

Nada mais variation in Brazilian Portuguese, *mais nada*

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The positioning of the adverb *mais* ‘more’ relative to negative indefinites such as *nada* ‘nothing’ or *ninguém* ‘nobody’ is variable in Brazilian Portuguese (BP). *Mais* occurs sometimes preposed (*mais nada*) and sometimes postposed (*nada mais*) to negative indefinites. This same variability in ordering is also well documented in certain varieties of Spanish, e.g. Atlantic varieties such as Puerto Rico, Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, and Argentina (García Cornejo 2008) and some Peninsular varieties (Kany 1966). In a recent formal account of the syntactic/semantic constraints on this variation in Puerto Rican Spanish, Gutiérrez-Rexach and González-Rivera (2012) posit that postposed *más* is constrained to purely negative uses and disallowed in comparative or focal constructions. Díaz-Campos and Zahler (2013) tested these constraints in Venezuelan Spanish using a variationist approach and found that while negative polarity greatly favored the use of the postposed adverb (*nada más*), as much as 36% of its use was affirmative, i.e. not restricted to purely negative uses. This discrepancy highlights the need for analyzing the constraints on this variation using naturally-occurring data.

Aside from a few brief acknowledgments of the existence of the same variation in BP (Silver 1948; Gomes de Matos 1967; García Cornejo 2008), no prior studies have examined the constraints on the choice of preposed or postposed variants. This study thus provides a detailed variationist analysis of *nada mais/mais nada* variation in BP. Taking data from interviews, fiction, news articles, and academic works from the *Corpus do Portuguese* (Davies & Ferreira 2006), we use multivariate logistic regression in R to test the constraints posited for Spanish (polarity, animacy of subject, comparative construction, verb type, and position relative to the main clause verb) and determine in what ways Brazilian Portuguese patterns similarly to or different from Spanish.

Our results reveal that, overall, BP actually prefers the preposed variant *mais nada* (55%) to postposed *nada mais* (45%), thereby distinguishing it from Spanish dialects, which all show the opposite preference. Much like Venezuelan Spanish, BP greatly favors *mais nada* in negative polarity contexts and allows this same preposed variant freely in affirmative contexts as well. But unlike Díaz-Campos and Zahler’s (2013) findings for Venezuelan Spanish, BP shows greater evidence of postposed *mais* in comparative constructions. And even more distinctive in BP is the position of the variable phrase relative to the main verb of the clause as a statistically significant predictor: the position of the negative phrase before the main clause verb favors preposed *mais*, but when the phrase occurs after the main clause verb postposed *mais* is significantly more likely.

These results highlight the need to explore the constraints on similar phenomena in closely-related languages using real language data and inferential statistical analysis, i.e. a comparative variationist approach (cf. Tagliamonte 2013). Empirical testing of the constraints posited in formal analyses can provide a more nuanced understanding of the variability of these constraints, as well as whether and to what extent they hold across different languages or language varieties, as both Díaz-Campos and Zahler (2013) and our study show clearly.

References

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