Dialect syntax through corpora: the subject doubling se construction

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This talk will discuss novel syntactic data made available by the existence of the CORDIAL-SIN: Syntax-oriented Corpus of Portuguese Dialects (http://www.clul.ul.pt) and consider their empirical and theoretical relevance for Romance and general syntax. It will also illustrate how and why a corpus of spoken language can be an optimal tool to study syntactic variation.

European Portuguese (EP) dialects display a double subject construction where the impersonal clitic se shares with a strong pronoun, a null pronoun, or less commonly a full DP, the role of sentential subject. This construction, exemplified in (1)-(2) below, is fully ungrammatical in standard EP and has gone totally unobserved by philologists and linguists who dealt with dialect variation in European Portuguese. The corpus CORDIAL-SIN brought it into light.

(1) a. A gente chama-se rãs a isto. (CORDIAL-SIN. FLF)
   pron.1PL calls-SE rãs to that
   ‘We call these ones rãs (frogs).’

   b. Chama-se-lhe a gente espigas. (CORDIAL-SIN. AAL)
   calls-SE-it.DAT pron.1PL espigas
   ‘We call it espigas (spikes of cereal).’

(2) a. Há várias qualidades que até ainda nós não se
   there.is several species that even already we not SE
   conhecemos. (CORDIAL-SIN. ALV)
   know-1PL
   ‘There are so many species among fish that even we (fishermen) do not know all of them yet.’

   b. Nunca se viemos este peixe. (CORDIAL-SIN. CLC)
   not SE saw-1PL this fish
   ‘We never saw that kind of fish.’

The talk will describe in detail the subject doubling se construction, as it surfaces in the corpus, and discuss the relevance of the geolinguistic information offered by CORDIAL-SIN to make full sense of the particular features of the dialectal construction. It will finally be proposed that a nominal that lacks a person feature may also be devoid of Case. This is how the clitic se of the relevant EP dialects is like: it has number (plural), but no person or Case. Its deficient nature is what makes subject doubling a grammatical option in dialectal EP. In a few dialects, the expletive-like se drifted in the direction of a pure expletive:

(3) a. Às vezes acontece; já se aconteceu. (CORDIAL-SIN. PIC)
   sometimes happens already SE happened.3SG
   ‘Sometimes it happens; it has already happened.’
b. Nunca se me aconteceu isso. (CORDIAL-SIN. CRV)

‘It never happened to me a thing like that.’

Under the proposed analysis, the subject doubling se construction of European Portuguese dialects brings new empirical evidence that supports the contentions (i) to (iii) below.

(i) “If all other conditions are right, a given argument can be linked to, and coherently composed with, more than one expression”. (Chung and Ladusaw 2004, on the extra object in Chamorro).

(ii) The impersonal se/si of standard EP, Spanish and Italian is not deficient with respect to φ-features and Case (cf. Cinque 1988), but a full referential expression (D’Alessandro 2004). Therefore, subject doubling with impersonal se/si is not an option in standard EP, Spanish and Italian.

(iii) Overt pure expletives are not necessarily blocked when in competition with null pure expletives in a particular grammar (cf. Chomsky’s 1981 Avoid Pronoun Principle).

References