Subject Bare Singulars in Brazilian Portuguese and Information Structure

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Introduction: Recent literature on bare singulars [BS's] in Brazilian Portuguese, sparkling from Schmitt & Munn (1999), has grown quite rapidly, specially in virtue of the asymmetry BS’s show between subjects and objects. The actual picture is quite complicated (e.g., with respect to sentences with kind predicates: see Muller 2002, 2004 versus Oliveira & Rothstein 2011, Oliveira 2012); but the basic facts are: object BS’s are generally allowed in both generic and episodic sentences, whereas subject BS’s are generally restricted to generic sentences. Now, as Schmitt & Munn (1999, 2002) observed from the start, subject BS’s distribution seems to be related to the information structure [IS] of the BS, and subsequent literature followed this by adding new claims about this relation (cf. Muller 2002, 2004; Oliveira & Mariano 2011, Mariano 2012, 2013). Our aim in this paper is to assess these claims and the concomitant explanations, trying to obtain a clearer picture of facts and issues.

Claims about the relation between BS’s and IS: The first relevant claim, made by Schmitt & Munn (1999, 2002), is that episodic sentences with BS’s become acceptable if they occur with a “list reading”, such as (1a), or with a focus particle such as só “only”:

\[
(1) \begin{align*}
  a) & \quad \text{Mulher discutiu as eleições, homem discutiu futebol…} \\
  & \quad \text{Woman discussed the elections, man discussed soccer…}
  \\
  b) & \quad \text{Só mulher discutiu as eleições.} \\
  & \quad \text{Only woman discussed the elections.}
\end{align*}
\]

Now, “only” is a focus particle, and contexts like (1a) are characteristic of contrastive topics (see Buring 2003). So, Schmitt & Munn are suggesting subject BS’s in episodic sentences are felicitous by being either foci or contrastive topics; but they offer no explanation for this (see Schmitt & Munn 2002). Taking a kind of complementary view, Muller (2002, 2004) suggests that subject BS’s are allowed in generic sentences because they are topics in such sentences. More precisely, they would not be DP arguments of the verb, but a sort of left-dislocation structure: they would be a predicate NP in A-bar position restricting a generic operator, which would also bind a subject pro. For her, subject BS’s in episodic sentences would be infelicitous precisely because semantically incompatible with such a topic structure.

Finally, Pires & Mariano (2011), Mariano (2012, 2013) and Pires (2012) go back to Schmitt & Munn’s observations, extending them a bit. Pires & Mariano claim that it is “prosodic prominence” that makes subject BS’s felicitous in episodic sentences. (Mariano’s experimental results on prosodic prominence in subject BS’s do not seem to confirm this, however; we will discuss this.) In the examples Pires & Mariano give, this seems to include – besides the cases in (1a,b) –cases of narrow and/or contrastive focus, too. Their analysis is based on Pires & Rothstein’s proposal that BS’s denote kinds, and Buring (1996)’s treatment of weak indefinites: the idea is that “prosodic prominence” evokes a set of alternatives, and this implicates the existence of a witness set for the kind denoted by the BS.

More recently, Mariano (2012) and Pires (2012) suggest a more “pragmatic” approach: “if a kind context is created, then one may utter [an episodic sentence] felicitously. This happens when the speaker wants to convey that what she is reporting is something extraordinary, something that can count for the kind, where the individual that performed the event is taken to bethe representative of the kind. (…) Prosodic prominence and lists are ways of foregrounding the kind interpretation” (Pires 2012, p.509).

3. Discussion: We will make an initial assessment of claims and observations on the basis of informal judgments and preliminary experimental results. According to this initial evidence, subject BS’s do not need to be “topics” in generic sentences; they can actually be foci:

\[
(2) \quad A: \quad \text{Que tipo de pessoa reclama sem motivo?}
\]
What sort of person complains for no reason?

B: POLÍTICO (tá sempre reclamando “de barriga cheia”).

POLITICIAN (is always complaining “with full belly”).

This indicates that subject BS’s in generic sentences are not informationally restricted, which goes against Muller’s approach. But our initial evidence does confirm Schmitt & Munn’s observations as well as Oliveira & Mariano’s: subject BS’s are restricted and, moreover, the restriction is lessened under focus by “only”, contrastive focus and “list readings”.

As we mentioned above, if this picture is correct, at least two alternatives of analysis are conceivable – as suggested in the work of Oliveira & Mariano: (a) one based on the idea that the relevant information structures are those that evoke a contextual set of alternatives for the BS’s; (b) another, more pragmatic one, based on the idea that “prosodic prominence” points to contexts where the BS is interpreted as (a witness of) a kind. In trying to distinguish these two approaches, we will discuss a number of cases, including (3) and (4) below.

(3) A: Quem falou de futebol na festa ontem?
Who spoke of soccer in-the party yesterday?

B: ?? MULHER (falou de futebol na festa ontem).
WOMAN (spoke of soccer in—the party yesterday).

MULHERES (falaram de futebol na festa ontem)
WOMEN (spoke of soccer in—the party yesterday).

C: Nada! (Foi) HOMEM (que) falou de futebol ontem.
No! (It was) MAN (that) spoke of soccer yesterday.

(4) A: O que aconteceu na festa? Por que você ficou tão surpreso?
What happened in-the party? Why you got so surprised?

B: (?) (Porque) [mulher ‘tava falando de futebol lá].
(Because) [woman was speaking of soccer there].

(Porque) [tinha mulher falando de futebol lá].
(Because) [there was woman talking of soccer there].

(3) verifies whether subject BS’s in episodic sentences are felicitous with informational focus – which is expected if “evoking a set of alternatives” is relevant. And (4) verifies whether “evoking a kind interpretation” is relevant despite the BS’s lack of “prosodic prominence”.

4. Conclusion: At present, it seems that the evidence favors the pragmatic approach: informational focus does not seem to improve acceptability of BS’s as subjects of episodic sentences considerably, cf. (3B) (and Figueiredo Silva, Nascimento & Araújo 2012); and a context that evokes kind interpretation seems to do, even if the BS is not “prosodically prominent” (e.g., not a contrastive focus or topic, cf. (4B)). We discuss some caveats in the evidence (including the experimental one obtained by ourselves and by Mariano 2012, 2013), and explore some theoretical consequences of this conclusion – in particular, concerning the interpretation of kind denoting noun phrases and individual predicates in episodic sentences.