

DOMINICAN *ELLO* AS A NON-DELETED NULL EXPLETIVE*

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ABSTRACT. The Spanish variety spoken in the Dominican region of El Cibao (DSEC) has an expletive pronoun *ello* which is optative and seems to be devoid of any semantic value. This squib aims to present an analysis for this expletive in line with the *Strong Uniformity Hypothesis* of Chomsky (2001): *ello* would be nothing but a non-deleted instance of an expletive null subject. The distribution and optionality of this expletive follow from the instability of a definiteness feature in the pronominal expletives of this variety.

Keywords. Dominican Spanish, overt expletive, null subjects, syntactic variation.

RESUMEN. El español hablado en la región dominicana de El Cibao (DSEC) tiene un pronombre expletivo *ello* de carácter optativo que no parece poseer ningún tipo de valor semántico. Este trabajo esboza un análisis para este expletivo en línea con la *Strong Uniformity Hypothesis* de Chomsky (2001): *ello* no sería más que una instancia no borrada de un sujeto expletivo nulo. La distribución y opcionalidad del expletivo se explican a partir de la inestabilidad de un rasgo de definitud en los pronombres expletivos de dicha variedad.

Palabras clave. español dominicano, expletivos abiertos, sujetos nulos, variación sintáctica.

1. Introduction: optional overt expletives in Dominican Spanish

It has been said that Dominican Spanish (DS) is a “forefront of linguistic innovation” (Toribio 2000: 317) since it presents unique properties with regard to other Spanish dialects.

And perhaps the most intriguing and most telling characteristic of the dialect is the presence of the non-referential pronoun *ello*, which is completely devoid of thematic content and force; the overt expression of the expletive [...] is striking, as it has no equivalent expression in other varieties of Spanish. (Toribio 2000: 321).

As Toribio points out, the variety spoken in the region of El Cibao (DSEC) has an expletive form *ello* that may or may not appear in existential constructions (1), impersonal constructions (2), with meteorological verbs (3), and unaccusative verbs (4).

(1) *Existential construction in DSEC (from Martínez-Sanz 2011: 30)*

Vamos ahí que (*ello*) hay sillas.

Let's go there that EXP are chairs

'Let's go there, since there are chairs in that place'.

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- (2) *Impersonal construction in DSEC (from Martínez-Sanz 2011: 30)*
 (Ello) tiene que haber otro paso.
 EXP should that to be other path
 ‘It should be other path’.
- (3) *Met. Verb construction in DSEC (from Bullock & Toribio 2009: 11)*
 (Ello) no está lloviendo aquí pero allá sí.
 EXP not is raining here but there yes
 ‘It is not raining here, but it is there’
- (4) *Unaccusative construction in DSEC (from Martínez-Sanz 2011: 413)*
 (Ello) casi no ha pasado ni un vehículo.
 EXP almost not has passed no a vehicle
 ‘Almost no vehicle has passed’.

As is well known, there are no (overt) expletives in other dialects of Spanish: the only acceptable patterns for these constructions in most varieties are the ones without *ello*. The following table captures the basic variation pattern.

(5)		<i>DSEC</i>	<i>General Spanish</i>
	a.	Llueve	YES
	b.	Ello llueve	NO

Given the optionality that DSEC presents regarding the presence of this expletive, it is tempting to homologate *ello* with some expletive-like forms found in other Romance varieties. For example, a very similar form is found in 17th Century Spanish:

- (6) *17th Century Spanish (from Silva-Villar 1998:249)*
Ello has de casarte.
 Exp have-2sg to get-married
 ‘You have to get married’.

The usual analysis for (6) consists in taking *ello* as a discourse-related left peripheral element (e.g., Uriagereka 1995, Silva-Villar 1998). However, this alternative does not seem to be correct in DSEC since, as Martínez-Sanz (2011) points out, *Transitive Expletive Constructions* are acceptable in 17th Century Spanish but they are not in DSEC.

- (7) *17th Century Spanish (from Silva-Villar 1998:256)*
Ello yo no sé por qué mi padre no
 EXP I not know why my father not
 me llamó la torda o la papagaya.
 me called-3sg the thrush or the parrot
 ‘I don’t know why I was not called either thrush or parrot by my father’.
- (8) *Dominican Spanish (Martínez Sanz 2011: 65, attributed to Toribio p.c.)*
 ***Ello** yo no sé por qué mi papá me puso Almeida.
 EXP I not know why my dad me called-3sg Almeida
 ‘I don’t know why my dad named me Almeida’.

According to Martínez-Sanz (2011), this evidence suggest that *ello* in DSEC occupies the [Spec,T] position. So, considering this, there are three very natural

questions that an analysis of *ello* should try to answer: (Q₁) how is it that a subject expletive can be optional, (Q₂) how do we explain its distribution in (1) to (4), (Q₃) what are the parameters of variation between DSEC and other varieties of Spanish.

2. Towards a uniformity-based analysis of overt expletives in DS

In order to provide a methodological basis for an analysis of overt expletives in DSEC, consider the *Uniformity Hypothesis* of Chomsky (2001).

(9) *Uniformity Hypothesis (Chomsky 2001: 2)*

In the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary, assume languages to be uniform, with variety restricted to easily detectable properties of utterances.

Bearing in mind (9), there are two possible kinds of analysis for expletive *ello*:

- (10) a. It is a superficial phenomenon, maybe a case of PF variation. The syntactic structure of sentences as those in (1) to (4) is identical for all varieties of Spanish.
- b. It is a core syntax variation. In sentences like those in (1) to (4), DSEC makes use of syntactic mechanisms (e.g., expletive insertion) not available in others varieties of Spanish.

As may be noticed, (9) states that (10a) should always be the “default” type of analysis. (10b), the idea that there is variation in the syntactic procedure, is an option that should be considered only if there is persuasive evidence contrary to (10a). Strikingly, most (if not all) of the analysis proposed in the literature follow the alternative (10b) (e.g., Toribio 2000, Martínez-Sanz 2007). Therefore, a necessary methodological step in order to maintain (9) is providing an analysis of *ello* according to (10a), even though its only objective is demonstrating that this alternative is wrong.

Now, (10a) leads to a very concrete observation regarding expletive phenomena in other varieties of Spanish.

- (11) If core narrow syntax is uniform among the varieties of Spanish, and if DSEC’s *ello* is a real subject expletive, then all varieties of Spanish should have (null) expletives.

Moreover, if we assume that overt expletive phenomena in DSEC is merely superficial (namely, a matter of PF), the hypothesis in (12) follows.

- (12) Expletive *ello* is a phonetically realized instance of an expletive null subject.

There are two main reasons to believe that a “superficial” analysis of *ello* is on the right track. First, *ello* and expletive null subjects seem to be in a completely free distribution in DSEC. Second, as Toribio (2000) observes, *ello* “is devoid of thematic content and [discursive] force”. An analysis of this kind, however, cannot be postulated if it is assumed that null expletives are primitive empty categories. Instead, a theory of null subjects whereby their silent nature follow from factors subject to parametric variation is required.

3. Deletion-based approaches to null subjects in romance

Although since the GB era it was typically assumed that null subjects were realizations of a particularly licensed and identified empty category (namely, *pro*), Holmberg (2005) reintroduces an idea previously proposed by Perlmutter (1968): that these constructions can be explained as involving a deleted pronoun.

- (13) ~~Pronoun~~ corr-e.
 run-T_{PRES}.3SG
 ‘*He/she runs*’.

Nowadays there is a growing interest in deriving the properties of null subjects from unpronounced pronominal elements in the [Spec,T] position, and there are several proposals aimed at explaining their lack of phonological realization. For example, Roberts (2010) attempts to derive the emptiness of these pronouns from the assumptions of his theory of clitic incorporation, which relies on a deletion operation that he subsumes to the *Copy Theory of Movement* (Nunes 2004). Independently, and as a corollary of his theory of ellipsis, Saab (2009) proposes a highly explicit mechanism according to which null subjects are elliptical pronouns whose antecedent should be a locally adjacent head. Leaving aside several differences concerning these proposals, they both explain the deletion of the subject because of the sameness relation that holds between the pronoun and T: in Roberts’ analysis, the ϕ -features of the pronoun and T are indistinguishable, so they form a movement-like chain in which the link corresponding to the pronoun is deleted; in Saab’s system, the agreement features of the finite verb act as an elliptical antecedent for the pronoun, so the latter is marked for non-pronunciation as a case of head ellipsis. Because of this similarity, I will remain agnostic to technical differences in the implementation of the analysis and assume that the requirement for deleting the subject pronoun is an identity relation between the ϕ -features of the pronoun and the verbal inflection.

In addition to identifying the agreement features of the pronoun and the verb, the classic theory of null subjects involves a licensing component: there must be a parametric property in the inflectional system of those languages that allows null subjects. Following seminal ideas by Rizzi (1982), Roberts & Holmberg (2010) propose that the presence of a definiteness D-feature in the T head is responsible for the licensing of null subjects.

- (14) *The Null Subject Parameter (Roberts & Holmberg 2010: 14)*
 Does T bear a D-feature?

Accordingly, T does not bear a D-feature in non-null-subject languages, but it does so in pro-drop languages. Roberts (2010) captures this very idea by assuming that the definiteness feature of the pronoun values T’s D-feature under Agree. However, in the general framework I am using here, I will just suppose that the identification of the features of the pronoun and T must include definiteness. Therefore, in order to delete a pronoun with a D-feature, T should also carry a D-feature. This idea is sketched in (15).

- (15) $\text{Pronoun}_{\{D,\varphi\}}$ — corr-e $_{\{D,\varphi\}}$.
run-T_{PRES.3SG}
'He/she runs'.

As Saab (2009) observes, one of the advantages of the deletion approach to null subjects is allowing for an explanation of cases where a potentially null subject cannot be deleted and has to be pronounced. According to his analysis, this is what happens in Trentino, a dialect from the north of Italy. This language requires some obligatory clitic subjects, although it has the classical properties of a consistent pro-drop language (e.g., free inversion in 16d).

- (16) *Trentino (Safir 1986, apud Saab 2009: 664)*
- | | | | |
|----|--------------|--------------|---------|
| a. | El Mario | el | magna. |
| | the Mario | 3.SG.MASC.CL | eat.3SG |
| b. | El | magna. | |
| | 3.SG.MASC.CL | eat.3SG | |
| c. | *Magna. | | |
| | Eat.3SG | | |
| d. | Magna | el Mario | |
| | eat.3SG | the Mario | |

Saab analyses this subject clitic as a potential null pronoun that *fails* to be unpronounced: since it is a clitic and incorporates into the morphological structure of the finite verb, its phonological deletion is prohibited by a general ban on eliding chunks of words¹.

4. So, what happens in DSEC?

Somewhat adopting Saab's approach, I will propose that *ello* is nothing more than a null subject expletive that has failed to be unpronounced. The main difference with Saab's account of Trentino clitic subjects relies on the factors that prevent the deletion of the pronoun: I will assume that an unsuccessful identification of the features of the pronoun and T is responsible for the pronunciation of the expletive in DSEC.

Following Sheehan (2007), I assume that the deletion analysis of null thematic subjects may be implemented in order to derive the phonological emptiness of expletive null subjects. So, for the analysis of a meteorological verb like *llueve* ('it rains'), I will propose a representation like (17), where a pronoun with a D-feature and φ -features occupies the [Spec,T] position.² This element is semantically vacuous because of its lack of θ -role.

- (17) $\text{pronoun}_{\{D,\varphi\}}$ lluev-e $_{\{D,\varphi\}}$
rain- T_{PRES.3SG}
'It rains'.

¹ Saab (2009) derives this ban as a corollary of his theory of ellipsis, but a similar claim is made by Baker (1988), who explicitly assumes that grammar cannot license transformationally derived empty categories (i.e., traces) as part of a X^0 .

² For greater explicitness, I assume that the pronoun moves to [Spec,T] from the [Spec,v] position in order to check the EPP. The required agreement between the internal argument, the expletive null pronoun and T in cases as (2) and (4) follow from a multiple agree relation: the pronoun agrees with the internal argument, and then T agrees with the pronoun and attracts it to its specifier position.

By assumption, the D-feature on expletive pronouns is quite stable in most varieties of Spanish. However, the pronominal system of DS is currently changing. As Otheguy, Zentella & Livert (2007) observed, DS speakers tend to produce more overt pronouns than other Spanish speakers (e.g. Dominican immigrants arrived in New York produce 41% of overt pronouns compared to 19% for Mexicans). Martinez-Sanz (2011) replicated these results with informants living in the island, and showed that the rates of overt subject use has increased in the last twenty years. According to Camacho (2010), this increase in the frequency of overt pronouns has led to an *undervaluation* of the pronominal elements. If it is assumed that this undervaluation is manifested in the loss of features in the pronouns, it is possible to conjecture that the D-feature on expletive pronouns has become *unstable* in DSEC and may drop sometimes. Therefore, an alternative derivation for (17) includes a version of the expletive without a D-feature.

$$(18) \quad \text{pronoun}_{\{\varphi\}} \quad \text{lluev-e}_{\{D, \varphi\}} \\ \text{rain-T}_{\text{PRES-3SG}}$$

Notice, however, that the structure in (18) does not comply with the identification requirement for deleting the expletive pronoun: the features of the pronoun and T are not “the same” since the pronoun lacks a D-feature. If there is no identity relation between both syntactic objects, then they should be pronounced independently. Particularly, the pronoun is spelled-out as *ello*.

Moreover, dropping the D-feature is not always possible. Since D-features encode referentiality, one of the properties of elements carrying them is the capacity of being selected as arguments of predicates (e.g., Longobardi 1994) and receive θ -roles. This means that D-features may only drop from subject pronouns in DSEC in those cases where the external argument is not marked for θ -assignment: existentials, impersonals, unaccusatives and with meteorological verbs. Therefore, the spell-out of the expletive pronoun as *ello* is restricted only to these kinds of sentences.

5. Concluding remarks

This squib sketches an analysis of overt expletive *ello* that sticks as close as possible to the *Uniformity Hypothesis*. I mentioned in the first section that there are three main questions to answer regarding *ello*, and I think this particular account offers very interesting responses to them. Following Camacho (2010), I take it that the high frequency of overt pronouns in DSEC has led to an undervaluation (i.e., loss of features) of its pronominal system (Q₃). Such undervaluation has rendered the D-features of pronouns unstable, whose presence is crucial for the deletion of null subjects, so sometimes they may drop (Q₁). However, the dropping of the D-feature is restricted to those constructions where the pronoun does not receive a θ -role, accounting for the distribution of *ello* (Q₂).

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