

VP ellipsis, null objects and aspect as a licensing category in Brazilian Portuguese

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Both Brazilian and European Portuguese (BP, EP), differently from other Romance languages, allow VP ellipses (VPE). According to the literature (cf. Matos 1992; Cyrino & Matos 2002; 2005; Rouveret 2011; a.o.), the elided sequence is licensed by the main verb or by an auxiliary which has left VP (1):

(1) Ninguém leu/tinha lido esse livro nem admitia que alguém lesse/tivesse Ø.

No one read/had read that book nor admitted that someone read/had

‘No one read/had read that book nor admitted that someone did/had.’

However, BP differs from EP with respect to VPE. As shown by Cyrino & Matos (2002, 2005), elided sequences receive different interpretations in these varieties. While in BP (2) can be interpreted as a case of VPE, in EP (where the form of the periphrasis is *está a ler*) it is preferably interpreted as a sentence with an intransitive verb (i.e., he is not reading anything), which signals that the VPE licensing conditions in both varieties is not the same, involving different functional projections: T in EP and ASP(ect) in BP.

(2) A Maria está lendo livros às crianças mas o João não está lendo Ø.

The Maria is reading books to-the children but the João not is reading

‘Maria is reading books to the children but João is not.’

Both varieties of Portuguese also allow null objects (NO) (cf. Raposo 1986; Galves 1989; Farrell 1990; a.o.). As pointed out by Matos 1992, Cyrino & Matos 2002, 2005, Santos 2009, and Rouveret 2011, among others, since an elided sequence can occur after a main verb, it is sometimes hard to distinguish between a VPE and a NO structure – see, for example, the glosses in (1). Rouveret (2011) (but see also Matos 1992) indicates that a distinction between these constructions can be made based on the fact that NOs only involve the direct object of the verb, while VPE includes all the complements of the verb and possible VP adjuncts. In Raposo’s (1986) analysis (see also Duarte 1987), the NO in EP cannot be subsumed under VPE, since it has some distinct properties from the latter, most notably the fact that it cannot occur in island structures, a restriction that does not apply to VPE. He concludes, then, that NOs in EP are variables. Costa et al. (forthcoming) also treat the EP NOs as variables although they assume that they share with VPE the ability to present strict and sloppy readings, a point to which we return. In any case, a crucial difference between EP and BP, however, is the fact that NOs in BP cannot be variables since they occur within islands:

(3) Joana guardou o casaco depois que lavou Ø.

Joana kept the coat after that washed

‘Joana put the coat away after she had washed it.’

In this paper, we argue that, differently from what occurs in EP, the NO in BP is, in fact, a case of ellipsis, licensed by the verb which has moved up to a lower functional projection, AspP. The proposal is based on the fact that NOs and VPE share many properties in this language.

First, just as in VPE, the NO in BP allows strict and sloppy readings (João’s or Pedro’s window), as in (4a). Yet, if an overt pronoun is used, as in (4b), the sloppy reading goes away. Considering that *pro* is the phonologically null counterpart of an overt pronoun, we take it as evidence that NOs as in (4a) cannot be represented by such a category.

(4) a. De noite, João abriu a janela, mas Pedro preferiu fechar Ø.

At night João opened the window but Pedro preferred to-close

‘At night, João opened the window, but Pedro preferred to close it.’

b. De noite, João abriu a janela, mas Pedro preferiu fechar ela.

‘At night, João opened the window, but Pedro preferred to close it.’

The NO in BP can only occur in a parallel structure wrt its antecedent (5):

(5) *O governador_i disse que o deputado desrespeitou Ø_i na festa

The governor said that the congressman disrespected at-the party

Assuming this is a condition for ellipsis (cf. Fiengo & May 1994), we claim that the NO is a case of ellipsis, corresponding to an elided DP/NP, taken as reconstruction of the antecedent following identity and licensing requirements.

There is, however, one distinction between VPE and NO. The latter has an animacy restriction in relation to the antecedent which the former lacks. The NO antecedent has to be [- animate], unless it is also non-specific (see Cyrino, 1997 and Cyrino & Lopes, 2005):

- (6) a. O policial insultou [o preso]_i antes de torturar *Ø/ele_i
 the policeman insulted the prisoner before of torture-inf *Ø/him
 ‘The policeman insulted the prisoner before torturing him’
 b. Policial sempre insulta [preso(s)]_i antes de torturar Ø_i
 policeman always insults prisoner(s) before of torture-inf Ø
 ‘Policemen always insult prisoners before torturing them’

We assume the structure in (7) for AspP (see Slabakova, 2001; MacDonald, 2008; a.o.), in which we have an outer AspP above vP responsible for the (im)perfectivity features. It is plausible to consider that there is an inner AspP between vP and VP to deal with telicity values associated with lexical aspect.

(7) [_{TP} [_{AspP} [_{Asp} [_{± perfective}]/[_{± SQA}] [_{VP}] [_{AspP} [_{Asp} [_{± telic}] [_{VP}]]]]]

We are also assuming Verkuyl’s (1993) [SQA] – specified quantity of the argument – as a feature to be checked in outer AspP (see also Slabakova, 2001). For him, the aspectual calculus, especially of telicity, is not only dependent on the lexical features of verbs (*Aktionsart*) – housed in the inner AspP – but also on the specificity of the object, considered in terms of its cardinality. The object moves up to the specifier of outer AspP and the verb moves all the way up to the Asp head, where a spec-head relationship is established guaranteeing the compatibility of features for Full Interpretation. Both sets of features, [_{± perfective}] and [_{± SQA}], would be uninterpretable in the outer Asp head to be checked against the verbal element that ends up in the head and the DP/NP which moves to its specifier position, respectively.

BP has lost generalized verb movement (see (2) above), the verb movement becoming restricted to Asp (cf. Cyrino & Matos 2005, Cyrino & Reintges 2012) where it licenses the elliptical null object, its indexes being strictly reconstructed in LF (Fiengo & May 1994), with no phonological content since this is a post-spell out operation.

Language acquisition evidence seems to point into that track. NOs are attested in the production of children acquiring BP at the same age when relevant aspectual distinctions are found, considering the production of imperfective forms and the presence of varied verb types when lexical aspect is taken into account. Aspectual adverbs are also found in declarative sentences and VPE forms in short answers to polarity questions at the same age span, replacing non-adult patterns previously used by the children (see Lopes 2009). Comparing these results to those obtained for EP (Santos 2009), it is observed that Portuguese children converge into the VPE adult grammar much earlier than the Brazilian ones. Considering VPE is licensed by T in that language, Portuguese children would have to deal with less checking operations than the Brazilian ones.

Similar results were also found for comprehension. Lopes & Santos (2012) applied a Truth Value Judgment Task to test VPE comprehension in both varieties in children between 4 and 6 years of age (44 Portuguese and 30 Brazilian subjects). The lowest percentage of adult answers for EP was 77.4% for the 4 year-olds, the same age group where the Brazilian children are behaving at chance (58% of expected answers). The five year-olds display a similar behavior as the Portuguese 4 year-old ones, converging only at 6. These results suggest a protracted development in BP. The worst results in BP involved a condition, among the ones tested, which should be rejected if children teased apart VPE from NOs. While the error rate was 5.4% for EP, in BP it raised to 20%, with the 4 year-old subjects alone having 50% of non-expected answers.