

# Semantic ambiguity and language change: on Past Participle Agreement in Catalan

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In Catalan, past participles in compound tenses can optionally agree in gender and number with the direct object (1). Since speakers are often unsure whether to use past participle agreement (PPA) or not, this phenomenon can be seen as a “doubtful case” in the sense of Klein (2003). In this paper, I analyze the properties of PPA in Catalan as a doubtful case and show that it emerges as a consequence of semantic ambiguity and subsequent semantic bleaching. Thus, the optionality concerning PPA is expected to further develop according to language-internal constraints. This, in turn, means that the potential role of the metalinguistic debate on phenomena like PPA (e.g. official proposals for prescriptive rules guiding the use of PPA) is probably non-existent.

In Old Catalan, PPA was common with all kind of objects and in all syntactic contexts (2). From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, an important decrease in PPA is attested. The variation, however, is not random, but correlates with the specificity of the direct object. Default morphology (i.e. masculine singular) is mainly used with non-specific objects, while specific objects usually trigger agreement. This semantic contrast, still present in some constructions in Standard French (Obenauer 1992), rapidly undergoes further changes. The semantic distinction conveyed by specificity is oscillating between speaker-oriented and hearer-oriented notions (cf. von Heusinger 2011). This gives rise to semantic ambiguity, leading to the loss of the semantic distinctions altogether, and the emergence of an optional agreement pattern, which can ultimately be conceptualized as a “doubtful case”. Hence, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, normative grammarians aspired to define rules for the correct use of PPA (e.g. Fabra 1919). Independently of these prescriptions, Catalan speakers, when using PPA, intuitively respect other complex grammatical restrictions (e.g. they differentiate between different persons and/or they are sensitive to *wh*-features). The same patterns are found cross-linguistically. Thus, I claim that the dissolution of case in Modern Catalan, along with the fixation of word-order (cf. Fischer 2010), is a decisive factor for the loss of PPA: under the view that verbal agreement is a morphological reflex of case assignment, it is expected that PPA should disappear as soon as accusative case weakens. This is in fact what we find in the Romance languages Spanish, Romanian, and Portuguese.

In sum, I propose that many morphosyntactic doubtful cases like PPA can only be solved in one way: language-internal factors (semantic ambiguity and bleaching, morphological change, economy...) exclusively determine the emergence, distribution and development of such phenomena.

(1) Creus que ja l' haurà vista/vist, la pel·lícula? (Stand. Cat.) you-think that already CL.3FSg.Acc=will-have seen.FSg/Default the film  
'Do you think he/she has already seen the film?'

(2) De tal manera haveu cobrada la vostra raó (16<sup>th</sup> century Catalan) of such way you-have got.FSg the your reason.FSg  
'In such way you recovered your common sense.'

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