

Brazilian Portuguese null subjects in light of a hybrid discourse-oriented system
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Null subjects in Brazilian Portuguese display a puzzling pattern that has not been fully accounted in current literature. In short, null subjects are seen in different patterns in matrix and embedded clauses. Furthermore, declaratives and questions also show a different distribution of null subjects, and WH movement seems to play a part in blocking null subject licensing in questions. This work aims to propose a solution to this puzzle by presenting a model centered around ϕ -feature and discursive (δ) feature interaction at the Left Periphery. The main historical assumption being that BP displays properties of a discursive-oriented language, an hypothesis based on the extended contact the language had with Bantu throughout its history.

The problem Brazilian Portuguese (henceforth, BP) displays a non-uniform distribution of null subjects. In matrix clauses, null subjects are licensed only when 1st person inflection arises. In questions, matrix null subjects are licensed for 1st and 2nd person; when the WH-phrase is fronted, null subjects become ungrammatical for all persons in questions' matrix clauses. 3rd person null subjects are licensed only in embedded clauses when there is an overt subject antecedent at the matrix.

The theoretical framework I assume, following Miyagawa (2009, 2017), that i) lower functional projections inherit unvalued features from C, and that these features can either be discourse features (δ) or ϕ -features; and (ii) that these features inherited from C will probe for a goal at the lower structure, causing movement of the goal to the feature's projection (the Probe Goal Union principle). In discourse-oriented languages, only δ features probe, while in agreement-oriented languages, only ϕ -features probe. This typology does not eliminate the possibility of languages with properties of both systems, which is what I suggest for BP. My main motivation for making such an assumption being the contact BP had with a group of discourse oriented languages, Bantu, throughout a significant part of its history. I call this the Bantu Contact Hypothesis, originally proposed by Avelar and Galves (2011, 2014).

The theoretical proposal Firstly, I assume null subjects are a [D] head carrying a bundle of unvalued ϕ -features, $D_{u\phi}$. Following the framework established above, I argue that agreement in BP utilizes both the δ and the ϕ probe, each one being inherited by either T or the Topic Projection. A second assumption is that null subjects in BP come into derivation with a valued $+\delta$. This reflects the fact that null subjects in BP are always either given or topics. In embedded environments, the null element $D_{u\phi, +\delta}$ is probed by the δ probe at the Topic Projection and moved to it. Once at Top, the bundle of unvalued ϕ -features is projected at the Phase Label of the embedded CP and is available for valuation by the higher syntactic structure, Matrix null subjects share the same structure, and the unvalued bundle of ϕ features will again be projected at the Phase Label of the matrix CP. I suggest the existence of a mapping function at the Syntax-Semantics Interface that will value this bundle mapping it into discourse referents in a [SPEAKER, HEARER] dichotomy. I argue that since there is no locally available syntactic element that could value the unvalued features of the null subjects, the features get valued at the CI interface. In declarative clauses, the feature is valued as [+SPEAKER], in questions as [+SPEAKER, +HEARER]; [-SPEAKER, -HEARER] (or simply [-PARTICIPANT] cannot be assigned via the interface function. As for questions with WH-movement, I assume the WH-element is also merged with $+\delta$ feature. This creates the intervention effects in matrix clauses, as the δ probe will probe for either the null subject *or* the WH-element at the lower structure.

References

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