



NULL BARE SINGULAR SUBJECTS IN BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE: TOPIC DROP, NOT ARGUMENT ELLIPSIS

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ABSTRACT

Brazilian Portuguese allows argument drop of bare singular subjects, a fact that has previously gone unobserved. This squib examines the status of argument-dropped bare singular subjects. Two possibilities are considered: (i) argument-dropped bare singular subjects are generated via argument ellipsis; (ii) argument-dropped bare singular subjects are generated via topic drop. It is argued that argument-dropped bare singular subjects in BP are generated under topic drop, not argument ellipsis.

Keywords: Brazilian Portuguese, bare singular subjects, topic drop, argument ellipsis

RESUMO

O português brasileiro permite *argument drop* de nomes nus em posição de sujeito, um fato até então não observado. Este squib examina o *status* deste tipo de *argument drop*. Duas possibilidades são consideradas: (i) *argument drop* de nomes nus em posição de sujeito é gerado por elipse argumental; (ii) tal tipo de *argument drop* é gerado por *topic drop*. É argumentado que *argument drop* de nomes nus em posição de sujeito é gerado por *topic drop*, não por elipse argumental.

Palavras-chave: português brasileiro, nomes nus em posição de sujeito, *topic drop*, elipse argumental

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1 INTRODUCTION

Brazilian Portuguese (BP) allows argument drop of bare singular subjects, a fact that has previously gone unobserved in the BP literature. The examples in (1) provide an illustration. In (1a), the bare singular *criança* ‘children’ has undergone argument drop; in (1b), the bare singular *soldado* ‘soldiers’ has done so.¹

- (1) a. Criança sempre chega na escola com sono na segunda-feira.
 child always arrives at.the school with sleepiness on.the Monday
 Já na sexta, __ sempre chega sem mochila.
 but on.the Friday __always arrives without backpack
 ‘Children always arrive at school tired on Monday. But on Friday, children always arrive without their backpack.’
- b. Soldado sempre fica estressado durante a semana, mas pelo menos no fim de semana __ fica tranquilo.
 soldier always stays stressed during the week but at.the least in.the end of week __stays calm
 ‘Soldiers are always stressed during the week, but at least during the weekend soldiers are relaxed.’

The purpose of this squib is to investigate the status of argument-dropped bare singular subjects in BP. I consider the following two possibilities: (i) in BP, argument-dropped bare singular subjects are generated via argument ellipsis; (ii) in BP, argument-dropped bare singular subjects are generated via topic drop. I argue that argument-dropped bare singular subjects in BP are generated under topic drop, not argument ellipsis.

The squib is structured as follows. In section 2, I consider—and reject—the possibility that argument drop of bare singular subjects is generated by argument ellipsis. In section 3, I argue that argument-dropped bare singular subjects are, in fact, generated under topic drop. Section 4 closes.

¹ Bare singular subjects are interpreted generically/habitually, as (1a) and (1b) demonstrate. Here and below, I use plural nouns (e.g., “children”, “soldiers”) in the translations, as this is the most natural way to render bare singular subjects in English. Further discussion of the interpretation of bare singulars in BP lies beyond the scope of the present article. I refer the reader to Schmitt and Munn (1999), Müller (2002), Ferreira (2010), Pires de Oliveira and Rothstein (2011), and Cyrino and Espinal (2015).

2 ARGUMENT DROP OF BARE SINGULAR SUBJECTS IS NOT GENERATED UNDER ARGUMENT ELLIPSIS

In this section, I consider the possibility that argument drop of bare singular subjects is generated via argument ellipsis. According to this proposal, sentences like (1a,b) would be generated as follows, with the bare singular subject being elided in subject position (i.e., in [Spec, TP]).

- (2) a. Criança sempre chega na escola com sono na segunda-feira. Já na sexta, [_{TP} ~~criança~~ sempre chega sem mochila]
 b. Soldado sempre fica estressado durante a semana, mas pelo menos no fim de semana [_{TP} ~~soldado~~ fica tranquilo]

The claim that sentences like (1a,b), which involve argument drop of bare singular subjects, is generated under argument ellipsis amounts to the claim that BP has argument ellipsis of subjects. In what follows, I will argue that BP does not have argument ellipsis of subjects, and hence that argument drop of bare singular subjects cannot be analyzed as involving argument ellipsis. I begin by reviewing evidence from the literature that BP has argument ellipsis of direct objects. With this in place, I then turn to the question of whether BP has argument ellipsis of subjects, concluding that it does not.

BP has argument ellipsis of direct objects (CYRINO, 1997; CYRINO; LOPES, 2016). I present two pieces of evidence in support of this conclusion.²

First, null objects in BP give rise to sloppy readings, in addition to strict readings (CYRINO, 1997). Crucially, overt pronouns in minimally-paired sentences allow strict readings, only.

- (3) A Maria_i mostrou o artigo dela_i pro Chomsky.
 the M. showed the article of.her to.the C.
 'Maria_i showed her_i article to Chomsky.'
- a. Já a Clara mostrou __pro Lasnik.
 But the C. showed __to.the L.
 'But Clara_j showed her_{i/j} article to Lasnik'
- b. Já a Clara mostrou ele pro Lasnik.
 But the C. showed it to.the L.
 'But Clara showed it (*Clara's article/✓Maria's article) to Lasnik.'

² For additional arguments, see Cyrino and Lopes (2016).

(4) O Pedro_i pôs os óculos dele_i na mesa.
The P. put the glasses of.him on.the table
'Pedro_i put his_i glasses on the table.'

a. Já o Tiago pôs__ na estante.
but the T. put__ on.the shelf
'But Tiago_j put his_{i/j} glasses on the shelf.'

b. Já a Tiago pôs eles na estante.
but the T. put them on.the shelf
'But Tiago put them (*Tiago's glasses/✓Pedro's glasses) on the shelf.'

Under the sloppy reading, an analysis of the null object in terms of *pro* would be hard to sustain, given that pronouns in minimally-paired sentences fail to support sloppy readings. Argument ellipsis, by contrast, accounts for the sloppy reading straightforwardly, as (5) demonstrates.

(5) a. Já a Clara_j mostrou [~~o artigo dela~~]_j pro Lasnik.
b. Já o Tiago_j pôs [~~os óculos dele~~]_j na estante.

Further evidence that BP allows argument ellipsis of direct objects comes from sentences such as the following, in which a bare singular object undergoes argument drop.^{3,4}

(6) a. A Maria mandou carta pro Pedro. Já o João mandou__ pra Carla.
the M. sent letter to.the P. but the J. sent__ to.the C.
'Maria sent letter(s) to Pedro. But João sent letter(s) to Carla.'

b. A Ana comprou revistinha pra Bia. Já o José comprou __ pro Rafa.
the A. bought comic book for.the B. but the J. bought __ for.the R.
'Ana bought comic book(s) for Bia. But José bought comic book(s) for Rafa.'

(7) a. Já o João mandou [~~carta~~] pra Carla.
b. Já o José comprou [~~revistinha~~] pro Rafa.

Importantly, *pro* would not account for the dropped objects' number neutral interpretation, as is shown by the fact that pronouns in minimally-paired sentences fail to produce such a reading (see (8)). Indeed, the insertion of a pronoun leads to semantic infelicity. Thus, argument drop of bare singular objects cannot be analyzed as *pro*.

³ The ability of bare singular objects to undergo argument drop was first noted in Cyrino and Espinal (2015).

⁴ Bare singular objects give rise to number neutral readings. I gloss number neutral readings as follows: N(s); e.g., "letter(s)".

- (8) a. A Maria mandou carta pra Pedro. # Já o João mandou ela/elas pra Carla.
the M. sent letter to.the P. but the J. sent it/them to.the C.
'Maria sent letter(s) to Pedro. #But João sent it/them to Carla.'
- b. A Ana comprou revistinha pra Bia. # Já o José comprou ela/elas pro Rafa.
the A. bought comic book for.the B. but the J. bought it/them for.the R.
'Ana bought comic book(s) for Bia. #But José bought it/them for Rafa.'

Having established that BP allows argument ellipsis of direct objects, I now consider whether BP has argument ellipsis of subjects. Consider the following sentences. These sentences show that null subjects in BP do not permit sloppy readings.

- (9) a. A Maria_i disse que o carro dela_i foi pichado.
the M. said that the car of.her was spray-painted
Já a Clara disse que ___ foi roubado.
but the C. said that ___ was robbed
'Maria_i said that her_i car was spray-painted. But Clara_j said that her_{i/*j} car was robbed.'
- b. O João_i disse que a plantinha dele_i murchou.
the J. said that the plant of.him wilted
Já o Pedro disse que ___ morreu
but the P. said that ___ died
'João_i said that his_i plant wilted. But Pedro_j said that his_{i/*j} plant died.'
- c. O João_i disse que a mãe dele_i era médica.
the João said that the mother of.him was doctor
Já o Pedro disse que ___ era advogada.
but the Pedro said that ___ was lawyer
'João_i said that his_i mother was a doctor. But Pedro_j said that his_{i/*j} mother was a lawyer.'
- d. [A Maria e a Júlia]_i acreditam que a mãe delas_i comprou uma televisão. Já a Clara e a Ana acreditam que ___ comprou um rádio.
the Maria and the Julia believe that the mother of.them bought a television. but the Clara and the Ana believe that bought a radio
'[Maria and Julia]_i believe that their_i mother bought a television. But [Clara and Ana]_j believe that their_{i/*j} mother bought a radio.'
- e. O Tiago_i disse que a mãe dele_i canta.
the T. said that the mother of.him sings
Já o Paulo disse que ___ dança.
but the P. said that ___ dances
'Tiago_i said that his_i mother sings. But Paulo_j said that his_{i/*j} mother dances.'

The inability of null subjects to produce sloppy readings indicates that BP does not allow argument ellipsis of subjects, and hence, that an argument ellipsis account of argument-dropped bare singular subjects cannot be correct.

Note, further, that an argument ellipsis account of argument-dropped bare singular subjects would fail to account for certain restrictions on where bare singular subjects can drop. To see that this is so, observe that argument ellipsis can apply in sentences involving wh-movement to the specifier of the CP immediately containing the elided argument. In (10), the null object permits the sloppy reading, which shows that the null object is generated under argument ellipsis. In (11), the null object is interpreted as a number neutral bare singular; as will be recalled from the discussion of (6a,b), above, this interpretation indicates that the null object has been generated under argument ellipsis.

- (10) [_{CP} Pra quem a Maria_i mostrou a tese dela_i t ontem]?
 to whom the M. showed the thesis of her yesterday
 [_{CP} E pra quem a Clara mostrou ___ t hoje]?
 and to whom the C. showed ___ today?
 'Who did Maria_i show her_i thesis to yesterday? And who did Clara_j show her_j thesis to today?'
- (11) [_{CP} Pra que parente o João sempre manda carta t]?
 to which relative the J. always sends letter
 [_{CP} E pra que parente a Carla sempre manda ___ t]?
 and to which relative the C. always sends ___
 'Which relative does João always send letter(s) to? And which relative does Carla always send letter(s) to?'

The above sentences show that argument ellipsis can occur in sentences involving wh-movement to the specifier of the CP immediately containing the null argument. If argument drop of bare singular subjects were due to argument ellipsis, we would expect argument drop of bare singular subjects to be able to occur in the same type of sentence: namely, sentences in which wh-movement targets the specifier of the CP immediately containing the null argument. The following example demonstrates that this prediction is not borne out.

- (12) [_{CP} Que videogame criança joga no Brasil]?
 what video game child plays in.the Brazil
 * [_{CP} E que videogame ___ joga em Portugal]?
 and what video game ___ plays in Portugal
 'What video game(s) do children play in Brazil? (intended) And what video game(s) do children play in Portugal?'

The preceding examples thus show that the distribution of argument ellipsis is distinct from the distribution of argument drop of bare singular subjects. This, in turn, lends further credence to the conclusion reached above that argument drop of bare singular is not due to argument ellipsis.

3 ARGUMENT DROP OF BARE SINGULAR SUBJECTS IS GENERATED UNDER TOPIC DROP

It is consensual within the BP literature that BP is no longer a consistent pro-drop language.⁵ That is, BP no longer licenses subject *pro*. This being so, the fact that BP licenses null subjects in matrix clauses may come as a surprise.

- (13) A: Onde está a Maria?
 where is the M.
 'Where is Maria?'
 B: [___ acabou de sair]
 ___ just of to.leave
 'She just left.'

(KATO et al.; 2023)

Modesto (2000), Rodrigues (2004), and Kato et al. (2023) argue that the null subject in such examples is generated under topic drop. That is, the null subject is generated by raising the subject to the left periphery, where the subject is subsequently deleted. According to this proposal, the null subject in (13) is generated as follows.⁶

- (14) a. [_{TP} A Maria acabou de sair] →
 b. [_{XP} A Maria [_{TP} t acabou de sair]] →
 c. [_{XP} A Maria [_{TP} t acabou de sair]]

The following property of topic drop is relevant to the ensuing discussion: topic drop is not possible in sentences involving *wh*-movement to the left periphery of the clause immediately containing the null subject. The following examples demonstrate this. In neither example is the null subject possible. (Note that the sentences become acceptable if an overt subject is used, rather than a null subject.)

- (15) A: Onde está a Maria?
 where is the M.
 'Where is Maria?'
 B: *[O que ___ fez desta vez?]
 the what ___ did this time
 'What did she do this time?'

(KATO et al.; 2023)

⁵ See Kato et al. (2023) and the many references cited therein.

⁶ I remain agnostic as to the precise position to which the topic-dropped DP raises in the left periphery. Here and below, I will accordingly label this position as "XP".

- (16) Que videogame o João joga na segunda-feira?
 what video game the J. plays on.the Monday
 *E que videogame ___ joga na terça-feira?
 and what video game ___ plays on.the Tuesday
 'What videogame does João play on Monday? And what videogame does he play on Tuesday?'

With this in mind, recall that argument drop of bare singular subjects is likewise impossible in sentences involving wh-movement to the left periphery of the clause immediately containing the null subject. This is shown by (12), repeated here as (17).

- (17) [_{CP} Que videogame criança joga no Brasil]?
 what video game child plays in.the Brazil
 *_{CP} E que videogame ___ joga em Portugal]?
 and what video game ___ plays in Portugal
 'What video game(s) do children play in Brazil? And what video game(s) do children play in Portugal?'

Given that argument drop of bare singular subjects is subject to the same distributional restriction as are uncontroversial cases of topic drop, I propose that argument drop of bare singular subjects is generated via topic drop. According to this proposal, the examples in (1a,b), repeated below, are generated as in (19) and (20), respectively.⁷

⁷ The examples in (18a) and (18b) contain overt material to the left of the dropped topic: *na sexta* 'on Friday' in (18a), and *pelo menos no fim de semana* 'at least on the weekends' in (18b). One might legitimately wonder whether the presence of such material blocks the application of topic drop. If such material does block topic drop, this would seriously jeopardize the conclusion reached in the text, that argument drop of bare singular subjects is generated via topic drop. Fortunately, however, such material does *not* block topic drop. This is shown by the following examples. As can be seen, the subjects can successfully drop, thus showing that the presence of material to the left of the null subject does not invariably block topic drop.

- (i) O João lia revistinha nos anos 80. Hoje em dia, ___ só joga videogame.
 the J. read comic book in.the years 80 today in day, ___ only plays video game.
 'João used to read comic books in the 80's. Nowadays, he only plays video games.'
- (ii) O João estudou álgebra no primeiro ano. Já no segundo ano, ___ estudou geometria.
 the J. studied algebra in.the first year but in.the second year ___ studied geometry
 'João studied algebra during the first year. But during the second year, he studied geometry.'

- (18) a. Criança sempre chega na escola com sono na segunda-feira.
child always arrives at.the school with sleepiness on.the Monday
Já na sexta, ___ sempre chega sem mochila.
but on.the Friday ___ always arrives without backpack
'Children always arrive at school tired on Monday. But on Friday, children always arrive without their backpack.'
- b. Soldado sempre fica estressado durante a semana, mas pelo menos no fim de semana ___ fica tranquilo.
soldier always stays stressed during the week but at.the least in.the end of week ___ stays calm
'Soldiers are always stressed during the week, but at least during the weekend soldiers are relaxed.'

(19) Já na sexta, [_{XP} *criança*]_i [_{TP} *t_i* sempre chega sem mochila]

(20) Pelo menos no fim de semana [_{XP} *soldado*]_i [_{TP} *t_i* fica tranquilo]

4 CONCLUSION

This squib has investigated the status of argument-dropped bare singular subjects. Two possibilities were considered: (i) argument-dropped bare singular subjects are generated via argument ellipsis; (ii) argument-dropped bare singular subjects are generated via topic drop. As to the former possibility, it was argued that although BP has argument ellipsis of direct objects, it does not have argument ellipsis of subjects, as is evidenced by the inability of null subjects in BP to produce sloppy readings. Given that BP does not allow argument ellipsis of subjects, it follows that argument drop of bare singular subjects is not generated by argument ellipsis. Rather, argument-dropped bare singular subjects are generated under topic drop. The evidence in support of this conclusion is distributional in nature. Argument drop of bare singular subjects shares the same distributional restriction as do uncontroversial instances of topic drop.

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