

A novel case of online-offline misalignments: accusative clitic doubling in Spanish

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Timed and untimed measures of sentence comprehension do not always align. Such misalignments arise when comprehenders show grammatically incompatible patterns online—in timed measures—yet detect the same violations offline, for example in post-sentence acceptability judgments. Misalignments are often attributed to retrieval interference from partially matching items in memory [1–3]. We report a novel source of misalignment leveraging accusative clitic doubling, a construction that varies across Spanish dialects, e.g., Antonio CLITIC_i saw the hairdresser_i; see (2–3). In European Spanish, clitic doubling is mainly restricted to strong pronouns, whereas in Rioplatense Spanish it extends to noun-phrase objects. Detecting the ungrammaticality of clitic-doubled nominal objects in European Spanish thus requires a dialect-specific constraint and may be further hindered by a superficially similar construction available in both dialects: clitic right dislocation (4). We support this hypothesis using data from acceptability judgments, self-paced listening, and visual-world eye-tracking. We show that these objects are deemed unacceptable in European Spanish but are processed similarly across dialects. This suggests that online–offline misalignments can result from delayed application of dialect-specific constraints [4] and/or competition from similar structures.

Experiments and results. We compared sentences with and without clitic doubling (1–2) in three experiments and two dialects (Rioplatense and European Spanish). In an untimed acceptability study (Experiment 1, $n = 80$), clitic-doubled sentences were rated as less acceptable than non-doubled sentences, but only in European Spanish, demonstrating a contrast between dialects (Figure 1A). By contrast, a self-paced listening study (Experiment 2, $n = 205$), where the sentences were presented without context, did not show any evidence of a processing disruption after hearing the doubled object in either dialect (Figure 1B). However, because the sentences were presented without context, it was unclear whether participants had properly processed the clitic. To address this possibility, a control condition was added in a visual-world eye-tracking experiment (Experiment 3, $n = 192$), in which the gender of the clitic could be used to predict a target picture because the display showed two characters that mismatched in gender (Figure 2). Participants showed evidence of using the clitic predictively. But again, this did not affect the processing of the doubled or non-doubled nominal object (Figure 1C). Taken together, these findings extend previous evidence that the time course application of grammatical constraints can vary across languages [5], showing that such variation can also arise between dialects of the same language.

References

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Figure 1. (A) Mean acceptability ratings in Experiment 1. (B) Median listening times in Experiment 2. (C) Average proportion of looks in Experiment 3.

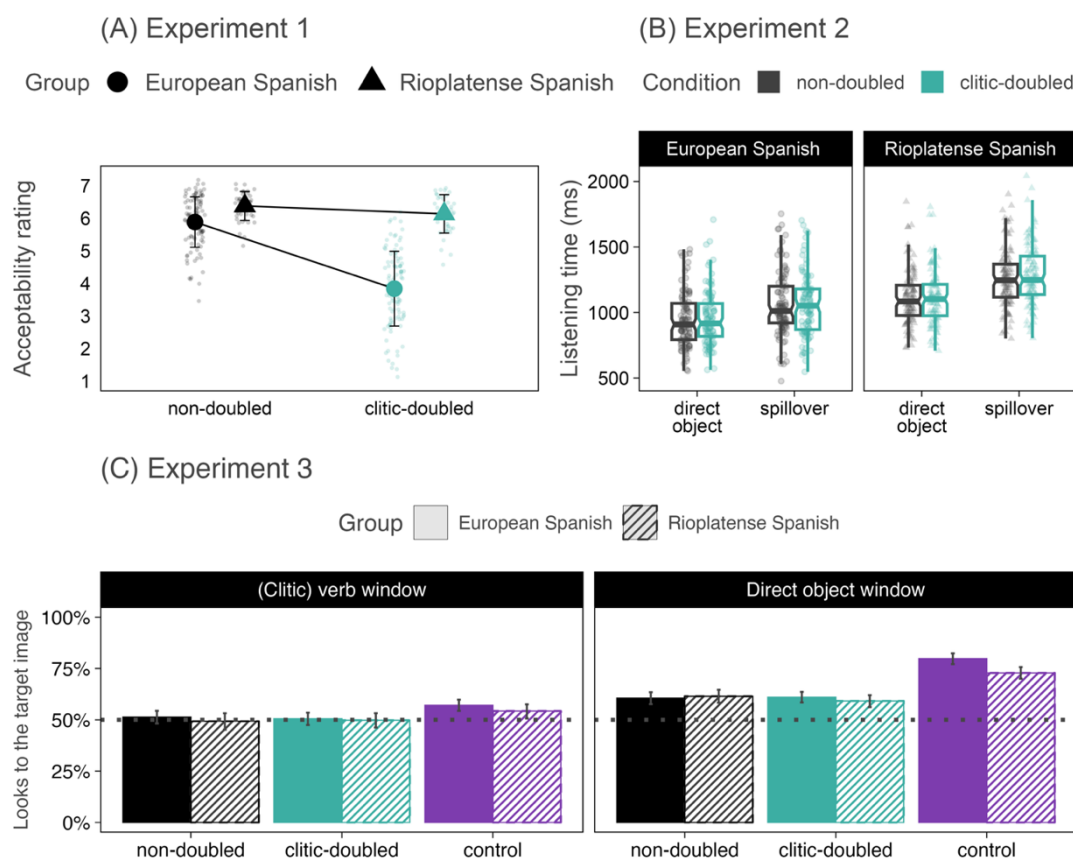
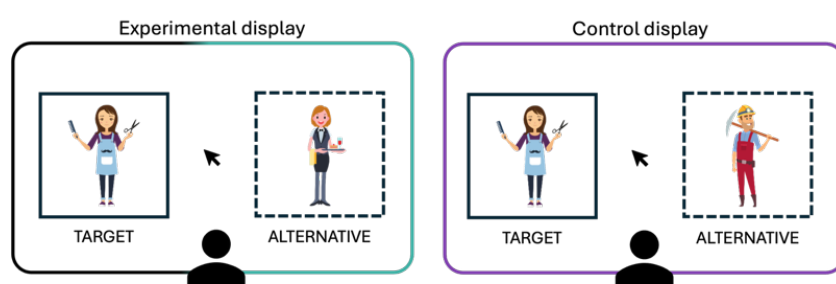


Figure 2. Displays in the visual-world eye tracking experiment (Experiment 3)



Language-specific information about accusative clitic doubling in Spanish

Accusative clitic doubling refers to the co-occurrence of an accusative clitic and a co-referential direct object within the same syntactic and prosodic unit. In Rioplatense Spanish, clitic doubling is optional: a direct object may occur without a clitic (1) or may be doubled by a clitic (2). In the doubled construction, the clitic *la* agrees in gender and number with the nominal object *a la peluquera*. By contrast, accusative clitic doubling in European Spanish is restricted to strong pronouns and to first- or second-person nominal objects (3). Thus, third-person nominal objects cannot be clitic-doubled in European Spanish. Sentences (1–2) were used in Experiment 3. Experiments 1 and 2 used identical sentences but with an additional adverbial phrase to account for spillover effects, e.g., Antonio (la) vio a la peluquera in the hallway el jueves por la mañana, ‘Antonio CLITIC saw the hairdresser in the hallway on Thursday morning’).

- (1) Sentence without clitic doubling (grammatical in Rioplatense and European Spanish)

Antonio vio a la peluquera en el pasillo.

Antonio saw DOM the hairdresser in the hallway.

‘Antonio saw the hairdresser in the hallway.’

- (2) Accusative clitic doubling with nominal objects (grammatical only in Rioplatense Spanish)

Antonio la_i vio a la peluquera_i en el pasillo.

Antonio CL.ACC.FEM.3SG_i saw DOM the hairdresser_i in the hallway.

‘Antonio saw the hairdresser in the hallway.’

- (3) Accusative clitic doubling with strong pronouns (grammatical in Rioplatense and European Spanish)

Antonio la_i vio a ella_i.

Antonio CL.ACC.FEM.3SG_i saw DOM her_i.

‘Antonio saw her.’

A construction that is superficially similar to accusative clitic doubling is clitic right dislocation, in which the word order is the same as with accusative clitic doubling but the co-referential object is dislocated to the right and interpreted as a topic (4).

- (4) Clitic right dislocation (grammatical in Rioplatense and European Spanish)

Antonio la_i vio, a la peluquera_i.

Antonio CL.ACC.FEM.3SG_i saw, DOM the hairdresser_i.

‘Antonio saw her, the hairdresser.’