

Semantic and phonological constraints on the distribution of null subjects in Brazilian Portuguese

Mary Aizawa KATO (Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Brazil)

Maria Eugênia Lamoglia DUARTE (Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)

Brazilian Portuguese (BP) is undergoing change in the Null Subject Parameter. Several variationist studies have shown that the change towards filled pronominal subjects is not uniform across grammatical persons, affecting, according to Duarte (1995), the deictic 1st and 2nd persons (74% and 90% of filled subjects) more frequently than the third person (58%), which can still be null in impersonal constructions, illustrated in (1):

- (1) a. ___ me custou sair de casa
cl.1st.p. cost+3rd.p. sg. leave the house
“It took me a long time to leave the house” / “I took a long time to leave the house”
b. ___ parece que os homens gostaram da cidade
seems that the men enjoyed+3rd p.pl the city “It seems that the men enjoyed the city”
c. ___ há / tem muita violência na cidade
there is / has a lot of violence downtown “There is a lot of violence downtown”

To account for selective licensing of null subjects in BP, Cyrino, Duarte & Kato (2000) proposed a sub-parametrization of Null Subject Languages (NSLs) taking into consideration existence of languages that restrict null subjects to non-referential uses.

We show that, along with impersonal null subject constructions, BP today tolerates unusual raising and hyper-raising constructions (2a,b). It also shows variation between impersonal use of *haver/ter* in existential contexts and personal use of *ter* (2c):

- (2) a. Eu custei a sair de casa
I cost to leave the house “I took a long time to leave the house”
b. Os homens parecem que (eles) gostaram da cidade
the men seem+3rd p.pl that (they) enjoyed +3rd p.pl the city.
“The men seem to have enjoyed the city”
c. Você tem muita violência na cidade
you have a lot of violence downtown “You have a lot of violence downtown”

The forms in (2) could be interpreted as evidence that BP is becoming a canonical non-NSL, like English. However, canonical non-NSLs, besides allowing personal constructions with *haver* and raising constructions with *parecer* ‘seem’, have a more general strategy of filling non-referential subject position with overt expletives, such as *it* and *there*, a possibility that does not exist in BP.

We present quantitative evidence for change in progress based on a trend study (Labov 1994) of Rio de Janeiro speakers with low or mid levels of formal education, comparing results from the early 80’s and the late 90’s. The results, which reveal a significant increase in frequency of the structures shown in (2), make it possible to discuss the actuation and embedding of the change and to propose that parametric change occurs at the interfaces. At the level of Logical Form, Chomsky’s “*Avoid Pronoun*” constraint functions for languages that allow null subjects. For languages like BP, the constraint is more specific: “*Avoid non-referential pronouns*”. We also propose that at the other interface, Phonetic Form, languages have filters regarding their rhythm. To account for preference for the forms in (2) to those in (1), we propose a prosodic constraint: “*Avoid V in initial position*”.