

An experimental study of ne-cliticization in Catalan

Clàudia Martínez-Hernández

Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain

<https://doi.org/10.36505/ExLing-2024/15/0020/000645>

Abstract

The Latin adverb *inde*, meaning ‘from there,’ has evolved into the partitive clitic *ne/en* in several Romance languages. While *ne-cliticization* has been extensively studied in Italian, research on its use in Catalan is both scarce and lacks empirical evidence. This study addresses this gap through two experiments involving acceptability tests and judgment tasks. The experiments challenge two established claims in the literature: (1) that *ne-cliticization* is dependent on the unaccusative status of the verb, and (2) that the presence of a locative element can cause unergative verbs to pattern like unaccusatives, thereby licensing *ne* as the main argument of the verb. The findings refute these claims, showing that *ne* can serve as the main argument of all intransitive verbs, irrespective of their unaccusative or unergative classification, and that locatives do not influence speakers’ choices regarding *ne-cliticization*.

Keywords: partitive clitic, unaccusativity, locative, animacy

Introduction

This study investigates *ne-cliticization* as main argument of intransitive verbs in Catalan. The partitive clitic *ne* can serve different functions, including quantifying of a noun. In such cases, the clitic may represent the object of a transitive verb or the subject of an intransitive one, as shown in (1).

- Ja hi ha molts turistes. i a l'estiu **n'**arribaran més.
□ Already there are many tourists and in the summer **en**-arrive more
‘There are already a lot of tourists and in the summer more of them will arrive’

This research focuses on the latter usage, where *ne* serves as the subject of an intransitive. The prevailing idea in the literature is that *ne-cliticization* is restricted to unaccusative verbs, based on Perlmutter’s (1978) Unaccusativity Hypothesis, which posits that intransitive verbs can be divided into two categories, unaccusatives and unergatives, based on their semantic and syntactic behavior. *Ne-cliticization* has been widely defended as an unaccusativity diagnostic (Belletti and Rizzi, 1981; Burzio 1986)

and treated as a linguistic fact, despite studies that suggest that ne-cliticization may also be acceptable with unergative verbs.

In Martínez Hernandez (2024), I critically evaluate the limitations of using ne-cliticization as a diagnostic for unaccusativity and revisit the assumptions underlying the UH. In that study, I conducted an experiment to examine the acceptability and production of ne as the main argument of both classifications of verbs with other semantic variables controlled. The findings confirmed that the clitic is compatible with both verb types, contradicting the traditional hypothesis. However, the results also revealed variability in the judgements that could not be solely attributed to verb type.

Building in this initial findings, the present study seemed to test two additional variables while further challenging the dependency of ne-cliticization on the UH: (1) the animacy of the subject and (2) the influence of the presence of a locative. The latter has been proposed in the literature as a factor that might cause unergatives to “behave” like unaccusatives, thereby exceptionally licensing the partitive as the main argument (Torrego, 1989; Todolí, 2002).

Methodology

The methodology of the experiments is outlined as follows. Ninety participants took part in both experiment. The sample varied in terms of location within Catalan-speaking areas, as well as age and education level. Given that Catalan is spoken in a bilingual area alongside Spanish, and that the clitic does not exist in Spanish, the participants also completed a pretest to assess their knowledge of the general clitic system in Catalan. As mentioned previously, this experiment builds on an earlier study. The results showed that all verbs tested, both unaccusatives and unergatives, were acceptable with the clitic, however, certain verbs, while deemed acceptable, showed a lower rate of acceptability (just above 55% of participants). These verbs were selected for the new experiments to investigate whether the new variables influenced their acceptability. The goal of the first experiment was to test whether there was a difference regarding subject animacy. The experiment consisted of 10 sentences using 5 different verbs and 10 distractors. Each verb was tested twice with subjects of differing levels of animacy, allowing for direct comparisons. The verbs tested were: *volar*, *quedar*, *caure*, *tremolar* and *nedar* (*to fly*, *to be left*, *to fall*, *to tremble* and *to swim*). Subject animacy was controlled following the hierarchy proposed by Aissen (2003). Participants were asked to rate the sentences using a scale from 1 to 4. The other experiment aimed to test the effect of locatives in boosting the presence of the clitic. As in the first part, verbs were tested in pairs. However, this experiment involved a production task. The verbs *passejar*, *plorar*, *estudiar*, *aparèixer* and *treballar* (*to walk around*, *to cry*, *to study*, *to appear* and *to work*) were tested with and without a locative in otherwise identical sentences in order to evaluate the presence of the clitic.

Results

The results for both experiments showed a clear tendency that allow us to draw strong conclusions. Regarding the animacy experiment, an example of the results for one of the verb pairs is provided in Figure 1. Instead of conducting a binary acceptability task, using a graded scale allowed us to observe tendencies within the acceptable range. Considering that ratings of 3 and 4 indicate acceptability, we observed with the verb *caure* that a higher rate of 3 occurred when the subject was human, while a higher rate of 4 occurred when the subject was inanimate. This was general tendency was observed in all pairs of verbs, with lower animacy subjects yielding higher acceptability rates.

As for the production experiment, the results were similarly conclusive. An example of the findings of verb *treballar* is shown below. There was indeed a difference when the sentence presented a locative but not pertaining to the partitive clitic. Catalan also features a locative clitic, *hi*, which represents among other elements a locative expression. The results of the verb *treballar* in the graph, reflect the same trend that all the other verbs presented as well. When a locative was included, the number of participants choosing to use the partitive clitic decreased, with many opting instead for the locative clitic or a combination of the two. Therefore, we can conclude that the behavior of both clitics is opposite to that described in the literature. When a locative is added, it intuitively boosts the presence of the locative clitic, and as a consequence, decreases the use of the partitive.

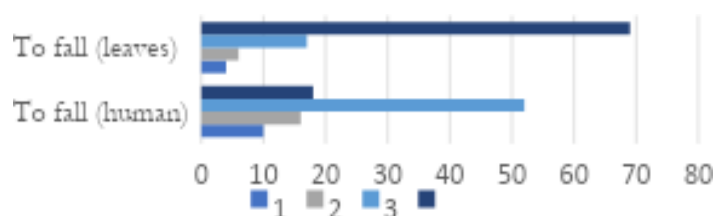


Figure 1. Acceptability results for verb *caure* (*to fall*) with different animacy in the subject.

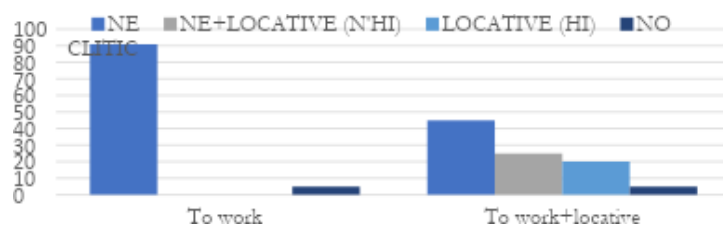


Figure 2. Production results of the clitic with verb *treballar* (*to work*), with and without locative.

Discussion

The results of this research confirm that, at the very least, *ne*-cliticization does not depend on the Unaccusativity Hypothesis. Moreover, these findings pose serious challenges to the proposal and its traditional diagnostics. This means partitive *ne* in Catalan is felicitous when cliticizing with any intransitive verb. However, this research has helped to refine our understanding of the clitic's behavior. The role of the locative, which has traditionally been linked to the clitic as a booster of its presence, has been shown not to boost the partitive. Instead, it increases the presence of locative clitic, as would have been intuitive in the first place. Additionally, the partitive has demonstrated a preference for arguments with relatively low animacy. All of the features identified in this research are associated with low prominence which aligns with the nature of the clitic, also semantically low prominent, by its indefinite and non-specific nature. In any case, this research supports the idea that a compositional interpretation of events account better for the facts than a lexicalist analysis of the verbal unit. The findings show the need to move away from rigid frameworks in favor of more dynamic approaches that account for the interplay of syntax and semantics in cliticization.

References

- Aissen, J. 2003. Differential object marking: Iconicity vs. economy. *Natural language & linguistic theory*, 21(3), 435-483.
- Belletti, A., Rizzi, L. 1981. The syntax of "ne": some theoretical implications. *The Linguistic Review* 1, 11–154.
- Burzio, L., 1986. *Italian Syntax: A Government-Binding Approach*. NY, Springer.
- Martínez Hernández, C. 2024. Ne-cliticization as unaccusativity diagnostic in Catalan. In Tănase-Dogaru, M (ed.), RRL (LXIX 3-4., 447-460) Editura Academiei Romane.
- Perlmutter, D. 1978. Impersonal passives and the unaccusative hypothesis. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* 38, 157–189.
- Todoí, J. 2002. Els pronoms. In J. Solà, M. R. Lloret, J. Mascaró, M. Pérez Saldanya (eds.), *Gramàtica del Català Contemporani*, Barcelona, Empúries, 1337–1433.
- Torrego, E. 1989. Unergative-unaccusative alternations in Spanish. *MIT Working Papers in Linguistics* 10, 253–269.