INDEFINITE NULL OBJECTS IN SPANISH AND BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that (Peninsular) Spanish allows null objects when the antecedent is an indefinite DP, a bare plural. In addition to indefinite null objects, which can have animate or inanimate antecedents, Brazilian Portuguese (BP) allows definite null objects, but only with inanimate antecedents. According to the literature, inanimate definite null objects are related to the availability of VP ellipsis licensed by the verb that has moved up to an aspectual projection in BP, an inexistent construction in Spanish. Definite null objects in BP are cases of DP ellipsis, licensed in the same way. Animate definite null objects, being higher in the structure, are inaccessible for this licensing. The problem, then, is how to explain the lack of animacy restrictions in BP indefinite null objects. I propose that indefinite null objects are cases of NP ellipsis licensed by a null D. I assume an analysis for bare plurals as actually being DPs containing a null D licensed by an operator (DE) that encodes absence of definiteness. I propose that the licenser for indefinite null objects in both Spanish and BP is this null D present in bare plurals.

Keywords: indefinite null objects, Brazilian Portuguese, Spanish, ellipsis licensing

RESUMO

É bem conhecido o fato de que o espanhol (peninsular) permite objetos nulos quando o antecedente é um DP indefinido, um plural nu. Além de objetos nulos indefinidos, que podem ter antecedentes animados ou inanimados, o português brasileiro (PB) permite objetos nulos definidos, mas somente com antecedentes inanimados. De acordo com a literatura, objetos nulos inanimados estão relacionados à elipse de VP licenciados pelo verbo que se moveu para uma projeção aspectual no PB, uma construção inexistente no espanhol. Objetos nulos definidos no PB são casos de elipse de DP, licenciadas da mesma forma. O problema, então, é como explicar a falta de restrições de animacidade para objetos nulos indefinidos no PB. Eu proponho que objetos nulos indefinidos são casos de elipse de NP licenciados por um D nulo. Assumo uma análise para plurais nus como sendo DPs que contêm um D nulo licenciado por um operador (DE) que codifica ausência de definitude. Eu proponho que o licenciador de objetos nulos indefinidos tanto no espanhol como no PB é esse D nulo presente em plurais nus.

Palavras-chave: objetos nulos indefinidos, português brasileiro, espanhol, licenciamento de elipse

1 INTRODUCTION

It is well known that (Peninsular) Spanish allows null objects (CAMPOS, 1986; SANCHEZ, 1999; among others) when the antecedent is a Bare Plural (BPl). Besides question-answer pairs, coordinated sentences (1) also allow such gaps:

(1)　Ando　buscando　*candidatos*, pero　no　　encuentro　Ø.
　　　walk　looking-for　candidates　but　not　　find
　　　'I'm looking for applicants, but I don't find (them).'

(LACA, 2013, p. 110)

In addition to indefinite null objects, which can be animate or inanimate (2), Brazilian Portuguese (BP) allows definite null objects, but only when their antecedents are inanimates (3a, b):

(2)　Ando　procurando　*candidatos/poltronas*, mas　não　　encontro　Ø.
　　　walk　looking-for　candidates/armchairs　but　not　　find
　　　'I'm looking for applicants/armchairs, but I don't find (them).'

(3)　a.　A　Maria comprou　*o(s)　　vestido(s)* depois de　experimentar　Ø.
　　　　　the Maria bought　the(PL) dress(PL)　after　of　try
　　　　　'Maria bought the dress(es) after trying trying (it/them) on.'

　　　b.　*A　Maria insultou　*o(s)　　rapaz(es)* depois de　beijar　Ø.
　　　　　the Maria insulted　the(PL) boy(PL)　　after　of　kiss

In this squib I propose a unified analysis that will explain why null objects in Spanish can occur when their antecedents are indefinites (bare plurals), and why Brazilian Portuguese indefinite null objects have no animacy restrictions. I will first briefly describe and present the analysis for BP null objects as proposed by Cyrino (1997, 2016a, 2019), and compare it to Spanish. After that I will present the puzzle posed by indefinite null objects in these languages. In order to explain the puzzle, I will assume Laca's (2013) analysis for topicalized bare plurals in Spanish, which will result in my proposal that indefinite null objects are instances of nominal ellipsis.

2 BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE NULL OBJECTS

As it is well-known, BP allows definite null objects; however, these must have an inanimate antecedent (DUARTE, 1986; CYRINO, 1994, 1997, 2016a, 2019; among others). This is clear in the contrast seen in (4):

(4)　a.　A　Lia comprou　*o(s)　　vestido(s)* depois de　experimentar　Ø.
　　　　　the Lia bought　the.PL dress.PL　after　of　try
　　　　　'Lia bought the dress(es) after trying (it/them) on.'

　　　b.　*A　Lia chutou　o(s)　　rapaz(es) depois de　beijar　Ø
　　　　　the Lia kicked　the.PL boy.PL　　after　of　kiss

Cyrino (1994, 1997, 2016a, 2019) proposed inanimate definite null objects are related to the availability of VP ellipsis (5) in the language. As it is argued in Cyrino & Matos (2005), VP ellipsis is licensed by the verb that has moved up to an aspectual projection in BP (CYRINO; MATOS, 2005). Therefore, in a sentence as (5a), with the relevant structure shown in (5b), the elided sequence *o livro para as crianças* ('the book to the children') is a copy of its antecedent where the verb *lido* ('read') has vacated the VP and moved to an inner aspectual projection, *InnAsp*:[1,2]

(5) a. A Maria tem lido *o livro para as crianças* e o Pedro tem também lido **Ø**
     the Maria has read the book to the children and the Pedro has too read

  b. o Pedro [$_T$ tem] [$_{VPaux}$ <tem> [$_{AdvP}$ [$_{Adv}$ também] [$_{vP}$ [$_{InnAspP}$
     [$_{InnAsp+V}$ lido [$_{VP}$ <V> o livro para as crianças]]]]]]

  ellipsis licensing

As for inanimate definite null objects, Cyrino proposes they are DP ellipsis in BP, allowed because these elided DPs can be licensed by the verb that has moved to this low, aspectual position (CYRINO, 1997, 2016a, 2019), shown in the structure in (6b):

(6) a. Pedro consertava *as bicicletas* e Rosa vendia **Ø** para amigos
     Pedro repaired the bicycles and Rosa sold to friends
     'Pedro repaired the bicycles and Rosa sold (them) to friends.'

  b. [$_{vP}$ [$_{InnAsp}$ [$_{InnAsp+V}$ vendia [$_{VP}$ <V> [$_{DP}$ as bicicletas] para amigos]]]]]]

  ellipsis licensing

The question is how to explain the impossibility for null animate definite objects in BP. Cyrino (2016a) follows the literature on Differential Object Marking (ORMAZABAL; ROMERO, 2007; LÓPEZ, 2012; IRIMIA; CYRINO, 2017; ORDOÑEZ; ROCA, 2018; among others), and assumes that animacy is the result of a syntactic process which raises definite objects which possess a Person feature out of VP. In other words, inanimate, being non-person DPs, stay *in situ*, whereas animate objects move out. The movement of animate DPs is driven by a functional category (F[person]) below vP and above InnAsp.[3] In this way, animate definite null objects in BP cannot be licensed by the verb in InnAsp, because the animate DP has moved to a higher, inaccessible position for that licensing. In other words, the animate DP moves to a position above the licensing site. Observe the structure in (7b).

1 The copies of the moved elements are represented with angle brackets < >.

2 For the discussion about the relevant aspectual projection in BP, see Cyrino (2016a, 2019).

3 In Cyrino's (2016a, 2019) proposal, 1st and 2nd person have the feature [+person], whereas animate 3rd person are [-person] and inanimate 3rd person have no value for the feature; they are non-person.

(7)   a.   Pedro levou *o   menino* para a   biblioteca depois que o   professor expulsou **ele**

              Pedro took   the boy   to   the library   after   that the teacher   expelled him

              'Pedro took the boy to the library after the teacher expelled him.'

   b.   [$_{vP}$ [$_{FP}$ **ele**[-person] F$_{[person]}$[$_{InnAspP}$ [$_{InnAsp+V}$ expulsou [$_{VP}$ <expulsou> <ele[-person]>]]]]]

Since inanimates do not have a [Person] feature (see footnote 3), they do not move out of VP and their ellipsis can be licensed by the verb in InnAsp, as seen in (6b).

3   SPANISH NULL OBJECTS

It is well known that (Peninsular) Spanish does not allow definite null objects:

(8)   *Pedro arreglaba *las bicicletas* y   Rosa vendía **Ø** a   sus   amigos.

       Pedro   repaired   the bicycles   and Rosa sold   to her friends

Cyrino (2016b) relates the lack of definite null objects (DP ellipsis) in Spanish to the lack of VP ellipsis in the language (see also CYRINO; MATOS, 2005, 2016a, 2019). In other words, since verbs in Spanish move to a high position, the verb is unable to license the ellipsis of the direct object.

(9)   **VP ellipsis**

       *Pedro le *leía libros a los niños*,   y   María también leía **Ø**.

       Pedro   ᴄʟ read books to the children and María too   read

(10)   **DP ellipsis**

       *Pedro arreglaba *las bicicletas* y   Rosa vendía **Ø** a   sus   amigos.

       Pedro   repaired   the bicycles   and Rosa sold   to her friends

Interestingly, however, null objects whose antecedents are indefinites are indeed possible in Spanish (CAMPOS, 1986; SANCHEZ, 1999; among others), as seen in (11):

(11)   A: ¿Compraste *puros*?

          bought   cigars

          'Did you buy cigars?'

      B: Sí,   compré **Ø**

          yes bought

          'Yes, I bought (some).'

(SANCHEZ, 1999, p. 236)

Besides question-answer pairs as (11), coordinated sentences (12) also allow such indefinite null objects in Spanish.

(12) Ando buscando *candidatos*, pero no   encuentro **Ø**.
      walk   looking-for candidates but   not   find
      'I'm looking for applicants, but I don't find (them).'

<div align="right">(LACA, 2013, p. 110)</div>

Notice that (13) is also possible, when Pedro and Maria examine different students (MT Espinal, p.c.):

(13) Pedro examina *alumnos* y   María también examina **Ø**.
      Pedro examines students and María also   examines
      'Pedro examines students and María does too.'

However, the sentence in (13) cannot be considered to exhibit VP ellipsis, since the language lacks this possibility, as seen above. So how can these null objects be possible in the language?
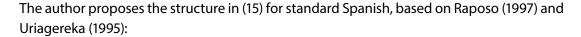
Campos (1986, p. 354) analyzes indefinite direct objects in Spanish by proposing that they may be dropped when the empty element occupying the argument position of the verb functions as a variable. The gap corresponds to a trace of the operator OP (HUANG, 1984; RAPOSO, 1986), and as such, it is subject to constraints on movement (islands), as can be seen in (14):
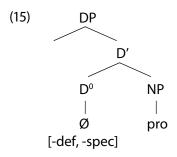
(14)   A: ¿Encontraron *entradas* para la pelicula?
           'Did you find tickets for the movie?'

       B: *Sí, pudimos entrar al cine porque encontramos **Ø**.
           'Yes, we were able to go into the cinema because we found (some).'

Sanchez (1999, p. 237-238), however, proposes a null pronoun analysis for indefinite null objects in Spanish. She states that:

> Restrictions on definiteness and specificity imposed on the antecedents of this pronoun can be better understood as a consequence of a matching in definiteness and specificity features between the antecedent's D^0 and the pronoun. If pronouns are DPs as proposed by Raposo (1997) and Uriagereka (1995), such matching can be formalized by assuming that the D^0 that heads the null pronoun in Standard Spanish is marked for [-definite, - specific] features (…). (SANCHEZ, 1999, p. 237-238)

The author proposes the structure in (15) for standard Spanish, based on Raposo (1997) and Uriagereka (1995):

(15)
```
          DP
           \
            D'
           /  \
         D⁰    NP
          |     |
          Ø    pro
     [-def, -spec]
```

BP also allows indefinite null objects. More puzzling in this language, however, is the fact that indefinite null objects, differently from definite null objects, allow both animate and inanimate antecedents:

(16)   a. Ando procurando *candidatos*, mas não encontro **Ø**.
           walk looking-for applicants but not find
           'I've been looking for applicants, but I don't find (them).'

       b. Ando procurando *poltronas*,   mas não encontro **Ø**.
           walk looking-for armchairs   but not find
           'I've been looking for armchairs, but I don't find (them).'

The puzzle is: why are null objects as the ones in (16a) possible in BP, where the antecedent is animate? They cannot be the result of DP ellipsis, since, as shown above, animate DPs move to a high position outside InnAspP and ellipsis could not be licensed in that position. In other words, it seems that indefinite null objects in BP are insensitive to the animacy feature of the antecedent.

How can we account for this? The answer I propose is related to the analysis of the indefinite DPs that are the antecedents to these null objects. Notice that they are Bare Plurals (BPls) both in Spanish and BP — (17a) and (17b) respectively:

(17)   a. Ando buscando *candidatos*, pero no encuentro **Ø**.
       b. Ando procurando *candidatos*, mas não encontro **Ø**.
          'I've been looking for applicants, but I don't find (them).'

In order to explore this fact, we have to look at BPls in object position in both languages.

4 ON BARE PLURALS

Bare Plurals in Spanish are only possible as objects, as postverbal subjects, or as modified/focalized preverbal subjects:

(18) **Postverbal subject**
    a. Asistieron   *obispos*.
       Attended.3PL bishops
       '(Some) bishops attended.'

    Preverbal subject
    b. **Obispos* asistieron.
       bishops attended.3PL

    Emphatic-Focus Fronting
    c. *OBISPOS* asistieron.
       bishops attended.3PL
       '(Even some) bishops attended.'

(LACA, 2013, p. 96)

Laca (2013) observes that there is a sub-kind of Spanish BPls (not noticed by the literature) that poses several problems for semantic theories with respect to their status. Thus, there is a group of preverbal BPls that do not have the intonation pattern of (the better understood) emphatic focus fronting but, nonetheless, it does not correspond to the unmarked intonation under which preverbal bare nouns are not allowed in Spanish. She calls these structures "topicalized bare plurals", as in (19):

(19) **BPl topicalization**
    Obispos asistieron
    bishops attended.3PL
    '(As for) bishops, (some) attended.'
    [pero no arzobispos   /pero se retiraron de inmediato]
    But   no archbishops did /but   they left   rightaway

(LACA, 2013, p. 96)

This is also the case with object topicalization, as in (20):

(20) **Object topicalization**
    a. *Bicicletas* vendemos.
       bicycles sell.1PL
       [pero en este momento no] hay
       but   at this moment   not there-is
       'We do sell bicycles, but we have none at the moment.'

20

Split-topicalization

b. *Obispos* asistieron   varios.

   bishops attended.3PL several

   '(As for) bishops, several attended.'

(LACA, 2013, p. 96)

Laca (2013) assumes BPls are properties, but then the problem is to explain their topicalized position (not allowed to properties). Her strategy to solve this apparent contradiction is to show that the "topicalized bare plurals" are not really topics in the sense of Cohen & Erteschik-Shir (2002). She concludes that the "topicalized bare plurals" should be better analyzed as external topics base-generated in this position.

But how does a property denoting BPl get to be the necessary type <e>? Laca assumes an independently required nominal null element, which is in this case anaphorically linked with the BPl. Evidence for this element, which would have the right semantic type for triggering the existential type-shift, comes from indefinite argument drop and nominal ellipsis. In other words, Laca relates these two widely ignored phenomena in this insightful way.

Laca (2013, p. 110) proposes:

> in BPL-Topicalization there is an element of category N/NP and of semantic type <e,t> sitting in the relevant ("gapped") argument position, and this element triggers the existential type-shift of the verbal predicate. This element is, however, not pronounced. It is not a trace, nor a null-clitic, but a case of N'-deletion/NP-ellipsis, of which there are other instances in Spanish. (LACA, 2013, p. 110)

In other words, for Laca (2013), the BPl identified gaps found in (21)-(22) are also present in the phenomenon investigated as NP ellipsis for Spanish (23):

(21) **Topicalized BPl**
      Obispos asistieron **Ø**.
      [pero no arzobispos/pero se retiraron de inmediato]

(LACA, 2013, p. 96)

(22) **Indefinite null object**
      Ando buscando *candidatos*, pero no encuentro **Ø**.

(LACA 2013, p. 110)

(23) **NP ellipsis in Spanish**
      Ayer   vi   la   *casa*   roja y   la   **Ø**   azul.
      yesterday saw the house   red and the   blue
      'Yesterday, I saw the red house and the blue one.'

5 ON NP ELLIPSIS

Saab (2018) has investigated NP ellipsis in Spanish and showed that this phenomenon entails deletion / non-pronunciation of a full-fledged nP, including the n itself and minimally the RootP.

(24) $[_{DP}$ D $[_{NumP}$ Num $\mathbf{[_{nP} \; n \; [_{\sqrt{P}} \; \sqrt{}]]]]}$

For Saab, ellipsis is a matter of phrasal selection. Some phrases are eligible to be elliptical in a given language for the syntactic occurrence of a lexical property (the E-feature approach, MERCHANT, 2001). In the nominal domain, different sorts of nominal ellipses are licensed depending on the loci of the E selection feature:

(25)

When we look at BP, we see that the language has the same kind of NP ellipsis as Spanish:

(26)   Ontem   vi   a   *casa*   vermelha e   a   **Ø**   azul
       yesterday saw the house   red   and the   blue
       'Yesterday, I saw the red house and the blue one.'

Let's assume that nominal ellipsis is licensed by D (SAAB, 2018) in both Spanish and BP:

(27)   a. Ayer vi $[_{DP} [_D$ la $[_{NP}$ casa]]] roja y $[_{DP} [_D$ la $[_{NP}$ ~~casa~~]]] azul

                                   └────┘
                              ellipsis licensing

       b. Ontem vi $[_{DP} [_D$ a $[_{NP}$ casa]]] vermelha e $[_{DP} [_D$ a $[_{NP}$ ~~casa~~]]] azul

                                   └────┘
                              ellipsis licensing

Let's also assume that topicalized BPls can be subsumed under the process of nominal ellipsis as proposed by Laca (2013). The question now is: what licenses the gap in indefinite null objects and topicalized BPls (since there is no overt D)? Observe (28) and (29):

(28)   **Indefinite null objects**
       a. Ando buscando [candidatos], pero no encuentro [~~candidatos~~].
       b. Ando procurando [candidatos], mas não encontro [~~candidatos~~].

(29)   **Topicalized BPls**

[Periódicos] hay un comerciante en el   barrio   que vende [~~periódicos~~]
newspapers has a   shopkeeper in   the neighborhood that sells
'(As for) newspapers, there is a shopkeeper in the neighborhood who sells them.'

(LACA, 2013, p. 109)

The semantic literature (DOBROVIE-SORIN; LACA, 1996, 2003; McNALLY, 2004; VAN GEENHOVEN, 1996; among others) propose that BPls in Romance have a property type denotation (that is, syntactically, they correspond to NPs). But, if that were the case, they should not be able to occur in topic position (LACA, 2013). Laca tries to circumvent this problem with a specific proposal for a semantic type shifting operation.

Instead, I advance a different analysis by assuming the proposal in Espinal & Cyrino (2013) and in Espinal & Cyrino (2019) for BPls.

6 PROPOSAL

Espinal & Cyrino (2013) and Espinal & Cyrino (2019) propose that, syntactically, Romance BPls are DPs containing an operator DE adjoined to a pluralized D. This operator cancels the definiteness of the DP. Hence, the structure for indefinites (BPls) as *candidatos* in (28) is shown in (30):

(30) $[_{DP} [_D$ DE $[_D$ PLURALIZER $[_{Ddef}$ Ø $]]] [_{NP}$ candidato$]]$

In order to explain the puzzle seen above concerning the possibility for indefinite null objects in BP and Spanish, I propose that in this type of null objects, we have *nominal ellipsis* in both languages and the *licenser* is the null D in BPls.[4]

(31)   a. Ando buscando *candidatos,* pero no encuentro **Ø**.

       b. ... buscando $[_{DP} [_D$ DE $[_D$ PLURALIZER $[_{Ddef}$ Ø $]]] [_{NP}$ candidato$]]$

           ... encuentro $[_{DP} [_D$ DE $[_D$ PLURALIZER $[_{Ddef}$ Ø $]]] [_{NP}$ ~~candidato~~$]]$

                                              └────────┘
                                              ellipsis licensing

As seen above, Laca (2013) proposes that the topicalization of BPls involves an instance of nominal ellipsis. In my proposal, both null indefinite objects and topicalization of BPls are possible because the nominal ellipsis is licensed by a null D_{def} whose definiteness has been cancelled by the operator DE. Therefore, in the topicalization of a BPl as in (32a) in Spanish, we have nominal ellipsis as in the structure in (32b):

(32)   a. Novelas, leo **Ø**.

           novels read

           '(As for) novels, I read (them).'

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4 Recall that Sanchez (1999) also proposes that null objects in Spanish are licensed by an empty (a *pro*) D.

b. [_Top_ [_DP_ [_D_ DE [_D_ PLURALIZER [_Ddef_ Ø]]] [_NP_ novela]] Top]... [_DP_ [_D_ DE [_D_ PLURALIZER [_Ddef_ Ø]]] [_NP_ ~~novela~~]]

$$\underline{\qquad\qquad}$$

ellipsis licensing

In this way, if we attribute for both BP and Spanish the same structure for BPls and the same licensers for nominal ellipsis, the puzzle pointed out in this paper seems to have been solved.

7 CONCLUSION

Assuming there are different ways of ellipsis licensing — VP ellipsis and nominal ellipsis are licensed by different functional categories (LOBECK, 1995) —, this proposal aims to explain puzzling data on null objects in Spanish and BP.

However, there are some further questions to be explored:

(i)   what is the precise relationship between indefinite null objects and NP ellipsis in Spanish in relation to movement restrictions?

(ii)   what is the actual informational and discourse-functional role of topicalized BPls and nominal ellipsis?

In any case, this squib explores a possible solution for the puzzling fact involving null indefinite objects in both Spanish and BP: in the former language it is the only possible occurrence of null objects, in the latter it is unrestrictedly allowed. In both cases, my proposal goes in the direction that, given the fact that indefinites are involved, we do not have a null object *per se*, but a case of nominal ellipsis licensed by a null Determiner.

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