

Article

# AN ANALYSIS OF ASYMMETRIES IN SUBJECT PERSONAL PRONOUN USAGE IN BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE AND SPANISH

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## Abstract

*The main purpose of this article is to reflect on first-person personal pronoun usage in Brazilian Portuguese and Spanish. Although both languages allow null subjects (CHOMSKY, 1981), the strategies used by Brazilian Portuguese and Spanish speakers differ regarding overt subject pronoun expression. First, we review the literature on personal pronouns in pro-drop languages from a syntactic perspective (BARBOSA, DUARTE, KATO, 2005; DUARTE, 2000; FERNÁNDEZ SORIANO, 2000). Then, we examine these constructions in both languages taking into account the theoretical contributions of textual linguistics and pragmatics (DAVIDSON, 1996; LEONETTI JUNGL, 2014; PADILLA GARCÍA,*

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2001; STEWART, 2003). Finally, we qualitatively examine the use of first-person subject pronouns in excerpts from interviews published in newspapers in Spain and Brazil, whose central theme is the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** *subject pronoun; descriptive grammar; syntax; pragmatics*

## Introduction

The grammatical category of pronouns has raised the most controversies in the grammatical tradition (FERNÁNDEZ SORIANO, 2000). One such example is the notion that the pronoun is the linguistic unit that replaces the noun, a notion that was criticized by several authors as early as the 1970s, such as Roca Pons (1976) and Alonso and Henríquez Ureña (1975). For Fernández Soriano, pronouns serve the same syntactic functions as nouns – or, rather, noun phrases –, and are “distinguished from the common noun since [they have] inherent semantic features, so that they can be assigned a constant lexical meaning” (FERNÁNDEZ SORIANO, 2000, p. 1211, author’s translation)<sup>1</sup>. As they replace noun phrases, some grammarians, such as Emilio Alarcos Llorach (1994), prefer to call pronouns “personal nouns” (*sustantivos personales*).

In 1994, Neide Maia González carried out an emblematic contrastive study on personal pronouns in Portuguese and Spanish. Her thesis addressed issues related to foreign language acquisition/learning from a generative perspective and investigated why the use of structures with tonic and atonic personal pronouns continues to be a challenging task for intermediate Brazilian learners of Spanish, even when higher-order structures have already been learned (GONZÁLEZ, 1994).

In the large body of literature on pronouns, much attention has been given to atonic pronouns. Likewise, atonic personal pronouns have always received greater attention in the teaching and learning process of Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL), for two main reasons: on the one hand, the use of atonic personal pronouns follows different patterns in Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese (BP); on the other hand, Spanish has complex constructions with concomitant use

of atonic direct and indirect object pronouns, which in BP are produced by means of different strategies. In Brazilian Portuguese (BP), pronominal objects can appear in three different ways: overt pronouns; null objects; and clitics, which are usually replaced by tonic overt third-person pronouns (syncretic the with the nominative form) in oral discourse, while in Spanish there is an evident preference for clitics. Since SFL Brazilian students identify an asymmetry between the two languages, SFL teaching materials have several sections dedicated to direct and indirect object pronouns often taught along with food and clothing-related vocabulary.

Fanjul and González (2014) notes that there is also a prominent asymmetry in the use of tonic personal pronouns in Spanish and BP. He gives as an example a sentence taken from a short story by Clarice Lispector (1a), contrasted to its translation into Spanish by Cristina Sáenz de Tejada and Juan García Gayo (1b):

- (1) a. *Ulisses telefonou e desta vez ele parecia exigir a presença dela...*  
Ulysses called and this time he seemed to-demand the presence her
- b. *Ulises llamó por teléfono y esta vez Ø parecía exigir la presencia de ella...*  
Ulysses called by phone and this time Ø seemed to-demand the presence of her  
(FANJUL; GONZÁLEZ, 2014, p. 30)
- (2) *Ulises llamó por telefono y esta vez él parecía exigir la presencia de ella...*  
Ulysses called by phone and this time he seemed to-demand the presence of her

As Fanjul and González states, in BP the reader infers that the pronoun *ele* (“he”) refers to Ulysses himself. On the other hand, in Spanish, it is the absence of the personal pronoun that warrants the same reading. If the translators had translated the passage with the overt pronoun, as in (2), the reader would most likely be induced to believe that there was a third character involved in the story, instead of interpreting the pronoun as an anaphora referring to Ulysses.

Sandro Sessarego and Javier Gutiérrez-Rexach (2017) observes that in Dominican Spanish (DS) and BP (both considered pro-drop languages), overt and null pronouns

co-exist. Like Fanjul and González (2014), he highlights how the choice between overt and null pronouns can give rise to ambiguity or refer to different referents:

As in the case of DS, in BP null and overt pronouns co-exist, and depending on the context, their interpretation may differ, as indicated by Modesto (2000: 152) and reported by Camacho (2013) (16). Thus, for example, the null subject in (16a) is obligatorily bound and does not display the ‘standard’ interpretive properties of *pro* (Holmberg *et al.* 2009), while the pronoun in (16b) can be interpreted as referring to either Paulo (i), Pedro (j) or somebody else (k).

- (16) Coexistence of overt and null pronouns
- a. O Pauloi convenceu o Pedroj que *pro* tinha que ir embora.  
the Paulo convinced the Pedro that had to go away  
‘Paulo convinced Pedro that he had to go away.’
  - b. O Pauloi convenceu o Pedroj que elei/j/k tinha que ir embora.  
the Paulo convinced the Pedro that he had to go away  
‘Paulo convinced Pedro that he had to go away.’ (SESSAREGO, GUTIÉRREZ-REXACH, 2017, p. 51)

Like Fanjul and González (2014), Fonseca and Guerreiro (2012) note how a sentence like (3) can increase processing load due to its clear ambiguity.

- (3) Maria<sub>i</sub> conversava com Ana<sub>j</sub> enquanto **ela**<sub>i/j</sub> cozinhava  
Mary talked to Ana while she cooked

In this regard, Fonseca and Guerreiro (2012) cite Carminati (2002), which investigated the anaphoric processing of overt and null pronouns in Italian:

[...] this author advanced a theory of assignment of pronoun antecedents, claiming that overt and null pronouns have distinct and complementary functions in language, as evidenced by their propensity to seek antecedents in different syntactic positions. Her data indicated that null pronouns tend to have as antecedents Nominal Phrases (NPs) in Spec, IP (subject) position, whereas overt pronouns prefer antecedents in lower positions in the sentence structure, usually as complements of the verb. This preference has become known as PAS - Position of Antecedent Strategy. (FONSECA; GUERREIRO, 2012, p. 120, our translation)

The comparison between Italian and BP points to structural differences between the two languages, similar to the case of Spanish and BP. In his grammar of the Spanish language, Emilio Alarcos Llorach (1994) emphasizes that the presence of overt subject personal pronouns is a matter of expressive emphasis. Hence, their presence may seem unnecessary in certain contexts, since their referents are evident to speakers:

The person morpheme included in the verb already distinguishes which of the three functions as the grammatical subject, and thus the presence of a personal noun is not really necessary to indicate an explicit subject: in *canto*, *cantas*, *canta*, the first, second and third persons, respectively, are already expressed as subject. However, the appearance of a personal noun in this function as an explicit subject is frequent, and not only in cases of phonic coincidence of verb forms (such as *cantaba*, *cantaría*, *cante*, in which the first and third persons are not distinguished), nor in the case of the third person (where gender distinction can provide greater precision about the specific reference to the subject). *Yo* and *tú* can also appear, although their personal reference is evident and unequivocal in each speech act. Therefore, the appearance of personal nouns in these cases of redundancy has a marked emphatic and expressive character, and consists of contrasting the person alluded to with the others. (ALARCOS LLORACH, 1994, p. 73, author's translation)<sup>2</sup>

From the observations above, we can see why Spanish is usually classified as a pro-drop language (CHOMSKY, 1981) within Government and Binding Theory (GB), since it favors the omission of tonic personal pronouns. Although BP also allows null subjects, it seems to be undergoing a change towards favoring overt subject pronouns. At the same time, it should be noted that there is a significant difference between spoken and written Spanish. While many written contexts favor omission of tonic personal pronouns, overt use of the personal pronoun *yo* is more frequent in argumentative discourse and may denote subjectivity, as argued by Serrano (2014).

For Chomsky (1981), pro-drop languages display the following properties: a. null subjects; b. free inversion of subjects in matrix clauses; c. long-distance wh-movement of subjects; d. null resumptive pronouns in embedded clauses; e. apparent violation of [that-t] filter.

- (4) a. \*Who do you think that *t* left  
 b. Quem você acha que saiu?  
 Who you think that *t* left  
 c. Quién crees que ha salido  
 Who  $\emptyset$  think that *t* have-left

With regard to property *e*, while a sentence like (4a) is ungrammatical in English, in BP (4b) or Spanish (4c) the corresponding sentences are quite standard.

Chomsky (1981) also introduced a principle that was later further studied taking Spanish and BP as case studies, the *Avoid Pronoun Principle*, which states that, whenever possible, overt pronouns should be avoided. Languages such as BP and Spanish avoid overt pronouns in various contexts, although, as we will see, they adopt different strategies when doing so. BP shows a preference for null direct object pronouns (5), while in Spanish overt direct object pronouns are obligatory (6).

- (5) Eu comi.  
 I ate  $\emptyset_{\text{OBJ}}$   
 (6) Lo comí.  
 It<sub>OBJ</sub>  $\emptyset_{\text{1SG}}$  ate.

González (1994) stresses how Portuguese and Spanish present empty categories that “apparently violate the empty category principle, according to which a category of this type has to be properly governed” (1994, p. 112, author’s translation). González then states that

The explanation for this would be, according to some generativists, that in null subject languages the empty category is properly governed by the agreement inflection, while in non-null subject languages, which are poor in inflection, there is no lexical category that can govern this empty category. (GONZÁLEZ, 1994, p. 112, author’s translation)<sup>3</sup>

Generative approaches point to issues of agreement, that is: in sentences such as *Lo hice*, the null subject is possible because verbal inflection is rich in Spanish. The same applies to languages such as Portuguese and Italian (SILVA, 2019). Although we believe this statement to be correct, it is only the

starting point for us to bring into discussion contributions from pragmatics and functional grammar, in order to better analyze which strategies motivate the choice for overt subjects (e.g., *Yo lo hice* vs. *Lo hice*). In other words, although both Spanish and BP allow null subjects, overt subject pronouns are also possible.

Barbosa, Duarte, Kato (2005) formulate four relevant patterns to describe the distribution of overt and null pronouns in BP from a generative perspective. These patterns take into account only grammatical components, that is, they do not include comparisons with data from text linguistics or pragmatics:

Pattern I: the antecedent of the null subject is the subject of the matrix clause; Pattern II: the antecedent is the subject of the previous adjacent sentence; Pattern III: the antecedent is the subject of a previous, non-adjacent sentence; Pattern IV: the antecedent is in the previous adjacent sentence, but is functionally distinct from the null subject. (BARBOSA, DUARTE, KATO, 2005, p. 24)

The asymmetry between BP and Spanish becomes clear when we verify that BP shows a tendency towards favoring overt subjects:

Camacho (2008, 2013) summarizes a variety of studies on BP prodrop phenomena and points out patterns that do not follow the predictions of the NSP. In particular, building on Duarte's (1995) research, he highlights the fact that the rate of overt pronouns in BP has increased steadily during the last century so that it went from 20% in 1845 to 74% in 1992. Such an increase in the use of overt pronouns parallels the erosion of the inflectional verb paradigm, as well as the reorganization of the pronominal system. (SESSAREGO, GUTIÉRREZ-REXACH, 2017, p. 50)

Duarte (1995), cited above, highlights that modern BP presents a tendency towards favoring overt subject pronouns, detracting from the null subject preference that was common in the nineteenth century:

Spoken Brazilian Portuguese is gradually displaying an increase in the use of overt pronominal subjects, even with non-human antecedents. These appear in contexts where a null subject shows up in EP, namely when they are

anaphorically related to a matrix subject. (DUARTE, 1995 *apud* BARBOSA, DUARTE, KATO, 2005, p. 15)

Maria Cristina Silva (2019), known for her work within the generative framework, has observed how, for the analysis of null subjects in linguistic corpora, several factors that contribute to their occurrence must be taken into account:

[...] However, as Roberts and Holmberg (2010) rightly note, one should be careful when analyzing these results because one needs to have more control over the syntax of languages than simply the individual properties that have been listed, since other factors may be interfering in whether a property is present or absent. (...) And the very fact that there are some properties that correlate in the formulation of the Null Subject Parameter shows that this approach is on the right track, although the road may be longer than initially thought. [...] (SILVA, 2019, p. 90-91, author's translation)<sup>4</sup>

NÃO  
COSNTA DAS  
REFERÊNCIAS  
>>

The need for greater control of syntactic variables, as pointed out by Silva (2019), is evident when we take into consideration contexts in which pro-drop languages require an overt subject. Silva-Corvalán (2001), in an important study on the sociolinguistics and pragmatics of Spanish, identifies three contexts where overt subjects are obligatory: 1. **contrastive contexts**, 2. **focal information**, and 3. **to avoid ambiguity**. Below, we compare the examples provided by the author in Spanish to the corresponding sentences in BP:

- (7) a. **Mi señora habla** bien inglés, pero **yo lo hablo** muy quebrado  
**My wife speaks** well English, but **I it speak** very bad
- b. \* **Mi señora habla** bien inglés, pelo **lo hablo** muy quebrado  
**My wife speaks** well English, but  $\emptyset_{1SG}$  **it speak** very bad
- c. **Minha esposa fala** bem inglês, mas **eu falo** com muita interferência  
**My wife speaks** well English, but **I speak**  $\emptyset_{OBJ}$  with much interference
- (8) a. – **¿Quién trajo** este diario?  
**Who brought** this diary?  
– **Yo lo traje**  
I it brought

- b. – **¿Quién trajo** este diario?  
**Who brought** this diary?  
– \*lo traje  
 $\emptyset_{1SG}$  it brought
- c. – Quem trouxe este jornal?  
Who brought this diary?  
– Eu trouxe  
I brought  $\emptyset_{OBJ}$
- (9) a. Y **ella iba a mi lado y yo estaba temblando**  
And she went on my side and I was trembling  
b. E ela ia do meu lado e eu estava tremendo  
And she went on my side and I was trembling

Although the subject pronouns are not completely obligatory in (9), their omission would make the sentence ambiguous. Adrián Fanjul and Neide Maia González (2014, p. 35) questions which factors contribute to the expression of subject pronouns in Spanish, since, from both syntactic and pragmatic perspectives, subject realization is not merely a matter of style. He argues this choice is related to information progression and impacts interpretation, specifically in terms of referent identification: the presence of an overt subject pronoun in Spanish favors a contrastive interpretation.

According to Fernández Fernández Soriano (2000, p. 25, author's translation), "we understand reference in its purely grammatical sense, that is, the possibility of denoting by means of a relationship with a nominal element: the antecedent"<sup>5</sup>. In order to investigate pronoun usage, then, we must also consider concepts such as "coreference" and "bound anaphoras".

- (10) *Jorge<sub>i</sub> entrou. Ele<sub>i</sub> sentou no sofá.* (MÜLLER, 2001)  
Jorge entered. He sat on-the sofa
- (11) a. *Jorge<sub>i</sub> entrou. Él<sub>j</sub> se sentó en el sofá.*  
Jorge entered. He  $pro_{REFL}$  sat on the sofa  
*Jorge<sub>i</sub> entrou y  $\emptyset<sub>i</sub>$  se sentó en el sofá.*  
Jorge entered and  $pro_{REFL}$  sat on the sofa

In (10), Müller (2001) demonstrates that, in BP, there is a necessary relation of coreference and c-command between the pronoun "ele" and its antecedent "Jorge". Although Müller does not contrast this example with Spanish, we provide a possible

translation in (11a). We can see that an overt subject pronoun would induce an independent interpretation of the subject in the second clause, based on preference for referential autonomy of the pronoun *Él*. If we were to convey the same meaning of (10) in Spanish, a possible translation would be (11b), with a null subject pronoun. In the terms of GB (MIOTO; SILVA; LOPES, 2007), the two DPs (*Jorge* and *ele/él*) can be coreferential in BP, but not in Spanish. Fernández Soriano (2000) also highlights how different binding relationships between pronouns and NPs obtain according to specific syntactic conditions.

In the next section, we will investigate which factors contribute to the expression of subject pronouns from different theoretical frameworks.

### Pragmatic and textual factors

Neves (2018) states that when a certain referent has already been introduced into the discourse, the speaker may often reintroduce it not just as a known element but as **given** information. This way, this process is not limited to reference, but also establishes coreference. Following Brown and Levinson (1987), Neves (2018) claims that:

The smaller the form of referential expression, the greater the preference for a coreferential reading. In this view, full nominal phrases would be less favored for coreferential interpretation than pronouns, and pronouns less favored than zero. Thus, if the speaker wants to express coreference, he or she will prefer, whenever possible, zero to pronoun, and pronoun to a full nominal phrase; on the other hand, the hearer understands that, if at any given point the use of a full nominal phrase was possible, and the speaker did not use it, and if the use of a pronoun was possible, and the speaker used zero, the choices should be interpreted as an intention to express coreference rather than independent reference. (NEVES, 2018, p. 93, author's translation)<sup>6</sup>

In a similar line of thought, Paredes Silva (1993) argues that, from the perspective of discourse connectivity, a switch in subjects tends to favor the expression of subject pronouns. For example, such is the case of discourse sequences in which a new point of view in relation to the theme under discussion is introduced. Posio (2008) corroborates Paredes Silva's claim by analyzing corpus data from both Portuguese and Spanish:

The analysis clearly shows that coreferentiality with the previous subject decreases the use of PPS in both corpora, but the difference is more marked in the Spanish corpus than in the Portuguese corpus. As for subject switching, the frequency of PPS grows more clearly in the Portuguese corpus, reaching 60.8%. In the Spanish corpus, subject switching favors the use of PPS, but the use of the pronoun is still the least frequent option, with 37.2%. (POSIO, 2008, p. 47)<sup>7</sup>

Brown and Levinson propose that null pronouns are preferred over overt pronouns whenever possible. Our initial hypothesis, however, is that omission (or null realization) occurs more frequently in Spanish than BP. Hence, this article examines the asymmetry between the two languages, based on the hypothesis that BP seems to be heading towards becoming a non-null subject language (DUARTE, 2000, p. 191), and proposes a brief analysis of the factors that come into play in the expression of subject personal pronouns.

Carminati (2002), *apud* Licerias and Dei Tos Cardenuto (2020) claims that overt and null pronouns select different anaphoric referents in Italian. Null pronouns tend to be assigned antecedents in Spec, IP, whereas overt pronouns have antecedents in other positions, such as verbal complements. Licerias and Dei Tos Cardenuto (2020) demonstrate how Spanish seems to follow the same pattern as Italian:

- (12) a. Alex<sub>i</sub> vio a Juan<sub>j</sub> mientras Ø<sub>i</sub> andaba en bicicleta.  
Alex saw to Juan while Ø rode in bicycle  
Alex<sub>i</sub> vio a Juan<sub>j</sub> mientras él<sub>j</sub> andaba en bicicleta.  
Alex saw to Juan while he rode in bicycle
- (13) O Alex<sub>i</sub> viu o João<sub>j</sub> enquanto ele<sub>i/j</sub> estava andando de bicicleta.  
The Alex saw the João while he was riding of bicycle

In (12a), the null subject with the verb *andar*, in Spanish, induces the reading that Alex was the one riding a bicycle. In (12b), on the other hand, the over pronoun conveys the idea that Juan was the one doing the riding. However, in BP (13), the ambiguity seems to remain in both cases, since the expression of the pronoun in the second sentence does not produce the same coreferential relation as in Spanish. In BP, both overt and null pronouns can be interpreted as referring to the subject

of the matrix clause, which clashes with the Avoid Pronoun Principle.

Turning now to a different line of reasoning, we will follow Koch and Marcuschi's (1998) claim that referentially is a discursive activity, whose strength lies in the idea that referents are also objects of discourse. That is to say the empirical reality, rather than a strictly sensory experience reflected by language, is a construction based upon the relation between the individual with reality.

At the same time, following Ducrot (1984) and Koch (2018), we will assume that, in each utterance, the choice of certain discursive strategies is motivated by the speaker's intention of making his or her intentions known. In other words: "A desire to say is understood as a desire to do; hence, all intentions of action (i.e., illocutionary acts) are introduced in the sense and it is assumed that the speaker wants, in some way, to make his or her intention known" (KOCH, 2018, p. 24, author's translation)<sup>8</sup>. Thus, we can interpret argumentation in a text starting from the effect produced by each pronominal choice. Argumentation, therefore, relates to the coherence of the text, and its interpretation is based on its relationship with an element of the event. Hence, the speakers are introduced into the text according to the subject's position in discourse.

Manuel Leonetti Jungl (2014), in an important article on word order, proposes a distinction between *grammar* and *pragmatics* that is relevant to us. He argues that there is a canonical, unmarked order, which is not subjected to specific textual conditions. As mentioned above, both BP and Spanish are canonical SVO languages. However, that a canonical order exists does not entail there is no flexibility or that these languages have no marked, flexible orders. Spanish, in particular, tends to display a freer subject order than BP and other Romance languages.

- (14) a. Nuria comprobó el regulador.  
Nuria checked the regulator  
b. \*Comprobó Nuria el regulador.  
checked Nuria the regulator
- (15) a. ¿Qué comprobó Nuria?  
What checked Nuria

b. \*¿Qué Nuria comprobó?  
What Nuria checked  
(LEONETTI JUNGL, 2014)

Leonetti Jungl (2014) demonstrates, in (14) and (15), how subject and verb positions in these clauses are defined by grammar: inversion in these cases would not produce a discursive effect, but rather ungrammatical sentences (14b, 15b).

These ordering facts are solidly established by grammar, and allow no other options to the speaker [...] From the postverbal position of the subject, in this case, no discursive effect is drawn, as is the case when the inversion is optional and the result of the speaker's choice. This is so because the inversion is forced by an obligatory grammatical mechanism. Thus, in this case, there are no interesting interactions between Grammar and Pragmatics. (LEONETTI JUNGL, 2014, p. 4, author's translation)<sup>9</sup>

We can compare Leonetti Jungl's examples with their possible translations into Portuguese:

- (16) Nuria comprovou o regulador.  
Nuria verified the regulator.  
(17) a. O que a Nuria comprovou?  
what the Nuria verified  
b. A Nuria comprovou o quê?  
the Nuria verified what

We can see there is a difference in constituent order in (16) and (17) between BP and Spanish. Additionally, in BP, a sentence like (17b) is possible, but not in Spanish.

These data illustrate, once again, how relevant it is to assess the flexibility in pronoun usage when analyzing the expression of subject pronouns in BP and Spanish. If such flexibility exists, it indicates the speaker's intention to point to readings that cannot be analyzed exclusively by syntax. Therefore:

Pragmatics, on the other hand, is in principle external to the linguistic system, and consists of the use of our inferential system in combination with linguistic knowledge to reconstruct what could plausibly have been the speaker's

intention in producing an utterance. (LEONETTI JUNGL, 2014, p. 5, author's translation)<sup>10</sup>

Davidson (1996), in his analysis of the use of *tú* and *yo* in Madrid Spanish, addresses the pragmatic weight that the use of overt pronouns carries:

[...] [A theoretical label] which explains more fully how speakers use the SPs to disambiguate possible epistemic parentheticals, trigger speech act reading of certain verbs, and increase their 'stake' in whatever they are saying, either in an argument or a statement of belief; it also serves to explain such meta-linguistic uses of the SP as signaling an attempt to either take or, in the case of the utterance final second person SPs, hand over the floor. (DAVIDSON, 1996, p. 545)

He broadens the concept of emphasis that is performed by pronouns and highlights how their use underlines the speaker's point of view:

It is my contention that speakers are using SPs to add 'pragmatic weight' to their utterance, a theoretical label which subsumes the notions of 'emphasis' that other authors have proposed, but which explains more fully how speakers use the SPs to disambiguate possible epistemic parentheticals, trigger speech act readings of certain verbs, and increase their 'stake' in whatever they are saying, either in an argument or in a statement of belief. (DAVIDSON, 1996, p. 551)

Several studies have examined the greater use of pronoun *yo* with some types of verbs, especially verbs of cognition, such as Enríquez (1984). Stewart (2003) points out that Spanish speakers use the pronoun *yo* in certain situations to support their opinions:

Consequently, the use of *yo* as a hedge to the Gricean maxim of quality can serve simultaneously to protect the speaker's face and to allow the construction of self. A speaker who hedges an opinion with *yo creo que* is able simultaneously to exploit two implicatures of *yo*, a 'powerful' one implicating 'I, with my authority, experience, expertise' and a powerless and face-protective one implicating that is merely the speaker's view alone. (STEWART, 2003, p. 199)

Stewart's claims will be relevant to our analysis, as we will focus on constructions in newspapers whose topics are generally in the first person (both singular and plural).

Pragmatics is particularly relevant to our study because of the concepts of *topic* and *focus*. In pragmatics, the **topic** of a sentence is what one is talking about, or "the starting point or the base on which the rest of the clausal information is anchored" (LEONETTI JUNGL, 2014, p. 7, author's translation)<sup>11</sup>. A clause can have different topics. As we analyze different clauses in the next section, we will examine whether there is a relationship between the use of overt subject pronouns and delimitation of topics.

On the other hand, clauses also include information that the speaker wishes to stress, which is usually new within the discourse. This information is called **focus**: "When a language marks the topic or focus by means of a determined position or a particle, it provides users with a way to indicate to the hearer how to process the information in a context" (LEONETTI JUNGL, 2014, p. 8, author's translation)<sup>12</sup>.

We will also follow the methodology indicated by Padilla García (2001), which groups utterances into **pragmatic boxes**, each containing distinct Spanish word orders. The boxes that are useful to our analysis are number 1 and number 2. The first includes SVO clauses with overt subjects. She notes that the use of overt subjects is marked in Spanish, as it is not the most common pattern. The second box includes the most common pattern in Spanish, when the subject is not overtly realized - (S)VO: "the subject is not expressed either because it is given information, it is actually present in the context, or both at the same time" (PADILLA GARCÍA, 2001, p. 238, author's translation)<sup>13</sup>. Subject pronoun expression is often linked to *reintroduction*, when the speaker identifies the need to recall and stress the subject of the utterance. At the same time, it can be attributed to the egocentric nature of discourse, as the speaker sees the need to leave a clear trace of his or her presence:

Often the subject possesses the feature +participant and coincides with the first person (yo). In these cases, its expression does not only indicate a reminder, but the omnipresence of the speaker in the discourse he/she is creating. Evidently, in all these cases, the subject +participant

(yo) is -new, since, not only has it previously appeared, but, thanks to the trait +participant, it is actually present in the speech act. (PADILLA GARCÍA, 2001, p. 246, author's translation)<sup>14</sup>

We will analyze how BP and Spanish behave in that aspect since these two languages have different strategies when it comes to pronoun expression, even though both null pronouns are possible in various contexts.

### Some examples extracted from important newspapers

Our corpus consists of fragments of interviews published in the following newspapers: *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Globo*, in Brazil; and *El País*, in Spain. The theme of all interviews was the COVID-19 pandemic. We chose these newspapers due to their relevance in each country and the fact all three appeal to the middle class. Our main objective was to investigate which factors contributed to the use of overt first-person subject pronouns (singular and plural). We conducted a qualitative analysis, rather than a study on their frequency of use. Therefore, we adopted a descriptive approach to this theme, which is relevant for the contrastive analysis of BP and Peninsular Spanish. However, it should be clear we will not focus on possible regional variations. On the other hand, the main objective is to verify a *modus operandi* of analysis, considering the interface between syntax and pragmatics. Our choice of first-person pronouns follows Duarte (1995) and González (1994), who observed that, in BP, the highest rates of expressed subjects are found in the first person, whereas Enríquez (1984) notes the very low rates of first-person subject expression in Madrid Spanish.

Our first example is taken from an interview with scientist Marilda Siqueira to the newspaper *O Globo*, in early August 2021. When asked about the behavior of the Delta variant in Brazil, she replied:

- (18) **A gente** não espera nada, porque **a gente** não faz previsão. **A gente** faz ciência.  
**A-GENTE** not expect<sub>3SG</sub> nothing, because **A-GENTE** not do<sub>3SG</sub> foretelling. **A-GENTE** do<sub>3SG</sub> science.  
**A gente** observa e vê o que está acontecendo. O que está

acontecendo agora é  
A-GENTE observe<sub>3SG</sub> and see<sub>3SG</sub> what is happening. What  
is happening now is  
que essa variante já foi detectada em 465 casos no Brasil,  
reconhecidos pelo  
that his variant already was detected in 465 cases in Brasil,  
acknowledged by-the  
Ministério da Saúde. Ela está presente em muitos estados.  
Alguns, incluindo Rio  
Ministry of-the health. It is presente in many states. Some,  
including Rio  
e São Paulo, já têm transmissão comunitária.  
and São Paulo, already have community transmission.  
(O GLOBO, 2021, highlights are ours)

In the excerpt above, the pronominal phrase *a gente* (semantically first-person plural, morphologically third-person singular) is repeatedly used.<sup>15</sup> At first glance, the use of this expression seems to be obligatory, since its omission would make it impossible for the hearer to identify the subject of the sentence. On the other hand, she could have constructed the sentences using the pronoun *nós* ('we'). If she had used *nós*, it would have been possible to omit the pronoun due to the presence of unequivocal verb agreement morphology:

- (19) Não **esperamos** nada, porque não **fazemos** previsão.  
Not  $\emptyset$  expect<sub>1PL</sub> nothing, because not  $\emptyset$  do<sub>1PL</sub> foretelling.

It is clear how the speaker intends to make her intention known (KOCH, 2018), signaling the egocentric nature of the sentence. We can identify clear parallelism in the sentence, since, if scientists are not the ones who have expectations and make predictions, then there must be a group who does so. If we draw on Stewart's (2003) claims, it also becomes clear that Marilda Siqueira highlights, by means of her use of overt pronouns, her authority, experience and expertise. That said, rather than simply emphasizing, this use also reinforces the power that scientists (the referents of the first-person plural pronoun) hold. Throughout the interview, Marilda Siqueira stresses the role political agents should play within a pandemic crisis, which justifies this possible parallelism. We will not

produce in this article an analysis based on membership categorization, by Harvey Sacks (1992), but:

Of particular interest is the “consistency rule” and its corollary the “hearer’s maxim”. The consistency rule states, roughly, that if a category from a MCD is used to categorize a member of a particular population, then all other members may be categorized with categories from that device. (DAY, 2011, p. 1)

Therefore, there is an evident notion of the enunciator’s membership to the sphere of those who do science. In two other excerpts, however, we observe how she avoids the expression of the subject pronouns. The topic (“we, the scientists”) is not delimited:

- (20) Alguns trabalhos já foram publicados em relação a isso, e quando **comparamos**  
 Some works already were published in relation to that, and when  $\emptyset$  **compare**<sub>1PL</sub>  
 não só a Delta, mas a p.1 em relação à primeira amostra detectada em Wuhan,  
 not only the Delta, but the p.1 in relation to-the first sample detected in Wuhan,  
 na China, **observamos** que, para essas variantes de preocupação, as vacinas  
 in China,  $\emptyset$  **observe**<sub>1PL</sub> that, for these variants of concern, the vaccines  
 apresentam uma diminuição na capacidade de resposta.  
 [...] Além do nosso  
 show a diminishment in-the capacity of response. [...] Besides of our-the  
 laboratório, a UFRJ está fazendo isso, então **estamos** com um número  
 laboratory, the UFRJ is doing that, so  $\emptyset$  **are**<sub>1PL</sub> with a number  
 expressivo, representativo do estado.  
 Expressive, representative of-the state.  
 (O GLOBO, 2021, highlights are ours)

In other words, within her line of reasoning, she does not see the need for the pronoun *nós* (‘we’) to be overtly expressed.

However, in another moment, when asked whether Fiocruz (a Brazilian public scientific research institution) was monitoring the Delta variant, she states:

- (21) **A gente** tem dados robustos, mas não é só a Fiocruz.  
Outras redes também  
**A-GENTE** have<sub>3SG</sub> data robust, but not is only the Fiocruz.  
Other networks also  
estão trabalhando nessa questão. Quem centraliza é o  
Ministério da Saúde.  
are<sub>3PL</sub> working on-the matter. Who centralizes is the  
Ministry of Health.  
(O GLOBO, 2021, highlights are ours)

Once again, by contrasting the role of scientists with that of the Ministry of Health, the pronoun is used and reintroduces the topic.

The strategy that appears in Marilda Siqueira's discourse is repeated by researcher Margareth Dalmoco, in an interview published in Folha de S. Paulo in December 2020. Let's look at the example below:

- (22) Por outro lado, **deixamos** de prestar atenção nas outras vacinas que estavam em  
On the other hand, **Ø stopped**<sub>IPL</sub> of pay attention to-the other vaccines that were in  
produção no mundo. E, hoje, há vacinas que já estão sendo aprovadas e **nós não**  
production in-the world. And, today, there-are vaccines that already are being approved and **we not**  
**temos** cronograma nem acordos de cooperação para sua compra. Então, hoje,  
**have**<sub>IPL</sub> schedule nor agréments of cooperation for their purchase. Thus, today,  
**nós vemos** o nosso ministro adiantar que vai ter uma compra de 70 milhões de  
**we see**<sub>IPL</sub> the our minister tell that will there-be a purchase of 70 millions of  
doses junto à Pfizer.  
doses from the Pfizer.  
(FOLHA DE SÃO PAULO, 2020, highlights are ours)

We see in this excerpt how she opts for a null pronoun in the first sentence but chooses overt pronouns in the two following sentences. Again, there is contrast – in this case, between a political figure (the minister) and the need to emphasize the topic (the reference to researchers).

Lastly, the third excerpt comes from another public figure, anthropologist Débora Diniz, in an interview to *Folha de S. Paulo* in April 2020, on feminist values in the post-pandemic world. She used overt pronouns in her answer to the question about the role of researchers in the dissemination of science in several contexts, although in many of them, the omission was possible:

- (23) Sempre **achei** que meu papel como pesquisadora era conversar com o mundo e  
 Always  $\emptyset$  **thought**<sub>1SG</sub> that my role as researcher was to-talk with the world and  
 ajudar a transformar o mundo, sempre **fui** engajada, nunca **participei** de mídias  
 help to transform the world, always  $\emptyset$  **was**<sub>1SG</sub> committed, never  $\emptyset$  **participated**<sub>1SG</sub> in media  
 sociais. Quando **eu tive** de sair do Brasil **eu me vi** impedida de dar aulas,  
 social. When **I had** of to-leave from Brazil **I pron**<sub>REFL-1SG</sub> **saw**<sub>1SG</sub> barred from giving classes,  
 de falar para grandes públicos. Como **eu ia** estar no mundo? Foi aí que **eu fui**  
 from to-speak to big audiences. How **I would**<sub>1SG</sub> to-be in-the world? Was then that **I went**<sub>1SG</sub>  
 para o Twitter. Sem a sala de aula, **eu ia** falar para quem quisesse conversar  
 to the Twitter. Without the classroom, **I would**<sub>1SG</sub> to-speak to who wanted to-talk  
 comigo.  
 with-me.  
 (FOLHA DE SÃO PAULO, 2020, highlights are ours)

In this excerpt, we can see how she places herself at first as just another researcher or public figure. However, in the following sentences, she switches from a professional

perspective to a personal experience. Several researchers like her did not have to leave Brazil and were not barred from teaching, but she was. Following Padilla García's (2001), we can identify the egocentric nature of discourse in this excerpt, through an exhaustive repetition of first-person pronoun *eu* ('I').

Let us compare these examples from BP with fragments extracted from the newspaper *El País*, from Spain. In the first example, psychologist Nuria García discusses how parents may deal with children's fears that arose during the COVID-19 quarantine. When asked about how to prevent children from developing fears or anxiety, she chooses overt subject pronouns in some contexts and null pronouns in others:

- (24) Lo fundamental es **mantener nosotros** una actitud proactiva ante el conflicto.  
The fundamental is **to-keep we** a proactive attitude towards the conflict.  
Si **nosotros nos mostramos** irritables, tristes o sentimos un gran miedo, **ellos**  
If **we pron**<sub>REFLEX-1PL</sub> **show**<sub>1PL</sub> irritable, sad<sub>PL</sub> or feel great fear, **they**  
**tendrán** más dificultades para gestionar sus emociones.  
Además, es importante  
**have**<sub>FUT-3PL</sub> more difficulty to manage their emotions.  
Additionally, is essential  
ser más comprensivos y flexibles que en otros momentos.  
No es una situación  
to-be more comprehensive<sub>PL</sub> and flexible<sub>PL</sub> than at other times. Not is a situation  
normal, así que las medidas que **debemos** tomar son más extraordinarias: extra  
normal, so that the measures that **Ø must**<sub>1PL</sub> to-take are more extraordinary: extra  
de amor, extra de paciencia y extra de creatividad. Aunque eso no significa que  
of love, extra of patience, and extra of creativity. However, that not mean that  
**tengamos** que estar siempre haciendo actividades.  
**Ø must**<sub>1PL</sub> that to-be constantly doing activities.  
(EL PAÍS, 2021, highlights are ours)

We see in the example above how pronoun expression seems to be related more to the contrast made between different subjects within the discourse than to the delimitation of her point of view and her individual experience. In the ten interviews published in *El País* that were analyzed, there were few examples in Spanish in which first-person subject personal pronouns were used for the latter.

We know that, in an oral corpus, results might be different. However, it is noticeable how the expression of subject pronouns is much more frequent in the small corpus of interviews from Brazilian newspapers. In the example below, Rocío Niebla talks about her routine as a mother during the pandemic in an interview to *El País* in February 2021. Although the title of the interview is **En primera persona**, we can observe how there is no clear preference for the omission of subject pronouns, and overt subject pronouns are also employed:

- (25) **Yo soy** de la escuela de “al mal tiempo buena cara” [...] **Me pregunto** si los  
**I am** from the school of “to bad weather good face” [...] **pron**<sub>REFL-1SG</sub> **Ø wonder**<sub>1SG</sub> if the  
seres humanos pudientes, cuando llaman a sus seguros médicos, les responde un  
human beings wealthy when **Ø call**<sub>3PL</sub> to their medical insurance, they responds a  
robot [...] **Me cuestiono** sobre la primera ventana a la sanidad que tenemos los  
robot [...] **pron**<sub>REFL-1SG</sub> **Ø ask**<sub>1SG</sub> about the first window to the healing **that Ø have**<sub>1PL</sub> the  
ciudadanos [...] Dos semanas antes de que Juan Fernández empezase en la  
citizens [...] two weeks before of that Juan Fernández started in the  
escuelita, **yo llegué** a un trabajo nuevo. [...] Muy enfadada **llamé** a la guardería  
school, **I arrived**<sub>1SG</sub> at a job new. [...] Very angry **Ø called**<sub>1SG</sub> to the daycare  
al día siguiente. [...] En principio pensamos que a Miguel, que es profe de

the day next. [...] In principle, we think<sub>1PL</sub> that to Miguel, who is teacher of secundaria en la pública, desde la dirección del instituto le dirían de teletrabajar high school in the public, since the direction of-the institute, would him tell to work-remotely hasta saber los resultados de la prueba a Juan. Pero no, con la indignación a until to-know the results of the test to John. But not, with the indignation on cuestras, sin saber si mismamente él ha podido o no contagiarse, ha estado dando back, without to-know if precisely he had could or not be-infected-pron<sub>REFLEX</sub> has<sub>3SG</sub> been giving clase a adolescentes. Yo por eso me convertí en la cuidadora oficial. Llamé a mi class to teenagers. I for that pron<sub>REFLEX-1SG</sub> became<sub>1SG</sub> to the official caregiver. Ø called<sub>1SG</sub> to my jefe y aceptó que trabajase desde casa.

At first glance, there seems to be no obvious pattern in terms of pronoun expression. However, on closer examination, we observe that pronouns seem to be used to contrast her generation to her daughter's, who lives in a different reality (according to her, an easier one). Although in the following sentences there is a preference for null subject pronouns, Rocío once again uses an overt subject pronoun (underlining the topic) as a counterpoint to the fact that Juan Fernández started to study. Lastly, the pronoun signals the reintroduction of the topic in the second-to-last sentence, causing the center of interest to be slightly highlighted. In the last sentence, however, the omission is preferred, since the speaker does not see the need to reintroduce the topic. Before the verb *trabajar* ('work'), the choice for omission also holds.

This last excerpt is especially interesting because it allows us to see how BP would employ a different strategy:

- (26) Llamé a mi jefe y aceptó que trabajase desde casa.  
Ø Called<sub>1SG</sub> the my boss and Ø accepted<sub>3SG</sub> that Ø worked<sub>SG</sub>  
from home.

- (27) a. ? Chamei o meu chefe e aceitou que trabalhasse de casa.  
 Ø Called<sub>1SG</sub> the my boss and Ø accepted<sub>3SG</sub> that Ø  
 worked<sub>SG</sub> from home.  
 Eu chamei o meu chefe e ele aceitou que eu trabalhasse  
 de casa.  
 I Called<sub>1SG</sub> the my boss and he accepted<sub>3SG</sub> that I worked<sub>SG</sub>  
 from home.

In (27a), a more literal version of (26), pronoun omission might sound slightly awkward, but it would not cause ambiguity. A BP speaker, however, would feel the need for pronoun *ele* ('he') before the verb *aceitar* ('accept'). Finally, the last part of the sentence would be ambiguous if it were translated as (27a), since the subject of *trabalhasse* ('work') would not be identifiable.

The last case worth examining is the interview of Jesús Candel, a doctor and activist who is famous for his advocacy for public health, as well as for always expressing his opinions rather informally and with many adjectives. We point out some fragments in which omission of the subject pronoun was possible:

- c. **Yo voy** a poner en marcha una iniciativa esta semana para llevar esto al  
**I will**<sub>1SG</sub> to set in motion an initiative this week to to-take it to  
 Parlamento andaluz [...] porque ya **sabemos** cómo funcionan en este país  
 Parliament Andalusian [...] because already Ø **know**<sub>1PL</sub> how work<sub>3PL</sub> in this country  
 – **tendremos** que **movernos nosotros**. [...] Pues ahora **estoy** muy bien  
 – **have**<sub>FUT-1PL</sub> that **to-move**<sub>1PL</sub> **we**. [...] Well now Ø **am** very well  
 porque **estoy** disfrutando del día a día y cada día **me encuentro** mejor,  
 because Ø **am** enjoying of-the day to day and each day,  
**pron**<sub>REFLEX-1SG</sub> Ø **find**<sub>1SG</sub> better,  
 más fuerte, venciendo a la metástasis y reduciendo el tumor. **Yo creo** que  
 more strong, overcoming to the metastasis and reducing

the tumor. **I believe**<sub>1SG</sub> that  
ese cariño es parte de mi curación y de la buena evolución  
de mi  
this love is part of my healing and if the excellent evolution  
of my  
enfermedad.  
illness.  
(EL PAÍS, 2021, highlights are ours)

In this article, we are not interested in right topic constructions, as is possibly the case in the sentence “tendremos que movernos nosotros” ( $\emptyset$  will have to move we). However, the choice of overt subject pronouns is noteworthy: the group of people who know how the country works (according to the words of Jesús Candel) is delimited.

In the fragment above, null pronouns were used three times, whereas overt pronouns were twice: “**Yo** voy a poner en marcha” and “**Yo** creo que esse cariño es parte de mi curación”. In the latter, he was highlighting his experience and expertise in both cases. Additionally, in the second occasion, his individual point of view is underlined (STEWART, 2003, p. 199): although Jesús Candel is a doctor, the opinion that the affection he received by the Spaniards is healing him is his own, not that of all doctors.

### **Concluding remarks**

A common problem that SFL teachers have to face with native BP-speaker learners is the use of personal pronouns. In this article, our aim was to demonstrate how BP and Spanish make different use of overt and null subject pronouns, despite both being pro-drop languages. We argued that an analysis that only takes syntactic aspects into account is not capable of explaining the flexibility in subject pronoun expression in both languages.

We also observed that, in terms of the argumentative aspects of personal pronoun usage, three factors seem to be relevant: 1. pronoun use as a resource for reintroducing topics; 2. pronoun expression as a topic delimitation strategy; 3. pronoun use as a way of reinforcing contrasts between referents.

Several studies in recent decades have already demonstrated how BP prefers overt subject pronouns, whereas Peninsular Spanish makes greater use of null subject pronouns. In this article, we have tried to show how essential it is to take the syntax-pragmatics interface into account when studying these constructions, as the flexibility in pronoun expression indicates its potential discursive function.

Lastly, although BP shows a preference for overt subject pronouns, we have demonstrated that overt pronouns also have a discursive effect. In Spanish, the omission of subject pronouns also has interpretive consequences. Therefore, the Avoid Pronoun Principle alone cannot explain the discursive mechanisms that guide the alternation of overt and null subject pronouns in either Spanish or BP. By reassessing the literature on subject pronouns in Portuguese and Spanish in both generative syntax and pragmatics, we have tried to put forward an approach that incorporates these two areas and offers an account of the differences between them.

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## **UMA ANÁLISE DAS ASSIMETRIAS NO USO DOS PRONOMES PESSOAIS SUJEITO EM PORTUGUÊS BRASILEIRO E EM ESPANHOL**

### **Resumo**

*Este artigo tem como objetivo principal propor uma reflexão sobre as construções com pronomes pessoais de primeira pessoa em português brasileiro e em espanhol. Embora as duas línguas permitam o parâmetro do sujeito nulo (CHOMSKY, 1981), as estratégias utilizadas pelos falantes de português e de espanhol diferem quanto à escolha pela explicitação ou não dos pronomes pessoais sujeito. Em um primeiro momento, revisaremos a bibliografia sobre os pronomes pessoais em línguas pro-drop a partir dos estudos da Sintaxe (BARBOSA, DUARTE, KATO, 2005; DUARTE, 2000; FERNÁNDEZ SORIANO, 2000). Em um segundo momento, refletiremos sobre as construções nestas duas línguas latinas levando em conta o background teórico dos estudos da linguística textual e da pragmática (DAVIDSON, 1996; LEONETTI JUNGL, 2014; PADILLA GARCÍA, 2001; STEWART, 2003). Finalmente, apresentaremos*

*um possível modelo de análise a partir de dados recolhidos em entrevistas concedidas aos principais jornais da Espanha e do Brasil cujo tema central é a pandemia da COVID-19. Não pretendemos realizar um estudo quantitativo, antes trata-se de uma reflexão que colaciona os estudos gramaticais e pragmáticos.*

**Palavras-chave:** *pronome sujeito; gramática descritiva; sintaxe; pragmática*

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