

# Pronominal Structure and the Third-Person Gap in Spanish

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## 1. Introduction

As shown in (1) with English and in (2) with Italian, there are languages that exhibit a paradigmatic gap in pronoun-noun constructions (Postal 1966; Abney 1987; Cardinaletti 1994; Déchaine & Wiltschko 2002; Panagiotidis 2002; Höhn 2016, 2017; Ackema & Neeleman 2018; Höhn 2020).

- |     |    |                 |     |    |                 |
|-----|----|-----------------|-----|----|-----------------|
| (1) | a. | we linguists    | (2) | a. | noi linguisti   |
|     | b. | you linguists   |     | b. | voi linguisti   |
|     | c. | *they linguists |     | c. | *loro linguisti |

The equivalent construction in Spanish requires the definite article between the pronoun and the noun: *nosotros los lingüistas*, which literally translates as ‘we the linguists’. Still, as the data in (3) reveal, the third-person gap is found in this language as well.

- (3) {nosotros / vosotros / ustedes / \*ellos} los lingüistas  
we          you.PL      you.PL      they      the linguists  
‘we/you (informal)/you linguists’

In Spanish, as in many Romance languages, the third-person pronouns *él/ella/ellos/ellas* ‘he/she/they/they (feminine)’ and the definite article *el/la/los/las* ‘the’ are remarkably similar in form, so one might venture that these elements occupy the same structural position, such as D. The ungrammaticality of *\*ellos los lingüistas* ‘they linguists’ could then be attributed to the *-llos* component of *ellos* competing with the definite article *los* for D, as in (4).<sup>1</sup>

- (4) \*[<sub>DP</sub> *ellos/los* [<sub>DivP</sub> *lingüistas*]]

The problem with this view is that it does not rule out *\*ellos lingüistas* ‘they linguists’, suggesting that a more nuanced account of the third-person gap in Spanish is warranted.

In this paper, I argue that the internal structure of third-person pronouns is different from that of first-person and second-person pronouns. In section 2, I demonstrate that pronoun-noun constructions are not instances of apposition even though they contain the definite article in Spanish. In section 3, I introduce the claim that person and definiteness belong to different syntactic projections based on the possibility of “unagreement” in this language. In section 4, I motivate the representation of person features and honorificity that I adopt in my approach to pronominal expressions. In section 5, I propose that each morpheme in third-person pronouns spells out a different head in the noun phrase and then illustrate how this account captures the ungrammaticality of both *\*ellos los lingüistas* ‘they the linguists’ and *\*ellos lingüistas* ‘they linguists’. In section 6, I show that third-person pronouns can be modified by nonrestrictive relative

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<sup>1</sup> I represent plural nouns as DivPs rather than as NumPs to maintain consistency with my work on the mass-count distinction, which builds on Borer’s (2005) structural approach to this phenomenon (Jambrović 2023, 2025).

clauses but not by restrictive relative clauses, a contrast that provides further support for my analysis of their internal structure. In section 7, I summarize the main arguments and conclude.

## 2. Ruling out apposition

Given that constructions like *nosotros los lingüistas* ‘we the linguists’ include the definite article in Spanish, it is essential to consider whether they may consist of a pronoun and a definite description in apposition. Not only does *nosotros los lingüistas* lack a prosodic break, but one can also discard the possibility of loose apposition on syntactic grounds. Following Pesetsky (1978), the quantificational expression *algunos de* ‘some of’ only takes scope over the pronoun in (5a), whereas it takes scope over the pronoun and the noun in (5b).

- (5) a. Algunos de [nosotros], los lingüistas, estamos preocupados.  
 some of us the linguists are.1PL concerned  
 ‘Some of us, the linguists, are concerned.’
- b. Algunos de [nosotros los lingüistas] estamos preocupados.  
 some of us the linguists are.1PL concerned  
 ‘Some of us linguists are concerned.’

That is, it is not necessarily the case that all referents of *nosotros* ‘us’ in (5a) are linguists, but it is in (5b). This interpretational difference is responsible for the unacceptability of (6b), which lacks the prosodic breaks that are found in (6a).

- (6) a. Algunos de nosotros, los lingüistas, estamos preocupados por otros de nosotros,  
 some of us the linguists are.1PL concerned about others of us  
 los filósofos.  
 the philosophers  
 ‘Some of us, the linguists, are concerned about others of us, the philosophers.’
- b. \*Algunos de nosotros los lingüistas estamos preocupados por otros de nosotros los  
 some of us the linguists are.1PL concerned about others of us the  
 filósofos.  
 philosophers  
 Literal: ‘Some of us the linguists are concerned about others of us the philosophers.’

Another difference between *nosotros, los lingüistas* ‘we, the linguists’ and *nosotros los lingüistas* concerns the addition of *todos* ‘all’ in (7), which requires a prosodic break.

- (7) a. Nosotros, todos los lingüistas, estamos preocupados.  
 we all the linguists are.1PL concerned  
 ‘We, all the linguists, are concerned.’
- b. \*Nosotros todos los lingüistas estamos preocupados.  
 we all the linguists are.1PL concerned  
 Literal: ‘We all the linguists are concerned.’

Nor does *nosotros los lingüistas* pattern like *mis colegas los lingüistas* ‘my colleagues the linguists’, a close appositive where the presence of two determiners confirms that there is another DP. According to Lawrenz (1993) and Höhn (2016, 2017, 2020), close appositives differ from pronoun-noun constructions in that they permit the second element to consist of coordinated singular expressions, as shown in (8) with names and in (9) with definite descriptions.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It is, nevertheless, possible for pronouns to be followed by coordinated plural expressions: *nosotros los lingüistas y los filósofos* ‘we the linguists and the philosophers’. I assume that there is a covert pronoun in the second conjunct, which is made overt in *nosotros los lingüistas y nosotros los filósofos* ‘we the linguists and we the philosophers’.

- (8) a. Mis colegas Pedro y Vilma son profesores.  
my colleagues Pedro y Vilma are.3PL professors  
'My colleagues Pedro and Vilma are professors.'
- b. \*Nosotros Pedro y Vilma somos profesores.  
we Pedro and Vilma are.1PL professors  
Literal: 'We Pedro and Vilma are professors.'
- (9) a. Mis colegas el lingüista y la filósofa son profesores.  
my colleagues the linguist and the philosopher are.3PL professors  
'My colleagues the linguist and the philosopher are professors.'
- b. \*Nosotros el lingüista y la filósofa somos profesores.  
we the linguist and the philosopher are.1PL professors  
Literal: 'We the linguist and the philosopher are professors.'

Taken together, the data in this section refute an analysis of *nosotros los lingüistas* based on either loose or close apposition.

### 3. Insights from unagreement

As Choi (2013, 2014) and Höhn (2016, 2017) observe, languages that use the definite article in pronoun-noun constructions allow for "unagreement", or the phenomenon in (10) where a nonpronominal expression appears with a first-person or second-person verb form (Moravcsik 1978, Jelinek 1984, Hurtado 1985, Villa-García 2010, Ackema & Neeleman 2018).

- (10) a. Los lingüistas somos interesantes.  
the linguists are.1PL interesting  
Approximate: 'We linguists are interesting.'
- b. Los lingüistas sois interesantes.  
the linguists are.2PL interesting  
Approximate: 'You (informal) linguists are interesting.'

While Choi and Höhn differ in the technical details of their proposals, both would concur that there are phonologically null pronouns in (10) that are responsible for the form of the verb, as schematized in (11).

- (11) a.  $\emptyset_{[x, \text{PART}, \text{AUTH}]}$  los lingüistas somos interesantes.  
the linguists are.1PL interesting  
'We linguists are interesting.'
- b.  $\emptyset_{[x, \text{PART}]}$  los lingüistas sois interesantes.  
the linguists are.2PL interesting  
'You (informal) linguists are interesting.'

In other words, the subjects in (10) are pronoun-noun constructions with a silent pronoun, one that is pronounced in (12).

- (12) a. Nosotros los lingüistas somos interesantes.  
we the linguists are.1PL interesting  
'We linguists are interesting.'
- b. Vosotros los lingüistas sois interesantes.  
you.PL the linguists are.2PL interesting  
'You (informal) linguists are interesting.'

The same account extends to apparent cases of unagreement that involve definite descriptions in object position. In (13), the possibility of the first-person clitic *nos* ‘us’ and the second-person clitic *os* ‘you all (informal)’ can be attributed to agreement with the optional stressed pronoun.

- (13) a.  $\overbrace{\text{Siempre nos invitan a (nosotros) los lingüistas.}}^{\text{always 1PL invite.3PL DOM us the linguists}}$   
 ‘They always invite us linguists.’
- b.  $\overbrace{\text{Siempre os invitan a (vosotros) los lingüistas.}}^{\text{always 2PL invite.3PL DOM you.PL the linguists}}$   
 ‘They always invite you (informal) linguists.’

In short, pronoun-noun constructions can appear in subject and object position, and it is the pronominal component that triggers first-person and second-person agreement.

In the remainder of this paper, I adopt Höhn’s (2016, 2017) claim that person features are hosted by PersP, which I represent as  $\pi$ P, in languages that use the definite article in pronoun-noun constructions and permit so-called unagreement. The essence of this proposal is illustrated in (14) with *nosotros los lingüistas* ‘we the linguists’ and *vosotros los lingüistas* ‘you (informal) the linguists’.

- (14) a.  $\pi$ P
- $\pi$  [PART, AUTH] *nosotros*
- DP
- D *los* DivP
- lingüistas
- b.  $\pi$ P
- $\pi$  [PART] *vosotros*
- DP
- D *los* DivP
- lingüistas

Since  $\pi$ P dominates DP in this approach, it reflects Ritter (1995: 421) view that “person implies definiteness, but definiteness does not imply person”. Nevertheless, as Höhn (2020) remarks, this analysis does not predict the third-person gap in Spanish, at least if one assigns third-person pronouns to the same position as first-person and second-person pronouns. After all, there is no principled reason why *\*ellos los lingüistas* ‘they the linguists’ could not have the structure in (15).

- (15)  $*\pi$ P
- $\pi$  *ellos*
- DP
- D *los* DivP
- lingüistas

Another mystery is the grammaticality of *ustedes los lingüistas* ‘you the linguists’ despite the fact that *ustedes* ‘you all’ and *ellos* ‘they’ appear with the same agreement morphology, as shown in (16).

- (16) {Ustedes / Ellos} son lingüistas.  
 you.PL they are.3PL linguists  
 ‘You all/They are linguists.’

To address both issues, it is necessary to consider whether third person is different from the absence of person and how to represent honorificity in Spanish.

#### 4. Person and honorificity in Spanish

In this section, I motivate the view that it is only pronominal expressions that are marked for person (Bianchi 2006, Ackema & Neeleman 2018, Sichel & Wiltschko 2021, Sichel & Toosarvandani to appear). As the contrast in (17) indicates, plural nominal expressions can occur with any plural verb form in Spanish, but third-person plural pronouns cannot do so.

- (17) a. Los lingüistas {somos / sois / son} interesantes.  
 the linguists are.1PL are.2PL are.3PL interesting  
 ‘We/You (informal)/The linguists are interesting.’
- b. Ellos {\*somos / \*sois / son} interesantes.  
 they are.1PL are.2PL are.3PL interesting  
 ‘They are interesting.’

If one were to attribute third-person agreement in (17a) to a covert pronoun, as in (18), it would be necessary to explain why this pronoun cannot be overtly realized, as in *\*ellos los lingüistas* ‘they the linguists’.

- (18)  $\emptyset_{[\pi]}$  los lingüistas son interesantes.  
 the linguists are.3PL interesting  
 ‘The linguists are interesting.’

If, however, definite descriptions lack  $\pi$ P altogether when they occur with third-person verb forms, one can instead appeal to failed agreement since third person is the morphological default (Bianchi 2006, Preminger 2014). As it turns out, there is further empirical support for the claim that nonpronominal expressions do not have person features.

I now modify a diagnostic by Ackema & Neeleman (2018) to show that the definite description *los lingüistas* ‘the linguists’ in (19a) can be coreferential with any pronoun, unlike the third-person pronoun *ellos* ‘they’ in (19b).

- (19) a. Tienes que hablar con los lingüistas para aprender de {nosotros / vosotros /  
 have.2SG that speak with the linguists for learn from us you.PL  
 ustedes / ellos}.  
 you.PL them  
 ‘You have to speak with linguists to learn from us/you all (informal)/you all/them.’
- b. Tienes que hablar con ellos para aprender de {\*nosotros / \*vosotros /  
 have.2SG that speak with them for learn from us you.PL  
 \*ustedes / ellos}.  
 you.PL them  
 ‘You have to speak with them to learn from them.’

This difference implies that *ellos* has some type of person feature that *los lingüistas* does not. In my analysis of Spanish, I adopt the privative system in (20), following Sichel & Wiltschko (2021) and Sichel & Toosarvandani (to appear), and distinguish between pronominal and nonpronominal structures through the presence versus absence of  $\pi$ P in (21).

- |         |                                   |               |         |  |               |
|---------|-----------------------------------|---------------|---------|--|---------------|
| (20) a. | $[\pi, \text{PART}, \text{AUTH}]$ | First person  | (21) a. | $[\pi\text{P}_{[\text{PART}, \text{AUTH}]} [\text{DP}]]$ | First person  |
| b.      | $[\pi, \text{PART}]$              | Second person | b.      | $[\pi\text{P}_{[\text{PART}]} [\text{DP}]]$              | Second person |
| c.      | $[\pi]$                           | Third person  | c.      | $[\pi\text{P} [\text{DP}]]$                              | Third person  |
| d.      | $[\ ]$                            | No person     | d.      | $[\text{DP}]$  | Nonpronominal |

The next issue to consider is the featural identity of *ustedes* ‘you all’, a pronoun that appears with third-person verb forms but is not subject to the third-person gap.

There is reason to suspect that *usted* ‘you (formal)’ and *ustedes* ‘you all’ bear a [PART] feature at the level of syntax based on the Person Case Constraint (Jambrović 2025). The different orderings of the pronominal clitics in (22) reveal that third-person pronouns are immune to this constraint, and if *usted* were syntactically third person as well, one would expect the same flexibility in (23), contrary to fact.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>(22) Ella reconoce a los filósofos.<br/> she recognizes DOM the philosophers<br/> ‘She recognizes the philosophers.’</p> <p>a. ¿Quién se los presentó?<br/> who 3 3PL.ACC presented.3SG<br/> ‘Who introduced them to her?’</p> <p>b. ¿Quién se la presentó?<br/> who 3 3SG.F.ACC presented.3SG<br/> ‘Who introduced her to them?’</p> | <p>(23) Usted reconoce a los filósofos.<br/> you recognizes DOM the philosophers<br/> ‘You (formal) recognize the philosophers.’</p> <p>a. ¿Quién se los presentó?<br/> who 3 3PL.ACC presented.3SG<br/> ‘Who introduced them to you?’</p> <p>b. *¿Quién se la presentó?<br/> who 3 3SG.F.ACC presented.3SG<br/> ‘Who introduced you to them?’</p> |
|--|--|

These types of data suggest that *usted* is syntactically second person, like *tú* ‘you (informal)’, hence its interpretation as a participant-denoting pronoun.

To differentiate *usted* ‘you (formal)’ from *tú* ‘you (informal)’, I resort to an [HON] feature on  $\pi$ , and to account for the agreement behavior of *usted*, I claim that this feature triggers the deletion of [PART] through the postsyntactic impoverishment rule in (24).<sup>3</sup>

- (24) [PART]  $\rightarrow$   $\emptyset$  / \_\_ [HON] Morphology

As a result of this process, the vocabulary items that correspond to *usted* and *tú* in (25) have no features in common by the time insertion takes place.

- (25) a. /usted/  $\leftrightarrow$   $\pi$ <sub>[HON, PART]</sub>  
b. /t/  $\leftrightarrow$   $\pi$ <sub>[PART]</sub>

Because *usted* loses its [PART] feature before it can serve as a goal for agreement, it only ever occurs with third-person verb forms and clitics.

Turning to the plural form *ustedes* ‘you all’, the analysis depends on the variety of Spanish under study. Peninsular Spanish distinguishes between *vosotros* ‘you all (informal)’ and *ustedes* ‘you all (formal)’, so the impoverishment rule in (24) is sufficient. Latin American Spanish, on the other hand, uses *ustedes* in both formal and informal contexts, and in these varieties, I propose that [HON] is deleted at logical form in structures that contain a [PL] feature, as formalized in (26).

- (26) [HON]  $\rightarrow$   $\emptyset$  / \_\_ [PL] Logical form (Latin American Spanish only)

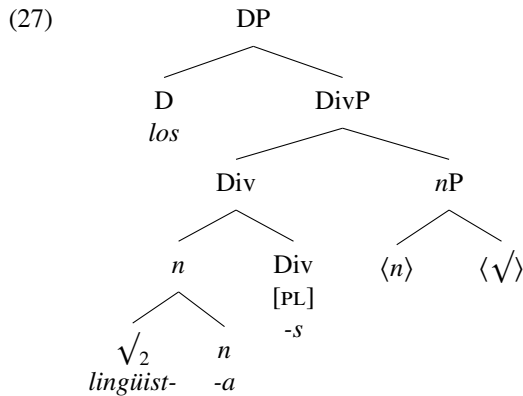
If, as I maintain, *usted* ‘you (formal)’ and *ustedes* are syntactically second person, the contrast between *ustedes los lingüistas* ‘you the linguists’ and \**ellos los lingüistas* ‘they the linguists’ is less surprising than it may otherwise seem.

## 5. The structure of third-person pronouns

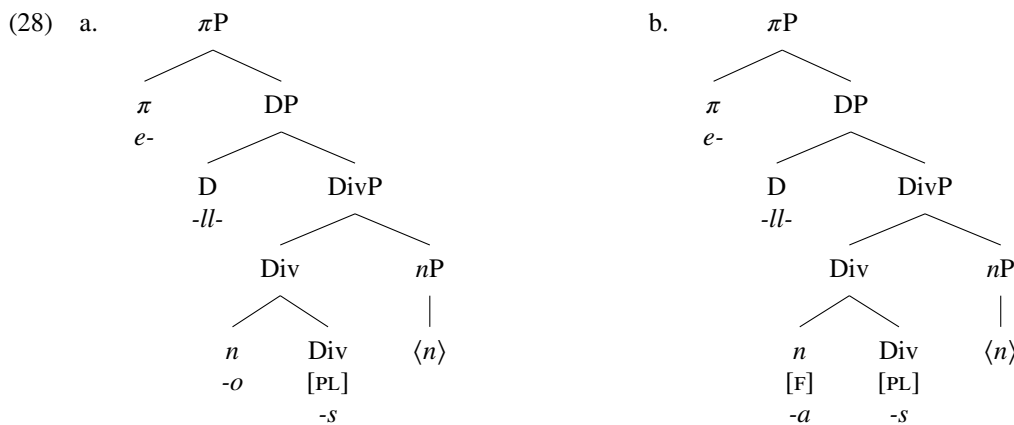
As mentioned in the introduction, third-person pronouns are morphologically similar to the definite article in Spanish: *él/ella/ellos/ellas* ‘he/she/they/they (feminine)’ and *el/la/los/las* ‘the’. Other than palatalization, the only difference between the two series is that the pronouns begin with a stressed *e-*, a vowel that I take to be the realization  $\pi$  in third-person pronouns. The unstressed *e-* in *el* ‘the’, on the other hand, is epenthetic (Harris 1991). As for the remaining segments, I assume that *-l/-ll/-l-* occupies D in all cases but not necessarily the class markers *-o/-a* and the plural suffix *-s*.

<sup>3</sup> See the appendix to Arregi & Nevins 2018 for a similar proposal that assumes binary features.

With a definite description like *los lingüistas* ‘the linguists’, it is clear that the *-o* and *-s* of *los* ‘the’ are gender and number concord on D and that the *-a* and *-s* of *lingüistas* ‘linguists’ belong to *n* and Div, respectively, as illustrated in (27).<sup>4</sup>



With the third-person pronouns *ellos* ‘they’ and *ellas* ‘they (feminine)’, however, one cannot narrow down the position of *-o/-a* and *-s* in the same way because neither can appear together with a noun: *\*ellos/ellas lingüistas* ‘they linguists’. Although it may be theoretically appealing to decompose *ellos/ellas* into *e-* in  $\pi$  and *-llos/-llas* in D, there are no data available to corroborate this possibility. Instead, I propose the alternative in (28), where there is a one-to-one correspondence between the morphemes that constitute third-person pronouns and the heads that they realize.<sup>5</sup>



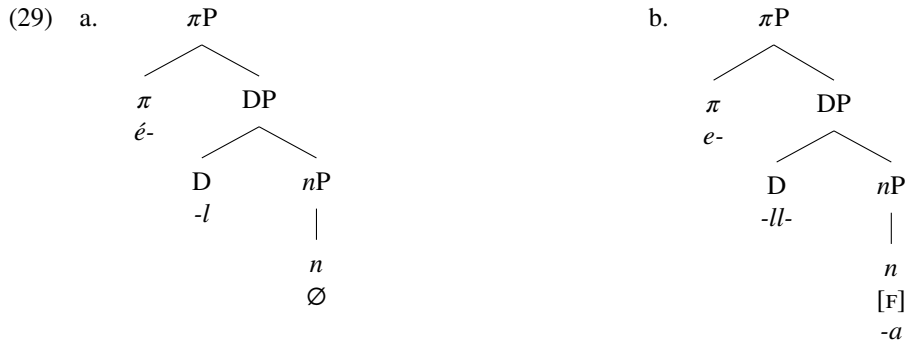
One reason to favor this approach is that it immediately rules out *\*ellos lingüistas* and *\*ellos los lingüistas* ‘they the linguists’ since *n* and Div cannot simultaneously be spelled out as the *-o* and *-s* of *ellos* and as the *-a* and *-s* of *lingüistas*. Still, for this explanation to be tenable, it is necessary to justify the exceptional lack of gender and number concord on D in (28), which I do on phonological grounds.

In *el lingüista/la lingüista* ‘the linguist/the (female) linguist’, the *e-/a* of the definite article permit the syllabification of *-ll-*, the exponent of definiteness. Similarly, in *los lingüistas/las lingüistas* ‘the (female) linguists’, the *-o/-a* of the definite article permit the syllabification of both *l-* and *-s*. In support of this point, consider that the definite article contracts with vowel-initial singular nouns but not with vowel-initial plural nouns in Catalan, a closely related language: *l’artista* ‘the artist’ versus *els/les artistes* ‘the artists’. With the third-person pronouns *ellos* ‘they’ and *ellas* ‘they (feminine)’ in (28), there is no need for gender morphology on D since the *-o/-a* in *n* syllabifies *-ll-* in D and *-s* in Div. As for the singular

<sup>4</sup> In Jambrović 2025, I include Panagiotidis’s (2019) AnimP in animate expressions and argue that gender features have semantic consequences when they are hosted by this projection but not by *nP*.

<sup>5</sup> In the absence of evidence that pronouns have roots in Spanish, I omit  $\sqrt{}$  in their structure.

pronouns in (29), *él* ‘he’ does not require *n* to be overt because the *é-* in  $\pi$  syllabifies *-l* in D, and *-a* in *ella* ‘she’ arguably serves a semantic rather than a phonological purpose.<sup>6</sup>



In summary, first-person and second-person pronouns are confined to  $\pi$  in Spanish, and third-person pronouns realize multiple heads in the noun phrase.

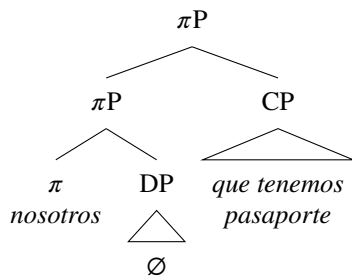
## 6. Pronouns and (non)restrictive modification

Pronouns in Spanish can be modified by nonrestrictive relative clauses if there is an intervening prosodic break, as in (30a), and they can be modified by nonrestrictive relative clauses if there is an intervening definite article, as in (30b).

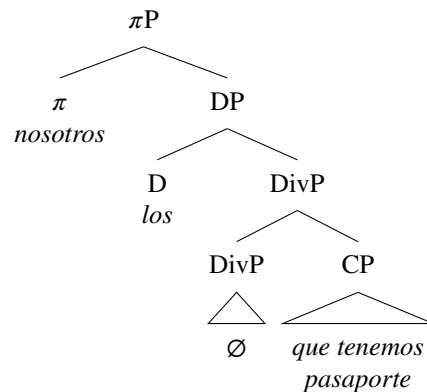
- (30) a. *Nosotros, que tenemos pasaporte, podemos viajar.*  
 we that have.1PL passport can.1PL travel  
 ‘We, who have a passport, can travel.’
- b. *Solo nosotros \*(los) que tenemos pasaporte podemos viajar.*  
 only we the that have.1PL passport can.1PL travel  
 ‘Only we who have a passport can travel.’

This difference can be captured by representing *que tenemos pasaporte* ‘who have a passport’ as a CP that adjoins to  $\pi$ P when nonrestrictive, as in (31), and to DivP when restrictive, as in (32).

(31) Nonrestrictive modification



(32) Restrictive modification



The fact that DivP can be made overt supports the approach in (32): *nosotros los ciudadanos que tenemos pasaporte* ‘we the citizens who have a passport’.

<sup>6</sup> See Jambrović 2023 for the claim that DivP does not project in nonplural definite expressions and Jambrović 2025 for an analysis of the “neuter” pronoun *ello* ‘it’.

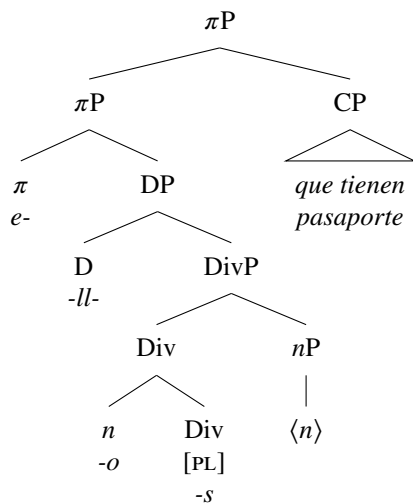


The low attachment site of restrictive relative clauses suggests that they may pose an issue for the realization of third-person pronouns. Indeed, *ellos* ‘they’ tolerates nonrestrictive modification in (33a) but not restrictive modification in (33b) or (33c).

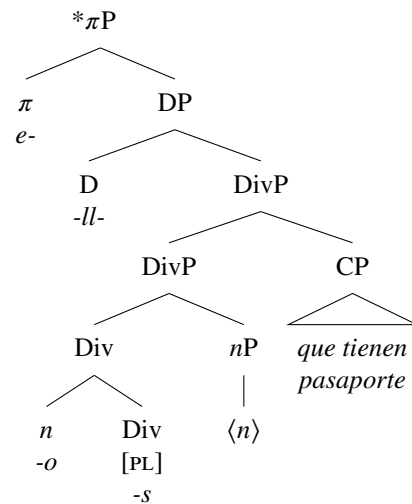
- (33) a. Ellos, que tienen pasaporte, pueden viajar.  
 they that have.3PL passport can.3PL travel  
 ‘They, who have a passport, can travel.’
- b. \*Solo ellos los que tienen pasaporte pueden viajar.  
 only they the that have.3PL passport can.3PL travel  
 Literal: ‘Only they who have a passport can travel.’
- c. \*Solo ellos que tienen pasaporte pueden viajar.  
 only they that have.3PL passport can.3PL travel  
 Literal: ‘Only they who have a passport can travel.’

As illustrated in (34) and (35), only the restrictive relative clause interrupts the chain of heads that are spelled out by *ellos*, which I consider to be responsible for the ungrammaticality of (33b) and (33c).<sup>7</sup>

(34) Nonrestrictive modification



(35) Restrictive modification



This analysis can, in principle, be extended to other languages where third-person pronouns face similar distributional restrictions, such as English: *\*they linguists* and *\*only they who have a passport*.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided a novel account of the third-person gap in Spanish, a language that uses the definite article in pronoun-noun constructions: *nosotros los lingüistas* ‘we the linguists’. After showing that these constructions behave differently than both loose and close appositives, I defended Choi (2013, 2014) and Höhn’s (2016, 2017) view that person and definiteness are not hosted by the same head in this language. Using  $\pi$ P and DP to represent these projections, I then motivated the claim that  $\pi$ P is exclusive to pronominal expressions, which is consistent with the broader stance in the literature that only pronominal expressions bear person features (Bianchi 2006, Ackema & Neeleman 2018, Sichel & Wiltschko 2021, Sichel & Toosarvandani to appear). Next, I presented evidence that *usted* ‘you (formal)’ and *ustedes* ‘you all’ are syntactically second person in Spanish, explaining the otherwise puzzling contrast between *ustedes los lingüistas* ‘you the linguists’ and *\*ellos los lingüistas* ‘they the linguists’. Finally, I proposed that third-person pronouns differ from first-person and second-person pronouns in that they spell out more than one

<sup>7</sup> Regarding collocations like *ellos dos* ‘they two’, see Jambrović 2025 for arguments that the numeral adjoins to  $\pi$ P and plays a role similar to that of the adverb *allí* ‘there’ in *ellos allí* ‘they there’.

head in the noun phrase, a configuration that prevents them from taking nominal complements or being modified by restrictive relative clauses.

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