Null objects and object pronouns in Portuguese in Salvador, Brazil

Amanda Thomas, University of Oxford

Accounting for the use of null and overt pronoun forms

Brazilian Portuguese third-person direct object pronouns can be null or overt. What determines when speakers use these different strategies?

Previous accounts, based on data from 1980s Rio de Janeiro:

- Binary features ±animate and ±specific. Pronouns referring to ±animate and ±specific nouns are more likely to be null
- ‘Recipe register’. ±Animate, ±specific food referents frequently realised as overt pronouns, rather than the expected null (Schwentter & Silva 2003)
- ±Animate category largely corresponds to ±human, except for possible instances of pets treated syntactically like humans

Research question: Are these generalisations true for the present-day variety of Brazilian Portuguese spoken in Salvador, Bahia?

Different available forms

Null
Eu já comprei o livro mas ainda não li ∅
I already bought the book but still NEG read ∅
I have already bought the book but I still haven’t read it.

Overt
Eu vi ela ontem
I saw her yesterday
or 
I her=saw yesterday

Devised examples

The two different overt forms (tonic pronouns and clitics) are used in distinct registers (informal versus formal) and are here treated together; in opposition to the null form. I use the term ‘null object’ with no commitment to a particular theoretical analysis.

New dataset

- 54,000 word corpus, based on twenty interviews with native speakers from the Universidade Federal de Bahia, 2015
- Two components in each interview: general conversation and story-telling task
- Picture book chosen to elicit a variety of different referents: human and various types of animals
- Also elicited descriptions of recipes for studying the ‘recipe register’

Broad patterns similar to other varieties

As expected, pronouns referring to ±animate and ±specific entities are overwhelmingly null.

Animacy Hierarchy

A useful tool for cross-linguistic comparison which we can adapt to account for the Brazilian Portuguese pattern:

1st person > 2nd person > 3rd person > proper names > humans > domestic animals > non-domestic animals > inanimates

A similar distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ animals has also been suggested for Australian languages e.g. Meryam Mir (Piper 2013).

Recipe register

No evidence of overt strategy being used for food: 100% of 41 pronouns referring to food were null.

The recipe register may be limited to certain regions of Brazil.

Conclusions and directions for future work

- Regional variation may play a role in the realisation of some kinds of objects as null or overt pronouns, but further work is needed
- Evidence for a split within the binary feature of animacy, which does not correspond to ±human division, in Brazilian Portuguese
- Adapting the Animacy Hierarchy makes it a more powerful tool, able to capture the facts of more languages
- Theoretical accounts of pronouns in BP must consider the semantic features of referents, which are sometimes unpredictable or not easily stated in terms of binary features

Selected references


Acknowledgements

Thanks to Louise Mycock and Stephen Parkinson at the University of Oxford for supervising this project, and to Alan Baxter and all participants at the Universidade Federal de Bahia for their valuable assistance.
I also thank the Heath Harrison Travelling Scholarship, the Merton College Linguists’ Travel Grant and the Faculty of Linguistics, Philology and Phonetics for funding this research and attendance at the Workshop.
Ethical approval: University of Oxford SSH IDREC, reference number SSH_C1A_13_060.