

## Variation in Syntax: null expletives and raised constituents in Brazilian Portuguese

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Previous works on the change affecting referential subjects in Brazilian Portuguese (BP) show a clear preference for overt pronouns rather than null subjects (1):

- (1) a. Eu acho que eu passaria por causa da base que eu tinha.  
*I think that I would-pass because of-the basis that I had*  
 b. Vocês dizem isso porque vocês são jovens.  
*you.2pp say it because you.2pp are young*  
 c. Ela ficou solteira porque ela quis.  
*She remained single because she wanted (to).*

However, BP continues to exhibit a productive system of null expletive subjects (*quasi*-argumental and non-argumental), as in (2):

- (2) a.  $\emptyset_{\text{expl}}$  Chove muito nessas florestas.  
 *$\emptyset_{\text{expl}}$  rain.3ps a lot in-these forests*  
 ‘It rains a lot in these forests’  
 b.  $\emptyset_{\text{expl}}$  Rachou a pele das minhas pernas  
*cracked.3ps the skin of-the my legs*  
 ‘The skin of my legs cracked’  
 c.  $\emptyset_{\text{expl}}$  Não ocorreu nenhum problema naqueles bairros  
 *$\emptyset_{\text{expl}}$  not occurred.3ps any problem in-those neighborhoods*  
 ‘No problems have occurred in those neighborhoods’

Such distribution –overt referential subjects and null expletives – however, is not what one can find in spoken BP today. This study investigates the competition between a null expletive and the raising of constituents, such as genitives and locatives, to the subject position in V DP unaccusative structures, as in (3), arguing that they can be considered a strategy to avoid a null category. In other words, the innovative form should be considered evidence of the embedding, or a side-effect, of the change in progress towards a non-null subject language.

- (3) a. [<sub>TP</sub> [Essas florestas]<sub>i</sub> chovem muito [ t ]<sub>i</sub> ]  
*these forests rain-3pp a lot*  
 b. [<sub>TP</sub> [minhas pernas]<sub>i</sub> racharam [a pele t<sub>i</sub> ] ]  
*my legs cracked.3pp the skin*  
 c. [<sub>TP</sub> [Aqueles bairros]<sub>i</sub> não ocorreram nenhum problema.  
*those neighborhoods not occurred.3pp any problem*

The *corpus* comes from casual and anonymous speech events collected from language used in daily life in contexts characterized by no explicit observation. The reason for using this method, which “has been established as an efficient and reliable tool of linguistic research” (Labov, 2006:40; Sankoff, 2005), is due to the fact that structures in (3) above are extremely rare or do not occur in our sociolinguistic interviews, in spite of being frequent in daily speech. We argue that such a competition can be attributed to the inflectional morphology - which allows clitic-like nominative pronouns, adjoined to T, leaving the Spec,T free to receive raised constituents as subject topics - and to BP Topic Prominence. This explains the non-development of a lexical expletive, attested in a variety of Dominican Spanish (Toribio, 1996). According to Li & Thompson (1976), discourse oriented systems do not “pronounce” non-referential categories. The results bring new contributions to the characterization of partial null subject systems (Holmberg et al., 2009; Holmeberg and Sheehan, 2010).

## References

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