fata // { pe mam\*(a)/vecin\*(a)/fat\*(a) bună}.  
CL.ACC call.1 SG LOC=DOM girl / girl.DEF // DOM mother.DEF/neighbor.DEF/girl.DEF good.F  
‘I call the girl / mom / the neighbor / the good girl.’ (*Romanian*)
- (4) Appu vistu a (\**su*) frate de Juanne / a *su* rei.  
have.1 SG seen.M.SG DAT/LOC=DOM DEF brother of Juanne / DOM DEF king  
‘I saw Juanne’s brother / the king.’ (*Sardinian-CentralEastern*; Jones 1995, 1999, adapted)
- (5) Les he trobades, a ses faltes / a les peres.  
CL.ACC have.1 found.F.PL DAT=DOM s-DEF mistake.PL / DAT=DOM l-DEF pear.PL  
‘The mistakes/the pears, I found.’ (*Balearic Catalan*; Escandell-Vidal 2009, Moll 1975, adapted)

**Syntactic or PF obliques?** The oblique appearance of these ‘special objects’ is at the core of an important debate: are they accusatives or of obliques syntactically? Non-trivial diagnostics (Bárány 2018, 2021, or Irimia 2023b, a.o.) unify DOM with unmarked accusatives, and not with obliques, motivating an **accusative** syntax. In D(istributed) M(orphology), oblique DOM is subject to an **Impoverishment** operation (Halle 1990, 1992; Halle and Marantz 1993; Noyer 1993, etc.), which removes the accusative feature *in the morphology*. Placing the burden only on PF is, however, problematic: in Romance, oblique DOM, as opposed to unmarked accusatives, produces important (PCC-type) co-occurrence restrictions, which are a matter of narrow syntax (Ormazabal and Romero 2007, 2013; Irimia 2023a, a.o.).

**Case hierarchies, syncretism, and \*ABA.** Bárány (2018), instead, explores an explanation based on PF syncretism, taking Spanish (1) as a case study: as DOM and datives are the only DP types that carry a structural Case feature which needs licensing (unmarked accusatives being caseless and thus unlicensed), they will be spelled out with the same morphology. Assuming that cases are not undecomposable categories (Bierwisch 1965; Caha 2009, a.o.), Bárány (2018) uses Harðarson’s (2016) hierarchy in (9), under which DOM and DAT are contiguous and can thus be targeted by the same syncretic spell-out rule.

- (6) [A B]<sub>ACC</sub> ↔ /-w/ (7) [A B C]<sub>DAT</sub> ↔ /-x/  
(8) [A B] ↔ /-y/ (*Syncretic spell-out rule*) (9) NOM > ACC > DAT > GEN > ABL/INS ...

This analysis is problematic too: i) Western Romance (WR) *a*-DOM is syncretic not only with DAT, but also with LOC(ative), and there is also the *de*-GEN. How to derive the LOC-DAT-DOM homomorphism without incurring an \*ABA violation in (9)? ii) unmarked accusatives are not as syntactically inert as they seem (they might trigger object agreement and/or clitic doubling, etc.). In order to reconcile these empirical facts, Irimia (2023b) extended a nanosyntax proposal, namely an enriched case hierarchy (initially formulated by Starke (2017)), also introducing locatives (Caha 2009). The enriched case hierarchy in (10) contains more than one accusative: SAcc - ‘smaller’ and BAcc ‘bigger’, the latter syncretic with DOM. An important question thus relates to the more precise internal structure of BAcc.

- (10) NOM > SACC > LOC<sub>1</sub> > SDAT > GEN > LOC<sub>2</sub> > BACC > BDAT ... (Irimia 2023b)

**A problem of projection.** Alternatively, some recent proposals (see especially Manzini and Franco 2016, et subseq.) revive the oblique syntactic nature (Torrego 1998) of oblique DOM: it shares with obliques an elementary predicate introducing a part-whole relation ( $Q_{\subseteq}$ ). Accusativity diagnostics are a problem of projection (Manzini 2024): in obliques, it is  $Q_{\subseteq}$  that projects, while in oblique DOM it is the D head. We show below that DOM-D (focusing on definites) interactions do not confirm this hypothesis,

providing instead support for (10), also under a nanosyntax, multi-layered organization of DPs.

**DOM and definiteness.** A comprehensive Romance picture of interactions between DOM and overt definiteness has rarely been examined. The patterns in (1)–(5) illustrate three main options, when it comes to a *definite* interpretation of marked objects: i) obligatory overt Def, as in Spanish (1); ii) overt Def blocked, as in (2) from Calabrese (Ledgeway et al. 2019, see also De Angelis 2020 for other Italo-Romance, Neuburger and Stark 2014 for Corsican, etc.); iii) overt Def permitted in some instances, but not others, as in Romanian (3) or Sardinian (4). Two conclusions are clear: i) unification with inherent obliques fails - WR DAT/LOC-*a* does not obey these restrictions (in Italo-Romance/Corsican it does not block the definite, in Spanish it allows bare nouns, etc.). While it is true that most accusative-introducing prepositions ban overt Def on *unmodified* nouns in Romanian, there are crucial differences between DOM-*pe* and LOC-*pe* (see also Hill and Mardale 2021): the former *requires* Def on *modified* nominals (3), the latter does not (11); ii) ungrammaticality of overt Def would not be predicted if D projection were required in oblique DOM (pace Manzini 2024). It is also unclear how variation would be derived.

- (11) Așezi bucatele **pe** mese mari. (12) [<sub>KP</sub> K=DOM [<sub>DP</sub> D ....]]  
 set.2SG food.DEF.PL on table.PL big.PL  
 ‘You set the food on big tables.’ (Rom) (13) [<sub>DP</sub> D=DOM ....[<sub>NP</sub> N ]]

**DOM-Def interactions. Some formal possibilities.** Postulation of a (structural accusative) KP layer in DOM (as in (12), López 2012, Ormazabal and Romero 2013, a.o.) explains obligatory Def in Spanish-type languages. Instead, for languages such as Calabrese (San Luca) in (2), Ledgeway et al. (2019) propose that DOM features are hosted in the D head (13), thus blocking Def. The challenge is how to exclude pronouns and other categories that contain a D head, but are *not* ungrammatical with DOM. Assuming that DOM pronouns involve a special structure (the pronoun raises to the complement of a K head in *v*P, or might not contain a D head) needs more robust empirical evidence. Dobrovie Sorin’s (2007) PF Extended Head mechanism in (14), initially proposed for Romanian, similarly blocks DOM-Def, but cannot easily explain the splits we see in Romanian or Sardinian (DOM-Def possible in some instances but not others).

- (14) Extended head (Dobrovie Sorin 2007, ex. 9; see also Giurgea 2023)  
 $[_{FP}F^0 [L^0]] \Rightarrow [_{F^0/L^0} F^0 \oplus L^0]$   
 where  $F^0$  is a functional head,  $L^0$  is a lexical head and  $F^0/L^0$  is an extended head

**Multi-layered DPs.** We propose that a good starting point in deriving DOM-Def interactions is DOM as a structural, ‘bigger’ ACC in a multi-layered DP configuration, as in (15), adapting Bernstein et al. (2021, 2024). As these authors convincingly argue, the two distinct D projections map to different types of definiteness/uniqueness (Ortmann 2014, following Löbner 1985, 2011, Schwarz 2013).

- (15) [<sub>KP</sub> K=DOM [<sub>DP1</sub> D1 [<sub>DP2</sub> D [<sub>NP</sub> N]]]] (16) \* [<sub>KP</sub> K=DOM<sub>δ</sub> [<sub>DP1</sub> D1<sub>δ</sub>... ]]

Under p(ragmatic)-uniqueness in D1, a nominal expression’s reference is unambiguous due to the ‘context of utterance’; s(ematic)-uniqueness in D2 arises from the lexical semantics (eg., unique nouns) or when ‘the hearer’s general knowledge or knowledge of the wider situation and of appropriate association is sufficient to identify the referent’ (Lyons 1999: 163), and includes ‘shared experience’, pronouns, etc. - categories that are independent of the pragmatic context. Interestingly, we see in (3) and (4) that these latter classes are not problematic under DOM: uniques (‘king’, ‘mother’, etc.), or definites identified via modification. P-uniqueness, instead, might be problematic: if it requires linking to the discourse via formal licensing ( $\delta$ ), it might end up competing with DOM (16), which itself can function as a discourse linking mechanism (López 2012, etc.). As Bernstein et al. also notice, p- and s-uniqueness might collapse across Romance. This can impact categories which are not inherently independent of the pragmatic context, i.e., definites as opposed to pronouns. Def might get extended either to p-uniqueness (requiring  $\delta$ -licensing and competing with DOM, if the latter also needs  $\delta$ -licensing) or to s-uniqueness (not requiring  $\delta$ -licensing and not competing with DOM, as in Spanish). As D also contains the structural ACC features (DOM signaling additional features beyond ACC), if it does not produce licensing restrictions, it will be spelled-out. Parametrization in the formal nature of DOM is equally crucial: there is also Balearic Catalan in (5), where DOM is possible with various Def Ds (*s*-form in D1, *l*-form in D2). Importantly,

Balearic Catalan DOM *needs* dislocation and is insensitive to animacy, contrary to in-situ DOM affecting animates across Romance; this indicates a type of DOM licensing which might not compete with Def.