On contextually defined ‘overt categories’ in Spanish

Null subjects have traditionally been argued to have different underlying internal structures despite their equal morpho-phonological externalization. Thus, in (1) – (3), even though we are uniformly dealing with a null subject, we have three different underlying elements either according to their morpho-syntactic properties or their derivational history: pro, PRO and NP-trace. In Romance pro-drop languages, also the corresponding overt pronominal subjects have the same morpho-phonological externalization but they have distinct syntactic properties.

(1) Julia dice que {Ø / ella (misma)} hará el trabajo.
Julia says that {she / herself} will-do the work.

(2) Julia promete hacer {Ø / ella (misma)} el trabajo.
Julia promises to-do {Ø / she (self)} the work.

(3) Julia hizo {Ø / ella (misma)} el trabajo.
Julia did {Ø / she (self)} the work.

In (1) – (3), the overt correlate of Ø is morphologically an emphatic pronoun, even though its (logical) syntactic properties differ and mirror those of different types of empty categories.

Building on the assumption that PRO can be ‘overt’ (see e.g. Alonso-Ovalle & D’Introno 2001, Livitz 2011, Sundaresan 2010, Herbeck 2015, 2018) we argue for a more general theory of overt categories which assumes that all instances of ‘pronouns’ in (1) – (3) are post-syntactic spell-out of a nominal D[ϕ] category, i.e. they all reflect input to the same Vocabulary Item in morphology (adopting DM, Halle & Marantz 1993). However, D[ϕ] is the result of different syntactic derivations (local Agree with AGR, mediated Agree via Fin, and movement):

(4) [CP C [TP Julia dice [CP que [AgrP [D[ϕ:_] AGR-hará ... el trabajo]]]]]

(5) [CP C [TP Julia promete [FinP Fin[self] [AgrP [D[ϕ:_] AGR[self]-hacer ... el trabajo]]]]]

(6) [CP C [AgrP Julia AGR-hace [vP [t,O[ϕ] ... el trabajo]]]]

Adopting the assumption that ‘traces’ are just morpho-syntactic feature bundles left behind by movement (cf. Chomsky 1981), an NP-trace is basically D and phi lacking a Root, which can receive an overt realization in post-syntactic morphology. What determines the option between null and overt spell-out post-syntactically is governed by information structure rather than Case, adopting a model in which features relating to topic/focus are assigned at the phase edge before morpho-phonological insertion applies (cf. López 2009). This way, the emphatic pronoun in (3) is basically the result of a DP which moves to topic position (see Barbosa 2009) whose trace (and not full copy) receives focus marking in Spec,vP, forming a topic-focus chain.