

When Differential Object Marking is Optional: The Case of Copala Triqui

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1 Introduction

Copala Triqui or *Xna'anj nu'* is an Otomanguean language of Oaxaca, Mexico belonging to the Triqui branch of the Mixtecan subfamily alongside Itunyoso Triqui and Chichahuaxtla Triqui. The three Triqui varieties share a large proportion of their lexicons and many grammatical characteristics including rich lexical and grammatical tone systems, isolating morphology, and head-initial syntax. Both VSO and SVO word orders are common in Mixtecan languages, but VSO order is taken to be underlying for Copala Triqui (Hollenbach 1992, 2008, 2019 a.o.).

Copala Triqui stands out as the only Triqui variety with overt accusative case marking (Broadwell 2022), and it is also counted among the more than 300 languages worldwide which mark only a distinct subset of transitive objects overtly (Bossong 1991). This phenomenon, known as DOM or differential object marking (Bossong 1985, Croft 1988, Comrie 1989, and Aissen 2003), is found in a wide range of languages, including many belonging to the Romance, Indo-Iranian, Turkic, and Semitic families (Bossong 1991, Bányi and Kalin 2021, Sinnemäki 2014). Because the literature on Spanish DOM is so extensive and because Spanish is frequently spoken alongside the indigenous languages of Mexico, we use it to introduce DOM here. The examples in (1) illustrate the most basic properties of DOM for General Spanish (see Leonetti 2008, Fábregas 2013, a.o.): in (1a) the direct object *su hermana* ‘his sister’ is preceded by the preposition *a*, known also as personal “a”, whereas the direct object in (1b) *el árbol* ‘the tree’ may not be introduced in this way.

- (1) a. El niño vio a su hermana.
DEF.M.SG boy saw.PST PREP POSS.F.SG sister
‘The boy saw his sister.’
b. El niño vio (*a) el árbol.
DEF.M.SG boy saw.PST DEF.M.SG tree
‘The boy saw the tree.’

For Spanish, and many other DOM languages, objects that are human and specific tend to be morphologically marked. Conversely, objects that are lower on the animacy scale (non-human animate, inanimate) or the specificity scale (non-specific) are less likely to be marked. In addition to animacy and specificity, definiteness (definite > indefinite), person (first, second > third), and information structure (given information > new information) are the most reported factors to condition DOM cross-linguistically (Silverstein 1976, Moravcsik 1978, Comrie 1979, Croft 1988).

Whether it is animacy, specificity, definiteness, person, or information structure that most influences the distribution of DOM in a given language, greater prominence according to any of these scales tends to result in increased morphological marking. Yet, in many DOM languages there is language-internal variation in how DOM interacts with the prominence scales. Bossong (1991) observes that it is both challenging to establish strict rules for DOM within a given language, and when it is possible, the application of those rules still exhibits some degree of flexibility.

Well-known examples of contexts in which DOM marking is optional in Spanish include toponyms (Monedero Carrillo de Albornoz 1978) and non-human animate objects (von Heusinger 2008, García García 2018), both instances where one would not expect to find DOM, but speakers may nonetheless employ it.

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- (2) a. El niño vio (a) tijuana.
 DEF.M.SG boy saw.PST PREP Tijuana
 ‘The boy saw Tijuana.’
- b. El niño vio (a) la iguana.
 DEF.M.SG boy saw.PST PREP DEF.F.SG iguana
 ‘The boy saw the iguana.’

In a similar vein, researchers report variability in the use of DOM with specific inanimate objects in some Spanish varieties, e.g. Mexican Spanish (Bautista-Maldonado and Montrul 2019) and Argentinian Spanish (von Heusinger and Kaiser 2005, Montrul 2013). The inverse scenario is also attested: one finds several Spanish varieties, especially in the Caribbean, where speakers produce and accept structures with and without DOM where the General Spanish literature suggests DOM is obligatory (see e.g. Alfaraz 2011 for Cuban Spanish, and Alba 2004 for Dominican Spanish). Spanish is by no means the only language that exhibits variation and optionality with respect to DOM: Bossong 2021 discusses animacy-based optionality in Papia Kristang; Cassarà and Mürmann 2021 investigate lexically-based optionality in a variety of Italian, and Dalrymple and Nikolaeva 2011 address information structure-based optionality in Persian.

This paper investigates optionality in Copala Triqui DOM, specifically as it pertains to the marking of non-human animate direct objects. After introducing Copala Triqui and its system of Differential Object Marking in Section 2, we present the results of an acceptability judgment experiment designed to probe DOM optionality while controlling for predicate-type and relative animacy (comparing subjects and objects), as well as to investigate any associated effects of word order (comparing VSO and SVO). Section 4 discusses speaker variability, particularly with respect to age as a proxy for Spanish proficiency, and Section 5 concludes.

2 Background

Copala Triqui is the largest of the three Triqui languages spoken in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. Intelligibility among Triqui speakers is asymmetrical: speakers of Copala Triqui are less able to understand other Triqui varieties than vice versa, which is likely due in part to the relative population size and exposure. The vast majority of the estimated 30,000 speakers of Triqui who are reported to reside in Mexico are speakers of Copala Triqui (INEGI 2020). All Triqui varieties exhibit VSO~SVO word order alternations. One noteworthy difference between Copala Triqui and the other Triqui varieties is that only Copala Triqui marks (a subset of) direct objects overtly. This section is dedicated to introducing Copala Triqui sentence structure.

2.1 Word Order

As is true for other Mixtecan languages, Copala Triqui word order is VSO~SVO. Unlike many V1 languages in the region though, VOS is not a possible word order. For out-of-the-blue and broad focus utterances, SVO is considerably more common than VSO in both Spanish and English-based elicitation contexts, both orders are common in natural conversation, and VSO is the default order for narration. The examples in (3) come from *The Legend of the Sun and the Moon* narrated by Vidal López (Broadwell et al. 2009) and illustrate VSO clauses (3a-b), and an SVO clause (3c):

- (3) a. Gaa ne ta-c-avi' roj xtaj.
 then CAUS-PERF-die DU deer
 ‘Then they killed the deer.’
- b. Dan meca-ta'aa roj maa xtaj.
 DM COM-catch DU ACC deer
 ‘They caught the deer.’
- c. Gaa ne cunudaj nij xcuu cu-tuman' ne qui-xtáj maa
 then all PL insect COM-spread.out and COM-sting ACC
 xcua'an=' Ca'aj
 grandmother=1PL Ca'aj.
 ‘Then all of the insects spread out and stung our Grandmother Ca'aj.’

The preverbal subject in (3c) *cunudaj nij xcuu* ‘all the insects’ is given information in the discourse, and therefore likely serving as a topic in this example. Generally, the preverbal position is associated with topic and focus in Copala Triqui, as in true for other V1 languages in the region. All topicalized and focused constituents—subjects, objects, and adjuncts alike—can be left-dislocated, clefted, licensed by the phrase-final topic marker *ro'*, or focused via *də'* ‘only’, but only subjects occur preverbally without the use of dedicated information-structural strategies.

2.2 Differential Object Marking

Direct objects in Copala Triqui are morphologically marked by the particle *maa*³² in a subset of transitive clauses; as such, Copala Triqui is a language that exhibits Differential Object Marking (DOM). López Espinoza (2022) reports that it is also realized as *mee*³² *ma*⁴, and *ma*³, and *man*³. Hollenbach (1992 *inter alia*) use spelling ‘man’ which seems to reflect an older pronunciation. We use *maa*³² following López Espinoza (2022) and the most common modern pronunciation.

The basic principles behind *maa*-marking were first described by Hollenbach (1992) and are given in (4):

- (4) *Maa*-marking of direct objects (Hollenbach 1992)
- a. All animate pronominal direct objects are obligatorily introduced by *maa* (see 5a)
 - b. Human direct objects tend to be introduced by *maa* (see 3c)
 - c. Non-human animate direct objects are optionally introduced by *maa* (see 3a-b and 5b)
 - d. Inanimate direct objects tend not to be introduced by *maa* (see 5c)

The naturally-occurring utterances in (3) as well as the constructed sentences in (5) illustrate the principles in (4). In (5a) the direct object is the first-person pronoun *'unj* and *maa* must precede it. In (3c), *xcuá'n' Ca'aj* *our grandmother Ca'aj* is *maa*-marked, as expected for human objects. In (5b), *maa*-marking is optional with the non-human animate object *xcuáá* ‘snake’. This optionality is also shown to be naturally occurring, as *xtaj* ‘deer’ is unmarked in (3a) and *maa*-marked in (3b). Finally, in (5c), *maa*-marking is disallowed with the inanimate direct object *tachrij* ‘feather’.

- (5) a. Niyaj xtaj marce maa 'unj a'.
 see bird red ACC 1SG DECL
 ‘A/the red bird sees me.’
- b. Niyaj xtaj marce (maa) xcuáá gáá a'.
 see bird red ACC snake DECL
 ‘A/the red bird sees the rattlesnake.’
- c. Rqué xtaj marce *maa tachrij maa 'unj a'.
 see bird red feather DAT 1SG DECL
 ‘A/the red bird gave a/the feather to me.’

Example (5c) also demonstrates that *maa* can introduce indirect objects. For predicates that use *maa* to introduce indirect objects, its presence is obligatory. In other words, the marking of indirect objects is not dependent on, e.g., the animacy of the argument. As shown in (6a-b), *maa*-marking is required for a non-human animate and an inanimate indirect object:

- (6) a. Rqué xtaj marce *maa tachrij maa xcuáá gáá a'.
 see bird red feather DAT snake DECL
 ‘A/the red bird gave a/the feather to the rattlesnake.’
- b. Rqué xtaj marce *maa tachrij maa yóó a'.
 see bird red feather DAT dirt DECL
 ‘A/the red bird gave a/the feather to the dirt.’

Cross-linguistically differential object marking is commonly syncretic with the dative case on indirect objects (Manzini and Franco 2016; Kalin 2018). In fact, Hollenbach (1992) writes about *maa* as though it were a preposition licensing both direct and indirect objects (analogous in many respects to how some authors treat Spanish *a*). Broadwell (2022) is the first to analyze *maa* as an

accusative case maker (that is homophonous with the preposition that licenses a subset of indirect objects), but he notes that Hollebach’s collaborators were elderly in the 1960s, and as such it is reasonable to assume the differences between his data, especially with respect to asymmetries in direct and indirect object marking, represent language change. For more on the relationship between accusative and dative case and the emergence of DOM in Copala Triqui, see Broadwell (2022).

In other recent work, López Espinoza (2022) confirms Hollenbach’s finding that *maa*-marking is obligatory with animate pronouns, but goes on to elaborate that in other cases, whether or not an object is marked depends in part on the status of the subject. Specifically, he finds that the presence of DOM on lexical definite human objects depends on whether the subject is pronominal or lexical.

- (7) Relative prominence in *maa*-marking (López Espinoza 2022)
 - a. Lexical definite human objects are obligatorily marked when the subject is also lexical.
 - b. Lexical definite human objects are optionally marked when the subject is pronominal.
 - c. Indefinite human objects and all non-human indefinite objects are optionally marked.
 - d. Inanimate objects are obligatorily unmarked.

Broadwell (2022) also indicates that the relative prominence of the object with respect to the subject affects the likelihood of DOM in the so-called optional contexts. Drawing from elicitation judgments, he suggests several factors that condition the grammaticality of *maa*-marking: First, he reports that speakers strongly prefer *maa* when the subject is equal to or lower in animacy as compared to the object. Relatedly, when the event does lend itself to a semantic differentiation of subject and object, *maa*-marking of the object is more likely. Next, he reports that *maa* is required when the subject is extracted. Finally, he notes that at least some speakers are also more likely to require *maa* in VSO clauses than in SVO clauses.

- (8) Factors that increase the likelihood of DOM (Broadwell 2022)
 - a. Subject is equal to or lower in animacy than the object
 - b. Event does not have a semantically determined subject
 - c. Subject is extracted
 - d. Subject and object are adjacent (VSO)

Ultimately, Broadwell (2022) concludes that *maa* serves to differentiate the object from the subject when its presence is neither required nor banned, appealing to the formal research that addresses how certain properties of the object known to affect DOM, i.e. specificity, definiteness, animacy, etc. are assessed relative to the subject, e.g., Aissen (2003). Thus, while López Espinoza (2022) and Broadwell (2022) agree that the relative prominence of the subject and object contribute to the distribution of DOM in some way, as anticipated (see Section 1), it is difficult to determine hard and fast rules for predicting the presence of DOM in Copala Triqui.

3 The Experiment

To further probe the role of DOM with non-pronominal, non-human animate objects, and animacy/specificity equivalence for subject and object, as well as any associated effects of word order, we designed an acceptability judgment study in which we also collected response times. Constructions that are easier to process and/or implicitly more natural tend to elicit faster acceptability responses (Bader and Haussler 2010). Additionally, response times provide valuable insight into underlying grammatical knowledge (Hoop 2007), and aid in determining preferences among different variants, as demonstrated by Tremblay (2005). Thus, considering response time has the potential to shed light on how the presence of a *maa* might facilitate sentence interpretation, and in turn, what factors condition DOM optionally.

3.1 Participants

In total, 35 Copala Triqui speakers participated in the study, ranging in age from 18 to 80. Four participants were male and the rest female. At the time of the study, all participants were residing

in diaspora communities within the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, on account of the widespread displacement of Copala Triqui from their traditional homeland in and around San Juan Copala (Pombo 2014). All participants are Triqui-Spanish bilingual to some degree, although the linguistic profile of individual participants varies quite a bit. While some participants have minimal Spanish-language proficiency, others are shifting to Spanish even though Triqui is the first language for everyone who participated in the study. Nonetheless, we believe that most of the participants were Triqui dominant, and that it is unlikely that any fall under the categories of 'heritage' or 'semi-speakers' (Rothman 2009). Participants were unlikely to have had any experience reading or writing Triqui, and many indicated limited Spanish literacy skills as well, which we anticipated and considered when designing the experiment.

3.2 Design

The experiment crossed two factors (within subjects, within items): The first manipulation is the presence/absence of *maa* ("DOM"; *maa*, null); and the second is the relative order of subject and verb ("Word Order"; VSO, SVO). This yielded the four conditions, as in (9), which all mean 'a/the goat nudged a/the cow.'

- (9) a. VSO *maa*
 Tiguíj tana maa scúj a'.
 nudge goat ACC cow DECL
- b. VSO null
 Tiguíj tana scúj a'.
 nudge goat cow DECL
- c. SVO *maa*
 Tana tiguíj maa scúj a'.
 goat nudge ACC cow DECL
- d. SVO null
 Tana tiguíj scúj a'.
 goat nudge cow DECL

Experimental materials were created by the authors of this paper, one of whom is a native Copala Triqui speaker. All of the materials involve reversible events and non-human animate event participants representing local domesticated and wild animals and insects. Materials were then normed by two other native speakers unfamiliar with the purpose of the study and recorded by a third.

We used a Latin square design and a pseudo-randomized order where no two critical items of the same condition occur one after the other. Each participant encountered three items in each condition, totaling twelve target items, along with six intransitive fillers featuring pronominal subjects (three VS and three SV). In sum, each participant rated 18 example sentences. The experiment was of relatively short duration to accommodate the time constraints of our participants.

We used Experigen (Becker and Levine, 2013) as the platform for data collection. After explaining the study and obtaining consent, participants indicated that they were ready to begin by clicking a 'play' button to listen to an audio recording on the experimenter's mobile phone. They were then able to rate each sentence on a 3-point scale represented by intuitive and familiar emojis (☹ = 1; not a good sentence), (☺ = 2; ok not great), or (😊 = 3; fully acceptable). Participants were not able to repeat the trials. In addition to rating for each trial, the participants' response times were recorded on the webserver. Finally, an experimenter, using a mix of Spanish and Copala Triqui, conducted an informal survey about language experience, use, and proficiency for both languages that was also recorded.

3.3 Results

Due to cell-service connection issues, 17 trials were lost, leaving 403 critical trials for analysis. We analyzed ratings by fitting a cumulative link mixed-effects regression model with crossed random effects for participants and items (Baayen, Davidson and Bates 2008; Jaeger 2008), as implemented in the *Ordinal* package of the statistical software R 4.3.2 (Christensen 2023; R core team 2015).

Word Order and Case served as predictors (sum coded). We report statistical outputs for the maximal random effect structure that allowed for convergence (Barr, Levy, Scheepers and Tily 2013).

The mean overall rating across conditions was 2.7 ($SD = 0.44$); however, no significant main effects or interactions were observed (all $ps > 0.37$). As for the intransitive fillers, 18 trials were lost, resulting in 193 trials for analysis. The mean overall rating across conditions was 2.75 ($SD = 0.4$), with no significant effect of word order observed ($p = 0.35$).

Turning to our response time analysis, after excluding trials rated as 1 ($n = 17$), we focused on those trials rated as 2 and 3, resulting in a total of 386 trials. Outliers were identified as values 2.5 standard deviations above the mean for each condition and were replaced with the mean plus the 2.5 standard deviation cut off. Subsequently, we fitted a mixed-effects linear regression model using the *lme4* package in R (Bates, Maechler, Bolker and Walker 2015), and following the same statistical protocol as reported above for the ratings analysis.

Figure 1 shows response times to the *maa*-marked and unmarked sentences in SVO and VSO order. The interaction between case and word order was significant ($t = -2.3$, $p = .022$), indicating that the effect of *maa*-marking on response times was different for SVO compared with VSO word orders. Nested planned comparisons revealed a significant effect of DOM for VSO conditions, demonstrating that the presence of *maa* in VSO order led to slower response times ($t = 2.3$, $p = .025$). There were no significant main effects (both $p > .38$).

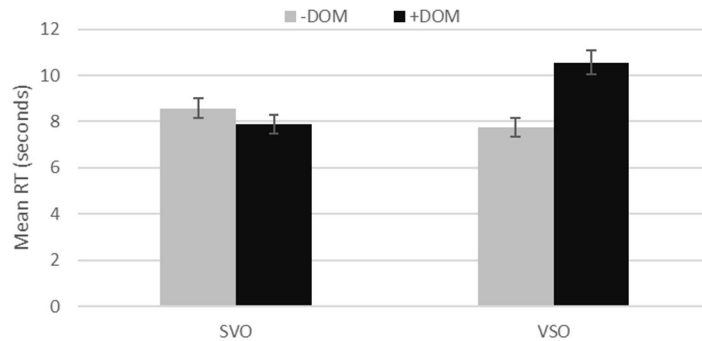


Figure 1: Mean RT (seconds) for SVO and VSO tokens with and without DOM.

Although the experimenters observed differences in the language profiles of individual participants, as a group, participants did not respond to the demographic survey in a way that allowed for a comparison ratings and response times according to any measure of bilingualism. All participants self-reported low confidence levels for Spanish proficiency in comprehension and speaking, whereas they all reported fairly high levels of comfort in Copala Triqui, and they reported speaking Copala Triqui most or all the time in most or all social contexts. We believe that the demographic survey therefore captured language attitudes and ideologies better than language proficiency. For that reason, we approached the question of how language background might influence results indirectly via age.

Age groups were determined based on migration trends and current life stage. The youngest group (<30; $n = 8$) were likely to be born in diaspora communities and as such were exposed to monolingual Spanish environments after age 6 when they were likely to enter primary school. The middle group (31-49; $n = 15$); were likely Triqui dominant through adolescence and many likely still are, although some are probably not. The oldest group (50-80; $n = 9$) are likely Triqui dominant currently, and likely speak little to no Spanish. For this analysis we excluded three participants who declined to share their age. We analyzed a total of 359 trials. Figure 2 shows response times by age group to *maa*-marked and unmarked sentences in SVO and VSO order.

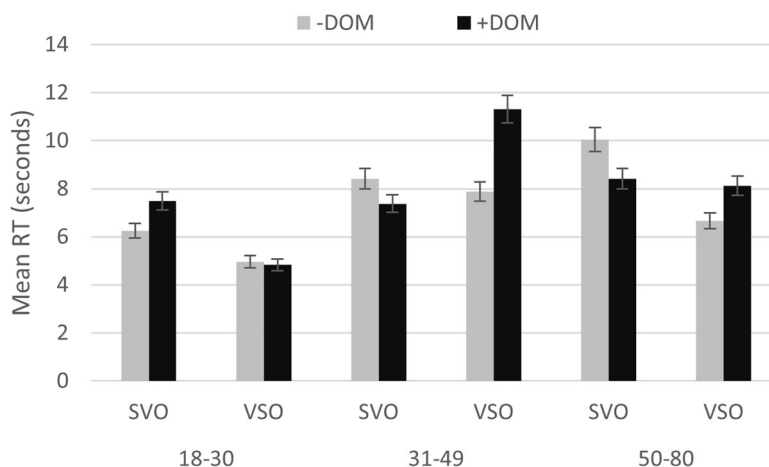


Figure 2: Mean RT (seconds) for SVO and VSO tokens with and without DOM.

We fit a 3 x 2 x 2 mixed-effects linear regression model to this data, with age band as additional fixed factor (coded with Repeated Contrasts). We found a main effect of age band, with the youngest group of speakers responding significantly faster compared with the middle group ($t = 2.4, p = .03$). We also found two interactions of age band with word order (for 18-30 vs. 31-49: $t = -2.1, p = .04$ and for 31-49 vs. 50-80: $t = 2.2, p = .03$). Interestingly, these two interactions were in opposite directions, indicating RTs from middle group of speakers patterned differently from RTs from the younger and older groups. In these two groups, VSO constructions triggered faster responses than SVO ones, and in the middle group, the reverse was found (in fact, it appears that this effect of word order for the 31-49 age group might have obscured the main effect of word order for the entire sample). There were no other significant main effects of interactions between age bands and other factors (all other $ps > 0.16$), besides the interaction of word order and case reported above.

4 Discussion

The ratings collected in the study align with prior findings by affirming that both verb-initial and subject-initial word orders are grammatical in Copala Triqui. At the same time, the response times for filler tasks corroborate the notion that verb-initial word order is more basic or underlying in Copala Triqui, in line with what is typically assumed about the language. Additionally, it was observed that *maa*-marking is optional for non-human animate objects, a claim that is well-supported in the literature (Hollenbach 1992, 2008, 2015, Broadwell 2022, López Espinoza 2022).

Neither ratings nor response times support the elicitation-based finding that *maa* is favored when the subject and object are equal in animacy, nor that *maa* is more strongly preferred in VSO clauses compared to SVO clauses (Broadwell 2022). Even though all subjects and objects in the experimental materials were equal in animacy and every predicate was reversible, there is no significant main effect for DOM in the ratings. However, it is possible that evidence from ratings and/or response time more in line with Broadwell's findings might have come from a manipulation in which the experimental materials featured less naturally reversible events, such as "the boy bit the dog," or from a series of two-alternative forced choice tasks.

With respect to the effect of word order, the observed interaction contrasts with the anticipated outcome: For the full participant group ($n = 35$), we found faster responses to VSO clauses without *maa* than those with it, suggesting that the presence of *maa* marking in VSO order triggers a higher processing difficulty compared with *maa*-marking in SVO order. Formal accounts of DOM might be understood to make the opposite prediction: namely, faster RTs to VSO clauses with *maa* compared to those without. As Broadwell (2002) reasons, because DOM is preferred in cases where the subject needs to be differentiated (Aissen 2003; Richards 2010; Fedzechkina et al. 2012 *inter alia*), VSO clauses might benefit from argument differentiation via *maa*-marking because the subject and object are adjacent.

We also note that, for the youngest group ($n = 8$) of speakers, we find a descriptively different pattern with respect to word order and case compared with the other two age groups: the younger speakers showed qualitatively quicker response times to SVO clauses lacking DOM compared to those with DOM. Given that the youngest speakers in this study, for which all participants were living in Spanish-dominant societies, might tend towards Spanish-language dominance, one might anticipate a higher frequency of SVO structures in general, and therefore no additional processing advantage from *maa* in SVO clauses. Yet, even among the youngest speakers, responses to VSO constructions were quicker than to SVO, suggesting factors beyond language dominance influencing their responses.

We do not find evidence to support an identification/differentiation explanation of DOM in Copala Triqui in which object marking differentiates a clause's object from its subject. Instead, DOM may serve to flag an object that appears in a position a position more commonly associated with subjects. This occurs in SVO word order, where the object appears in the immediately post verbal position, occupied by the subject in the base VSO order. It appears that DOM may be less necessary in VSO word order (hence the longer response times for *maa*-marked VSO clauses), suggesting that providing information about the event (i.e. the verb) before its arguments (i.e. S and O) might obviate the need for object marking. We leave a full exploration of this possible explanation to future work.

Another possible explanation, also based on the concept of 'basic' word order in Copala Triqui, concerns the derivation of SVO clauses. If SVO were derived via A'-movement as opposed to A-movement—the correct analysis has yet to be determined—we might expect *maa*-marking to aid the interpretation of these clauses. As mentioned in Section 2, only subjects appear preverbally without dedicated topic or focus marking. As such $S_{\text{TOP}}VO$ clauses without *maa*-marking would not be ambiguous with $O_{\text{TOP}}VS$ clauses per se; however, in other known A'-structures, ambiguity would arise without *maa*. As shown in (10), *maa*-marking differentiates between the subject and object interpretation of a *wh*-question.

- (10) a. Me se tiguíj tana ga?
 what nudge goat WHQ
 ‘What did the goat nudge?’
 b. Me se tiguíj maa tana ga?
 what nudge ACC goat WHQ
 ‘What nudged the goat?’

In these cases, it is unclear whether *maa*-marking with non-human animates is truly obligatory or rather strongly preferred (cf. Broadwell 2022). Still, if *maa*-marking facilitates the interpretation of A'-structures more generally, we should consider whether it also facilitates the interpretation of SVO clauses as well.

5 Conclusion

In this study, we examined optionality in differential object marking in Copala Triqui and considered how word order affects DOM in a language which exhibits both VSO and SVO word orders. Copala Triqui speakers, like many speakers of minoritized languages, are a largely bilingual (and increasingly trilingual) population. Still, individual speakers represent varying degrees of bilingualism on account of varied life experiences and exposure to the Spanish language. Our study used age as a proxy to consider the effect of different kinds of Copala-Triqui/Spanish bilingualism on participant responses. Spanish is a well studied-DOM marking language, but it is also a language spoken alongside many hundreds of indigenous languages. In a recent collection of papers, researchers investigate DOM variability in areas where Spanish is in contact with Asháninka, Guaraní, Huánuco, Shipibo, and Quechua (Kabatek, Obrist and Wall, eds. 2021). Most of these studies focus on how Spanish is influenced by local languages, but another important avenue of research would be to investigate the role of Spanish and Spanish bilingualism in shaping the DOM systems of local languages. We have only just scratched the surface of this topic for Copala Triqui.

Our findings also suggest that traditional elicitation methods are perhaps not as well-equipped as other methods to capture morphosyntactic optionality in linguistic fieldwork, especially concerning how optionality might interact with speaker age and other variables across the population. Here, we found that speakers from different age groups respond differently to an experimental manipulation of word order. More generally, this inquiry highlights how both within-language optionality concerning case marking on the one hand, and cross-speaker variability in syntactic processing on the other, can be reflected in the timecourse of acceptability judgments in an experimental fieldwork task.

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