OVERT AND NULL SUBJECT IN DOUBLE NEGATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE

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1. Intro

Double negative phenomena began to be studied in the southern region of Brazil by Goldnadel et al. (2013) and Lima (2013), based on spoken corpora.

(1) Eu estou achando que *ele não vai aguentar a ponta não*.

(2) Não, *não me obrigou não*. Fui por livre e espontânea vontade.

So far these studies have investigated only pragmatic properties, describing and explaining some of the pragmatic features of these constructions, contrasting them with simple negatives. Our focus here is slightly different: let's investigate a more 'grammatical' aspect of double negation: the realization of overt subjects (example 1) or null subjects (example 2) in these structures.

This interest is due to a very peculiar property of double negative constructions: whereas BP is known for favoring overt pronominal subjects, we find the exact opposite in double negatives.

- Berlinck, Duarte & Oliveira (2015: 100) observe that roughly 78% of all the finite clauses investigated in NURC have an overt pronominal subject (versus 22% of null subjects).
- Investigating a different spoken corpus (VARSUL), we found similar results: 76% of the finite clauses present overt pronominal subject and 24%, null subjects.
- Investigating a more recent corpus with spoken data only from Porto Alegre (LinguaPOA, cf. Battisti et al. 2017), we found very similar figures: 71% overt pronominal subjects vs 29% null subjects.

In contrast, what we found in double negatives was a bit puzzling: 73% of null subjects vs 27% of overt pronominal subjects.

2. Some hypotheses and numbers

We know that BP no longer exhibits characteristics of a canonical +pro-drop language – unlike European Portuguese (Duarte 1993, 1995, Cavalcante & Duarte 2008, a. o.). At the same time, we also know that the first negative element of the double negation construction seems to be going through a grammaticalization process (cf. Ramos 2002, Furtado da Cunha 2007). This element is losing its phonetic properties (*não> num> nu> n'*, cf. Souza 2007).

One might think, thus, that the role of the first negative element may be associated merely with 'filling' the left position of the IP, which could favor null subject clauses. Maybe that's why i*n double negation constructions we will find more null subjects than expressed subjects.*

Although double negative constructions do favor null subjects (3/4 of the cases), we still find many cases of overt subject (about 1/4). We then investigated precisely those cases. Based on recent work (cf. Soares 2017, Othero & Spinelli, 2019a,b) and the now classic Cyrino, Duarte & Kato (2000), we investigated which subject types were overt. Our hypothesis is that *among the overt subjects, we will preferably find 'prominent' antecedents.*

'Notice, however, that there is a conflict here between two principles - the first related to hypothesis I and the second related to hypothesis II. On the one hand, the first negative element of the double negative construction favors null pronominal subjects; on the other hand, a +gs antecedent/referent favors pronominal subject. Both principles are acting simultaneously and in conflict.

We reanalyzed all the subjects we found (23 occurrences) and classified their antecedents according to their semantic gender trait. If the hypothesis is to be correct, we should preferably find referents with marked semantic gender (+gs) in the occurrences of pronominal subjects.

Overt pronominal subjects		
+gs	**23/24**	**95.8%**
-gs	1/24	4.2%

Now let's tackle the conflict. We are investigating two 'grammatical principles' that are in competition in BP grammar with respect to pronominal subject marking: the first favors null subjects in a very specific context: double negative constructions. The second favors overt pronoun subjects (+gs referents are expressed by pronouns), not only in this context, but in general.

This second principle is, thus, more general (it is about pronominal subject marking in BP). The first is specific (concerns only double negative structures). It seems we have a conflict that can be solved using the well-known 'Elsewhere condition' (or the 'Pānini principle'), cf. Anderson (1969), Kiparsky (1973), Aronoff (1976): a more specific rule applies before a more generic one. The 'more specific' is the one related to double negatives; therefore, we must find *more null subjects than overt ones* (and indeed we do). The most general principle states that a high referent/antecedent in the hierarchy (i.e. a +gs) should preferably be expressed by a pronominal subject (as it is, in fact, the case). If our reasoning is correct so far, then we can test two more hypotheses: *among –gs referents/antecedents, we shall find preferably null subjects* and *among +gs referents/antecedents, we shall find free variation*.

Notice that these hypotheses deal with very different scenarios. First, we take the 'noise' out of the equation.

-gs subjects		
Null	**39/40**	**97.5%**
Overt	1/40	2.5%

This hypothesis predicts a conflict: +gs would favor overt pronoun subjects, but in this double negative context, these two forces should match. In other words, the 45 occurrences of +gs antecedents/referents shall present free variation (null subject and overt subject).

+gs referents/antecedents		
Overt subjects	23/45	51%
Null subjects	22/45	49%

Of the 45 occurrences of highly referential subjects we encountered, half of them (49%) were later referred to by a null subject. What we find here goes against the gender semantic hypothesis and against what we would expect based on the referential hierarchy of CDK (2000), i.e. 'why are these very prominent referents/antecedents being expressed by null subjects?'. The simple answer: they are in a double negative context. That makes these double negative constructions so interesting.