

Null objects in Santomean Portuguese: Effects of animacy, specificity and definiteness

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It is well-known that, unlike other Romance languages such as Spanish (Campos, 1986), Portuguese allows [+definite] null objects (Raposo, 1986), even though many studies that have explored the alternation between null and pronominal objects in European Portuguese (EP) and Brazilian Portuguese (BP) have found that null objects tend to be [-definite] in these varieties (e.g., Schwenter, 2014). Moreover, it has been noted that, in accordance with the Referential Hierarchy (Cyrino et al, 2000), there is a division of labour between null and pronominal objects with regard to animacy and specificity in EP/BP, as [+animate, +specific] objects are more likely to be realised as pronominal and [-animate, -specific] objects are more likely to be null (e.g., Cyrino, 1997; Figueiredo, 2014; Schwenter, 2014). There is also evidence of an interaction among definiteness, specificity, and animacy in EP/BP, although these two varieties appear to differ with respect to the relative weight of these factors as predictors of the occurrence of null objects (Schwenter, 2014).

Recent studies have noted that null objects are highly productive in Santomean Portuguese (STP), a highly nativised variety of Portuguese spoken in São Tomé and Príncipe (Gonçalves & Madeira, 2025). As in EP/BP, object realisation has also been found to be influenced by animacy in this variety: objects are significantly more likely to be null when they are [-animate] and [+animate] objects are mostly pronominal. However, little is known about the effects of specificity and definiteness, nor about how these two factors interact with animacy, in determining the form of the object in STP.

Hence, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) Do specificity and definiteness influence object realisation in STP? (2) Is there an interaction between animacy, specificity and definiteness in the distribution of null objects in STP? (3) Do these three factors differ in their relative significance as predictors of the occurrence of null objects in STP? The study is based on the PALMA-STP corpus, which consists of interviews with 77 STP native speakers (Gonçalves et al., 2021). A total of 618 occurrences of third-person direct objects were extracted, annotated, and considered for analysis.

The results show that null objects are less constrained by definiteness than pronominal objects, which show a strong bias towards [+definite] antecedents. Null and pronominal objects also differ with respect to specificity: they significantly prefer [-specific] antecedents, while pronominals prefer [+specific] antecedents. Definiteness, specificity and animacy differ in their relative importance as predictors of null object occurrence in STP: animacy emerges as the most significant predictor, followed by specificity. Definiteness was found not to have a significant effect on its own, but only in interaction with specificity. We will show that STP patterns with EP and BP in assigning a primary role to animacy but differs from them in assigning a stronger role to specificity, which will be argued to support the view that null objects in STP are undergoing a process of extension along the Referential Hierarchy, whereby they are becoming more referential (Cyrino et al., 2000; Gonçalves & Madeira, 2025).

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Examples:

- (1) a. *também tenho uma irmã também que vive lá no quintal.*
also have.1sg a sister also that lives there in.the backyard
Depois a zzz irá conhecer [-].
then the will meet.inf
'I also have a sister that also lives there in the backyard. You will meet (her) later.'
- b. *se eu tenho uma roça e eu não trabalho [-], o governo toma [-]*
if I have.1sg a farm and I not work.1sg the government takes
'If I have a farm and I don't work (it), the government will take (it)'
- c. *banco aqui as pessoas saem com plástico de dinheiro, saca*
bank here the people go.out.3pl with plastic of money bag
dinheiro na mão na rua a andar. (...) Não tem
money in.the hand in.the street to walk. not have.3sg
nenhum assalto, pois como vai chegar um dia desses
no robbery because how go.3sg come.inf one day of.those
assim que eles vão vir assaltar [-].
this.way that they go.3pl come.inf rob.inf (them)
'People here leave the bank with the money in a plastic bag, they carry this plastic bag in their hands and walk down the street. There are no robberies, but there will be a day when they'll come and rob them.'