

The Subject Position in Brazilian Portuguese: the Embedding of a Syntactic Change

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1 Introduction

In their discussion of the “embedding” problem, Weinreich, Labov & Herzog (1968:172) state that “linguists are naturally suspicious of any account of change which fails to show the influence of the structural environment upon the feature in question”. In other words, any account of change should try to answer the question: “what other changes are associated with a given change in a manner which cannot be attributed to chance?” (101).

A remarkable difference between European and Brazilian Portuguese is related to the setting of the Null Subject Parameter (NSP). While European Portuguese (EP) behaves like a prototypical Romance Null Subject Language (NSL), contemporary Brazilian Portuguese (BP) is a partially pro-drop system (Kato 2000), with preferably overt referential subjects and null expletive subjects in **finite** clauses. This paper will show that the usually null arbitrary subject of infinitival clauses begins to be phonetically represented by nominative pronouns, used in finite sentences to convey arbitrary interpretation, an unexpected “side effect” or “by-product” of the ongoing process of change in the setting of the NSP, since a null subject in non-finite sentences is a more general property of natural languages. Our analysis will compare data from European and Brazilian Portuguese, inspired by Cavalcante’s (2006) diachronic analysis of such structures in Classical and Modern European Portuguese (16th to 19th centuries).

This article is organized as follows: Section 2 illustrates the reduction of the BP inflectional verbal paradigm and its consequences in the reset of the NSP regarding the preference for overt referential (definite and arbitrary) subjects in finite clauses; Section 3 shows some other evidence of the embedding of the change: the appearance of left-dislocated subjects and the subject-gerund order, two structures typical of non-NSLs; Section 4.1 describes the coexistence of an arbitrary empty subject and of the indefinite clitic *se* in nonfinite clauses across the history of EP; in Section 4.2 our empirical analysis based on modern material is presented. Conclusions appear in Section 5.

2 Parametric Change in Progress in Brazilian Portuguese

Duarte’s (1993) diachronic study shows that the change in the setting of the NSP in PB could be related to the reduction of its inflectional paradigm. Such a reduction was motivated not only by phonological processes (which do occur in some varieties) but also by changes in the set of personal nominative pronouns, as shown in Table 1.

Per./Nb.	Pronouns	Paradigm 1	Paradigm 2	Paradigm 3
1 st . sing.	Eu	am o	am o	am o
2 st . sing.	Tu	am a s	-	-
	Você/Tu	am a	am a	am a
3 rd . sing.	Ele/Ela	am a	am a	am a
1 st . plur.	Nós	am a mos	am a mos	-
	A gente	-	am a	am a
2 nd . plur.	Vós	am a is	-	-
	Vocês	am a m	am a m	am a m
3 rd . plur.	Eles/Elas	am a m	am a m	am a m

Table 1. Pronominal and inflectional paradigms in BP (*amar* ‘to love’)

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Table 1 shows that second person singular *tu* ‘you’, with an exclusive verbal morphology (/s/), has either disappeared in some regions of the country or is used in variation with *você* ‘you’, a former address form *Vossa Mercê* ‘Your Mercy’, which combines with the unmarked third person singular verb morphology; first person plural *nós* ‘we’ is in variation with the former nominal expression *a gente* ‘the people, one’,¹ the preferred pronoun among younger speakers, which also combines with the third person singular verb form. Second person plural *vós* ‘you’ has disappeared in both EP and PB, but only in BP has it been replaced by *vocês*, used indistinctly to refer to more than one person. Some dialects of EP keep the pronoun *vós* and, even those which do not use it, preferring nominal expressions such as *os senhores* ‘the gentlemen’, *as senhoras* ‘the ladies’, still use possessives and obliques from the same paradigm as *vós* (*vos*: oblique; *vossos*: possessive).

Today, paradigms 2 and 3 coexist in BP, paradigm 3, with only three distinct verb forms, being preferred by younger speakers, regardless of social class and level of formal education. Such a reduction must have been the trigger for a “partial” reset of the NSP: not only definite but also arbitrary pronominal subjects are preferably overt in finite clauses, as shown in (1) and (2), respectively.

- (1) a. Mas **eu** acho muito engraçado quando **eu** lembro o modo que **eu** fui criada. (BP)
But I find (it) very funny when I remember the way that I was raised
 b. **Vocês** são muito jovens. **Vocês** pensam que vocês podem mudar o mundo. \emptyset Acham que tudo é fácil. (BP)
You are very young. You think that you can change the world. (you) think that everything is easy
 c. **Ela** ganha bem, mas eu acho que **ela** devia ganhar mais porque **ela** merece. (BP)
She earns well, but I think that she should earn more because she deserves (it)
- (2) a. **Você** quando **voce** viaja, **voce** passa a ser turista. Então **voce** passa a fazer coisas que **voce** nunca faria no Brasil. (BP)
You, when you travel, you become a tourist. So, you start doing things that you would never do in Brazil
 b. **A gente** tem que seguir o que **a gente** sabe e da forma que **a gente** foi criado. (BP)
One has to follow what one knows and in-the way one has-been raised
 c. Quando **eles** querem **eles** fazem. Quando **eles** querem **eles** acham dinheiro. (BP)
When they want they do (it). When they want, they find money

European Portuguese, on the other hand, keeps a “functionally” rich paradigm (Roberts 1993), with a limited number of syncretisms, which allows licensing and identification of null subjects. As shown in Duarte (1995) 1st, 2nd and 3rd person subjects are preferably null, unless co-reference is impaired by a possible intervening subject or emphasis and contrast are intended. See examples in (3) below.

- (3) a. Hoje \emptyset gostava de ser magistrado porque \emptyset estou convencido que \emptyset talvez evitasse mais injustiças como magistrado do que as que \emptyset posso evitar como advogado. (EP)
Today (I) would rather be a magistrate because (I) am convinced that (I) might avoid more injustices as a magistrate than the ones (I) can avoid as a lawyer.
 b. Por exemplo, nesse trabalho que \emptyset apresentou sobre poesia, \emptyset é capaz de me dizer o que é \emptyset aproveitou do contato com os alunos? (EP)
For example, in-this work that (you) presented about poetry, (you) are able to tell me what (you) profited from the contact with the students?
 c. O corredor_i vive as corridas desde o primeiro dia que \emptyset _i chega. (EP)
The car racer lives the races from the first day that (he) arrives.

The same is true for arbitrary subjects in finite sentences. They are either represented by the

¹For the grammaticalization of *a gente* and *Vossa Mercê*, see Lopes (2003) and Lopes & Duarte 2003, among others.

indefinite clitic *se* or by the verb inflected in the second or third person plural, with the null arbitrary subject (*we, they*) identified by the verb morphology, following the same pattern exhibited by definite subjects:

- (4) a. Se **se** gostou uma vez de uma coisa, tem que **se** continuar fiel àquele estilo. (EP)
If (one) se-CL liked something once, (one) has to se-CL keep faithful to that style
 b. \emptyset_{arb} Não falavam em tapeçaria nessa altura; \emptyset_{arb} só se referem a uns leves trabalhos, nem sequer \emptyset_{arb} dizem a palavra bordado. (EP)
(they) did not mention tapestry at that time; (they) only refer to some light work, (they) do not even mention the word embroidery
 c. Outras vezes \emptyset_{arb} até vamos reajustar o nosso gosto. Às vezes até falta de conhecimentos. Depois \emptyset_{arb} contactamos com pessoas que têm até melhor gosto do que nós, que são indivíduos sensíveis (...) e \emptyset_{arb} aprendemos. (EP)
Other times (we) even readjust our taste. Sometimes even lack of taste. Then (we) contact people who have better taste than we do, who are sensible (...) and (we) learn

In sum, an expressed referential pronoun is the unmarked form in spoken BP today, and in spite of the normative pressure in Brazilian schools, written language already shows the effects of the change (Barbosa, Duarte & Kato 2005; Duarte 2004, 2007). Null subjects are felt by younger generations as very formal in speech. EP, on the other hand, obeys the “Avoid Pronoun” Principle, preferring a null subject with a syntactically accessible referent (Calabrese 1986).²

3 Some Evidence of the Embedding of the Change

Some important evidence of the embedding of the change towards a non-NSL has been collected among the past years. Besides the use of referential overt pronouns for non-animate referents, BP exhibits left-dislocated subjects, a type of structure not attested in null subject languages of the Romance group, but very frequent in French. Interestingly enough, such structures can appear in root or embedded clauses, with or without a pause; with or without an intervening element between the dislocated element and the sentence. Such dislocated element can be a noun or a pronoun, animate or non-animate, definite, indefinite or arbitrary (see Duarte 1998, 2003).

- (5) a. **A minha vida; ela_i** já foi mais tranqüila; hoje ela é mais agitada.
The my life it already was more quiet; today it is more agitated.
 b. Eu acho que **o povo brasileiro; ele_i** tem uma grave doença.
I believe that the people Brazilian he/it has a serious disease
 c. **Mulher nenhuma; ela_i** pode querer dominar o homem. **O homem; ele_i** é livre por natureza; **a mulher; ela_i** tem que aceitar isso.
No woman she can wish to dominate the man. The man he is free by nature; the woman she has to accept that.
 d. Não é como o Rio de Janeiro, que **você** em cada esquina **você** tem um bar pra você lanchar.
(It) is not like Rio de Janeiro, where you in every corner you have a bar for you to have a snack

²Brazilian Portuguese still presents a third person singular null subject with arbitrary reference in finite sentences, such as in (i) below, which is related to its partial pro-drop nature (cf. Galves 1987; Duarte 1995; Cavalcante 2007):

(i) Antigamente [\emptyset_{arb}] punha a mesa para tomar lanche.
In the past (one) used to set the table to have a snack.

The structure is in variation with the use of nominative pronouns and is restricted to habitual actions in the present or the past.

Another important side “effect” of the change is the practically categorical use of “subject-gerund” order in BP, which is found in English and French, but not in Italian, Spanish or European Portuguese (see Britto 2000; Barbosa, Duarte and Kato 2005:35).

- (6) a. **Você saindo** do Brasil, a gente sente uma falta muito grande dessa parte de verdura.
You leaving from-the Brazil, one feels an absence very big of-this part of vegetables
 b. **O Pedro chegando**, nós saímos.
The Peter arriving, we leave.

Now we turn to the focus of this paper: the change affecting the subject of infinitival clauses.

3 Arbitrary Subjects of Infinitival Clauses

3.1 A Drop of History

Null arbitrary subjects in infinitival clauses seem to be a more general property of languages, a property which is shared by Portuguese. However, Portuguese also shows the possibility to use the indefinite clitic *se* to mark arbitrary reference in infinitival sentences just like in finite sentences (see (4a) above). Such a possibility has been claimed to be due to the presence of the inflected infinitive, a property of Portuguese and Galician (*cf.* Cinque 1988; Dobrovie-Sorin 1998).³ The diachronic study of Classical Portuguese (from the 16th to the 18th century) and Modern Portuguese (19th century)⁴ carried out by Cavalcante (2006) shows that (a) the use of *se* is found in variation with an empty subject in infinitival clauses with preference for the null subject strategy and (b) the overall frequency of *se* declines from 20% in Classical Portuguese to 10% in Modern Portuguese, a rate that remains throughout the 20th century in Portugal.

The variation of indefinite *se* and a null subject is shown in (7).

- (7) a. Também, para [\emptyset_{arb}] **abreviar** razões, é de muita utilidade na prática, como quando dizemos: ficou em sêco, deitou azar, troceu a orelha, deu cinco (F. Rodrigues Lobo, n. 1579)
also, for [\emptyset_{arb}] to-abbreviate reasons, (it) is of much utility in practice...
 “Moreover, in order to abbreviate explanations, it is very useful in practice...”
 b. Também, para **se abreviar** razões, é de muita utilidade na prática
also, for se-CL to-abbreviate-3PS reasons, (it) is of much utility in practice
 c. Também, para **se abreviarem** razões, é de muita utilidade na prática
also, for se-CL to-abbreviate-3PP reasons, (it) is of much utility in practice
 (=also, for reasons to be abbreviated.....)

Example (7a) illustrates the null subject with an actual token from the 16th century. Two other possible uses of *se* appear in (7b) and (7c): (7b) shows the use of *se* plus a non-inflected infinitive with a transitive verb followed by a plural internal argument and (7c) shows again the use of *se* in a passive construction, as shown by the agreement between the inflected infinitive and the plural internal argument. The three structures are attested in the sample composed of 1506 tokens.

All verbs in Cavalcante’s sample were transitive and the plural number of the internal argument did not always trigger the passive construction (i.e. verbal agreement). As for the favoring environment for the presence of the clitic *se*, the author points out the presence of a preposition introducing the subordinate infinitival clause (note agreement with the internal argument in (8b)).

³Other NSLs, like Italian, do not allow the presence of *se*, unless it is related to an inflected head, which is finite Infl (*cf.* Cinque, 1988; Dobrovie-Sorin, 1998).

⁴The data come from the *Tycho Brahe Parsed Corpus of Historical Portuguese*, a corpus of written texts by Portuguese authors born between the 16th and 19th centuries (www.ime.usp.br/~tycho).

- (8) a. Põe-se quando a oração já faz algum sentido, mas não o que basta **para se entender** de que se fala (Antonio Verney, b. 1713)
puts-3PS-se-CL when the sentence already makes some sense, but not what suffices for se-CL-to understand of what se-CL-speaks
 “(this) is put when the sentence makes some sense, but not enough to understand what one is talking about”
 b. entendo que não haverá dúvida **em se suspenderem** estas ordens (Vieira, *Letters*, b. 1608)
(I) understand that not will be doubt in se-CL-cancel-3PP these orders
 “I believe these orders will be cancelled without any doubt”

Another observation is that the use of *se* sometimes, but not as a rule, seems to prevent a coreferential reading, when there is a possible candidate in the previous context, like the first person pronoun *eu* (I) in (9).

- (9) E sendo bastante razão esta, para eu haver sentido muito a total falta que delas tivemos neste correio, se acrescenta a êste sentimento **não se saber a causa** por que faltaram ... (Vieira, *Letters*, b. 1608)
and being enough reason this-one, for I to-have missed much the total lack that of-them (we) had in-this mail, se-CL-adds-3PS to this feeling not se-CL-to-know the cause for which they missed
 “And besides the fact that I missed them in this mail, it is added to this feeling the lack of knowledge about why I missed them”

In sum, we can conclude that the competition between arbitrary PRO and indefinite clitic *se* is kept across time in EP, but the use of *se* tends to decrease, which might mean that an empty category is enough to assure an arbitrary interpretation of PRO. Should the use of *se* be a strong conditioner for the arbitrary interpretation, one would expect an increase in this usage, which does not happen in EP.

3.2 Our Analysis for Contemporary Spoken EP and BP

In this section we compare the representation of arbitrary subjects in EP and BP infinitival clauses, using speech samples from C-Oral-Rom Reference Corpus (Cresti & Moneglia, 2005) for EP⁵ and from NURC-RJ (Urban College Educated Speakers from Rio de Janeiro) for BP.

Some questions to be answered are: (a) considering that EP and BP behave differently regarding the representation of arbitrary subjects in tensed clauses, should they exhibit different behaviors in infinitival clauses? (b) considering that spoken BP, contrary to EP, shows extremely low rates of indefinite *se* in tensed clauses to convey arbitrary interpretation to the subject, restricted to the speech of older generations with higher levels of formal education (Duarte 1995), should we find the implementation of nominative pronouns in the subject position? (c) in case of affirmative answers, what explanation could we find for a tendency that does not seem to be related to the properties of the NSP? Table 2 shows the distribution of data for speech in each variety.

	Strategies					Total
	[Ø _{arb}]	se	você	a gente	NP	
EP	68 (89%)	6 (8%)	0	1 (1.5%)	1 (1.5%)	76
BP	160 (77%)	3 (1.5%)	37 (18%)	4 (2%)	3 (1.5)	207

Table 2: Distribution of arbitrary subject strategies in spoken EP and BP

⁵To keep the EP sample comparable we selected only interviews with college-educated speakers. Such a restriction is responsible for a smaller sample for EP.

As we expected, null subjects are preferred in both varieties: 89% for EP and 77% for BP. The distribution between null subject and *se* in EP confirms Cavalcante's (2006) results for the historical course of indefinite *se* in Portuguese, which reaches 10% in her contemporary sample for writing. The modest rate of 1.5% of *se* in BP confirms the scarcity of its use in this variety. Examples in (10) suggest that the use of *se* in each variety seems to be more conditioned by the presence of a preposition than by a functional motivation:

- (10) a. a nora desses amigos da Manuela levou-nos a conhecer Brasília inteira que também é muito fácil \emptyset_{arb} **conhecer** porque aquilo é tudo tão organizadinho que basta \emptyset_{arb} **conhecer** um fragmento para **se perceber** bem como é que funciona tudo (**spoken EP**)
the mother-in-law of-these friends of Manuela took-us to to-meet Brasília whole which also is very easy \emptyset_{arb} to know because that is all so organized that (it) suffices \emptyset_{arb} to-know a fragment for se-CL to-notice well how works everything
 “The mother-in-law of Manuela’s friends took us around to get to know Brasília, which is easy to know because it is so well-organized that it is enough to know a part of it to understand how it all works”
- b. Brasília é uma ótima cidade para \emptyset_{arb} **morar** dentro de casa...e \emptyset_{arb} **ter** tudo ... é uma cidade agradabilíssima de **se viver**. (**spoken BP**)
Brasília is an excellent city for \emptyset_{arb} to-live indoors...and \emptyset_{arb} to-have everything (it) is a city very-pleasant for se-CL to-live
 “Brasília is an excellent city to live indoors and to have everything. It’s a pleasant place to live”

Both EP and BP show very low rates of the arbitrary nominative pronoun *a gente* (one) and of generic NP *a pessoa* (the person), as shown in examples in (11).

- (11) a. portanto se calhar, melhor **a gente** saber tudo porque se faz tudo na mesma (**spoken EP**)
therefore if (it) happens, better one to-know everything because everything ends up the same way
 “Therefore, it is better to know everything because it ends up the same way”
- b. não há a oportunidade de **a pessoa** fazer assim um rasgo daqueles (**spoken EP**)
(there) is no opportunity for the person to-do this-way a manifestation like that
 “There is no chance to have such a reaction”
- c. Eu acho que greve é a arma de trabalhador pra **gente** usar na hora certa, no momento exato, senão a gente se desgasta. (**spoken BP**)
I think that strike is the weapon of the worker for one to-use in the right time, in the right moment, otherwise one se-REFL tires-out
 “I believe that striking is a weapon to be used at the right moment...”
- d. Vão botar o pessoal todo na rua, isso é que é triste, **a pessoa** perder o seu emprego. (**spoken BP**)
(they) are going to put all the people in the street, that is what is sad, the person to-lose his job
 “They will put everyone out on the streets, which is very sad: to lose one’s job”

What draws one’s attention in Table 2 is the expressive frequency of 15% of occurrences of the nominative pronoun *você* (you), a non-attested use in EP, but the preferred pronoun to convey arbitrary reference with finite sentences, as shown in (2a) above. Some examples of such a strategy can be seen in (12):

- (12) a. Então, quer dizer, por isso que eu digo, não adianta **você** fazer o pré-vestibular se você não tiver a base. (**spoken BP**)
So, I mean, that’s why I say, (it) isn’t worth you to-take the entrance course if you don’t have the basis

“So, that’s why I say that it’s no use to take the preparatory entrance examination if you lack a good base”

b. agora já é muito mais barato **você cozinhar com óleo**(spoken BP)

now (it) is already much cheaper you to-cook with oil

“Now, it’s cheaper to cook with vegetable oil”

c. **Você** ter qualquer profissão da área tecnológica te paga melhor que o magistério.
(Spoken BP)

you to-have any profession of the technological área pays you better than teaching

“Working in the technological area pays better than teaching”

The use of nominative pronouns represents a good solution for a system that is losing clitics (a long-term process of change that started with the third person accusative and dative clitics) and needs to mark the subject position. Another advantage for those who still use the reflexive third person clitic, which is a homophone of the indefinite clitic *se*, is that the reflexive and a nominative pronoun can co-occur, as in (13a). Another possibility would be the null subject option, as in (13b). The simultaneous use of indefinite *se* and reflexive *se* (13c) would render the sentence ungrammatical:

(13) a. O Rio de Janeiro é uma cidade adorável **pra você** se divertir, né. (spoken BP)

Rio de Janeiro is an adorable city for you se-REFL to-enjoy

“Rio de Janeiro is an adorable city to enjoy yourself/oneself”

b. O Rio de Janeiro é uma cidade adorável **pra** \emptyset_{arb} *i se_i* divertir, né.

Rio de Janeiro is an adorable city for \emptyset_{arb} se-REFL to enjoy

c. * O Rio de Janeiro é uma cidade adorável **pra se** se divertir né.

Rio de Janeiro is an adorable city for se-CL-ARB se-CL-REFL to-enjoy

4 Conclusion

The history of arbitrary **se** with infinitives in Portuguese reveals a parsimonious use, sometimes to prevent a definite interpretation of the subject, sometimes related to the presence of a preposition. The rates of **se** found today in BP, in speech as well as in writing, reveal a very marginal use. The decline observed by Cavalcante (2006) should be the reason why Brazilian normative grammarians, who have established the rules for “good use of language” according to European models at the turn of the 19th century, are extremely emphatic in the prohibition of the use of **se** with infinitives. According to them, it has “no utility” or “no function”. This should explain the results found for written BP: the same low rates of **se** found for EP (around 10%) and the absence of nominative pronouns. While **definite** overt pronouns from speech are already being implemented in writing (Duarte 2007), **arbitrary** overt subjects remain preferably null. And since the use of **se** is recommended as the best strategy to express arbitrariness in finite sentences and carries prestige, it may be a useful strategy to mark the subject position in a system that tends to do so, which is the case of BP. Therefore, an increase in the use of **se** in writing is expected while the use of nominative pronouns is implemented in speech.

The analysis makes it clear that the use of an element to fill the subject position, be it a clitic or a nominative pronoun cannot be attributed to chance. It should be credited to the parametric change in progress and to the fact that the system has the inflected infinitive. The rising rates of markers of agreement found in BP (see Naro and Scherre 2003, among others) should also be an element to favor even more the use of the inflected infinitive. It is no surprise to find (14a) in a signed article written by one of the most popular Brazilian writers, who prefers the “passive” construction with indefinite **se** to the use of **se** in an active sentence (14b) (both prohibited by traditional grammars) and the “prescribed” null subject in (14c):

(14) a. Já é comum **escreverem-se** ensaios polissilábicos. (BP)

already (it) is common to-write-3pp se-CL polysyllabic essays

“It’s already common to write polysyllabic essays”

(=polysyllabic essays to be written)

- b. Já é comum **escrever-se** ensaios polissilábicos.
already (it) is common to-write-3ps se-CL polysyllabic essays
- c. Já é comum \emptyset_{arb} **escrever** ensaios polissilábicos.
already (it) is common \emptyset_{arb} to-write polysyllabic essays

The option chosen by the writer is the same noticed in Classical Portuguese whenever the transitive verb exhibited a plural internal argument (as shown in (8b)). More research is needed, but it is impossible not to relate it to a larger “web” of embedded changes. The “embedding” problem is being pursued in the analysis of definite subjects in infinitival clauses (Duarte in preparation).

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