

## Revisiting indefinite direct objects in contexts triggering non-specific interpretation

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### 1 Introduction

This paper studies the behaviour of indefinite direct objects (DO) when occurring in four contexts which trigger a non-specific interpretation on the DO. As known, Romanian DOs may be marked by means of the differential object marker ‘*pe*’ (deriving from the locative preposition (*s*)*p(r)e* (on)) and may be additionally doubled by a pronominal clitic. The former mechanism has been labelled *Differential Object Making (DOM)* while the latter bears the name of *Clitic Doubling (CD)*.

The starting point of the analysis is the controversial issue of specificity discussed in the literature in connection to both DOM and CD: Farkas (1987), Dobrovie-Sorin (1990, 1994) and Cornilescu (2000) argue that DOM is responsible for the specific reading. Steriade (1980) and Gierling (1997) on the other hand correlate specificity to clitic doubling. Tigău (2011), Chiriacescu and von Heusinger (2011a, b) regard specificity as a joint effect of DOM and CD. Tigău (2015, 2016) insists even on the functional unity of CD + DOM as a clause-level construction exhibiting a dedicated semantics and pragmatics.

The experiment enclosed in this paper has been developed on the model presented in Tigău (2020) and von Heusinger and Tigău (2019) with the aim of verifying some inconclusive results there. More specifically, von Heusinger and Tigău (2019) report on the existence of two groups of speakers: one group which allows marked DOs in these contexts and another group which discards these DPs as ungrammatical. We also added a norming task in order to probe for the exact interpretation that the respondents assign to the items.

### 2 An experiment on indefinite DOs

**Experiment design.** The experiment focused on the behaviour of unmarked, DOMed and CDed+DOMed indefinite direct objects in the context of four contexts forcing a non-specific reading: *cel mult/cel puţin* (‘at most’ / ‘at least’), *câte* (‘some’), *oarecare* (‘any’), *subjunctive*. Relative to each context we built 8 sentences in which we varied the DO type, thereby obtaining three variants for each sentence and an overall number of 96 items. We evenly distributed these items in 4 lists. We added 14 fillers to each list and then randomly distributed all the items in the lists. The lists were afterwards formatted as Google online forms in such a way that respondents could only see one item at a time, they could not move back or forth across the questionnaire, nor were they able to access the following item without having assessed the previous one first.

For each item we designed an acceptability scale ranging from 1 (very bad) to 7 (very good) and a special question probing for the specific/non-specific interpretation of the indefinite DO in that item. Example (1) contains an actual experimental item in all its three variants:

- (1) Directorul de proiect **(ii)** va accepta **(pe)** cel mult trei voluntari.  
Manager.the of project them.CL will accept DOM at most three volunteers  
‘The project manager will accept at most three volunteers.’

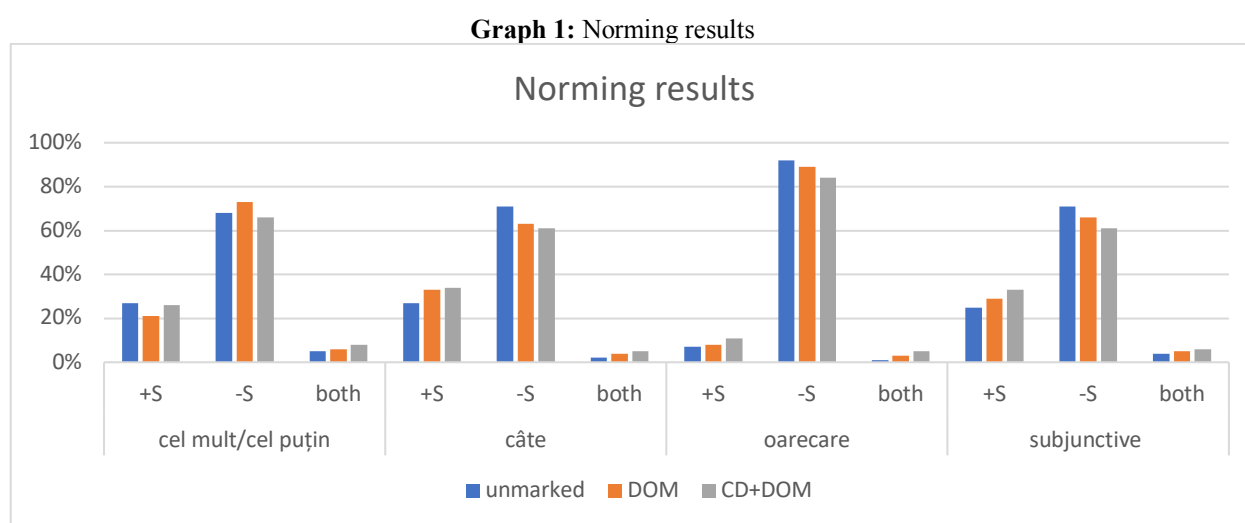
Each questionnaire was assessed by at least 20 native speakers of Romanian, with a total of over 80 people taking part in the experiment.

**Experimental results.** Given the vast literature discussing both DOM and CD as specificity mechanisms, our expectation was for respondents to accept items containing unmarked DOs and to reject those items featuring marked DOs (DOMed and CDed+DOMed). We thus started from the following two hypotheses:

**H1:** Unmarked indefinite DOs are accepted in non-specific contexts and evince a non-specific interpretation

**H2:** Marked indefinite DOs will be rejected in non-specific contexts, given that there is a clash between these contexts and DOM and CD as specificity triggering mechanisms

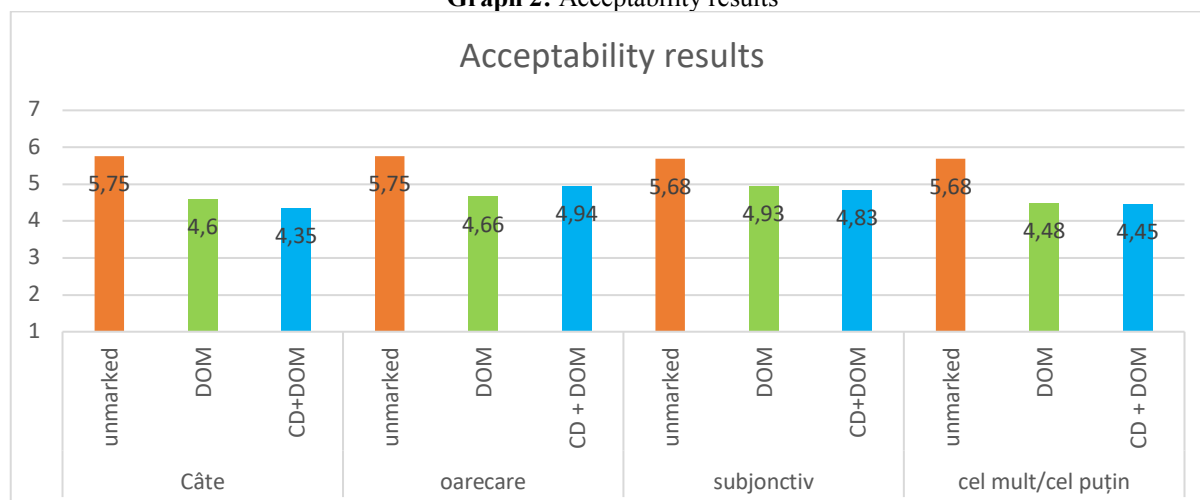
**Observations on the norming task.** Several important observations may be made on the basis of the norming results depicted in Graph 1:



Firstly, *all types of DOs, whether marked or not, seem to lose their specific interpretation when occurring in the four contexts*. The majority of speakers chose the non-specific reading over the specific one irrespective of the context or DO type; the ratios between +S vs. -S are roughly constant for three of the contexts (*cel mult/cel puțin*, *câte*, *subjunctive*), with over 61% of speakers assigning the items -S readings irrespective of DO type. There is a significant increase in preference for the non-specific interpretation for the *oarecare* context, where over 84% of the informants opted for -S reading on all DO types. Expectedly, respondents most readily assign the non-specific interpretations to items containing unmarked DOs but the difference in this respect between unmarked items on the one hand and marked ones is not very big and show a steady decline on a scale *unmarked* > *DOMed* > *CDed+DOMed* (there is one exception: *cel mult/cel puțin* contexts where *DOMed* items reach the highest percentage on a non-specific interpretation). Thus, it is quite clear that all the four contexts force non-specificity and that marking does not impinge on this effect. The results confirm our hypothesis H1, but disconfirm hypothesis H2.

**Observations on the acceptability task.** The vast majority of informants assessed the experimental items as acceptable, assigning scores which surpass by far the mid of the 7-rung acceptability scale.

**Graph 2: Acceptability results**



Items containing unmarked DOs receive very high acceptability scores, surpassing the threshold of 5 for all the four contexts. Items featuring DOMed DOs or DOMed+CDed DOM receive lower scores but these revolve around an average of 4,34 so they are deemed as quite acceptable by speakers. Note also that there is no significant difference as to the speakers' preference for items featuring DOMed DOs or CDed+DOMed DOs. Thus, all experimental items were found acceptable by speakers, irrespective of DO marking, with a noticeable preference for items containing unmarked DOs. The results confirm our hypothesis H1, but disconfirm H2 as our expectation was for marked DOs to be excluded from non-specific contexts.

**Discussion.** We need to discuss experimental results against the background of our initial hypotheses:

1. **High acceptability for unmarked DOs:** As seen, the acceptability scores assigned to unmarked DOs were expectedly high. Romanian unmarked indefinite DOs may allow both a specific as well as a non-specific reading and may acquire both a wide scope and a narrow scope interpretation when co-occurring with other scope taking expressions. As a consequence, the non-specific reading, which is generally available with unmarked indefinites, will be the one to get actualized in the four contexts forcing a non-specific interpretation.

2. **Unexpectedly high acceptability for marked DOs:** A possible explanation for these results might be that neither DOM nor CD are specificity triggers. The specific reading signalled in many papers may arise as a consequence of the syntax that these mechanisms come with: they may trigger movement to a position which favours certain semantic mechanisms of interpretation which, in turn, lead to the specific reading (see Tigău 2020 and López 2012 for a proposal).

### 3 Conclusions

The experiment presented in this paper has revealed a few interesting facts regarding the behaviour of Romanian indefinite DOs in contexts forcing a non-specific interpretation. Unmarked DOs fare very well in these contexts, exhibiting a non-specific reading. This is to be expected, given that unmarked indefinites freely allow both a specific and a non-specific interpretation. DOMed and CDed+DOMed DOs fare less optimally than their unmarked counterparts but, contrary to our expectations, they are assessed as quite acceptable and

assigned a non-specific reading. It seems then that neither DOM nor CD represent specificity triggering mechanisms and we may conclude that Romanian does not have a category of objects which are necessarily interpreted as specific.

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