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A PROBLEM IN TEACHING A FIRST LANGUAGE: TOPICALIZATION IN ORAL PORTUGUESE[1]

One of the problems envolved in learning to write is the interference of oral language structures. Students tend to translate oral structures directly into the written language. Usually, however, the written tradition is more conservative than the oral and many innovations which appear in colloquial language are not accepted in compositions. More often than not everything which is new in written language is considered by teachers as error, and because there are so few studies of colloquial Portuguese, they do not know why the students tend to use some types of sentences instead of others. The importance, then, of the description of oral language structures is evident, since if the teachers do not know the structures of oral language themselves they cannot understand many of the difficulties their students have in the process of learning how to write. To change this status quo, we have to know first the reason why the student uses the structure he does. To accomplish this it is therefore necessary that we observe and describe the structures of oral language. Then, we may proceed and make contrastive studies between oral and written language in order to help the teacher to design a pedagogy for teaching composition.

My purpose in this paper is to call attention to a problem which exists in Portuguese, but which may exist in other languages as well, since the ignorance of oral language structures, or the prejudice against colloquial registers is not a privilege of those working in my country. As a result of ignorance and prejudices, when teachers find in their students' compositions a type of sentence which is not usual in written

language they tend to consider it an error. Sometimes, as it occurs today in Brazilian Portuguese, the structure may be so different from those they are familiar with that they think the student who uses it "does not master the correct thinking patterns".

I want to study, in this paper, a type of sentence which is very common in colloquial Portuguese, even among educated people, but which is not accepted in written language, and when used in compositions, it is considered an error, "bad Portuguese", "without logic", "whithout structure", etc. Teachers do not understand why their students use such structures, and they are completely at a loss when confronted with them. Students do not know either why they "err" and are equally confused. However, when we observe oral language, these structures are completely natural and when we ask educated native speakers about them, they say: "We say this". Some examples, used by the author 'spontaneously' in real situations of speech, are listed in (1).

(1) a) Essa casa   bate muito sol.   "This house is very sunny"
      This house strikes much sun.

   b) A belina cabe muita gente. "Many people fit in this car"
      The car   fits many people.

   c) Essa janela   não   venta   muito. "This window is not
      This window does not blow much wind.   windy"

The reaction of educated people to sentences such as these in written language is that they are not correct, and they must be replaced by the sentences listed in (2).

(2) a) Nessa   casa   bate   muito sol. "This house is very sunny"
      In this house strikes much sun.

   b) Na belina cabe muita gente. "Many people fit in this car"
      In the car   fit   many people.

   c) Nessa   janela   não   venta muito. "This window is not
      In this window does not blow much wind   windy"

When consulted, native speakers think that those sentences in (1) are related to the sentences in (2), which are accepted in written Portuguese. But the fact is that in colloquial Portuguese both constructions are used and their meaning is different. The sentences in (2) are sensed as more neutral, more impersonal than the sentences in (1), where the first NPs are in a topic position. We could analyze the

sentences in (1) as a result of a transformation of topicalization which changes the adverbial into the subject of the sentences and deletes the preposition in the process. Notice that the sentences in (1) have a surface structure like a SVO sentence. Teachers do not accept the sentences in (1) because in written language the verbs *bater* and *caber* do not admit subjects like *casa, carro. Ventar* is subjectless. However, the same phenomenon occurs when we say "João é difícil de entender" 'John is difficult to understand', in which *João* is topicalized and corresponds to "É difícil entender João" 'It is difficult to understand John'. As this topicalized sentence is accepted in written language, teachers do not say they do not "have structure".

It is my intention (in this paper) to discuss these and other similar sentences and to show that it is important to understand their structure if we want to assist Portuguese teachers in their task of helping their students to master the structures of written language.

An explanation for similar English Ss has been proposed by Lakoff (1977) based on the theory of prototypes[2]. He thinks there is a prototypical agent-patient subject S which has a cluster of properties, like:

1) "There is an agent, who does something;
2) There is a patient, who undergoes a change to a new state;
3) The change in the patient results from the action by the agent;
4) The agent's action is volitional;
5) The agent is in control of what he does;
6) The agent is primarily responsible for what happens (his action and the resulting change)".

Lakoff lists fourteen properties, but he declares that "of all the agent properties that typically pair with subjecthood", "primary responsability is the most central".

For him, in the English S (3) below, *car* would be the subject (he calls it a patient subject) because "the properties of the car are more responsible for the way it drives than is anything the agent does" (p. 248).

(3) This car drives easily.

He shows the pairing of subjecthood with primary responsability as a gestalt. When the patient is more responsible by what the verb conveys it becomes subject also.

This explanation via cognitive psychology is very attractive, indeed. If we try to apply it to the Portuguese Ss in (1) we see that the

native speaker feels the first NP as also somehow responsible for what the verb conveys. "Essa casa" (this house) is a well built house, and this is the reason why it receives so much sun. When this S was said, the speaker's intention was to praise a quality of her house. And this is what distinguishes this structure from the other, in (2), in which this responsability is not present. "A belina" (the car) is responsible also by "fitting many people" since it is a spaceful car. At the same time, the window is responsible by not entering too much wind in the the car, since the window in question is a very small one.

However, the similarity between the Ss in (1) and (3) do not go much further. They are different in some points. First, the English S has what Lakoff calls a "patient subject", and corresponds to an active S like (4), with an agent, an active verb and an object:

(4) Someone drives this car easily.

None of Portugueses Ss in (1) corresponds to an active S like in English. We have a Portuguese type of S which corresponds to (3), which is (5), but I am not interested in it now.

(5) Este carro vende bem.

Ss in (1) do not have a "patient subject" like (3) and (5). Another difference is that to the transitive verb in (4) corresponds an intransitive verb in (3) and (5), in which cases there are no objects since the object of (4) became the "patient subject" of (3) and (5).

Consequently, the only real similarity between Ss in (1) and in (3) is the fact that the first NP in the former Ss have the responsibility of what the verb indicates. S (1c) has one more similarity with the S analysed by Lakoff, i.e.,*ventar* "to blow wind" is intransitive. However, there is a peculiarity in *ventar* which does not exist in "sell": *ventar* is a subjectless verb in Portuguese -- it does not have, normally, subjects. However, in (1c), *ventar* shows up with an (apparent) subject: *janela,* "window".

The other Ss, (1a) and (1b), have an apparent SVO structure but the verb *caber* 'to fit' is usually intransitive in Portuguese and *bater* is not usually used as a verb preceded by an agent and followed by an object, either.

We see, then, that these Ss are not "canonical" SVO Ss, as can be also seen from the fact that they do not admit Passive transformation. (6) is ungrammatical:

(6) *Muito sol é batido nessa casa.
    Much sun is striken on this house.
    *Muita gente é cabida nessa belina.
    Many people is taken in this car.

We can conclude then that these Ss are only apparently of the SVO type and at least this is a challenge for an analysis which supposes that the first NP in these Ss is a subject.

Turning to the "responsibility" of the subject, we see that this fact is found in Ss like (7), in contrast with (8).

(7) João parece estar doente. "John seems to be sick"
(8) Parece que João está doente. "It seems that John is sick"

We feel that the difference between (7) and (8) is that (8) is impersonal: we know that *John* is sick by some fact which can be independent of John. In (7) there is something in John which shows that he is sick. There is a relation between *John* and the verb in (7) which is absent in (8).

The same happens with the following examples:

(9) O jaboti dá pra ver (ser visto) de noite.
    "The turtle is possible to be seen at night"
(10) Dá pra ver o jaboti de noite.
    "It is possible to see the turtle at night"

S (9) was said as an answer to an objection made by me to my son, who was searching his pet animal in the dark. He used this sentence to show that, thanks to the color of the animal, he could find it in the dark. If he used (10), the visibility could be due to any other cause. In (9) the responsibility of the animal in its visibility is marked.

Sentences like (7) and (9) have been studied by generative grammarians who analyse them as the result of a transformation of topicalization, in which the subject of the embedded S in (7) and the object of S (9) are raised to topic position in the S.

If we do not follow transformational theory and adopt a surface grammar approach we do not need to analyse these Ss as subject and predicate structures, but simply as another type of S, namely topic-comment structures.In a previous paper, Pontes (1980), I tried to show that in Portuguese we have this type of Ss and, based on Li & Thompson (1976), that they should be analysed as such, and not as transformations of subject-predicate Ss. Chafe (1976) calls attention to the fact that in Chinese and other topic prominent languages, the locative can be the topic and in such cases the preposition is not necessary as it is in English.
In Portuguese things happen as in topic-prominent languages. It is therefore quite normal in oral Portuguese to find a S like (11):

(11) A casa onde mora a Betânia tá todo mundo doente.

"The house where lives Betania everybody is sick".

This construction, as pointed out in my previous paper, is similar to the Chinese Ss with locatives as topics, as described by Li & Thompson (1976). With respect to the Ss in (1) we see that locatives are exactly in topic position. The fact that they are in some way responsible for what follows, shows that responsability is not a property of subjects only, as can be seen in examples (7) and (9), in which the topic is responsible for what the verb conveys.

I propose, then, to analyse Ss as (1) as topic-comment S, not as SP sentences for the reasons presented. As I have shown, this analyses accounts for the fact these sentences do not behave like other SVO sentences.

Besides, the subjects responsibility (Lakoff's) explanation is not sufficient for explaining other Ss in Portuguese, which have the same structure of Ss (1), but in which we cannot see any "responsibility" of the subject:

(12) a) Esse rádio estragou o ponteiro. "This radio has damaged its hand"
b) O jasmin amarelou as pontas. "The jasmin tree has made its points yellow
c) Meu carro furou o pneu. "My car blew its tire"
d) Carlos cresceu o nariz. "Carl has grown his nose"

These Ss, like (1) Ss, have the apparent SVO structure, but they do not undergo passive T either. There is no semantic relation between the apparent "subject" and the verb, since although the verbs are active, the apparent subjects could not perfom the actions expressed by them. These Ss correspond to Ss like those in (13):

(13) a) O ponteiro do rádio estragou. "The radio's hand was damaged"
b) As pontas do jasmin amarelaram. "The jasmin's points became yellowish"
c) O pneu do carro furou. "The car's tire blew up"
d) O nariz do Carlos cresceu. "Carl's nose grew"

Ss in (13) have a subject formed by a NP with a partitive followed by an intransitive verb. As we can see from (12) it is the partitive which is in topic position. Partitives in topic position are very common in topic prominent language, as described by Li & Thompson (1976) and Roberta Barry (1975). Another important characteristic which deserves to be mentioned is that the subject of the intransitive verb in (12) appears in topic sentences in a postposed position, looking

like an object (See *o ponteiro*, in (12a), *as pontas*, in (12b),*o pneu* in (12c) and o *nariz* in (12d)). This fact is similar to the one reported by Givón (1979), that in some languages, including Romance, "topic-shifting of objects also results in a variant VS order in the rest of the clause, as against the neutral (and more innovative) pattern of SV" (p. 82).

We see, then, that these Ss are only apparently SVO. It is mainly the surface order of elements which makes us think of them as SVO. In Portuguese there is one more argument, however,which could favour the interpretation of the first NP as subject: it is the question of agreement. In Portuguese, the verb agrees with the subject of the sentence. Agreement could be a factor for decision, if we could show that the verb in (12) agreed with the second NP, which corresponds to the postposed subject. This could be a "proof" that the first NP is definitely not the subject. Unfortunately, in contemporary Portuguese, agreement is disappearing, and one case in which the absence of agreement is most noticed, is when the subject is postposed.

One should not take the fact that it is possible for the verbs in (12) to agree with the first NP to be a "proof" that the first NP is the subject, since the agreement rule in Portuguese could be formulated as being simply between the first NP and the verb. Anyway, agreement is a very weak argument, since this rule tends not to be applied, in some cases, and as far as topics are concerned there is an oscilation, which has been for long registered in traditional grammars. These teach us that both forms are correct in the following case (a classical example of topicalization):

(14) As flores{parece que murcharam. "The flowers seem to
{parecem   have faded"

The only example I have of colloquial Portuguese in which the verb agrees with the postposed subject is (15), but the speaker was in doubt, when she uttered the S:

(15) Esta casa, floriram as bougainvilles antes do tempo.
This house, flourished the bougainvilles before time.

It is important to notice the intonational break after the topic in (15). The Ss I am studying in this paper do not have this intonational break, which is a characteristic of many topic-comment Ss I studied in my previous 1980 paper. This break is optional in TC Ss, but when it is present, it marks the S as a TC S. As the problem of agreement was also examined in my previous paper, I want now to speculate why the speaker uses the structures in (12) instead of structures in (13). What we see in all of the Ss in (12) is that the speaker chooses to put in topic

position what corresponds in meaning to the totality of an object instead of its part . For example, instead of "o ponteiro desse rádio estragou" he says "Esse rádio estragou o ponteiro". This means that in every case, the whole is mentioned first and then its part. Returning now to Lakoff's article, in which he makes an attempt to explain English Ss via Gestalt psychology, I see in these Ss (12) a typical "gestalt" procedure in which the whole is enunciated first and then a comment about some part of this follows.

If the gestalt explanation for these Ss is adequate, we have the same formal structure — in this case topic-comment — which may be explained via cognitive psychology — specifically via gestalt — as responsibility of the first NP, or as the whole coming first.

Another possible explanation for these Ss is via the function-nalism theory. Firbaš (1971) states that in our languages old information comes first and new information at the end of the S. It is amazing to note how this is the case in everyone of these Ss, in (1) and (12). Compare Ss in (1) with Ss in (2), and Ss in (12) with Ss in (13). We can see that one of the differences between each pair of Ss is that, in TC Ss, old information comes first, new information comes in the end.

These Ss were said in real situations. In each S the first NP, the topic, refers to some object or person which is obvious, given the pragmatic context, and which in many cases is being pointed at, which results in a structure with a demonstrative pronoun.

I am considering as old information in these Ss, that which is given by the pragmatic context and which constitutes the topic, in (1) and (12). The new information comes with the second NP, in every topic sentence (see Ellen Prince (1981) for a similar point of view on topicalization in English).

Take, for example (12a) 'Esse rádio estragou o ponteiro' — this S was said in a room, pointing to the radio, which was in the context. The new information comes in the end of the S: that the radio's hand has been damaged. The same thing happens with the other Ss in (1) and (12).

Anyway, I think that if one wants to accept Lakoff's explanation on the basis of Gestalt psychology it is not necessary to analyse these Ss as SP. To analyse Ss in (1) as having subjects only because their first NPs show some responsibility for what the verb conveys is to try to "save" the subject at any price. Lakoff lists fourteen properties of the subject. It seems to me too much effort to characterize a NP as subject only on the basis of one of these characteristics. Why shouldn't we look at these NPs as something else other than subjects? I suspect that linguists, specially generative linguists, have been too much anglocentric or at least europo-centric. We have inherited from greek-grammar, via latin-grammar, the categories subject and predicate and we do not want

to see other structures, like topic-comment, which are common in eastern languages, as possibly existing in our own languages. Furthermore, the studies on oral, colloquial registers are rare. In oral Portuguese I have shown that topic-comment Ss are very frequent and I am gathering data which show that these Ss are very frequent in written language also, and are more frequent indeed in earlier writers. Portuguese grammarians from earlier centuries list these structures as "figuras de linguagem", i.e., as expressive resources of language. I do not know why recent Portuguese grammars do not accept them, since they are very much used in advertising and even by the most respected writers. Carlos Drummond recently wrote:

(16) "A cidade dá pra sentir o riso dos adultos. . ."(EM,20/06/81).
The town is possible to feel the adult's laughter.

Portuguese teachers, unfortunately, do not follow the use of good writers, but the prescription of grammarians. When we show them that even the best writers use these structures in their writings, they answer that "the writer knows how to use them, in order to attain a certain effect, but the students do not know this". This attitude is based on the prejudice that the native speaker does not know how to use his language in order to communicate the most subtle "nuances" of meaning. This misbelief is beeing disconfirmed by everyone who studies oral language in real situations. The communicative competence of native speaker is amazing. In the analysis of the Ss studied in this paper, what I have discovered is exactly this: that the different structures (1) and (2) are used by native speaker with different goals. If the native speaker uses them knowing what he wants to communicate in oral language, why wouldn't he know how to use them in writing?

We can compare the S used by Drummond with the S used by my son (12 years old) in an oral language situation (S (9)) and see if there is any difference in expressive power. I think it is obvious that there is no difference, but it is difficult to convince Portuguese grammarians and teachers of this fact. It is a double prejudice: on the one hand the assumption that people do not know their language; on the other hand the assumption that the good writer is conscious all the time of what he uses. It is difficult to convince teachers that oral language is the "fountain" from where good writers "drink" their sentences. The more we study the structures of oral languages and their use in real situations the more we see how the native speaker is highly sophisticated in the use of his language. We see that the stylistic sophistication of good writings is present in every dialogue of anonymous people.

The non-acceptance by teachers of these structures in students' composition, is, for me, an impoverishment of the student's power of

expressions. Since SP structures and TC are not variants, but convey different meanings, the student becomes restricted to one of them while writing.

Ruth Brend (1981) says in her abstract that teachers correct individual Ss in the compositions of their students without taking much into account the immediate and remote contexts (linguistic and pragmatic) of those Ss. She affirms that "the corrections do not allow the students to say *what they wish to say*" (1981, 3). Her purpose is to show that "the native speakers of a language are usually well-versed in the presentation of themes, emphasis, phoci, etc." (id)

The main problem in teaching composition in Portuguese is not the students, but the grammatical tradition in my country, which is much too conservative and prescriptive. The prejudices are too strong and generalized and do not allow the native speaker to use his linguistic creativity and ability in the written language as he so fluently does in oral language. The students are taught from early school days that he does not know his language, that what he uses in oral language is wrong, and that he needs to learn at school how to substitute the oral structures for the accepted structures of the written language postulated by grammarians. The task is similar to learning another language. Nobody knows how to write, in the end. Gomes de Matos (1981) for example has reported the prejudices the students from Recife have in relation to their language. But I think this attitude is not peculiar of students of this region. The native speaker in general, in Brazil, even if he is a professor at a University, does not think he knows his language and does not have confidence in what he writes. The belief that Portuguese language is so difficult that nobody knows how to write it is pervasive in our society. The teachers reinforce this misbelief, each time they refuse a sentence because some grammarians for unknown reasons says that this S is not good.

These attitudes make the task of studying written Portuguese, a difficult one and they are a constant source of prejudice against low-class students, contributing in this way to maintain the "knowledge" among a few privileged as has always happened in a country where only a small number of people have the chance to study.

One of the main tasks, or perhaps the main one, of Applied Linguistics in Brazil is to fight against these prejudices, by describing the spoken language, and showing how rich it is, how people know their language and use it appropriately, and that many of these structures (as it happens with the ones I study in this paper) are completely normal and accepted in languages which have long writing tradition. Chinese and Portuguese are among these languages.

NOTES

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