Talking about null indirect objects in Brazilian Portuguese

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This paper examines the syntax of the null indirect object in Brazilian Portuguese (BP) in the context of directional ditransitive verbs such as *dar* “to give”; *mandar* “to send”; *contar* “to tell”; *dizer* “to say”; *perguntar* “to ask”; *prometer* “to promise”; *acrescentar* “to add”; *levar* “to take”. The verbal context also includes dynamic verbs of construction/creation such as *cozinhar* “to cook”; *assar* “to bake”; *construir* “to build”; *desenhar* “to draw”. Adopting a comparative perspective, I propose that BP differs from European Portuguese (EP) in the grammatical encoding of indirect objects (cf. Torres Morais & Berlink, 2006, 2007), Torres Morais & Salles (2010)). In EP, the indirect object can be a distinct structural class, morphologically identified by a dative marker. By hypothesis, the preposition *a* is the morphological realization of an abstract dative Case, akin to a case suffix. As full DPs, indirect objects appear preceded by the morpheme *a* (a-DP), whose corresponding dative clitic pronoun is *lhe/lhes* (3rd person singular and plural). Indirect objects can also be licensed as -prepositional phrases (PP). In this case, they behave as oblique arguments, introduced as different participants or as modifiers of the event expressed by the verb (cf. Mateus et al. 2003). Following Pylkkänen (2002) and Cuervo (2003), I assume that indirect objects may be realized in two different configurations. One is projected by a low applicative head which introduces and licenses dative DPs, both syntactically and semantically (1a-a’). The other one is projected by a lexical/true preposition. While the first configuration exhibits the main syntactic properties of the English double object construction (DOC), the second one is the prepositional ditransitive construction (PDC) (1b-b’).

(1)  

a. *O João enviou uma carta à Maria/enviou-lhe uma carta.*  
‘John sent Mary a letter/sent her a letter.’

  a’. [VP O João [v [VP enviou [APPL à Maria/lhe [APPL Ø [DP uma carta]]]]]]

b. *O João enviou uma carta para a Maria/para Lisboa.*  
‘John sent a letter to Pedro/to Lisbon’

  b’ [VP O João [v [VP enviou [PP uma carta [P para [DPgoal/locative a Maria /Lisboa]]]]]]

An interesting fact about (standard) BP, as opposed to EP, is that the applicative configuration involving lexical and pronominal datives is not found, the indirect object being projected in the prepositional configuration, as illustrated in (1b-b’). I propose that the absence of (1a-a’) is related to a profound reanalysis in BP pronominal paradigm. At the same time, the increasing use of the preposition *para*, in place of the preposition *a*, constitutes evidence for the loss of the morphological expression of indirect objects (cf. Berlink, 2001, Gomes, 2003; Torres Morais & Berlink, 2006, 2007). In fact, quantitative studies dealing with data collected from different regions of Brazil, and with documents dated from the 18th to the 20th century, show that the grammatical expression of indirect objects has undergone significant changes, which essentially amount to two related phenomena: a decrease in the use of the preposition *a*, which is replaced by the preposition *para*, and a decrease in the use of the dative clitic pronoun, particularly the 3rd person clitic *lhe(s)*, which is replaced by two different strategies of pronominalization: (i) the use of a strong pronoun within the prepositional phrase; (ii) the significant rise in the occurrence of null indirect objects which have an antecedent in discourse or in the linguistic context. Both strategies, illustrated in (2a-c) bellow, are extracted from written language, collected by Freire (2005):
(2) a. O Cebolinha vai adorar o computador! [...] E amanhã cedo ensino tudo direitinho pra ele! (PB: Almanaque do Cebolinha, n.º 77, outubro de 2003 – História em quadrinhos)

‘Cebolinha will love the computer! And tomorrow morning I’ll teach him everything properly!’ (PB... cartoon)

b. Devo soltar o Tatá no quintal pra se exercitar e dar a ele duas colheres de comida! (PB: O melhor da Disney: as obras completas de Carl Barks, vol. 3, maio de 2004 – História em quadrinhos)

‘I must let Tata out in the backyard to exercise and give him two servings of food.’ (PB... cartoon)

c. O atendimento é sofrível. Já avisei ao gerente e dei um prazo para que o atendimento melhore. (PB: O Globo, 12-09-2004 – Trecho de fala em reportagem)

‘The service is very bad. I already informed the manager and gave him time to improve the service.’ (PB... report)

The low productivity of 3rd person dative clitics not only in spoken language but also in less formal written language is good evidence that the recovery of lost dative clitics through schooling is only partial (cf. Galves, 2001; Freire, 2000, 2005; Kato, Cyrino & Corrêa, 2009). In his quantitative analysis Freire (2000, 2005) also points out two important conclusions about EP and BP: (i) In EP, in which the lexical pronoun is the preferred strategy, the rate of null indirect objects is low and almost restricted to declarative verbs (dicendi), as illustrated in (3a-b). In BP, the omission of indirect objects is possible with all types of dynamic ditransitive verbs.


“Believe me, Brigite! The Patacônico just wants your recipe!”. “I know! I only gave him some attention in order to make you jealous” (EP... cartoon)

b. O cliente viu a minha lupa e perguntou-me se eu era detective! Como eu respondi, ele disse que precisava dos meus serviços! (PE: Disney Especial, n.º 222, outubro de 2004 – História em quadrinhos)

‘The client saw my magnifying glass and asked me if I was a detective. As I answered him yes, he said that he would need my services.’ (EP...cartoon)

(ii) In EP data, the strong anaphoric pronoun is completely absent. Regarding BP, this anaphoric strategy is highly productive. Under the proposed analysis, my hypothesis is that in EP there is no empty category that corresponds to a pronominal argument in applicative contexts. The low level of clitic omission is determined by a condition requiring that the morphologically marked applicative phrase (either by the dummy preposition a or by the dative clitic lhe/lhes) be lexically realized. In other words, the presence of a-DPs or dative clitics evidences the configuration with the projection of the applicative phrase. In these terms, the absence of a lexical indirect object is a diagnostic for a transitive structure. Based on this hypothesis, the strong theoretical claim of this paper is that there is a relation between the high rates of null indirect objects/strong anaphoric pronouns and the loss of the applicative construction in BP, as opposed to EP. I tentatively propose that the empty category in BP is the null realization of the strong anaphoric pronoun.

References


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