Null objects and object pronouns in Portuguese in Salvador, Brazil

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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 (Schwenter & 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	Ø
I	already bought the book but still	NEG read	Ø

I have already bought the book but I still haven't read **it**.

Overt

Eu vi	**ela** ontem		Eu **a**=vi	ontem
I	saw **her** yesterday	**or**	I **her**=saw	yesterday

I saw **her** yesterday.   I saw **her** 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'
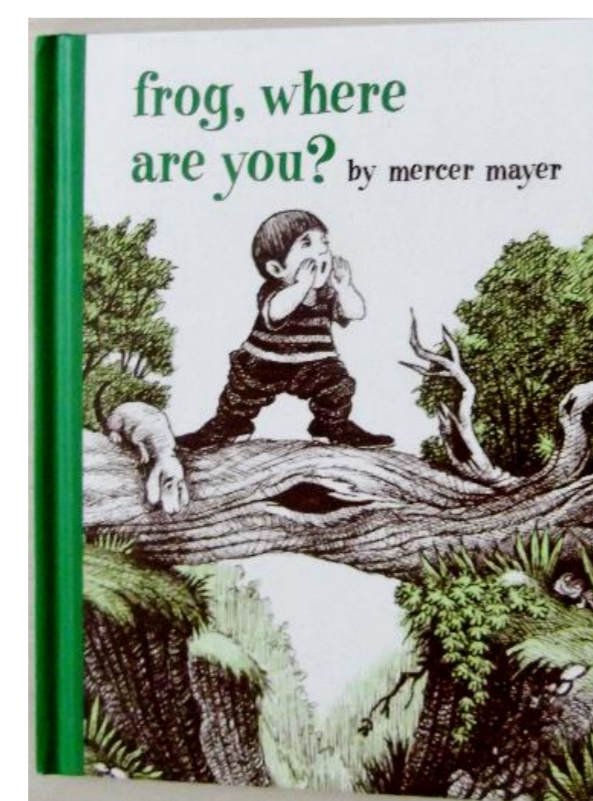
Broad patterns similar to other varieties

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

±Animate and ±specific referents (%)
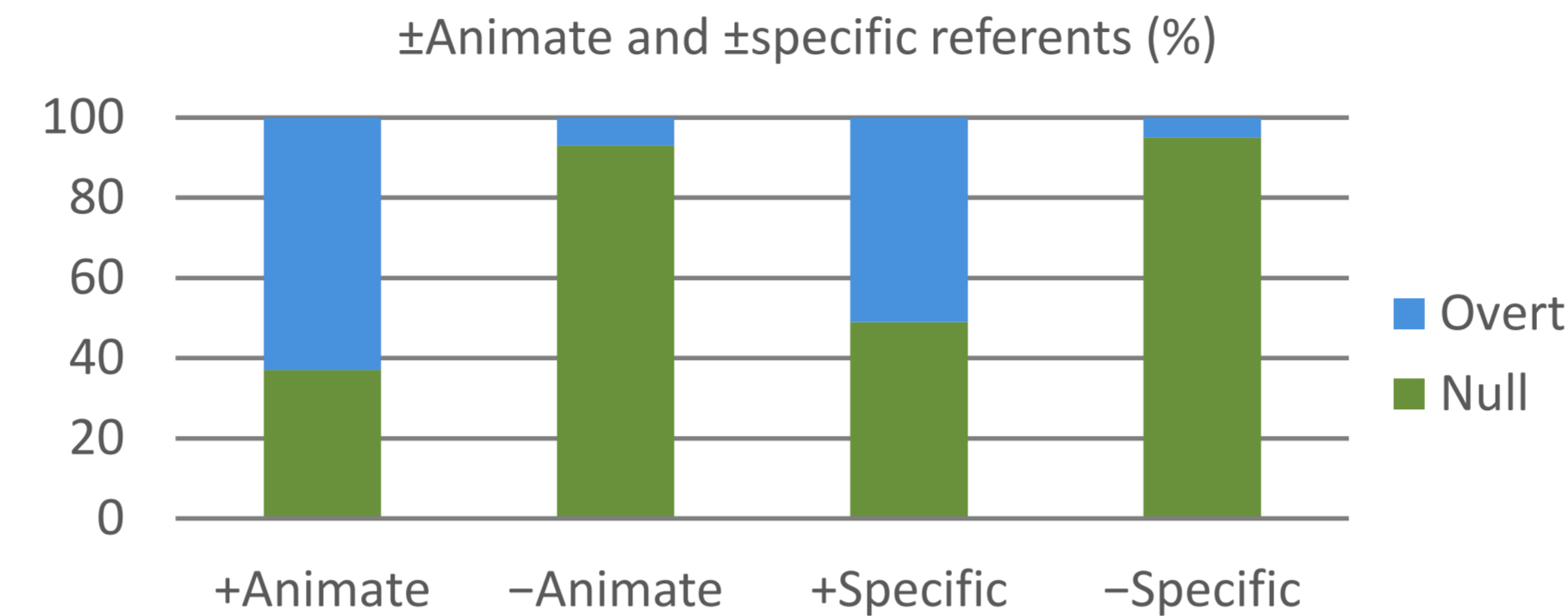
Trends in Portuguese as spoken in Salvador are similar to those seen in Rio de Janeiro.

Next: consider previously under-studied variation within the binary ±animate feature, distinguishing it from ±human

Dog versus frog

Strong evidence in favour of a distinction within non-humans in the +animate category:

Domestic versus non-domestic animals (%)
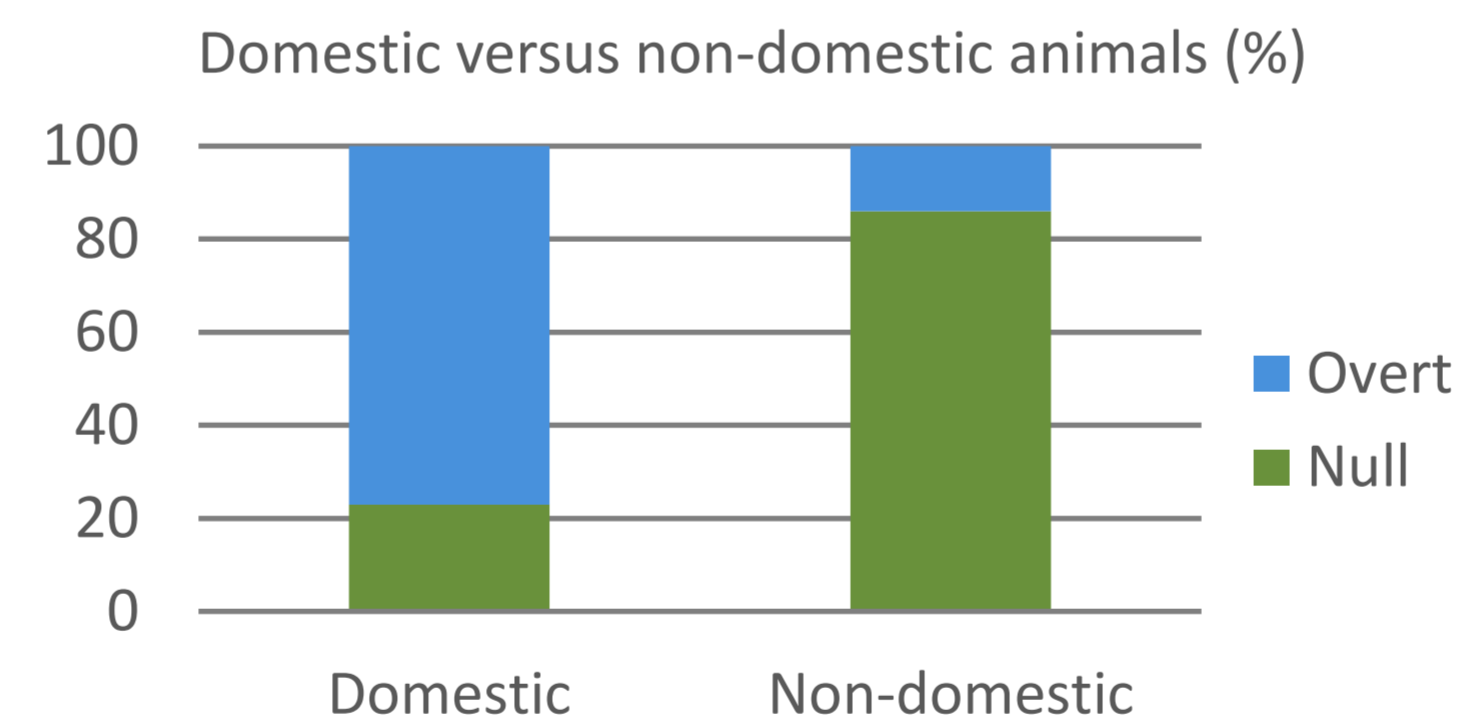
Dog – domestic

Quando a	gente comprou **ele**	o nome dele	era Ralph
When	the people bought **him**	the name of.him	was Ralph

When we bought **him**, his name was Ralph.

Frog – non-domestic

Aí	o menino pega	um dos sapos e	leva Ø com ele
Then	the boy picks.up	one of.the frogs	and takes Ø with him

Then the boy picks up one of the frogs and takes **it** with him.

Examples from 2015 corpus

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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 ±animate, which does not correspond to a ±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

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