

## VERB INITIAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN PORTUGUESE AND THEIR COUNTERPART CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH\*

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In Kato (1980) I showed that Portuguese is a language that makes wide use of verb-initial constructions, a fact that is due to the optionality of the subject as a basic sentence constituent.

I have also argued that this feature of Portuguese correlates systematically with several other properties which are apparently dissociated and have been treated in independent chapters in traditional grammars. The facts are the following: a) passives without subject raising; b) subject pronoun deletion; c) postposed subjects.

Berman (1980) has shown that Hebrew is also a case of an (S) VO language and has independently concluded that this type of language tends to manifest the properties that I had predicted to be characteristic of (S) VO languages.

As both Hebrew and Portuguese show this systematic correlation among facts that were not traditionally thought to be related, and English, unlike Hebrew and Portuguese, has an obligatory subject constituent, it seems sensible to have all these facts grouped in a contrastive analysis and have this systematicity used for pedagogical purposes. In this paper my aim is to show how the facts analysed in Portuguese are manifested in English.

Generally speaking both English and Portuguese exhibit the SVO order for unmarked neutral sentences, both for transitive and intransitive constructions.

João come torta de galinha.  
O bebê dormia.

John eats chicken-pie.  
The baby slept.

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In certain constructions, however, they differ in the presence or absence of the subject.

1. In *Existential Sentences*, while Portuguese is subjectless, English has a dummy *there* acting as subject. In English, unlike Portuguese, agreement is governed by the object.

Há um unicórnio no jardim.	There is a unicorn in the garden.
Há unicórnios no jardim.	There are unicorns in the garden.

2. In *Weather and Time Expressions*, while English has a dummy *it* for subject, Portuguese is subjectless.

Vai chover.	It is going to rain.
É tarde.	It is late.

3. *Agentless Constructions* in Portuguese can be either active<sup>1</sup> without subject or passive, while in English the only possibility is the passive construction with an overt subject.

Venderam a casa.	_____
Vendeu-se a casa.	_____
A casa foi vendida.	The house was sold.

4. *Modal Constructions* with a sentential complement are subjectless in Portuguese, whereas in English the corresponding forms have a dummy *it* for subject.

Parece que ele não gosta de futebol.	It seems that he does not like soccer.
Acontece que ele é burro.	It happens that he is stupid.

5. *Request Formulas with 'Poder'* can be impersonal in Portuguese but not in English.

Pode comer esse bolo? <sup>2</sup>	_____
(Eu) posso comer esse bolo?	Can I eat this cake?

<sup>1</sup> Traditional grammars call sentences with the active verbal form with *se* 'syathetic passives'. I prefer to consider them agentless active forms.

<sup>2</sup> This form is preferred in informal speech and child discourse. It might be claimed that this is a shortened version of *A gente pode comer bolo?* (*a gente* being an informal expression for *we*), but as the latter appears in child language before the complete form, I imagine that the subjectless construction is an impersonal request formula which is later expanded into a more analytical form like *Eu posso?* (can I?), *A gente pode?* (can we?), or *Nós podemos?* (can we?).

The fact that, though an SVO language, Portuguese does not reject a verb-initial construction explains why *subject creating transformations* are not productive in Portuguese while obligatory in English.

6. When the subject is made vacant in the *passive transformation*, if the original object is a sentence, there is an obligatory insertion of *it* in English. Portuguese remains subjectless.

A comissão confirmou que houve vazamento de informação.	(the committee confirmed that there was leakage of information)
Ø Foi confirmado (pela comissão) que houve vazamento de informação.	*Ø was confirmed (by the committee) that there was leakage of information.
It was confirmed (by the committee) that there was leakage of information.	

7. When the subject is made vacant by *extraposition*, English inserts the dummy *it* obligatorily. Portuguese leaves the sentence subjectless.

Convencer Pedro é fácil.	To convince Peter is easy.
Ø É fácil convencer Pedro.	*Ø is easy to convince Peter.
	It is easy to convince Peter.

8. *Subject Raising* is less productive in Portuguese than in English:

Parece que João mentiu.	It seems that John lied.
João parece ter mentido.	John seems to have lied.
É provável que João vença.	It is likely that John will win.
_____	John is likely to win.
Aconteceu que João estava lá.	It happened that John was there.
_____	John happened to be there.

Even a dummy subject in a subordinate clause can undergo raising in English:

Parece que há problemas lá.	It seems that there are problems there.
_____	There seems to be some problems there.

Portuguese, on the other hand, often resorts to topicalization when foregrounding is required:

João, aconteceu que (ele) estava lá.	_____
O João, é possível que (ele) vença.	_____

While subject creating transformations are less productive in Portuguese, transformations that make subject position vacant are productive in Portuguese but not in English.

## 9. Subject downgrading or subject postposing

9.1. Subject downgrading in finite sentences is very productive in Portuguese with presentative, aspectual and psychological verbs and also with verbs of pain. In English, when applied, it is required that the dummy *there* be inserted.

## a) presentative verbs

Minha carteira sumiu.	My wallet disappeared.
Sumiu minha carteira.	_____
Uma rosa apareceu no jardim.	A rose appeared in the garden.
Apareceu uma rosa no jardim.	There appeared a rose in the garden.
Sobrou um ovo. <sup>8</sup>	_____
Há um ovo sobrando.	There is an egg left.

## b) aspectual verbs

A festa começou.	The party began.
Começou a festa.	_____
O barulho continuou.	The noise went on.
Continuou o barulgo.	_____

## c) psychological verbs

Esta cor me agrada.	This color pleases me.
Me agrada esta cor.	_____
Sua opinião não lhe interessa.	Your opinion does not interest him.
Não lhe interessa sua opinião.	_____

## 9.2. verbs that denote pain

A cabeça me dói.	(my head aches)
Me dói a cabeça.	_____
Eu estou com/tenho dor de cabeça.	I have a headache.
Tudo me dói.	(every part in me is in pain)
Me dói tudo.	_____
_____	I ache all over.

The dative case with verbs of pain appears as an oblique complement of the verb in Portuguese whereas in English it appears as subject. The objective case can appear as a subject in normal position or as a downgraded subject in Portuguese, but only as a subject in initial position in English.

<sup>8</sup> Actually *sobrar* behaves more like an existential verb and as such may have the VS order as basic.

9.3. Subject postposing is obligatory in Portuguese in gerundive clauses and disallowed in English.

Os automóveis no Brasil são muito caros, sendo o Landau o menos acessível.	Cars are very expensive in Brazil, the Landau being the least accessible.
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9.4. In complement clauses where the predicate is an adjective, the subject of this adjective can be postposed in Portuguese, but not in English.

As mulheres consideram as brincadeiras dos maridos inocentes.	The wives consider their husbands' jokes innocent.
As mulheres consideram inocentes as brincadeiras dos maridos.	_____

Subject downgrading or postposing has to be distinguished from *permutation of subject and adverbial*, which does not leave the sentence-initial position vacant.

Up came the rabbit.
Down ran the children.

## 10. Subject pronoun deletion

10.1. When the verb is unequivocally marked for person and number the pronoun can be omitted in Portuguese, but not in English.

(Nós) falamos duas línguas.	(we) speak + 1st p. pl two languages
(Tu) gostaste de peça?	(you) like + 2nd p. pl the play?
(Eu) estou com fome.	(I) am hungry

## 10.1. In Portuguese

Questions with the illocutionary force of a request, an offer or an invitation (indirect speech acts) can have the pronoun *você* (the addressee) omitted even if the verb is unmarked.

(Você) quer café?	(you) want coffee?
(Você) precisa de ajuda?	(you) need help?
(Você) não quer entrar?	(you) not want come in?

Pronoun deletion is less applicable when questions are intended as real questions, though sometimes forms like the following, with elliptical subject, can be heard, when the speaker wants to avoid using an address form (*você* or *senhor(a)*).

- |                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| (?) toca violão?     | ( ) play the guitar? = Do you play the guitar? |
| (?) come feijão?     | ( ) eat beans? = Do you eat beans?             |
| (?) está com pressa? | ( ) are in a hurry? = Are you in a hurry?      |

Note: in English subject deletion can occur in questions, in loose pragmatic constructions, normally involving auxiliary deletion as well.

- (Are you) going somewhere?  
— (you) wanna see?

10.2. Anaphoric pronouns can be deleted in Portuguese when the 'precede-command' condition is met. In English the pronoun is retained.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| Pedro pensa que (ele) é honesto.                     | Peter thinks he is honest.                |
| Quando (ele) esteve aqui, Pedro estava descabelado.* | When (he) was here, Peter was dishevelled |

10.3. In short yes-no answers, Portuguese deletes the anaphoric pronouns. In English the pronoun is never deleted.

- |                     |                                |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| — João vem à festa? | — Is John coming to the party? |
| — Vem.              | — Yes, he is.                  |

In order to explain why certain rules are more productive in one language while being constrained to be applied in the other, I have attributed this phenomenon to the 'structure-preserving' nature of transformations (cf. Emmonds (1972)), which states that, except for the root transformations, all transformational rules yield forms that are predictable through phrase structure rules.<sup>5</sup> Postulating a base-rule of the form

$$S \rightarrow (NP) VP$$

any rule that has as its structural change the form VP will be well-formed in Portuguese. Likewise English will have a rule

$$S \rightarrow NP VP$$

which predicts that a rule cannot have as its output a sentence of the form VP in English. Imperatives would constitute an exception to this proposal, but their exceptional character may be due to the fact that they have been treated

\* In the first example *Pedro* precedes the pronoun *ele* and in the second example *Pedro* commands the pronoun as the S node that dominates the latter does not dominate the former.

<sup>5</sup> Structure-preserving transformations are cyclic whereas root transformations can only modify the topmost sentence.

as sentences when they may actually constitute a speech act with no sentence constituenthood. Like exclamations, which encode several types of speech acts, they can be just phrases from the syntactic point of view. Considered as such, imperatives would not constitute an exception in our proposal.

Permutation of subject and adverbial in English and topicalization in Portuguese, which distort the canonic word order SVO, would be root transformations. As such they cannot be applied to subordinate clauses as can be seen in the ill-formed sentences below:

- \*I saw that *up came the rabbit*.  
\*Ele disse que o João, *acontece que estava lá*.  
(he said that John happens that was there)

I have also shown (Kato 1980) that the phrase-structure rule above was not sufficient to account for the problem of subject postposition in Portuguese. In order for subject postposing to be a structure-preserving rule, we would have to say that after postposition the NP becomes the object of the verb, thus meeting the structural description of the phrase-structure rule that expands VP:

$$VP \rightarrow V NP$$

However, though positionally the NP in

Sumiu minha carteira

is an object, its behavior with regard to cliticization is not that of an object. Compare the two constructions:

- |                                    |                  |
|------------------------------------|------------------|
| Comi as uvas. → Comi-as            |                  |
| (I) ate the grapes) ((I) ate-them) |                  |
| Sumiu minha carteira → *Sumiu-a    |                  |
| (disappeared my wallet)            | (disappeared-it) |

Moreover, at least in a formal register, the postposed NP retains one property of subjects, which is to govern agreement, though it might be argued that this property is being lost as many speakers who apply agreement when the NP is preposed do not do so when it is postposed

- As notas de \$5 sumiram.  
(the bills of \$5 disappeared + 3rd p. pl)  
Sumiu as notas de \$ 5.  
(disappeared the bills of \$ 5)

Another possible explanation is to consider subject postposing a root transformation. However, unlike topicalization or adverbial and NP shift,

sentences with postposed NPs can occur in subordinate clauses, which makes postposition a structure-preserving rule.

Eu disse que começaram as aulas

(I said that began classes)

Eu notei que sumiram as notas de \$ 5.

(I noticed that disappeared the bills of \$ 5)

The solution for our problem is to postulate an alternative phrase structure rule for Portuguese so that two canonical positions for subject will be predicted in the base. The expansion rule for sentence will have the following form:

$$S \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} (NP) \text{ VP} \\ V \text{ NP} \end{array} \right\}$$

where both NPs are interpreted as subjects as they are immediately dominated by S. The rule also shows that verb initial constructions are always intransitive.

Base-generated verb-initial constructions would include: existential sentences, weather and time expressions, agentless active constructions, modal constructions and impersonal forms with 'poder'. All cases of subject downgrading would be transformationally derived. Initial subjects would be converted into postposed subjects, a structure-preserving operation guaranteed by the last phrase-structure rule proposed.

We shall now analyse what I initially called "passives without raising". Comparing English and Portuguese, one can say that after agent postposing, Portuguese does not require that the subject be raised to subject sentence initial position.

Portuguese	English
A polícia confirmou a notícia	The police confirmed the news.
Foi confirmada a notícia pela polícia.	*Ø was confirmed the news by the police.
A notícia foi confirmada pela polícia.	The news was confirmed by the police.

However, if the object is plural the verb agrees with it after the passive operation:

Foram confirmadas todas as notícias.

(were confirmed all the news)

Two possible accounts can be given for this fact:

- a) in the absence of a subject agreement is governed by the object.
- b) the original object is actually raised, not to the position of the initial subject, but to post-verbal subject position.

The latter seems a better explanation as sometimes in informal Portuguese we may have constructions where agreement does not operate:

Foi feito consertos no banheiro de baixo.

(was made repairs in the bathroom downstairs)

The last example would be a case of passive without raising and the previous one, with agreement, would have raising to post-verbal position. Raising to sentence initial position would not be obligatory like in English due to the optionality of the initial subject in the phrase structure rule of Portuguese.

The phrase-structure rule proposed for Portuguese states that this language is a partially verb-initial language, a fact that, I believe, is correlated to the optional choice of the NP in the first alternative ( $S \rightarrow (NP) VP$ ). The alternative expansions of S are therefore hypothesized to be typologically linked, a proposal that finds support in the analysis of Hebrew made by Ruth Berman and in our analysis of English, in a contrastive approach with Portuguese, which showed that English has no verb-initial constructions either basic or derived.

Finally, our paper makes a small contribution to theoretical linguistics expanding Emmonds' structure-preserving constraint to predict not only possible movement operations, but also possible deletion sites.<sup>6</sup>

#### REFERENCES

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<sup>6</sup> I do not consider gapping and other forms of coordination ellipsis as syntactic deletion rules. I follow the interpretive view that they are construal rules, not transformational rules.