

## TWO IS BETTER THAN ONE: SUBJECT DPs IN SPANISH THIRD PERSON PLURAL ARBITRARY SENTENCES

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**ABSTRACT.** Spanish has an arbitrary construction with no overt subject and obligatory plural agreement on the verb. When a secondary depictive predicate adjective appears in this construction, the adjectival agreement is optionally singular for some speakers. This number agreement mismatch reveals that this construction involves two distinct subjects: an implicit argument agent as well as an expletive structural subject. I demonstrate that this agreement optionality on secondary predicates is a result of a process known as *defective circumvention* (Storment 2025b), by which a probe can conditionally Agree past a featurally deficient goal to obtain features from a non-deficient goal. In this construction, the deficient goal is the implicit argument (Collins 2024), and the non-deficient goal is a plural null expletive. I further show that the optionality in these sentences is a result of a configuration which fails to fully satisfy economy conditions in the syntax.

**Keywords.** implicit arguments, Spanish, arbitrary subjects, optional agreement, defective circumvention

**RESUMEN.** El español presenta una construcción arbitraria sin sujeto explícito y con concordancia obligatoria en plural en el verbo. Cuando en esta construcción aparece un adjetivo predicativo secundario de tipo depictivo, la concordancia del adjetivo es opcionalmente singular para algunos hablantes. Este desajuste en la concordancia de número revela que la construcción implica dos sujetos distintos: un argumento agente implícito, así como un sujeto estructural expletivo. Demuestro que esta opcionalidad en la concordancia de los predicados secundarios es el resultado de un proceso conocido como *elusión defectiva* (*defective circumvention*; Storment 2025b), mediante el cual una sonda puede, de manera condicional, establecer concordancia (*Agree*) más allá de una meta con rasgos deficientes para obtener rasgos de una meta no deficiente. En esta construcción, la meta deficiente es el argumento implícito (Collins 2024), y la meta no deficiente es un expletivo nulo plural. Asimismo, muestro que la opcionalidad en estas oraciones es el resultado de una configuración que no satisface plenamente las condiciones de economía en la sintaxis.

**Palabras clave.** argumentos implícitos, español, sujetos arbitrarios, concordancia opcional, elusión defectiva.

### 1. Introduction

In Spanish, there is a third person plural arbitrary subject *pro*, called arbitrary due to the fact that it has no overt controller or antecedent (Condoravdi 1987, a.o.). Also available in Spanish are depictive secondary subject-oriented adjectival predicates. Typically, when these elements cooccur in an utterance, and the verb and the secondary predicate are controlled by the same subject, both the verb and the secondary depictive predicate (SDP) show plural agreement. See (1):

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- (1) No sé quién es el autor, pero parece que escrib-ieron la carta borrach-os.  
no know.1SG who is the author, but seems that wrote-3PL the letter drunk -MPL  
'I don't know who the author is, but it seems like they wrote the letter drunk.'

For some speakers<sup>1</sup> in colloquial speech, when these two constructions cooccur in the same sentence, there is an optional number mismatch observed on the agreement morphology of the verb and the agreement morphology of the SDP adjective. See (2).

- (2) No sé quién es el autor, pero parece que escrib-ieron la carta borrach-o.  
no know.1SG who is the author, but seems that wrote-3PL the letter drunk -MSG  
'I don't know who the author is, but it seems like they wrote the letter drunk.'

As such, for the speakers who accept (2), there is an optionality of number agreement on the SDP with a 3pl arbitrary subject. See (3).

- (3) Escrib-ieron la carta borrach{-o/ -os}.  
wrote -3PL the letter drunk {-MSG/-MPL}  
'They wrote the letter drunk.'

Here the verb obligatorily shows plural agreement, while the SDP shows singular or plural number agreement. I analyze the number agreement mismatch as two different instantiations of Agree borne out in the same clause: one Agree relation established with the verb and a DP bearing a plural number feature, and another established between the SDP adjective and a DP bearing no number feature, thus leading to singular morphology. When the verb and the SDP both bear plural features, it is because they have both undergone Agree with the plural DP. The optionality comes about via a process of Agree called *defective circumvention* (Storment 2025b). This exact kind of number agreement optionality with multiple arguments is seen elsewhere in Spanish (Fernández-Serrano 2022; Ausín & Depiante 2023; Ormazabal & Romero 2024, a.o.).

In this paper, I detail the processes of agreement that give rise to the plural number agreement on the verb and the optional singular agreement on the SDP. The numberless DP I analyze as an implicit agent argument (Collins 2024), and the plural DP I analyze as expletive externally merged in a relatively high position. In explaining the syntax of this construction I also derive the facts about the optionality of number agreement on the SDP, and the fact that singular number agreement is not available for some speakers.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I give an overview of arbitrary subjects and secondary depictive predicates in Spanish. In Section 3, I discuss the data on the number mismatch construction with numerous examples as well as an overview of the facts on optionality. The analysis of the two subject DPs is presented in Section 4. I show the syntax of the optional Agreement in Section 5. In Section 6, I discuss the nature of syntactic optionality and intraspeaker variation. Section 7 concludes.

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<sup>1</sup> There are some Spanish speakers for whom this agreement mismatch is ungrammatical, and they note that this is not standard Spanish. This is, then, a point of variation among Spanish speakers. Following Rodríguez-Mondoñedo (2008), perhaps Spanish can be classified into two (somewhat arbitrarily distinguished) dialects A and B with respect to this phenomenon.

## 2. Background

Spanish has a third person plural arbitrary subject as well as subject-oriented SDPs. This section examines closely the nature of these two syntactic phenomena, which is necessary in order to discuss the distribution of the construction in which the number agreement mismatch can be observed.

### 2.1. Spanish arbitrary subjects

Spanish has multiple arbitrary null subjects. Arbitrary here means no syntactic controller or antecedent. At least three types have been described (Alonso-Ovalle 2002).

- (4) PRO<sub>arb</sub> fum -ar es peligros -o. (Alonso-Ovalle 2002:1)  
 PRO<sub>arb</sub> smoke-INF is dangerous-MSG  
 Smoking is dangerous.
- (5) En ese restaurante *pro* trabaj-as como un esclavo. (Alonso-Ovalle 2002:1)  
 in that restaurant *pro* work -2SG like a slave  
 In that restaurant you work like a slave.
- (6) *pro* llam-an a la puerta. (Alonso-Ovalle 2002:1)  
*pro* call -3PL to the door  
 ‘There is somebody knocking at the door.’

These examples here differ in the phi-features shown on verbal agreement. In (4), there is no verbal agreement. In (5), the agreement is second person singular. In (6), the agreement is third person plural. In other words, there is a source of second person singular phi-features in (5), and there is a source of third person plural phi-features in (6). It is not possible to discuss the phi-feature values available for subject-verb agreement in (4) as there is no agreement morphology or overt DPs.

The standard analysis of examples (4)-(6) is that there is one subject DP in each of these sentences that agrees in phi-features with the verb, if the verb is finite. As it goes, the subject DP *pro* in (5) bears second person singular phi-features, the *pro* in (6) bears third person plural phi-features, and the PRO<sub>arb</sub> in (4) bears no phi-features (Suñer 1983; Jaeggli 1986; Cinque 1988; Goodall 1999; Alonso-Ovalle 2002; Cabredo-Hofherr 2003; 2006; Costantini 2009; a.m.o.). There are analyses that reduce some of these arbitrary subjects to a single source, for example claiming that the subject of (4) is the same as that of (6), just without verbal agreement (McFadden & Sundaresan 2018). It is not possible, however, to reduce the second person singular arbitrary subject of (5) and the third person plural one of (6) to a single source, as they demonstrably trigger different phi-feature agreement, and they also have different syntactic and semantic distributions<sup>2</sup>. In this paper I do not focus on the arbitrary second person singular DP.

The analysis in this paper demonstrates that the construction in (4) actually involves two distinct subject DPs. As such, from this point on I do not make reference to the properties of what has been described in the literature as the third person plural arbitrary *pro* itself; rather I make reference to the properties of the third person plural arbitrary (henceforth 3PL-ARB) construction as a whole.

I now detail the syntactic and semantic properties of the Spanish 3PL-ARB construction. First, the 3PL-ARB subject must be null. If it is overt, it must have a referential interpretation. That is, the

<sup>2</sup> For example, the 2sg arbitrary *pro* can be an object, it can be overt, it does not yield an agreement mismatch for any speakers, and it may obtain a first, second, or third person referent. All of these points are not true of the 3pl arbitrary *pro*, which I detail in this section.

overt subject must have a definite, plural referent. See the following example, marked with a hash symbol @ to indicate that the sentence is not grammatical with a 3PL-ARB interpretation.

- (7) @Ellos llam-an a la puerta.  
 they call -3PL to the door  
 ‘They are knocking at the door,’ (\*‘Someone is knocking at the door.’)

Second, the only possible position in which an argument can have the 3PL-ARB interpretation is the subject position as an external argument AGENT (Cinque 1988; Jaeggli 1986; Rizzi 1986; Goodall 1999; Egerland 2003). Arbitrary reference cannot obtain of a third person plural direct object, indirect object, object of a preposition, or any other position besides the AGENT subject position. This is certainly relevant to the fact that null subjects are far more readily available in Spanish than null direct or indirect objects (and null objects of prepositions are totally ungrammatical), and, as shown above, the 3PL-ARB subject must be null. I show an example of a direct object and another of an indirect object, both with clitic doubling to not preclude the possibility of a null argument.

- (8) a. @Los vi.  
 them.ACC saw.1SG  
 ‘I saw them.’ (\*‘I saw someone.’)  
 b. @Les envió un mensaje.  
 them.ACC sent.3SG a message  
 ‘He sent them a message.’ (\*‘He sent someone a message.’)

In fact, any other DP which refers back to these 3PL DPs must also be plural, and cannot appear in the unmarked/singular form (note that this is *not* the case in (2)).

- (9) a. Los vi, pero no sé a {quiénes/\*quién}.  
 them.ACC saw.1SG, but not know.1SG to {who.PL/\*who.SG}  
*int*: ‘I saw them, but I don’t know who.’  
 b. Les envió un mensaje, pero no sé a {quiénes/\*quién}.  
 them.ACC sent.3SG a message, but not know.1SG to {who.PL/\*who.SG}  
*int*: ‘He sent them a message, but I don’t know to whom.’

Again, the only type of subject that is able to receive the 3PL-ARB interpretation is an *agentive* subject. See the following example from Jaeggli (1986).

- (10) @Lleg -an cansad-os después de un viaje tan largo. (Jaeggli 1986:50)  
 arrive-3PL tired -MPL after of a trip so long  
 ‘They arrive tired after such a long trip.’ (\*‘Someone arrives tired after such a long trip.’)

Verbs which do not assign an agent theta role may appear with generic subjects, but not arbitrary ones. Crucially the referents of the subject in (7) must be plural, which does not fit the criteria of the subject of 3PL-ARB construction (Suñer 1983). See Cinque (1988) and Chierchia (1995) for detailed discussions of the differences between arbitrary and generic pronominals in Romance.

- (11) a. @Tien-en miedo de los fantasmas por acá.  
 have-3PL fear of the ghosts for here  
*int*: ‘People are afraid of ghosts around here.’  
 b. @Siempre lleg -an a tiempo en este país.  
 always arrive-3PL to time in this country  
*int*: ‘People always arrives on time in this country.’

The common analysis here is that the DP *pro<sub>arb</sub>* with third person plural phi-features is only available to be externally merged in Spec,vP (Cinque 1988; Jaeggli 1986; Goodall 1999).

The referent of the subject of the 3PL-ARB construction can be singular, despite the plural phi-features of the subject (Suñer 1983). See the following example (modified from Goodall (1999)).

- (12) Firm -aron nueva ley. El firmador fue el president.  
 signed-3PL new law. the signer was the president  
 ‘They signed a new law. The signer was the president.’ (‘Someone signed a new law.’)

Though the referent of the subject does not have to be plural, it does have to be third person.

- (13) #Est-án manejando el auto, pero aún no ten -go mi licencia.  
 are-3PL driving the car, but yet no have-1SG my license  
*int*: ‘{They are/\*I am} driving the car, but I don’t have my license yet.’

The referent of the subject also must be animate.

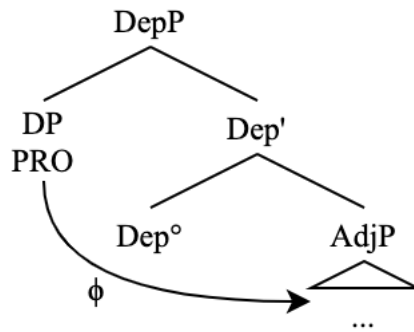
- (14) #Destru -yeron la ciudad. Ese huracán fue horrible.  
 destroyed-3PL the city. that hurricane was horrible  
*int*: ‘{They/\*it} destroyed the city. That hurricane was horrible.’

The interpretations of 3PL-ARB constructions are similar (if not identical) to those of short passives (Goodall 1999; Collins 2024). Thus, the first part of example (12) could similarly be glossed as ‘A new law was signed’ or ‘There was a new law signed’. Relevant to this interpretive fact is my claim that the argument in Spec,vP in this construction is the same implicit argument *pro<sub>un</sub>* that Collins (2024) identifies as the external argument of short passives.

## 2.2. Secondary depictive predicates

Secondary depictive predicates are (usually postverbal) adjectival phrases that modify arguments. Structurally they are adjuncts of vP—but not of VP—when they modify the subject of the sentence (Roberts 1988), and the agreement seen on the adjective comes from whatever element controls the DP PRO within the depictive phrase (Williams 1980; Mallén 1991, Pykkänen 2008; Collins 2024). Here, I analyze PRO is the specifier of the functional projection DepP, and in these cases it takes an adjectival phrase as its complement.

## (15) Structure of DepP



Spanish adjectives inflect for number and gender. The adjective in the DepP inflects for the number and gender features inherited via controlling of the PRO in its specifier. An example of a secondary depictive predicate in Spanish from Mallén (1991), as well as an adjectival agreement paradigm<sup>3</sup> for Spanish, is given below.

- (16) Raquel compr -ó el coche entusiasmada-a. (Mallén 1991:385)  
 Raquel bought-3SG the car happy -FSG  
 ‘Raquel bought the car happy.’

(17)

	MASC	FEM
SG	-o	-a
PL	-os	-as

In this example, feminine singular agreement on the SDP adjective is obligatory. The adjective *entusiasmada* within the DepP gets its number and gender features from PRO. PRO gets its phi-features from agreement with the closest c-commanding DP (Rosenbaum 1967), which in this case is the external argument DP *Raquel*. SDPs that modify the external argument are adjoined to vP and SDPs that modify the internal argument(s) are adjoined lower: to VP.

In any context outside of the 3PL-ARB construction, phi-feature agreement with SDPs is always obligatory for all speakers, even for those speakers which accept the agreement mismatch for the 3PL-ARB construction.

- (18) \*Raquel compr -ó el coche entusiasmada-o.  
 Raquel bought-3SG the car happy -MSG  
*int*: ‘Raquel bought the car happy.’

This is true even with other null 3PL subjects. See the example modified from (8) (Jaeggli 1986).

- (19) \*Lleg -an cansad-o después de un viaje tan largo.  
 arrive-3PL tired -MSG after of a trip so long  
 ‘They arrive tired after such a long trip.’

<sup>3</sup> This only holds for adjectives that are not irregular. Adjectives ending in *-e*, *-i*, or a consonant do not inflect for gender. I avoid such instances in this paper.

Therefore, the fact that a number agreement mismatch is possible with the 3PL-ARB construction is quite surprising given what we know already about the syntax of SDPs and phi-feature agreement in Spanish. In the remainder of this paper I develop an analysis of the construction that accounts for this fact.

### 3. The mismatch

Although there is no extant literature on SDPs occurring in the 3PL-ARB construction, Google searches can produce numerous grammatical examples (Collins 2023). Several are duplicated below. The acceptability of these examples and others given in the paper are corroborated by the judgments of several native Spanish speakers from various places in the Hispanosphere as well, which has been confirmed with grammaticality judgment stimuli and in various presentations and public discussions.

- (20) Parece que la escrib-*ieron* borrach-*o*.  
seems that it wrote -3PL drunk -MSG  
'It seems that they wrote it drunk.' (*int*: 'It seems that someone wrote it drunk.')
- (21) Rob-*an* armad-*o* a Heladería "Kapricho's".  
rob -3PL armed-MSG DOM creamery "Kapricho's"  
'They rob Kapricho's ice cream shop.' (*int*: 'Someone robs Kapricho's ice cream shop.')
- (22) Yo creo que la opción de wpp de borrar mensajes la hicieron especialmente para  
I think that the option of wpp of erase messages it made.3PL especially for  
cuando escrib-*en* borrach-*o*.  
when write -3PL drunk -MSG  
'I think that the option on Whatsapp to delete messages was made especially for when they send drunk texts.' (*int*: '...when someone sends drunk texts.')
- (23) Si te escrib-*en* borrach-*o* que te extrañ-*an*, significa que esa persona es tuya.  
if it write -3PL drunk -MSG that you miss -3PL, means that that person is yours  
'If they text you drunk that they miss you, it means that that person is yours.' (*int*: 'If someone texts you drunk...')
- (24) Pero como la moda es que ahora rob-*an* armad-*o* con escopeta de caza.  
but how the style is that now rob-3PL armed -MSG with rifle of hunt  
'But as is the style now, they rob armed with a hunting rifle.' (*int*: '...someone robs armed with a hunting knife.')

This mismatch of obligatory plural agreement on the verb and optional singular agreement on the adjective is not strictly limited to SDP adjectives, though at the time of writing this paper I have the most data on SDP agreement, so I focus on this for the analysis. I briefly show another case of the mismatch, though, which is with a predicate adjective. This example is also from Google.

- (25) ¿Te han sido infiel?  
you have.3PL been unfaithful.SG  
'Have they cheated on you?' (*int*: 'Has anybody cheated on you?')

This is the exact same mismatch shown above: default agreement on an adjectival element in the 3PL-ARB construction which typically matches in phi-feature agreement with the agreement morphology shown on the verb, which is third person plural. To demonstrate that this is not a

bare adverbial or any such thing where default agreement is expected, I show an example produced by a native speaker on Twitter showing an agreeing predicative adjective and the same default predicative adjective in a single utterance.

- (26) Yo veo como les so -n infiel -es pero no di -go nada porque nadie  
 I see.1SG how y'all.DAT be-3PL unfaithful-PL but no say-1SG nothing because nobody  
 me dijo a mi cuando me era -n infiel.  
 me.DAT said.3SG to me when me.DAT were-3pl unfaithful.SG  
 'I see how they cheat on y'all but I don't say anything, because no one told me when they  
 cheated on me.' (int: 'I see how people cheated on y'all but....people cheated on me.')

It cannot be the case, then, that this number agreement mismatch is not a result of the syntax of secondary predication by itself<sup>4</sup>. Rather, it must be derived from the syntax of the 3PL-ARB construction itself, as this is the only configuration in which it is possible. As such, this construction involves two DPs involved in these agreement relations: one with deficient phi-features for default (which surfaces as singular) agreement on the SDP, and another with plural phi-features for plural agreement on the verb. I detail this analysis in the remainder of the paper.

#### 4. Two subject arguments

Many languages make use of multiple subject positions at once (Larson 1988; Koopman & Sportiche 1991; Bobaljik & Jonas 1996; Koster & Zwart 2000; Harwood 2012, a.m.o.). In languages that require overt subjects, this is obvious. See one example from Icelandic (27a), and one from English (27b).

- (27) a. það borðuðu sennilega margir jólasveinar bjúgun. (Icelandic; Bobaljik  
 there ate probably many Christmas.trolls the.sausages. & Jonas 1996:196)  
 'Many Christmas trolls probably ate the sausages.'  
 b. There was a boy eating an apple. (English; Harwood 2012:215)

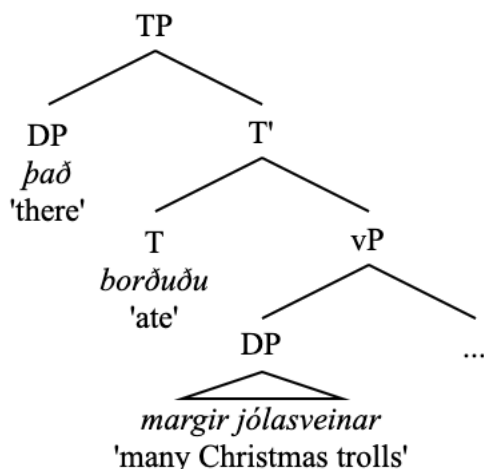
The Icelandic sentence (ignoring the adjunct 'probably') can be analyzed as having the following simplified structure with regard to the subject positions.

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<sup>4</sup> This agreement mismatch may also be possible with other types of adjuncts such as PP adjuncts. Preliminary observations suggest that some Spanish speakers accept the number mismatch in (i), but not in (ii), and that even those who do not accept (i) find it an improvement over (ii).

- (i) Escrib-ieron la carta sobre sí mism-o, pero no sé quién es el autor.  
 wrote -3PL the letter about self same -MSG, but no know.1SG who is the author  
 'They wrote the letter about themselves, but I don't know who the author is.'
- (ii) Daniel y Felix escribieron la carta sobre sí mismos  
 Daniel and Felix wrote-3pl the letter about self same-mpl  
 'Daniel and Felix wrote the letter about themselves'

(28) Structure of subjects in (27a).



Here, two subject positions are occupied—Spec,vP hosts the agent, and Spec,TP hosts an expletive. The Spanish 3PL-ARB construction is similar in this way. I account for the number agreement mismatch in terms of a null agent that lacks phi-features and an ‘expletive’ (in the sense that it is inserted directly into Spec,TP) that has plural phi-features.

Further still, data from null-subject languages lend themselves to an analysis of two distinct subject DPs in one construction—one null and one overt (Rizzi 1986; Cinque 1988; Egerland 2003). See the following example from Italian with the subject clitic *si*, which is analyzed as an arbitrary subject clitic that cooccurs with an expletive (‘pleonastic’) subject *pro* (Cinque 1988).

(29) *pro si dorme.* (Italian; Cinque 1988:534)  
 pro *SI* sleeps  
 ‘One sleeps.’

A number mismatch of the same nature as the one analyzed in this paper is possible with the subject clitic *si* of Italian, the only differences being that the singular agreement is on the verb and the plural agreement on the adjective, and that one of the two DPs is overt. The *si* clitic as the source of the plural features (Manzini 1986; Rizzi 1986; Cinque 1988; Egerland 2003).

(30) Quando *pro si è giovan-i...* (Italian; Egerland 2003:79)  
 when pro *SI* is young-MPL  
 ‘When one is young...’

Similarly, I analyze the 3PL-ARB construction in Spanish as involving a thematic subject and an ‘expletive’ (or existential) subject. I identify the thematic subject as the implicit argument *pro<sub>un</sub>*. The *pro<sub>un</sub>* is the lower subject—in Spec,vP—and controls singular agreement on the SDP when it surfaces. The expletive in Spec,TP is featurally plural (controlling subject-verb agreement) and binds the implicit argument agent (Collins 2024). Furthermore, the SDP can optionally undergo agreement with the expletive subject for number via defective circumvention. Here, I use the term ‘subject’ to refer to any number of elements that are in different positions in a clause. In this construction being analyzed here, we have a thematic subject in Spec,vP and a structural subject in Spec,TP. I expound on these two elements now.

#### 4.1. Implicit argument

Collins (2024) describes the existential implicit argument *pro<sub>un</sub>*. This DP is the same implicit argument that serves as the external argument AGENT of short passives in Collins (2024). That is, it is the subject that is externally merged in Spec,vP.

- (31) a. The proposal was criticized *pro<sub>un</sub>* at the meeting, (Collins 2024:20)  
 b. The package was sent *pro<sub>un</sub>* this morning.  
 c. John was killed *pro<sub>un</sub>* this morning.

See the following description of this implicit argument.

- (32) Existential Implicit Argument (*pro<sub>un</sub>*): (adapted from Collins 2024:22)  
 a. *pro<sub>un</sub>* is a DP.  
 b. Phi-features: none.  
 c. Interpretation: *pro<sub>un</sub>* is of type <e> and is existentially bound.

The claim that impersonal pronouns are feature-deficient is corroborated elsewhere (Holmberg & Phimsawat 2017; Fenger 2018). It is certainly relevant here, as this is how default agreement surfaces on the SDP. Note that, in the examples provided in (31) (and elsewhere in Collins (2024)), *pro<sub>un</sub>* does not control verbal agreement. This is also the case of the deficient implicit argument in the 3PL-ARB construction. It is also always an AGENT.

Additionally, the examples from Collins (2024) of *pro<sub>un</sub>* are all instances of episodic arbitrariness, which is also the case of the 3PL-ARB sentences (Suñer 1983; Jaeggli 1986; Condoravdi 1987; Chierchia 1995; Cabredo-Hofherr 2003). In this way, the distribution of the implicit argument is accounted for in the same way in English short passives and the Spanish 3PL-ARB construction. Assuming the Spanish standard passive works largely the same as the English short passive, this unifies Spanish passives with the aforementioned constructions as well. This makes complete sense keeping in mind from Section 2.1 that the 3PL-ARB construction and short passives have similar interpretations.

The referent of this element in the 3PL-ARB clauses must be third person (see (13)). This is compatible with the view that *pro<sub>un</sub>* lacks phi-features altogether if one assumes that third person is actually the absence of a person feature in Spanish (Béjar 2003; Anagnostopoulou 2005; Nevins 2007; Bobaljik 2008; Kayne 2010; Kučerová 2019; Storment 2025b).

This null implicit argument *pro<sub>un</sub>* is the source of the optional default singular features on the SDP adjective. The adjective in these examples must always be masculine as well, which is expected if the source of agreement is an element without phi-features, as masculine is the default gender inflection in Spanish. Thus, *pro<sub>un</sub>* is the source of agreement on the SDP, and cannot control verbal agreement. It also receives the theta role AGENT as it is the argument originating in Spec,vP. Collins (2024:22) explains that this implicit argument must also be existentially bound, meaning that some existential element must control *pro<sub>un</sub>*. Collins does this via a null existential operator which is introduced solely for the purpose of binding the agent. In the 3PL-ARB construction, however, this can be done with the existential expletive that is also the source of plural verbal agreement.

For this second DP with plural phi-features to control subject-verb agreement, I turn to the existential argument, also known as an expletive subject. I show that this argument serves as the highest structural subject (in Spec,TP) and provides the plural phi-features for subject-verb

agreement. Additionally, this existential argument serves as the existential operator that Collins (2024) says needs to bind *pro<sub>un</sub>* (see (32)).

#### 4.2. Existential argument (expletive)

The second subject DP in the 3PL-ARB construction is an existential argument. This DP appears in Spec,TP, where it controls subject-verb agreement. Existential arguments refer to DPs which are traditionally categorized as existential expletives, such as *there* of English, *il-y* of French, and *hi* of Catalan.

- (33) a. There appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire. (English)  
 b. There were no problems with the analysis.
- (34) Il y a deux hommes. (French; Schütze 1999:478)  
 it LOC has two men  
 ‘There is two men.’
- (35) Hi han tres cadires. (Catalan; Rigau 2005:8)  
 LOC have three chairs  
 ‘There are three chairs.’

In these three languages, the existential expletives are overt: they have phonetic form. This is not the case in Spanish (disregarding for the time being the ‘fossilized’ locative clitic on the present tense verb form of existential *haber*).

- (36) Hab -ía un hombre en el jardín. (Rodríguez Mondoñedo 2006:333)  
 had -3SG a man in the garden  
 ‘There was a man in the garden.’

In addition to being overt, the expletive subjects in English, French, and Catalan can all control verbal phi-agreement (optionally in the cases of English and Catalan, and obligatorily in the case of French). Evidence for this claim comes from the fact that, in the presence of a third person plural postverbal “associate” subject, verbal agreement may still surface as singular in these constructions.

- (37) There {was/were} many problems in the paper. (English; Storment 2025b:32)
- (38) Il y {a/ \*ont} deux hommes. (French; Schütze 1999:478)  
 it LOC {has/\*have} two men  
 ‘There is two men.’
- (39) Hi ha {-Ø/ -n} tres cadires. (Catalan, Rigau 2005:8)  
 LOC have{-3SG/-3PL} three chairs  
 ‘There is/are three chairs.’

The singular agreement in these cases is driven by the presence of the expletive. Without the expletives, there can be no singular agreement.

- (40) Many problems {were/\*was} in this paper (English)

The same possibility for singular agreement in the presence of a plural associate in existential constructions is shown in several varieties of Spanish as well (Rodríguez-Mondoñedo 2008).

- (41) Hub{-o/ -ieron} dos hombres en la fiesta. (Rodríguez-Mondoñedo 2008:339)  
 had {-3SG/-3PL} two men in the party  
 ‘There was/were two men at the party.’

The possibility of singular agreement, then, is a tool to diagnose the presence of a null expletive in Spanish existentials. Indeed, the same agreement optionality appears in other constructions in Spanish in which a null existential or expletive subject is needed in order to satisfy conditions such as the EPP (Pinto 1994; Adger 1996; Zubizarreta 1998; Goodall 2001; Kučerová 2014). An example of this comes from unaccusative verbs with postverbal subjects.

- (42) Ya lleg -ó el colectivo.  
 already arrived-3SG the bus  
 ‘The bus already came.’

The same agreement optionality arises in some varieties of Spanish when the postverbal subject here is plural. The same alternation has been noted in Portuguese (Costa 2000).

- (43) Ha {-Ø/ -n} venido muchos turistas este año. (Aragonese Spanish, Saura 2010:575)  
 have {-3SG/-3PL} come much tourists this year  
 ‘There {has/have} come many tourists this year.’

Such optionality is not possible when the subject is preverbal.

- (44) Muchas turistas ha {-n/ \*-Ø} veniendo este año.  
 many tourists have{-3PL/\*-3SG} come this year  
 ‘Many tourists have come this year.’

As such, when there is no necessity for Spec,TP to be filled by an expletive, the agreement optionality in these examples disappears. The multiple possibilities of agreement in these cases show that more than one potential goal must be present in the derivation: one to trigger singular agreement, and another to trigger plural agreement. Existentials and unaccusatives often appear with expletives crosslinguistically, and I argue that there is an expletive subject present in Spec,TP as the structural subject in 3PL-ARB constructions as well that gives rise to the agreement optionality on the SDP in these clauses.

Two potential goals, each with a different featural makeup and each accessible to the same probe(s), are needed to obtain the kind of agreement optionality seen with SDPs in 3PL-ARB sentences. These two goals are the implicit argument *pro<sub>un</sub>* in Spec,vP, and a null expletive *pro<sub>expl</sub>*, which has a plural number feature and appears in Spec,TP. These two arguments form the necessary conditions for agreement optionality in which a deficient goal stands as intervener between probe and non-deficient goal, which I detail in the following section.

## 5. Deriving optionality

In this section I discuss how—in line with the analysis above—SDPs modifying the subject in the 3PL-ARB construction can optionally surface with either singular agreement or plural agreement for some speakers, when such optionality is not optional for any speakers outside of this construction. This analysis defends a view of syntactic control as Agree (not as movement), and it also relies on the notion of defective circumvention (Storment 2025b), in which a probe may conditionally probe past a featurally deficient goal to go on to agree with a goal that bears all of the relevant features that the probe is specified to find.

### 5.1. Adjunct control as Upward Agree

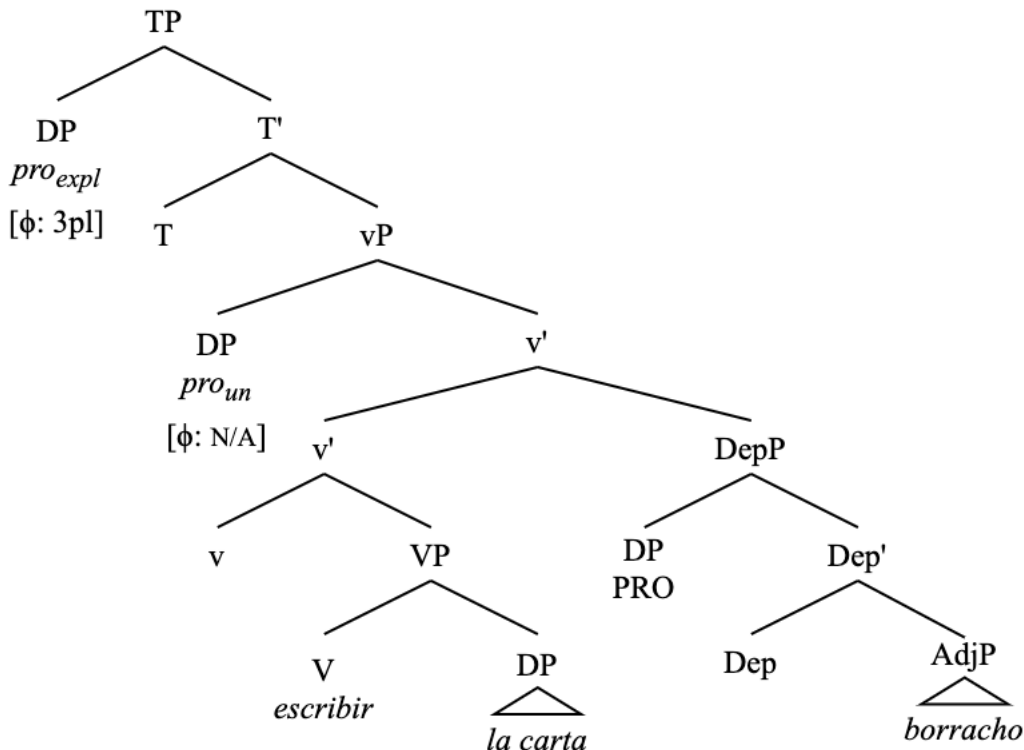
Let us return to the example in (3), repeated below.

- (45) *Escrib-ieron la carta borrach*{-o/ -os}.  
 wrote -3PL the letter drunk {-MSG/-MPL}  
 ‘They wrote the letter drunk.’

Given the discussion on the two different subjects in this construction, this example can be further annotated as follows.

- (46) *pro<sub>expl</sub> escrib-ieron pro<sub>un</sub> la carta borrach*{-o/ -os}.  
*pro<sub>expl</sub>* wrote -3PL *pro<sub>un</sub>* the letter drunk {-MSG/-MPL}  
 ‘They wrote the letter drunk.’

- (47) Structure of *Escribieron la carta borracho(s)* ‘They wrote the letter drunk’

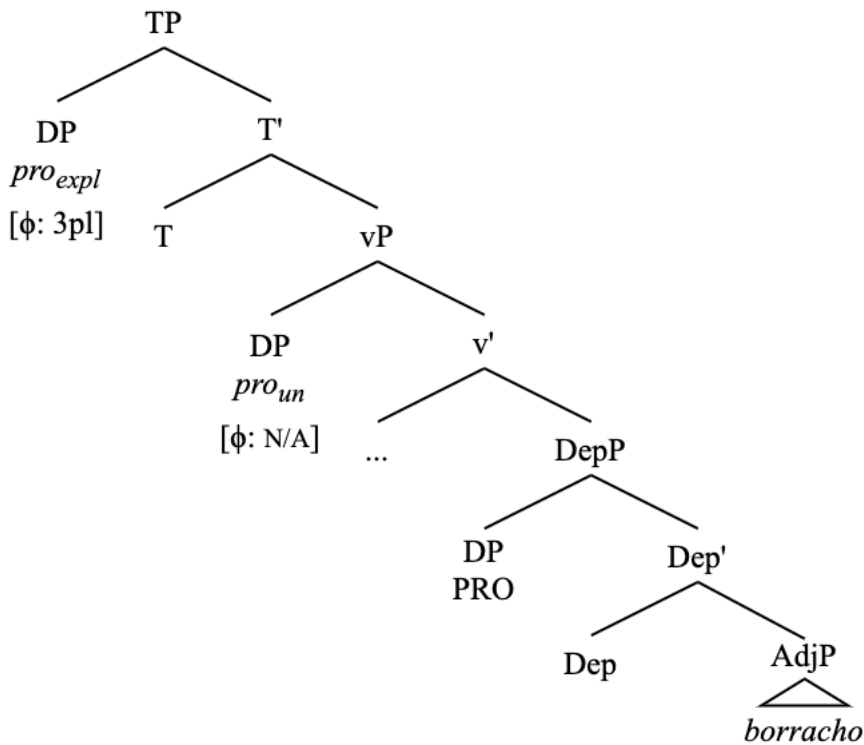


The PRO in Spec,DepP must be controlled by a nearby antecedent DP. This involves at minimum the coindexation of the two relevant DPs and the sharing of phi-features from the controller to the contreee (Rosenbaum 1967; Postal 1970; Jackendoff 1972; Chomsky 1973; Bach 1979; Bresnan 1982; Sigurðsson 1991; Landau 1999; Wurmbrand 2002; Polinsky 2013). In the structure shown in (47), there are two DPs that c-command PRO.

Control of the PRO of the DepP is an instance of exhaustive control (EC) (Landau 1999) as the PRO subject of DepP must exhaustively corefer with the subject of the matrix clause. In this case, the set of individual(s) who are drunk is exact the same as the set of individual(s) who wrote the letter.

I simplify the aforementioned tree in order to show only the relevant structures for control of PRO in (47).

(48) PRO and its two c-commanding DPs (derived from (47))



Typically the controller of PRO is the closest c-commanding DP (Rosenbaum 1967). The c-command relation establishes coreference. Agreement is necessary to transfer phi-features from the controlling DP to PRO in EC (Landau 1999; Collins & Postal 2012). See the following condition on coindexation agreement (Lasnik & Uriagereka 1988; Payne & Huddleston 2002; Sag, Wasow, & Bender 2003; Carnie 2007; Collins & Postal 2012).

(49) *The Pronominal Agreement Condition* (Collins & Postal 2012: 89)  
 If P is a nonexpletive pronominal whose immediate antecedent is A, then P agrees with A in those phi-features for which P is not inherently valued.

In this definition, the features of A are copied to P. The phi-feature values of the controller are copied to the contreee PRO. The contreee needs to be valued for phi-features because it is

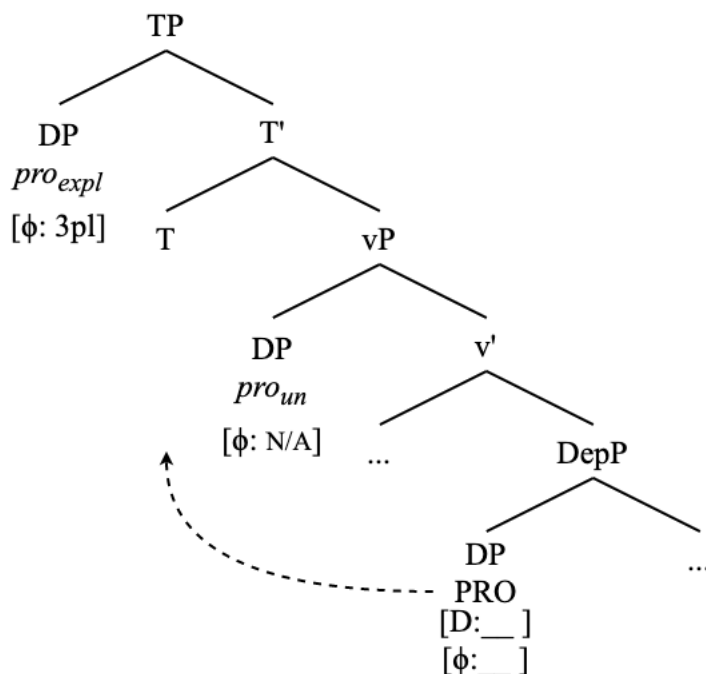
unvalued for then. In a standard definition of Agree, this makes the controlee PRO a probe and the controlling DP a goal. See the following.

- (50) *Agree* (Coon & Keine 2021:665)  
 A probe segment [uF] agrees with the closest accessible DP in its domain that bears [F]. If Agree is established, the hierarchy of segments containing [F] is copied over to the probe, valuing and thus removing [uF].

Assuming Upward Agree is possible in these cases<sup>5</sup> (Baker 2008; Zeijlstra 2012; Wurmbrand 2012; 2014; Bjorkman & Zeijlstra 2014; 2019; Himmelreich 2017), the accessible DPs in the domain of the probe include local DPs which c-command the probe, as opposed to downward agreement in which the probe c-commands its potential goals.

As such, the PRO in DepP undergoes phi-agreement with the argument(s) that c-command it. The PRO of the DepP, then, is a phi-probe. This probe also bears a [D] feature as the antecedent needs to be a DP (and it is not just DPs which can bear phi-features (Keine & Zeijlstra 2024; a.o.). The potential controllers are simultaneously the potential phi-goals. See the potential controllers and goals in (48) recast in this light, with an arrow to indicate that PRO searches upward.

- (51) PRO as a phi-probe



<sup>5</sup> Accounts of upward Agree such as Bjorkman & Zeijlstra (2019) assume that *all* agreement must be upward. There are various issues with this assumption, not all of which is relevant to outline here. There is convincing evidence that movement of a goal below a probe to a position above the probe is motivated by agreement (Preminger 2014). If movement is never fed by agreement, then yet another desideratum must be stipulated to feed movement. These issues, however, do not mean that upward Agree may never occur. In cases such as EC where an element may only agree with an antecedent that c-commands it, upward Agree indeed seems optimal. In this paper I show downward Agree taking place for an operation such as subject-verb agreement. As such, I assume that upward and downward Agree are simultaneously possible: Agree is Bidirectional (Baker 2008; Himmelreich 2017).

Here agreement is taking place out of an adjunct clause—the SDP—and the potential goals which c-command the goal are located outside of the adjunct clause in the matrix clause. As adjuncts form islands for movement (Johnson 2002), analyzing control as movement (Hornstein 1999; Boeckx, Hornstein, & Nunes 2010) is not sufficient to explain this type of EC.

Furthermore, control as movement cannot derive the optionality of number agreement on the SDP as movement alone cannot change the phi-feature specification on a given DP. Viewing EC as involving upward agreement, however, sufficiently derives the pattern of singular/plural agreement optionality. In the following section, I detail how exactly Agree derives the pattern of optional singular/plural agreement on the SDP adjective.

### 5.2. Defective circumvention

In (51), PRO is a phi-probe which searches its upward domain—i.e. DPs which locally c-command it—for a suitable goal, which in this case is an element bearing [D] and/or [ $\phi$ ]. As the closest c-commanding DP to PRO is the implicit argument agent *pro<sub>um</sub>*, which lacks phi-features, though it has a [D] feature since it is a DP. The DP that would typically be the controller of PRO (and is coreferential with it) is not a suitable candidate for phi-agreement. This is what creates the optionality of singular or plural agreement on the SDP adjective. The phi-probe on PRO can either Agree with *pro<sub>um</sub>* for only [D], or it can go on to probe again to Agree past *pro<sub>um</sub>* and Agree with *pro<sub>expl</sub>* for [ $\phi$ ]. Agreement with only *pro<sub>um</sub>* leads to singular adjectival morphology, and agreement with *pro<sub>expl</sub>* (after already having Agreed with *pro<sub>um</sub>*) leads to plural adjectival morphology.

This conditional multiple Agree configuration is known as defective circumvention (Storment 2025b), which is defined as follows.

- (52) *Defective Circumvention* (Storment 2025b)  
 A probe P enters into an Agree relation with a closer phi-deficient goal  $\alpha$  and then conditionally goes on to Agree past  $\alpha$  with a further, more featurally-specified goal  $\beta$ , given that the features of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are not incompatible with one another.
- a. Agree without defective circumvention → “Default” (3sg) agreement
  - b. Agree with defective circumvention → Agreement matches features of a DP

The general configuration for defective circumvention is schematized as follows, where F and G represent syntactic features.

- (53)  $P_{[F:][G:]} > XP1_{[F]} > XP2_{[F][G]}$

Here, the goal  $XP1$  that intervenes between P and  $XP2$  is featurally deficient under the following definition of deficiency (which I use interchangeably with the term ‘defectivity’).

### (54) *Featural deficiency*

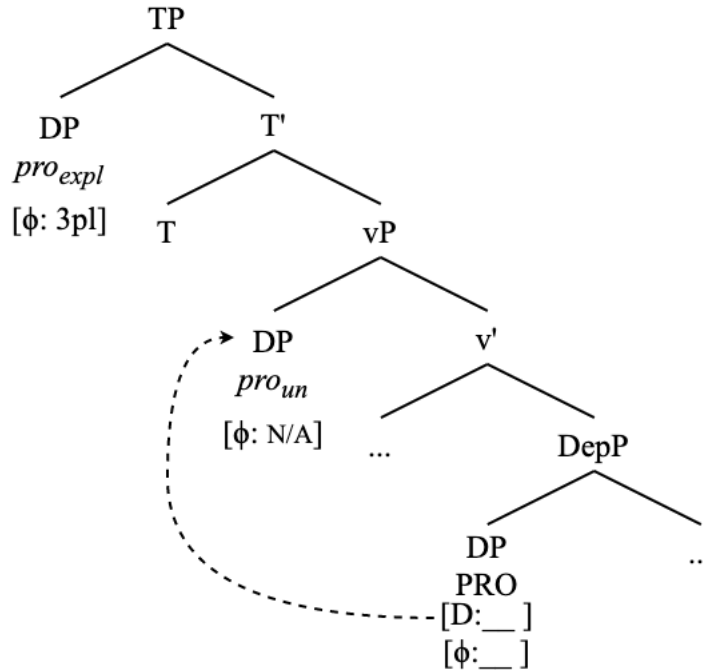
A DP is featurally deficient iff the features for which it is specified are a nonzero proper subset of the features on the relevant probe.

In this way, the phi-deficient implicit argument DP *pro<sub>um</sub>* in Spec,vP is featurally deficient with respect to the phi-probe on PRO, because it lacks [ $\phi$ ], which the PRO is specified to search for. Derivationally, in the schema in (51), when PRO initiates its search(es) for its relevant unvalued features, it will first encounter the phi-deficient *pro<sub>um</sub>*. PRO initiates its search for something to

value its [D] feature before it searches for [ $\phi$ ] because [D] is hierarchically arranged above [ $\phi$ ] in a feature-geometric structure which I assume is present in both phi-goals and probes though I do not indicate the geometries here (Harley & Ritter 2002; Béjar 2003; Preminger 2014; Coon & Keine 2021; Keine & Zeijlstra 2024; Storment 2025a; b).

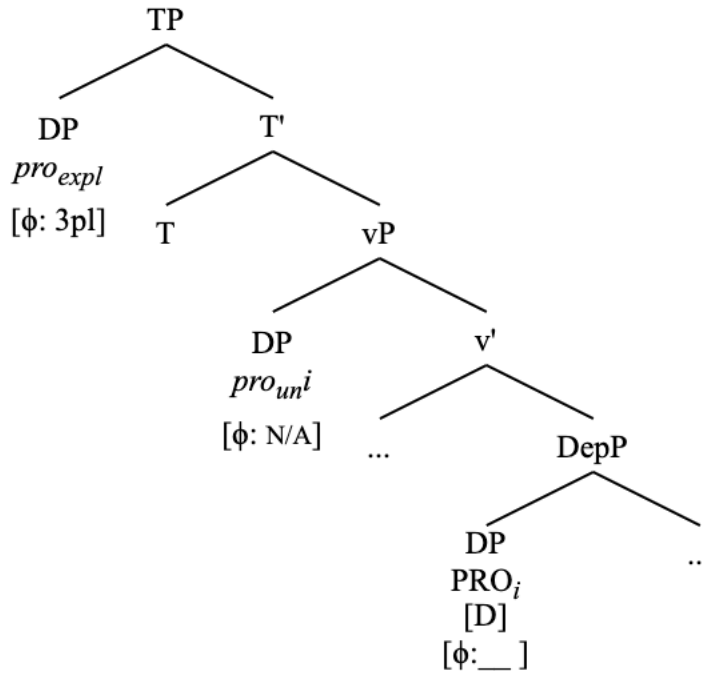
Given this information, I now show the derivation of Agree which can derive either singular or plural agreement on the SDP adjective via defective circumvention in 3PL-ARB subject clauses. First, the probe on PRO initiates a search for an element bearing [D] due to the presence of its unvalued [D] feature.

(55) PRO searches for an element bearing [D]; finds *pro<sub>un</sub>*



The closes potential goal that c-commands PRO is the implicit argument DP *pro<sub>un</sub>*, which bears a [D] feature but no phi-features. Given that Agree effectively reduces to Minimal Search as defined by closeness under c-command (Chomsky 2000; 2001; Storment 2025b), this causes the first element that PRO Agrees with to be *pro<sub>un</sub>*. This triggers valuation of the [D] feature on PRO, and also establishes coreference between the thematic subject implicit argument and the PRO of the DepP (i.e., the agent of the clause is the same element that is modified by the SDP).

- (56) Coreference between *pro<sub>un</sub>* and PRO; [D] is valued on PRO.

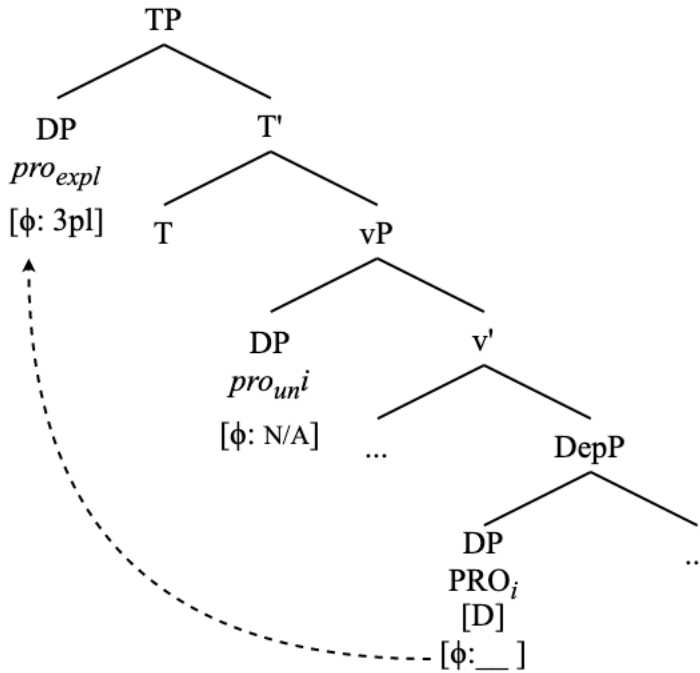


Were the element in Spec,vP here a normal, non-phi-deficient thematic subject, the unvalued  $[\phi]$  feature on PRO would also be valued here, causing the SDP to show agreement in number and gender with the thematic subject. Since this thematic subject lacks  $[\phi]$ , however, no such thing occurs, and the unvalued  $[\phi]$  feature on the probe remains unvalued.

At this point, the probe has the option to not search again, and have an unvalued  $[\phi]$  feature that does not get valued. This is not an issue for the probe, or for the operation Agree (Béjar 2003; Preminger 2014), and it leads to the spellout of default phi-features on the SDP, which in Spanish is masculine and singular (this is what is seen with unagreeing forms elsewhere). If the probe does not search again, defective circumvention has not occurred, and the probe has only undergone Agree with one goal.

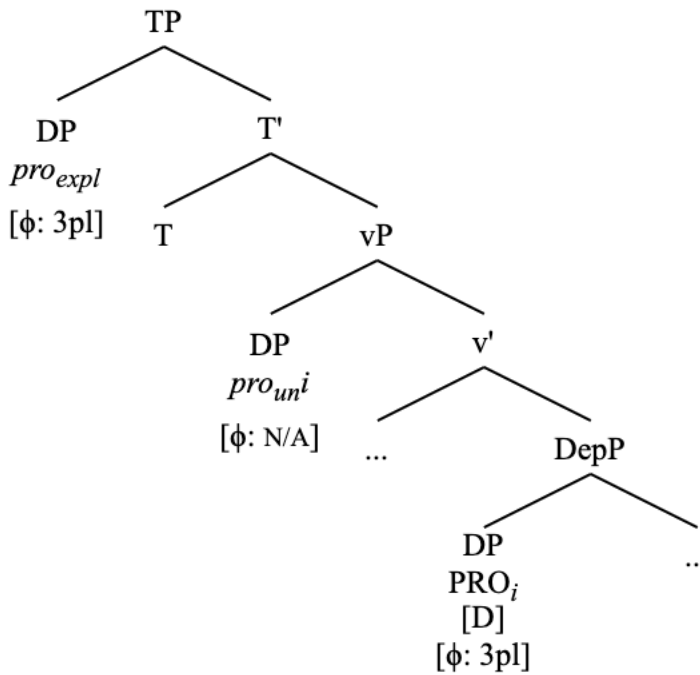
If the probe does search again for an element bearing phi-features, it will find the closest element that c-commands it that bears  $[\phi]$ , which is the structural subject *pro<sub>expl</sub>* in Spec,TP. At this point, after PRO has undergone Agree with an element bearing only [D], if it does not choose the option to stop searching altogether, it will search a second time based on its unvalued  $[\phi]$  feature to find the closest element bearing  $[\phi]$  in its upward search domain.

- (57) PRO searches for an element bearing  $[\phi]$ ; finds *pro<sub>expl</sub>*



When PRO probes for  $[\phi]$ , it finds *pro<sub>expl</sub>* which has third person plural phi-features. This results in these phi-feature values being copied over to PRO.

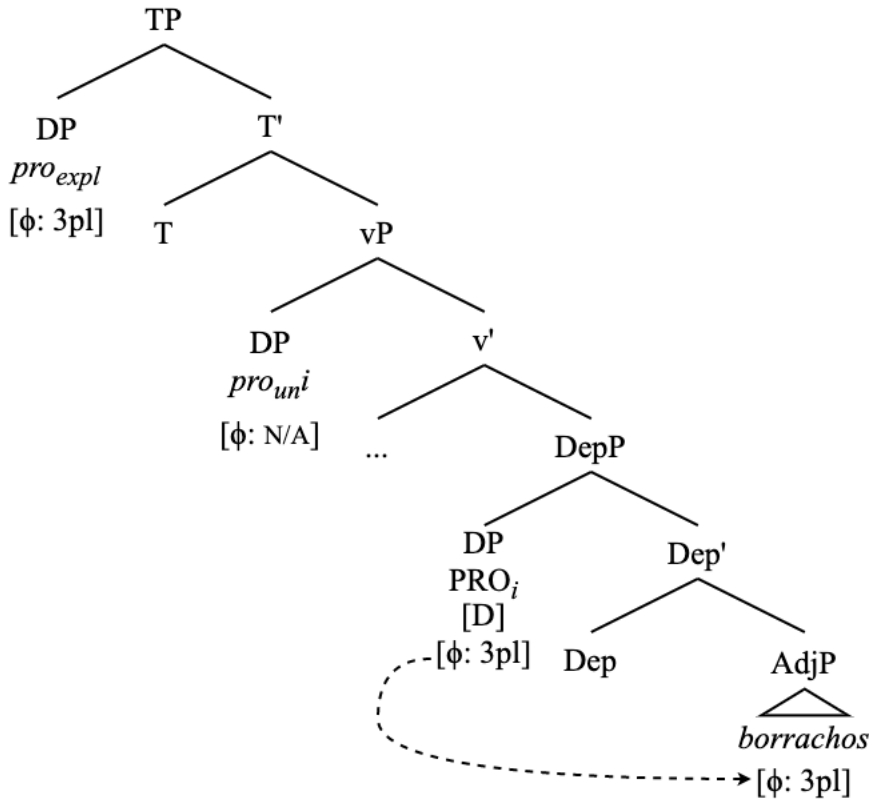
- (58)  $[\phi]$  is valued as third person plural on PRO



Here, defective circumvention has obtained, as the probe on PRO has Agreed first with a closer deficient goal, then gone on to Agree with a further goal that bears all the features for which it is specified. Defective circumvention in this case has resulted in PRO multiply Agreeing with two

DPs—*pro<sub>expl</sub>* and *pro<sub>un</sub>*—and bearing features of both. Defective circumvention here results in plural agreement being spelled out on the SDP adjective.

(59) Plural agreement on SDP adjective derived from defective circumvention



Defective circumvention leads to plural agreement on the SDP, which matches the inflection of the verb. A lack of defective circumvention in Agree on the SDP leads to the SDP showing singular agreement, which leads to the optional feature mismatch presented in this paper. This is summarized below.

- (60) a. Agree without defective circumvention → Singular agreement  
 b. Agree with defective circumvention → Plural agreement

How exactly the grammar chooses between these options to do defective circumvention or not—and why some speakers have a preference for one option over the other—is the focus of the following section. Before that, I discuss briefly why there is no such optionality in this configuration for verbal agreement, even though there is similar optionality of verbal agreement elsewhere in Spanish.

### 5.3. Verbal agreement

As discussed in Section 2.1, the verbal agreement in the 3PL-ARB construction is obligatorily plural. If the verbal agreement were singular, there would be no possibility of an arbitrary agent interpretation (indicated with @) and no possibility of optional plural agreement on the SDP.

- (61) @Escrib-ió la carta borrach{-o/ \*-os}.  
 wrote -3SG the letter drunk {-MSG/\*-MPL}  
 ‘He/she/it wrote the letter drunk.’

Thus, the optionality of agreement in 3PL-ARB clauses is only present on SDPs, and does not ever manifest in verbal agreement. As mentioned previously, there are other areas of Spanish where such optional number agreement can be observed. In these cases, verbal agreement is affected by the optionality. These cases include optional agreement in impersonal *se* constructions (Ausín & Depiante 2023; Ormazabal & Romero 2024), existentials with the verb *haber* (Rodríguez-Mondoñedo 2008), and dative experiencer subject constructions (Fernández-Serrano 2022), to name a few.

- (62) a. Se censur -ó los documentos. (Ormazabal & Romero 2024:445-6)  
 se censored-3SG the documents  
 b. Se censur -aron los documentos.  
 se censored-3PL the documents  
 ‘The documents were censored.’
- (63) a. Hab-ía unas mujeres en la fiesta. (Rodríguez-Mondoñedo 2006:334)  
 had-3SG some women in the party  
 b. Hab-ían unas mujeres en la fiesta.  
 had-3PL some women in the party  
 ‘There was/were some women at the party.’
- (64) a. Nos encant-a las películas de terror. (Fernández-Serrano 2022:9)  
 us.DAT love -3SG the films of terror  
 b. Nos encant-an las películas de terror.  
 us.DAT love -3PL the films of terror  
 ‘We love horror movies.’

Optional verbal agreement is possible here because these configurations in (62) to (64) involve a verbal phi-probe (on a head such as T<sup>0</sup>) probing downward with two potential goals in its search space: a postverbal thematic subject, and some kind of deficient<sup>6</sup> structural subject that intervenes between the probe and the postverbal thematic subject. Thus, the same situation in which defective circumvention is possible is borne out here with a verbal phi-probe which searches downward, as opposed to what we saw earlier with control as Agree probing upward.

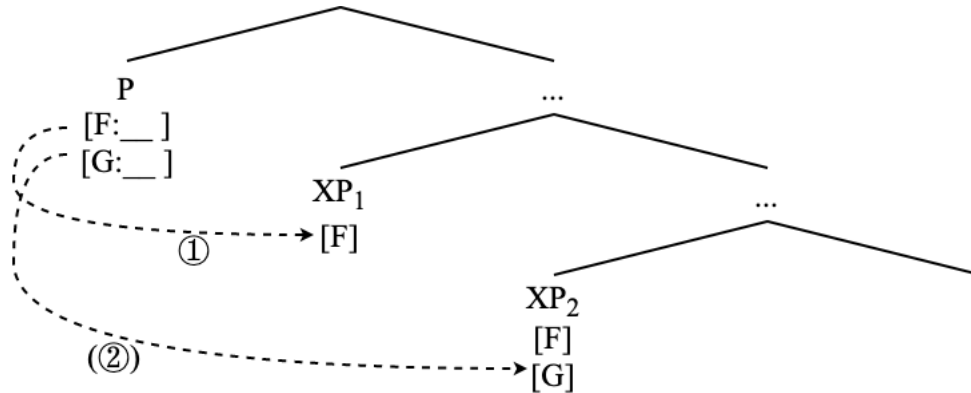
When a phi-probe is located relatively high in a clause and searches downward, a deficient structural subject intervening between the probe and a non-deficient postverbal thematic subject will give rise to the possibility of defective circumvention. This is what we see in the cases of optional verbal agreement.

On the other hand, when a phi-probe is located relatively low in a clause and probes upward, a deficient postverbal thematic subject intervening between the probe and a non-deficient, higher structural subject will give rise to the same possibility of defective circumvention, which is what we see in the case of optional number agreement with SDPs in 3PL-ARB sentences. These two

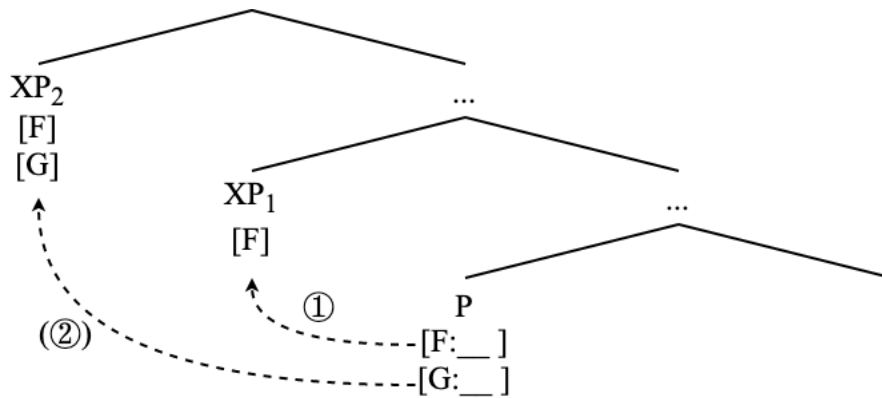
<sup>6</sup> For defense of the view that the *se* subject is at least partially phi-deficient, see Cinque (1988), Ormazabal & Romero (2022), and Ausín & Depiante (2023). For the same view of null existential expletives, see Tortora (2014a) and Stormont (2025b). For the same view of dative subjects, see Rezac (2004; 2008), Bjorkman & Zeijlstra (2019), and Fernández Serrano (2022).

directional possibilities of defective circumvention are diagrammed below, with (65) showing the configuration for downward defective circumvention that happens with optional verbal agreement, and (66) showing what happens in upward defective circumvention which gives rise to optional agreement with SDPs in 3PL-ARB clauses.

(65) Downward defective circumvention



(66) Upward defective circumvention



In these structures, the arrows labeled (1) indicate the first cycle of probing which finds the deficient goal which is closest to the probe, and the arrows labeled ((2)) indicate the second optional step of defective circumvention in which the probe conditionally agrees with the further, non-deficient goal. In either case, the first cycle of probing by itself gives rise to default singular agreement being spelled out, and the second cycle gives rise to non-deficient agreement.

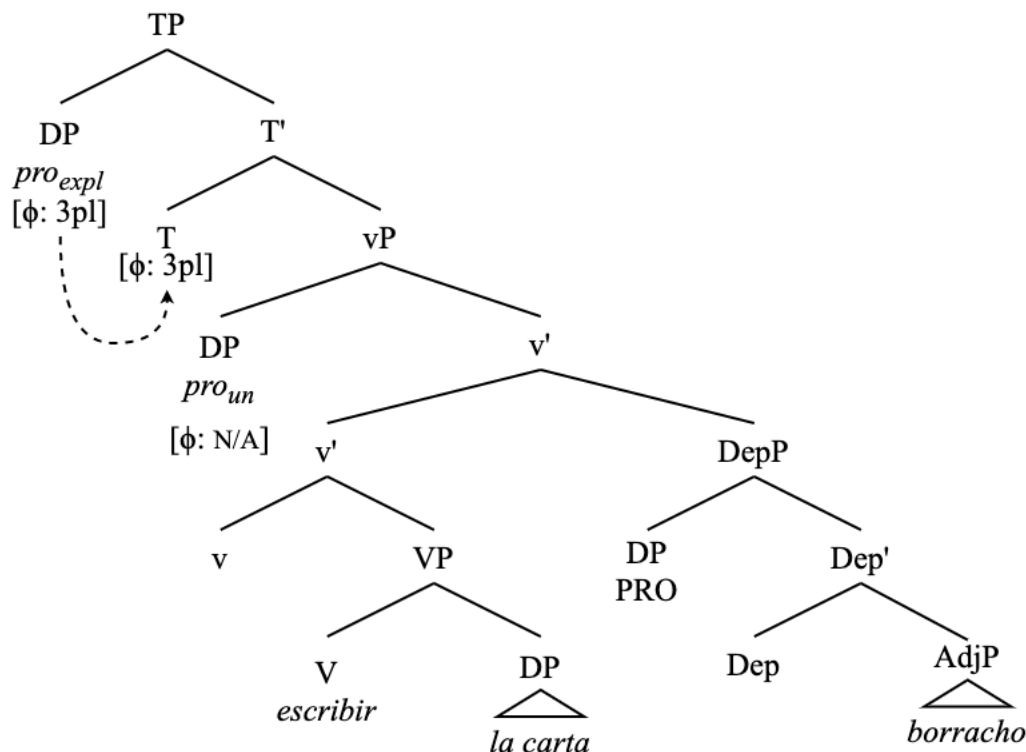
These differences explain the reason why there is no optional verbal agreement. In the 3PL-ARB clauses, the deficient argument is the thematic agent subject located in Spec,vP. The non-deficient phi-bearing structural subject is located above the thematic subject, and is closer to the verbal phi-probe on T<sup>0</sup>. Because of this, there is never the possibility of the phi-probe on T<sup>0</sup> encountering the deficient argument first and spelling out singular number as a default value. The first element that T<sup>0</sup> agrees with is always plural.

As the element located in Spec,TP, *pro<sub>expl</sub>* always agrees for phi-features with T<sup>0</sup> (Holmberg 2005). This *pro<sub>expl</sub>* has third person singular phi-features. Assuming that T<sup>0</sup> in Spanish is specified to search at least for an element bearing person and number features (Gravely et al. 2025), this

means that an element such as *pro<sub>expl</sub>* with third person plural features would always value all the unvalued features on  $T^0$ ; thus  $T^0$  would have no reason to search for another goal.

Furthermore, given that the implicit argument *pro<sub>un</sub>* lacks phi-features altogether, and that  $T^0$  is searching only for elements bearing phi-features (unlike the phi-probe on PRO, which searches for a [D] feature as well), it would never be a viable goal for Agree with  $T^0$  in the first place. As such, the only option for verbal agreement is as follows. I do not indicate the verb moving to  $T^0$  here, though I assume that this does occur (Camacho & Sánchez 2016).

(67) Subject-verb agreement in 3PL-ARB clauses.



Only when the element in Spec,TP—the structural subject—is deficient is there the option for defective circumvention with verbal agreement. This is the case for the constructions in (62) through (64). In the 3PL-ARB construction, however, it is the thematic subject—not the structural subject—that is deficient. The thematic subject is third person plural, which triggers obligatory third personal plural verbal agreement.

At this point it is necessary to comment on the fact that this analysis posits two different null expletive elements in the grammar of Spanish with different featural makeups: a null existential expletive which is partially phi-deficient, as well as a third person plural expletive found (at least) in THE 3PL-ARB construction.

Having two expletive elements in a single grammar with different featural makeups and different contextual distributions is not unheard of at all: take English ‘there’, which lacks a number feature (Chomsky 1981; 2001; Béjar 2003:62; Deal 2009; Tsiakmakis & Espinal 2022; a.o), compared with English ‘it’, which has a singular feature. Additionally, these two expletive elements of English are not interchangeable (in most dialects (Green 2002)) and are restricted each to their own contexts.

- (68) a. {There/\*it} was some problems with the paper. (Standard English)  
 b. {There/\*it} arrived a train at the station.
- (69) a. {It/\*there} rained yesterday. (Standard English)  
 b. {It/\*there} seems that no one is home.

Therefore, it is not unfounded that, for Spanish, the number-deficient existential expletive would be restricted to verbs like *haber*, while the plural expletive only appears in the 3PL-ARB construction<sup>7</sup>.

What is perhaps a bit more unusual here is the claim that an expletive element has plural features as, crosslinguistically, expletives tend to be either morphologically singular (either because they bear a singular feature or because they are not marked for number) since singular is a less “marked” number value than plural is (Harley & Ritter 2002). This is not unattested, however. For example, there are morphologically plural expletives in some varieties of Appalachian English and Scots which trigger plural verbal agreement (Montgomery 2006; Tortora 2006).

- (70) a. They are another one down the street. (Appalachian English; Tortora 2006:281)  
 b. It seems like they used to be more water in the streams than they are now.  
 c. They have been a big change.
- (71) a. Are they any waater coming in over it? (Scots; Montgomery 2006:140)  
 b. An they were an oald män among them.  
 c. That year was pretty hard, they weren’t much money to be made.

It is thus possible—and attested—for an expletive to have plural features, which lends credence to the *pro<sub>expl</sub>* analysis of plural verbal agreement presented here. This plural *pro<sub>expl</sub>* is also responsible for plural agreement on the SDP adjective whenever defective circumvention occurs. In the following section, I discuss the nature of the grammar that allows for variation in whether defective circumvention occurs (leading to plural SDP agreement) or not (leading to singular SDP agreement).

## 6. Optionality and variation

It is now necessary to elucidate on the nature of the optionality between speakers realizing an SDP adjective in 3PL-ARB sentences which agrees in number with the verb, or does not. This optionality is shown in (1) and (2), and repeated here.

- (72) Escrib-ieron la carta borrach-os.  
 wrote -3PL the letter drunk -MPL  
 ‘They wrote the letter drunk.’
- (73) Escrib-ieron la carta borrach-o.  
 wrote -3PL the letter drunk -MSG

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<sup>7</sup> These observations on the distribution of expletives in both English and Spanish cast doubt on a traditional account of expletives in which these elements are a kind of syntactic placeholder (Chomsky 1981; 1995; Lasnik 2001; Epstein & Seely 2002; Richards 2002; Svenonius 2002; McGinnis & Richards 2005; Bever 2009; a.o), given that these elements appear to be selected by different verbs and perhaps even have different semantic contributions to the clause. Though I do not pursue such an account here, I believe that the data presented in this paper could support an account of “low” expletive arguments (Deal 2009; Tortora 2014a; Kayne 2016; Storment 2025b; a.o).

‘They wrote the letter drunk.’

Again, it must be noted that not every speaker accepts the non-agreeing form in (73), and, for those who do accept it, they accept the agreeing form in (72) as well. In other words, we are dealing with two distinct situations: one in which the SDP must match the verb for number agreement, and another in which the SDP may optionally surface as either singular or plural. Thus far in this paper, I have detailed an analysis in which a single set of grammatical operations produces either the non-agreeing variant or the plural agreeing variant, depending on whether or not the operation known as defective circumvention occurs.

In this section, I detail how exactly the process of defective circumvention can be an optional step in the grammar of some speakers, as well as the preference for some speakers to not accept the non-agreeing variant at all. This kind of intraspeaker variation is a puzzle for syntactic theory (Adger 2006; Tortora 2014a; Obata & Epstein 2015; Fernández-Serrano 2022; a.o.).

### 6.1. Violable constraints

Crucially, the analysis presented in this paper relies on the step of defective circumvention being optional (indeed, most applications of defective circumvention are optional (Storment 2025b)). As for why this step should be optional in the case of SDP agreement in 3PL-ARB clauses, the decision in a grammar to perform or not perform defective circumvention can be modeled in terms of violable grammatical constraints (Prince & Smolensky 1993; McCarthy & Prince 1995; Preminger 2014).

Under this view, the decision for the probe on the PRO of the SDP to not probe a second time after agreeing with *pro<sub>un</sub>* to obtain defective circumvention represents a violation of a kind of preference in the grammar for probes to value their unvalued features (which is still not strictly obligatory). Conversely, the decision for the probe to search a second time to value [ $\phi$ ] represents a violation of a preference in the grammar to not have to probe too many times. These preferences are indicated in (74a) and (b), respectively.

- (74) a. VALPHI:  
An unvalued [ $\phi$ ] feature on a probe should Find and Agree with a valued instance of [ $\phi$ ] if it is present in the derivation.  
b. MINPROBE:  
A probe should initiate as few searches as possible.

If these preferences are weighted equally in the grammar, then both the non-agreeing SDP variant (no defective circumvention) and the agreeing SDP variant (defective circumvention) in 3PL-ARB clauses are both equally viable output candidates.

- (75) Escrib-ieron la carta borrach{-o/ -os}.  
wrote -3PL the letter drunk {-MSG/-MPL}

	MINPROBE=VALPHI	
a. $\text{Escrib-ieron}$ <i>Sing. SDP</i>		*
b. $\text{Escrib-ieron}$ <i>Plural SDP</i>	*	

Now, for speakers who prefer only the SDP which matches in number with the verb, we can easily imagine a scenario in which the preference VALPHI is ranked higher than the preference

MINPROBE. In this system, the derivation in which defective circumvention does not occur always incurs a greater violation than the derivation in which the probe searches again to value its [ $\phi$ ] feature. This means that the non-agreeing SDP will always be ruled out in favor of the agreeing one.

- (76) Escrib-ieron la carta borrach{-os/ \*-o}.  
wrote -3PL the letter drunk {-MPL/\*-MSG}

	VALPHI>>MINPROBE	
a. <i>Sing. SDP</i>	*!	
b. <i>Plural SDP</i>		*

There is no variant of Spanish (to my knowledge) in which the non-agreeing SDP form is preferred to the complete exclusion of the agreeing form (i.e., speakers will reject the agreeing form). In the framework depicted here, this means that there are no varieties of Spanish in which only probing once is preferred over not agreeing in phi-features when it comes to adjectival agreement. This ranking is perhaps reflected in the fact that the agreeing SDP form is certainly what is considered prescriptively correct, with the non-agreeing form being considered prescriptively incorrect.

This ranking of preferences, however, is definitely not something that is generalizable across the entire grammar of Spanish. Looking again at the case of associate agreement with existential *haber* sentences, the situation is flipped. When the existential verb *haber* has a third person plural postverbal subject, the verb may optionally show plural agreement in some varieties of Spanish. Example (63) is repeated here.

- (77) Hab{-ía/ -ían} unas mujeres en la fiesta. (Rodríguez-Mondoñedo 2008:334)  
had {-3SG/-3PL} some women in the party  
'There was/were some women at the party.'

There are other speakers for whom plural agreement is not accepted, and only singular agreement is preferred (Rodríguez-Mondoñedo 2008). This is indeed the prescriptively correct pattern in Spanish.

- (78) Hab{-ía/ \*-ían} unas mujeres en la fiesta.  
had {-3SG/\*-3PL} some women in the party  
'There was/were some women at the party.'

There are no speakers for whom plural agreement is preferred and singular agreement is rejected as ungrammatical in these cases. Thus, we have a situation in which the non-agreeing variant is preferred over the agreeing variant in the case that there is a preference. Modeling this with violable constraints, the two possibilities shown in (77) and (78) look as follows.

- (79) Hab{-ía/ -ían} unas mujeres en la fiesta.  
had {-3SG/-3PL} some women in the party

	MINPROBE=VALPHI	
a. $\text{☞}$ <i>Sing. verb</i>		*
b. $\text{☞}$ <i>Plural verb</i>	*	

- (80) Hab{-ía/ \* -ían} unas mujeres en la fiesta.  
had {-3SG/\*-3PL} some women in the party

	MINPROBE>>VALPHI	
a. <i>Plural verb</i>	*!	
b. $\text{☞}$ <i>Sing. verb</i>		*

For other constructions still, such as the impersonal *se* construction (see example (62), Ormazabal & Romero (2024), Ausín & Depiante (2023)), this kind of agreement optionality does not correspond to any sort of preference and seems to be a case of true, “unranked” optionality. These kinds of inconsistencies show that modeling this kind of variation with violable constraints (independently assuming that we do not want caveats ad infinitum and that we want this stuff to be generalizable across constructions) is not on the right track.

## 6.2. Economy conditions

If modeling these preferences in terms of violable constraints is indeed the way to go, it would have to be the case that preferences MINPROBE and VALPHI, for cases in which they are ranked, are relativized to the domain of different constructions and/or different types of agreement. It would also have to be the case that these preferences are, ultimately, completely arbitrary. In the case of existential *haber*, speakers show a preference (which is reflected in prescriptive norms) for a lack of number agreement (no defective circumvention). In the case of SDPs in 3PL-ARB clauses, speakers show a similar preference for having number agreement (having defective circumvention).

Therefore, the introduction of these preferences and the ranking of them requires positing that these preferences are independently motivated elements in the grammar that are sensitive to different clause types or types of Agree. If these preferences are taken seriously as independent conditions in the grammar, then it seems that the number of these preferences and combinations of them across contexts would have to exponentially increase in order to account for any kind of inter-/intra-speaker variation such as these examples.

This kind of thinking gets away from the utility of this kind of constraint ranking to conveniently model the way certain preferences are ranked in cases of optionality in grammar, and teeters dangerously close to granting these ranked constraints a large degree of explanatory power in the grammar, which I do not want to do. Affording any explanatory power to these kinds of ranked constraints places a very heavy burden on the grammatical system to introduce as many abstract constraints and conditions as needed to derive the complex patterns of variation seen in a language, which ultimately does not fall in line with the idea that natural language grammars should operate in accordance with the simplest, most economical conditions possible (Berwick & Chomsky 2016; Chomsky 2021). Furthermore, it does not actually tell us anything about why these constraints and conditions should exist in the first place.

In pursuing an account of these data that offers explanation beyond mere description (Chomsky 1965), we can better model these types of preferences and optionalities with generalizable economy conditions that reduce to principles of computational efficiency (Collins 2001; Chomsky 2024).

In line with economy principles, we can reconsider the preferences above in (74), except, instead of preferences, we can talk about what is not preferred in the grammar.

Probing is costly in the syntax. Probing more than once, then, is more costly than only probing once. Thus, the preference MINPROBE can be reconsidered in terms of economy conditions. Instead of an independently motivated component of the grammar stating a preference to only probe once, it is sufficient to say that a computational system may instead prefer not to have to probe more than once simply because of the computational burden of having to probe again.

Furthermore, if a probe does not search more than once when it still has unvalued features, those unvalued features get sent off to the interfaces. While this does not create a “derivational time-bomb” that leads to ungrammaticality (Preminger 2014) as was previously thought, it still means that some additional work has to be done by the computational system in order to retrieve a default value at transfer (see Partial Default Agreement (PDA) in Béjar (2003), and similar proposals in Fernández Serrano (2022)). This additional work only occurs when there are unvalued features left over on a probe, so non-deficient goals do not induce the need for such a mechanism. Therefore, having leftover unvalued features on a probe is costly in the syntax as those features have to be somehow dealt with at the level of spellout and interpretation.

In these cases of SDP agreement in 3PL-ARB clauses, probing more than once is costly. Not probing more than once is also costly as it requires assigning a default value to a leftover unvalued feature on the probe. In this way, the option of not doing defective circumvention as well as the option of doing defective circumvention both involve costly syntactic operations. In other words, they both involve a violation of principles of generalized economy.

In this way, there is no major difference between the fact the prescriptive tendency in existential *haber* clauses is to not have number agreement, and the fact that the prescriptive tendency for SDP agreement in 3PL-ARB clauses is to have number agreement. Both simply involve a non-economical operation, and the way the grammar chooses which non-economical operation to go with is something that can ultimately be attributed to extra-grammatical factors (see Ormazabal & Romero 2024).

Reducing the availability of these different kinds of preferences to generalized economy conditions also explains the optionalities of agreement seen in other constructions across Spanish (and other languages) without having to posit any major differences between these constructions because of the prescriptive tendency for agreement to go one way or another. See the following examples, with the prescriptively ‘incorrect’ agreement pattern indicated with an exclamation point. First see variation in number agreement in dative subject sentences.

- (81) Nos encant{-an/ !-a} las películas de terror. (Fernández-Serrano 2022:9)  
 us.DAT love {-3PL/!-3SG} the films of terror  
 ‘We love horror movies.’
- (82) Me encant{-a/ !-an} hacer planes. (Fernández-Serrano 2022:167)  
 me.DAT love {-3SG/!-3PL} make plans  
 ‘I love making plans.’

Next, see variation in number agreement in existential clauses in Spanish and English.

- (83) Hab{-ía/ !-ían} varios problemas.  
 had {-3SG/!-3PL} several problems  
 ‘There {was/!were} several problems.’
- (84) There {were/!was} several problems.

In either of these cases, the variation can be explained in terms of general preferences in the grammar to conform to economy conditions and principles of computational efficiency, with the fact that the prescriptive preferences are different between (81) and (82) or (83) and (84) not having to do with any major difference between the nature of the relevant constructions or languages.

In this framework, intraspeaker variation and morphosyntactic optionality come about when there is more than one way to avoid violating economy principles that result from the application of syntactic operations in a single derivation.

All of the cases of optionality here result from how agreement probes handle agreement with—and agreement past—a deficient goal. This general configuration in which defective circumvention can occur seems to be a corner of languages’ grammars in which no possible outcome is completely economical. This is perhaps because, most of the time, phi-probes do not have to deal with deficient elements, since most phi-goals are indeed maximally specified for phi-features. There is no guarantee in language that any and all syntactic operations should be maximally economical and computationally efficient, though grammars certainly have a preference for achieving those ideals. As such, the inability to completely satisfy such conditions in a single derivation gives rise to optional ways of handling it.

## 7. Conclusion

This number agreement mismatch alternation in the colloquial Spanish of some speakers reveals a number of interesting facts about the syntax of Spanish and the architecture of grammar as a whole. I convincingly show that the Spanish 3PL-ARB construction actually involves two distinct null subject arguments: one implicit argument agent *pro<sub>im</sub>* in Spec,vP and another expletive argument *pro<sub>expl</sub>* in Spec,TP. This consideration leads to a number of interesting empirical conclusions.

The controlling of PRO in the secondary predicate I show to be an instance of exhaustive control. PRO is a phi-goal which probes upward to agree with its syntactic antecedent. Showing control as upward agreement out of an adjunct clause complicates the theory of control as movement (Hornstein 1999). Due to the deficient nature of the implicit argument, PRO can optionally agree only with the implicit argument and spell out singular agreement as a default, or it can probe above Spec,vP past the implicit argument agent and receive a phi-feature value from the expletive in Spec,TP via defective circumvention, at which point the secondary predicate surfaces as plural.

This kind of number agreement optionality can be seen in various places across Spanish and in other languages as well, especially when phi-deficient goals are involved, thus creating the setup for defective circumvention in a variety of contexts. In this paper, I have mentioned agreement optionality in existential *haber* sentences, postverbal subjects of unaccusative verbs, impersonal *se* constructions, and dative clitic subject constructions, all in addition to the optionality of adjectival agreement that occurs in 3PL-ARB clauses.

Optional adjectival agreement additionally surfaces in other areas of Spanish, such as with verbs of perception and predicative adjectives (Greeson 2025).

- (85) Los vinos sab -en ranci {-os/ -o}. (Greson 2025:29)  
 the wines taste-3PL rancid {-MPL/-MSG}  
 ‘The wines taste rancid.’

Though I do not analyze such cases in this paper, Greson (2025) claims that the optionality in adjectival agreement in this example comes from the fact that verbs of perception such as *saber* ‘taste’ involve the projection of a covert perception source argument. The adjective can then either optionally track singular agreement with the perception source argument, or track plural agreement with the structural subject *los vinos*. I believe that this analysis is compatible with—and, indeed, can be informed by—a defective circumvention analysis of optional number agreement.

In this paper, I show that such cases of optional number agreement and intraspeaker variation can be analyzed as the output of a single set of grammatical operations and can also be modeled in terms of violable constraints, although these options and preferences for agreement are better captured in terms of how well they conform to economy preferences and principles of computational efficiency in the grammar.

This work also takes seriously the importance of colloquial and nonstandard data that does not conform to prescriptive linguistic norms, as the singular SDP agreement in 3PL-ARB clauses is not prescriptively correct. I show here that these data, which historically have been overlooked, have the capacity to inform and deepen our understanding of natural language syntax and variation. These types of data should be taken seriously—even for well-documented languages such as English and Spanish—as they provide insights that might otherwise be overlooked.

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