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PRONOUNS AND EMPTY CATEGORIES IN PORTUGUESE AND ROMANCE LANGUAGES, A CONVERSATION WITH SONIA CYRINO

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Sonia Maria Lazzarini Cyrino is a professor at the State University of Campinas – Unicamp and a CNPq researcher. Her research on null objects in Portuguese and other Romance languages are reference in the area, since at least the her chapter “Observações sobre a mudança diacrônica no português do Brasil: objeto nulo e clíticos” (*Observations about the diachronic change in Brazilian Portuguese: null object and clitics*), published while still a PhD student, in the 1993 book organized by Ian Roberts and Mary Kato, *Português brasileiro: uma viagem diacrônica*³ (*Brazilian Portuguese: a diachronic trip*), up to more recent research, such as the chapter “Null objects and VP ellipsis”, published in co-authorship with Gabriela Matos (University of Lisboa) in the recent *The Handbook of Portuguese Linguistics*⁴, organized by Leo Wetzels, Sergio Menuzzi and João Costa.

Among the many contributions of Sonia’s research, we can certainly list her diachronic research on theatre plays that map the decrease of third person clitics and the frequency increase of null objects as strategies for anaphoric retrieval of object in BP; her investigation of grammatical traces of anaphoric antecedents that favor the

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³ ROBERTS, I.; KATO, M. A. (orgs.) *Português brasileiro: uma viagem diacrônica*. Campinas: Ed. da Unicamp, 1993.

⁴ WETZELS, L.; COSTA, J.; MENUZZI, S. *The handbook of Portuguese linguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2016.

pronominal retrieval or by empty categories such as anaphoric direct object; her referential hierarchy, which influences pronominal phenomenon involving subjects and objects in many languages (published in an article with Mary Kato and Maria Eugênia Duarte⁵); her many papers showing the distinction between VP ellipsis and proper null objects; her investigations on differential object marking (DOM) in Romance languages; etc. Besides, Sonia has already advised twenty undergrad students, thirteen master's candidates and four PhD candidates who defended under her advising.

OTHERO – Sonia, your dissertation “Null object in Brazilian Portuguese: a diachronic-syntactic study”⁶ was a pioneer research on null object in BP and up until now it is one of the most influent texts in the area. What was the meaning of this paper in your academic journey, on one side, and in the development of studies about null object in BP and in other Romance languages, on the other? How would you evaluate it today, after almost 25 years of the paper’s publishing?

CYRINO – Gabriel, I am so privileged of being a part of a group of syntacticians who began diachronic research in BP using a generative perspective. This group is composed of students from the graduation program, oriented by Mary Kato, Fernando Tarallo and Charlotte Galves, in the end of the 80's and the beginning of the 90's. It was a special moment in which new research perspectives were opening up for us, plenty of challenges we chose to face. The challenges would extend from its own theoretical board up to *corpora* search to develop our research. The topic I chose to dedicate myself to, null objects, was a topic that had already captured the attention of researchers in the synchronic study of BP, but, up until then, had been little (if any) explored in diachronic terms. My initial idea for PhD was to explore the acquisition of null object, since my master's had been about acquisition of null subject in L2.

⁵ CYRINO, S. M. L.; DUARTE, M. E.; KATO, M. A. Visible subjects and invisible clitics in Brazilian Portuguese. In: KATO, M. A.; NEGRÃO, E. V. (eds.) *Brazilian Portuguese and the Null Subject Parameter*. Frankfurt: Vervuert-Iberoamericana, 2000.

⁶ CYRINO, S. M. L. *O objeto nulo no português do Brasil: um estudo sintático-diacrônico*. PhD dissertation: Unicamp, 1994 (published in 1997 by Ed. da Universidade Estadual de Londrina, Londrina, PR).

Though, after an excellent course on diachronic syntax under a generative perspective, offered by Fernando Tarallo and Mary Kato in preparation for Ian Roberts' visit in the following term, I had no doubts over investigating the phenomenon under a diachronic point-of-view. The research questions were very clear, and, from then on, I began an investigation path that up until today I still invest on. In diachronic terms, it seems that subsequent studies to my dissertation confirmed its results. In theoretical terms, however, the "null object" category is still a topic of many investigations, since it manifests itself with different properties in different languages. To this end, it is still a field worth exploring, and this number of **ReVEL** may contribute to elucidate many questions regarding the theme.

OTHERO – How do the grammars of BP and European Portuguese (EP) differentiate when we talk about null objects? Is there any indication of syntactic difference between the grammars of these two varieties of Portuguese?

CYRINO – In the year 2000, I started collaboration with Professor Gabriela Matos (University of Lisboa), in a project whose objective was a comparative study of BP and EP, organized and directed by Mary Kato and João Peres. We started to investigate the differences between the two varieties of Portuguese regarding the possibility of VP ellipsis. From then on, we investigated other related phenomena, such as the Overt Null Complement Anaphor, and we were able to attest that there is a syntactic difference manifested through verb movement, which allows licensing of empty categories in a distinct way in each variety. Regarding the null object, it became clear to me that the EP phenomenon is more diverse than the one that occurs in BP. In our language, we have other changes that contributed to the arising of our own null object, among them, the loss of third person clitics and the loss of long verb movement. In EP, these changes did not occur and the existence of null objects must be a consequence of other (universal) grammar possibilities, possibilities that also exist in Hebraic, Turkish, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Quechua, Basque Spanish, among others, each language presenting the null object with specific and different properties from those that characterize the null object in BP. Obviously, null

objects that are universally allowed and ruled by pragmatic matters also exist in BP. But my point is, besides these, we have yet another kind of null object that does not occur in other languages, since in our case, it is about the consequence of syntactic changes that other languages have not gone through.

OTHERO – Sonia, what can we say regarding the theoretical status of this empty category we call null object? Is there still divergence to know whether we are facing a *pro* or another empty element in Portuguese (BP e EP)? How about the other Romance languages, is there any consensus about how the null object fits in the typology of empty categories?

CYRINO – As I have previously mentioned, I believe that “null object” is a broad term that can designate a series of different phenomena. There are languages that present the “topic drop” phenomenon, which has different characteristics from a typical null object in BP. Other languages allow the null object as ellipsis (e.g., Hebrew, Turkish), i.e., a similar construction to the one that I propose for null objects in BP. However, the properties of null objects in these languages are different, for example, in the matter of the null object’s antecedent’s animacy feature: these languages allow null objects with animated antecedents, while null objects in BP don’t. For this reason, the theme still arouses many investigations and there is recent literature discussing these matters.

OTHERO – The pioneer study of Fernando Tarallo⁷ verified a relation between the frequency increase of the null object and the occurrence decrease of null subject in BP. Since Tarallo’s research, which conclusion has been reached in the study of this relation between pronominal and null subject *versus* pronominal and null object?

⁷ TARALLO, F. *Relativization strategies in Brazilian Portuguese*. PhD dissertation. University of Pennsylvania, 1983.

CYRINO – Mary Kato, Eugênia Duarte and I wrote an article in 2000 in which we investigate this correlation. In fact, these two changes occur in BP, but a matter that is still in debate involves the status of the empty categories involved in both phenomena. To this end, I do not believe that we can reach any conclusion regarding the “pronominal empty category” factor and its relation with the overt subject or object in BP, once the pronominal empty category’s own definition is still debatable. What we were able to determine is the relevance of antecedents’ traces for the phonetic realization or not of the subject and the object, and this fact should contribute for a deeper theoretical analysis. In the article in question, we based our results in the proposal of a Referentiality Hypothesis followed by a child under acquisition process. However, such hierarchy’s own statute inside a generative proposal is still debatable.

OTHERO – **I believe the grammatical studies in BP have advanced a lot in the last years, due to, mainly, a good capacity of formation of new researchers and remarkable publications by researchers from your generation, Sonia. Regarding the theme of this ReVEL’s edition (“Pronouns and empty categories”), for example, we count on your pioneer and influential studies, besides studies by José Lemos Monteiro, Fernando Tarallo, Mary Kato, Sergio Menuzzi, Maria Eugenia Duarte, Maria Cristina Figueiredo Silva, among others. Besides that, you’ve helped to form new generations of Brazilian linguists. To this end, what is there still to discover, in BP, when it comes to “Pronouns and empty categories”? What can new studies reveal regarding BP’s grammar in this sense?**

CYRINO – As previously mentioned, many studies are still welcomed to explain BP regarding possibilities of overt pronoun. One is a better explanation of the pronoun structure in itself. From the seminal study by Cardinaletti & Starke, some proposals were made regarding tonic pronouns in BP, but the status of the remaining clitic pronouns awaits a deeper investigation, since their behavior has been compared to an agreement manifestation. Regarding empty categories, studies that discuss their

several manifestations, unfolding the properties that characterize their differences depending on their function are also welcomed.

OTHERO – Sonia, usually, we finish the interviews asking for bibliographical suggestions from our interviewees. So, as an authority in the area, would you mind suggesting to our readers some influential texts on the subject “Pronouns and empty categories”, in special texts that investigate BP and other Romance languages?

CYRINO – There are many texts on this theme, and it is difficult to make an exhaustive suggestion. Everything published by Mary Kato and Charlotte Galves on the theme is mandatory reading. Besides that, we also have studies by Eugênia Duarte and her group, by Sergio Menuzzi, Maria Cristina Figueiredo Silva, and other Brazilian researchers who dedicate themselves to this theme. Besides these and more recently, Gabriela Matos and I wrote a chapter about null objects and VP ellipsis in BP and EP, published on the *Handbook of Portuguese Linguistics*. About diachronic change, we will soon have the release of volume VI of the collection *História do Português Brasileiro (History of Brazilian Portuguese)*, edited by Contexto. In this volume, organized by me and Maria Aparecida Torres Morais, there are several chapters discussing the matter of pronouns and empty categories in Brazilian Portuguese, in a diachronic perspective, under a generative point of view. Also, under a diachronic perspective, we have the recent re-edition of *Português Brasileiro: uma viagem diacrônica (Brazilian Portuguese: a diachronic trip)*, organized by Ian Roberts and Mary Kato and published by Contexto, and, in the near future, we will have a second volume with several chapters about this theme. I hope I have not forgotten any important reference to this brief presentation, and I would like to make myself available for any reading indications that may be more specific.