Topics, Subjects and Agents in Classical and Brazilian Portuguese: Hypothesis for a Grammatical Change

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The literature on the diachrony of Portuguese has been fluent in comparative studies between Brazilian and European Portuguese (hf. EP), but not many studies compare Brazilian Portuguese (hf. BP) to Classical Portuguese (hf. ClP), the grammar corresponding to 16th-18th century Portuguese texts, from which (according to GALVES ET AL. 2006) both modern varieties have emerged. Recent developments on the study of the syntax of ClP and its contrasts with EP (PAIXÃO DE SOUSA 2004, GALVES ET AL. 2005, 2006, 2010; CAVALCANTE ET AL., 2010), based on a large syntactically annotated historical corpus (TBC, 2010), make the comparative analysis with BP possible and necessary.

This paper presents a hypothesis for the grammatical change originating BP from ClP based on data from the TBC. This will reveal that some of the so-called innovative aspects of BP can in fact be traced back to 16th-17th century Portuguese, opening a new outlook on the roots of the grammatical change - in particular, the analysis proposed here bears on the debate around the loss of pro-drop in Brazilian Portuguese and its relation to topic prominence (cf., among others, KATO ET AL., 2000). The paper brings a comparative analysis of word order, null-subject and valency patterns in ClP and BP, starting from the observation of two main contrasts: ClP presents elevated rates of XVS, frequent and liberal null subjects; none of these features apply to BP, where XVS orders are infrequent (BERLINK, 1989, among others), and null subjects are infrequent and configurationally restricted (MODESTO, 2000, among others). The frequency of XVS orders in ClP (cf. [1] below) is shown by CAVALCANTE ET AL. (2010), GALVES ET AL. (2010), (2005), who claim that the pre-verbal position in this grammar hosts pragmatically prominent constituents, foci and topics alike (much as SITARIDOU ET AL., 2009 propose for Old Romance in general). CAVALCANTE ET AL. (2010) and GALVES ET AL. (2010) also documented an elevated frequency of null subjects in ClP texts (cf. [2] below); as it will be shown in this paper, moreover, null subjects in this grammar are independent of word order.

[1]   A quinta capitania conquistou   Pedro do Campo Tourinho   (1552)
       The fifth province conquer.PAST.3SG   Pedro do Campo Tourinho
       Pedro do Campo Tourinho conquered the fifth province

[2]   ... quando vão   para os apanhar, botão-lhes   aquella tinta diante dos olhos (1585)
       ... when go.PRES.3PL to them= catch, put.PRES.3PL=them that tint before of-the eyes
       ...when big fishes try to catch an octopus, the octopus throws tint into the big fishes' eyes

In this paper, those aspects are analyzed in combination with an observation regarding argument structure in ClP, resulting from a survey on the valency of 385 verbs (46.658 tokens, c. 3.000.000 words) from ClP texts selected in the TBC. This shows, among other aspects, an intriguing statistical correlation: arguments bearing the semantic role of Agent appear as null subjects in 67%-84% of the cases, whereas arguments bearing other semantic roles (such as Instrument or Theme) surface as null subjects at a 32%-45% rate (these rates depending on the verb transitivity class, so that the highest rates correspond to Agent arguments of alternant verbs). Interestingly, recent studies indicate that in BP, Agent is not a predominant semantic correspondent for subjects. This will be argued on the basis of what NEGRÃO ET AL. (2008) has described as *flexible diathesis*, and PERINI (2009) as *ergative alternance*. We interpret BP's flexible diathesis patterns as revealing that in this grammar, for a variety of verbs, most thematic roles can ascend to subject, while "Agent" is frequently suppressed from the argument grid - cf. [3], with "atropelar", *'to run over'*, appearing as a one-place verb, taking the patient argument as a subject:

[3]   Cuidado, senão você   atropela !   (2008, BP)
       Careful,   or-else 'you'-3SG run-PRES.3SG over !
       'Be careful, or else you will get ran over!'

The main empirical observation made in the paper is that the construction patterns in which Agent tends to be suppressed in BP correspond to those in which Agent arguments tend to surface as null subjects in ClP. The combination between this observation and the data on word order and null subjects leads to the proposal that the central issue in the change from ClP to BP is the reanalysis of structures with null subjects and non-subject pre-verbal arguments functioning as topics (XV) into SV structures. In other words, constructions with null agent subjects and fronted complements are reanalyzed into constructions with pre-verbal, non-agent subjects; schematically: XV was reanalyzed into SV (cf. [4]):

[4]   *Classical Portuguese*:   [NP-Non-Agent]-*Topic/Focus*   V   [pro-Agent]-*Subject*
       Brazilian Portuguese: [NP-Non-Agent]-*Subject/Topic/Focus* V

The paper proposes that the primary locus of this reanalysis were structures with alternant verbs, ensuing change in verb valency in those cases. In other words, XV(X) constructions (where V is a three-place

or two-place verb; fronted X is a topic or focus, an argument, and bears a semantic role other than Agent; S is null and bears the role of Agent, cf.[**5**]) are reanalyzed into SV(X) constructions (where V is a two-place or one-place verb and pre-verbal S bears a semantic role other than Agent, cf. [**6**]):

[**5**]   Uma chamada D. Urraca casou   com o conde D. Reimão de Tolosa (1500)
        One called D. Urraca   marry.PAST.3SG   with the count D. Reimão de Tolosa
        'The one called D. Urraca, he (the king) married to the count D. Reimão de Tolosa'

[**6**]   Santana casou   com baterista   no Hawai (2010, BP)
        Santana marry.PAST.3SG with drum-player   in Hawai

In sum, the pre-verbal position is reanalyzed from a topic position into a subject position; this overrules the classical verb valency in some cases (such as with '*casar*'), and provides the possibility for the generalized ergative-flavoured constructions described by NEGRÃO ET AL. (2008) and PERINI (2009) in BP.

The process of grammatical change thus described points to the loss of properties involved in the licensing of null subjects, and the maintenance of the property of left-prominence - which amounts to stating that topic-prominence is no diachronic innovation in BP. This is in fact what the paper argues: ClP itself is a topic-prominent language (which is sustained considering, among others, ClP constructions with pre- verbal hanging topics and post-verbal lexical subjects, cf. [**7**]) - a claim to be defended in the light of MODESTO (2008).

[**7**]   Maria Monteira tinha   uma sua filha   muitas verrugas nas maõs (1590)
        Maria Monteira have.PAST.3SG one her daughter   many warts in-the hands
        'Maria Monteira, one daughter of hers had many warts in her hands'

This hypothesis may throw a new light on the syntax of topics and subjects in BP, as the data on ClP reveals that the properties of BP regarding topics are hardly innovative. If the proposal brought by this paper is correct, BP innovates in its verb diathesis patterns and in its null subject licensing properties, whereas topic-prominence is a feature it conserved from 16th-17th century Portuguese. As it shall be discussed, the question will remain, for further research, as to the implications of this analysis of the grammatical change for the diachrony of Portuguese (and Romance) in general.

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