Differential Object Marking and Topicality in Balearic Catalan

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Many languages overtly case-mark some direct objects, depending on semantic and pragmatic features, such as definiteness and animacy: this is known as *Differential Object Marking* (hereinafter, DOM), following Bossong (1991) and Aissen (2003). The functional motivation for DOM is to distinguish subject and object: the more subject-like an object is, the greater the likelihood of its being overtly case marked.

Catalan has been described as manifesting DOM in a very restricted way, with pronouns only, covering the upper end of the scale of definiteness (Comrie 1979, Aissen 2003). Such basic description is usually made taking into account the standard or privileged variant only. Some degree of abstraction is, of course, necessary in order to obtain relevant generalisations for typological characterisations and inter-linguistic comparison. However, paying attention only to the received standard can definitely condemn many data from dialectal syntax to obscurity — data that are nevertheless precious to obtain not only a more fine-grained picture of the language itself, but also a better understanding of the parameters responsible for variation and linguistic change.

The aim of this paper is to present some data on DOM from Balearic Catalan and to address some of the questions that they raise. My examples show that in Balearic Catalan a preposition systematically occurs to introduce not only strong pronouns, but also (some) clitic-dislocated objects. As far as I know, this fact is new to the literature on DOM in Catalan and calls for a principled explanation: How is the occurrence of the preposition to be accounted for? What kind of objects can receive the special mark? What is the relevant dimension? How do those data fit in with our current views on DOM? What are the consequences and implications for a general theory of DOM?

The analysis presented points to topicality as the relevant dimension that can explain the distribution and the spreading of DOM. This finding is consistent with the proposals by Rohlfs (1971), Pensado (1985), Laca (1987), and Leonetti (2004), among others. Thus, when information packaging devices are taken into account, a different picture of DOM in Catalan emerges.