

Alternation between pronoun and null object in Brazilian Portuguese: Disentangling the effects of anaphoric referent semantic properties

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In spoken Brazilian Portuguese, the main strategies for third-person direct object anaphoric resumption are the tonic pronoun *ele/ela* and the null object ($\emptyset$) (Schwenter & Silva, 2003). Previous literature has emphasized the central role of animacy (Duarte, 1989): with inanimate referents, the null object functions as the default strategy, whereas with animate referents greater alternation emerges between null and pronominal realization. This variability has further been associated with semantic properties of the anaphoric referent, notably definiteness (Schwenter, 2014), specificity (Cyrino, 1997), and semantic gender, namely the presence or absence of inherent biological gender in the referent, as in the contrast between *uma menina* [+gs] and *uma pessoa* [-gs], the latter being compatible with more than one biological gender (Creus & Menuzzi, 2004).

In order to disentangle the effect of these factors, we experimentally investigated their effect on the choice of anaphoric strategy for third-person direct objects with animate referents. An acceptability judgment questionnaire was administered through Lime Survey to 100 native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese aged 18 to 70 years (mean age = 36), residing both in Brazil and abroad and representing heterogeneous sociodemographic profiles. Participants evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale sentences containing an anaphoric resumption of the direct object. The anaphoric referent was systematically manipulated according to three independent variables: (1) definiteness/specificity, organized according to the hierarchy definite specific > indefinite specific > indefinite nonspecific (Aissen, 2003); (2) presence or absence of inherent semantic gender ([+gs] vs. [-gs]); and (3) type of direct object realization, namely tonic pronoun or null object. The combination of these variables yielded 12 experimental conditions (cf. Table 1). Twenty-four base items were inflected across all conditions, generating 288 experimental sentences, distributed into 12 questionnaire versions according to a Latin square design. In addition, 24 filler sentences were included, six overtly ungrammatical, to monitor participants' attention.

Overall, with animate referents, the tonic pronoun emerged as the preferred anaphoric strategy across conditions (Table 1). However, ratings also showed that semantic properties of the referent modulate the relative acceptability of the two forms. More specifically, the null object proved more acceptable with indefinite, nonspecific referents lacking inherent semantic gender, whereas its acceptability decreased when these properties were absent. Among the factors examined, specificity appears to exert the strongest effect. While, in specific contexts the tonic pronoun received a higher mean rating (5.82 vs. 4.89 for the null object); in nonspecific contexts the two means converged considerably (5.49 vs. 5.30), indicating that nonspecificity increases the acceptability of the null object while reducing the tonic pronoun's overall advantage. A linear mixed-effects model confirmed a robust interaction between specificity and type of realization: although specificity tends to lower acceptability judgments overall, the tonic pronoun in specific contexts raises ratings by almost 0.7 points (cf. Figure 2), confirming the prevalence of specificity over definiteness and semantic gender in conditioning anaphoric choice in spoken Brazilian Portuguese.

References

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Cond.	Semantic features	Illustrative Stimulus	Mean (SD)
A	DefSpec, +GS, Tonic Pronoun	Ontem vi o filho do Paulo chorando e eu consolei <i>ele</i> .	5.91 (1.60)
B	DefSpec, +GS, Null Object	Ontem vi o filho do Paulo chorando e eu consolei.	4.85 (2.11)
C	DefSpec, -GS, Tonic Pronoun	Ontem vi o neném do Paulo chorando e eu consolei <i>ele</i> .	5.74 (1.70)
D	DefSpec, -GS, Null Object	Ontem vi o neném do Paulo chorando e eu consolei.	4.98 (2.09)
E	IndefSpec, +GS, Tonic Pronoun	Ontem vi um menino chorando e eu consolei <i>ele</i> .	5.90 (1.63)
F	IndefSpec, +GS, Null Object	Ontem vi um menino chorando e eu consolei.	4.87 (2.10)
G	IndefSpec, -GS, Tonic Pronoun	Ontem vi um neném chorando e eu consolei <i>ele</i> .	5.72 (1.74)
H	IndefSpec, -GS, Null Object	Ontem vi um neném chorando e eu consolei.	4.85 (2.08)
I	IndefNSpec, +GS, Tonic Pronoun	Quando vejo um menino chorando, eu sempre consolo <i>ele</i> .	5.40 (2.01)
J	IndefNSpec, +GS, Null Object	Quando vejo um menino chorando, eu sempre consolo.	5.20 (2.02)
K	IndefNSpec, -GS, Tonic Pronoun	Quando vejo um neném chorando, eu sempre consolo <i>ele</i> .	5.59 (1.85)
L	IndefNSpec, -GS, Null Object	Quando vejo um neném chorando, eu sempre consolo.	5.40 (1.92)

Table 1. Experimental Conditions, Illustrative Example, and Mean Acceptability Ratings

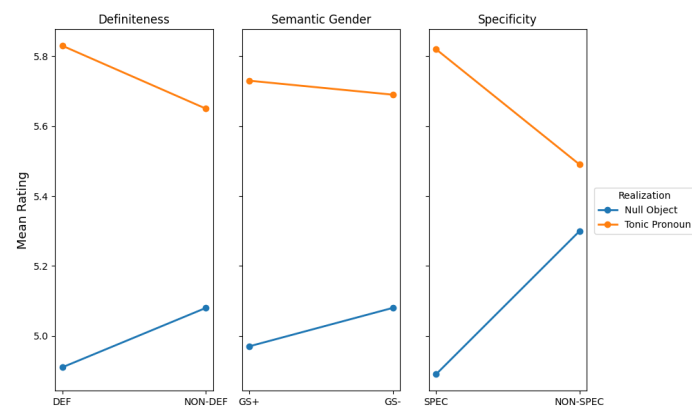


Figure 1. Graphical Representations of Mean Acceptability Ratings by anaphoric referent property

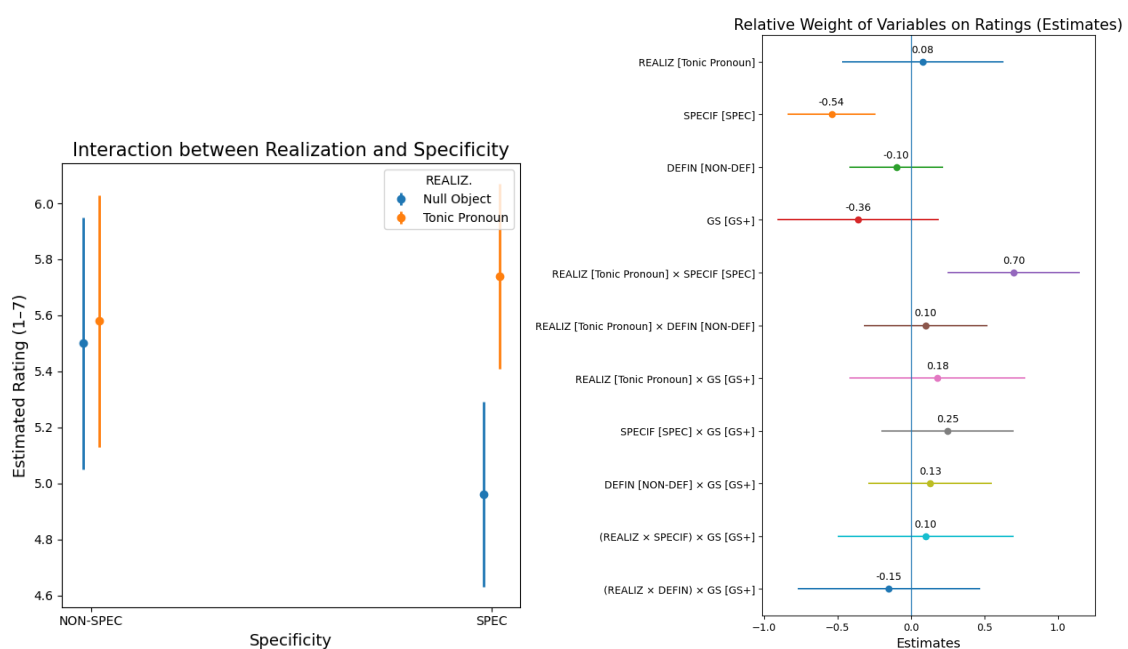


Figure 2. Relative Weight of the Variables in the Linear Mixed-Effects Model