

**PARADIGMATIC CHANGES IN THE PRONOMINAL SYSTEM: A
SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE THIRD PERSON PLURAL IN CAXIAS**

**MUDANÇAS PARADIGMÁTICAS NO SISTEMA PRONOMINAL: UMA ANÁLISE
SOCIOLINGÜÍSTICA DA TERCEIRA PESSOA DO PLURAL EM CAXIAS**

**CAMBIOS PARADIGMÁTICOS EN EL SISTEMA PRONOMINAL: UN ANÁLISIS
SOCIOLINGÜÍSTICO DE LA TERCERA PERSONA DEL PLURAL EN CAXIAS**

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ABSTRACT

The completion of the pronominal subject is a recurring phenomenon in Brazilian Portuguese (BP), especially in structures that employ the third-person plural. The alternation between the completed subject (they/them/the personal) and the null subject ($\emptyset$) constitutes a syntactic variable that has attracted the attention of several language scholars due to reflective processes of change and variation in BP grammar. This article, based on Variationist Sociolinguistics, investigates the completion of the pronominal subject in the third-person plural in the speech of the Caxias community, located in the interior of Maranhão. The main objective is to describe the linguistic and social factors that condition the realization of the completed forms (they/them/the personal) as opposed to the null subject ($\emptyset$). To this end, interviews with 72 informants, stratified by sex, age group, and education, were tested based on the parameters of Variation Theory. Quantitative data analysis was performed using the GoldVarb X program. The results demonstrate that the subject's completion occurs with a frequency of 61.2%, favored primarily by the presence of elements between subject and verb, gerund verb tense, disyllabic verbs, interrogative sentences, and a higher level of elementary education. The study reinforces the hypothesis of an ongoing change in Brazilian Portuguese, in which the third-person plural tends to be completed.

Keywords: Variationist Sociolinguistics. Pronominal Subject. Linguistic Variation. Brazilian Portuguese.

RESUMO

O preenchimento do sujeito pronominal é um fenômeno recorrente no português brasileiro (PB), especialmente nas estruturas em que se emprega a terceira pessoa do plural. A alternância entre o sujeito preenchido (eles/elas/o pessoal) e o sujeito nulo ($\emptyset$) constitui uma

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variável sintática que tem atraído a atenção de diversos estudiosos da linguagem por refletir processos de mudança e variação na gramática do PB. Este artigo, fundamentado na Sociolinguística Variacionista, investiga o preenchimento do sujeito pronominal na terceira pessoa do plural na fala da comunidade caxiense, localizada no interior do Maranhão. O objetivo principal é descrever os fatores linguísticos e sociais que condicionam a realização das formas preenchidas (eles/elas/o pessoal) em oposição ao sujeito nulo (Ø). Para tanto, foram analisadas entrevistas de 72 informantes, estratificados por sexo, faixa etária e escolaridade, com base nos parâmetros da Teoria da Variação. A análise quantitativa dos dados foi realizada por meio do programa GoldVarb X. Os resultados demonstram que o preenchimento do sujeito ocorre com frequência de 61,2%, sendo favorecido, sobretudo, pela presença de elementos entre sujeito e verbo, tempo verbal no gerúndio, verbos dissílabos, sentenças interrogativas e nível de escolaridade fundamental maior. O estudo reforça a hipótese de mudança em curso no português brasileiro, no qual a terceira pessoa do plural tende ao preenchimento.

Palavras-chave: Sociolinguística Variacionista. Sujeito Pronominal. Variação Linguística. Português Brasileiro.

RESUMEN

El llenado del sujeto pronominal es un fenómeno recurrente en el portugués brasileño (PB), especialmente en las estructuras en las que se emplea la tercera persona del plural. La alternancia entre el sujeto explícito (ellos/ellas/el personal) y el sujeto nulo (Ø) constituye una variable sintáctica que ha atraído la atención de diversos estudiosos del lenguaje por reflejar procesos de cambio y variación en la gramática del PB. Este artículo, basado en la Sociolingüística Variacionista, investiga el llenado del sujeto pronominal en la tercera persona del plural en el habla de la comunidad de Caxias, ubicada en el interior de Maranhão. El objetivo principal es describir los factores lingüísticos y sociales que condicionan la realización de las formas explícitas (ellos/ellas/el personal) en oposición al sujeto nulo (Ø). Para ello, se analizaron entrevistas a 72 informantes, estratificados por sexo, grupo etario y nivel educativo, tomando como base los parámetros de la Teoría de la Variación. El análisis cuantitativo de los datos se realizó mediante el programa GoldVarb X. Los resultados demuestran que el uso explícito del sujeto ocurre con una frecuencia del 61,2%, siendo favorecido principalmente por la presencia de elementos entre el sujeto y el verbo, el tiempo verbal en gerundio, verbos bisílabos, oraciones interrogativas y un nivel de educación primaria más alto. El estudio refuerza la hipótesis de un cambio en curso en el portugués brasileño, en el cual la tercera persona del plural tiende a aparecer explícita.

Palabras clave: Sociolingüística Variacionista. Pronombre Sujeto. Variación Lingüística. Portugués Brasileño.

1 INTRODUCTION

Language, as a social phenomenon, is characterized by its dynamic nature, subject to variations that reflect the heterogeneity of speech communities. In this context, Variationist Sociolinguistics offers a theoretical and methodological framework to understand the processes of linguistic variation and change in natural languages.

This study focuses on filling in the pronominal subject in the third person plural in the speech of the urban community of Caxias (MA), observing the forms *they/them* and *the personal*, in contrast to the null subject.

Lucchesi (2009) starts from an empirical and variationist perspective, centered on the observation of the natural speech of Afro-Brazilian communities that preserve historical linguistic traits. This methodological choice is fundamental because it allows us to analyze the phenomenon of the pronominal subject in contexts marked by African influence and irregular linguistic transmission, factors that may have played a relevant role in the configuration of popular Portuguese. Thus, the author seeks to understand how the use or erasure of the subject pronoun manifests itself in varieties with a strong Afro-descendant sociocultural heritage.

The author also shows that the erasure of the subject does not occur randomly, but is conditioned by linguistic factors. When the referent has already been mentioned or is easily retrievable in the discourse, the omission of the pronoun becomes more likely. This observation reinforces the principle of linguistic economy and demonstrates that pragmatic and syntactic rules interact in the structure of Afro-Brazilian Portuguese, bringing it closer to other null subject languages and highlighting the internal and systematic functioning of these varieties.

Based on the hypothesis that Brazilian Portuguese has been going through a process of change from a language of null subject to a language of full subject (Duarte, 1993; Mollica, 2007), this research seeks to answer the following questions: (i) is there a greater frequency of filling in the subject in the third person plural? and (ii) what linguistic and social factors contribute to this achievement?

Based on data from interviews with 72 informants, stratified according to sex, age group and education, and statistically analyzed through the *GoldVarb X program*, this article aims to contribute to the understanding of the conditioning factors that govern the use of the completed subject and, consequently, to the consolidation of the hypothesis of an ongoing change in Brazilian Portuguese.

2 VARIATIONIST SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Variationist Sociolinguistics, developed by William Labov (2008), is based on the principle that linguistic variation is systematic and conditioned by factors internal and external to the language. Language is understood as a social phenomenon, whose variable forms reveal regular patterns when statistically analyzed. Labov proposes that languages vary because they are constantly changing, and this change is motivated by the role of speakers in specific social contexts.

Linguistic heterogeneity is therefore an inherent characteristic of linguistic systems. According to Mollica (2003), variation and change must be understood within a set of multiple, simultaneous and predictable conditionings. For Santos (2008), the existence of more than one way to express the same content does not compromise the functionality of the language, but reinforces its flexibility in the face of the communicative demands of society.

This approach breaks with the traditional view of structuralist linguistics, especially that proposed by Saussure (2006), which treated language as a homogeneous and stable system. Labov, on the contrary, argues that heterogeneity is not noise, but a constitutive part of the linguistic system – and more: that it is precisely variation that sustains linguistic change.

In the Brazilian context, scholars such as Bortoni-Ricardo (2004), Tarallo (1997), Lucchesi *et al.* (2012) and Scherre (2005) were fundamental to adapt and consolidate the assumptions of Variationist Sociolinguistics to the linguistic realities of the country. Bortoni-Ricardo (2004), for example, highlights the importance of considering the social and historical contexts of speech communities, understanding language as a social practice permeated by identities, power relations and social mobility.

Scherre and Naro (1991), in their studies on verbal agreement, demonstrated how linguistic and social factors — such as class, education and age group — influence the realization or omission of morphosyntactic traits in Brazilian speech, which evidences the regularity of variation and contributes to the elaboration of probabilistic rules.

In addition, the statistical methodology adopted by Variationist Sociolinguistics — through programs such as *GoldVarb X* — allows quantifying and interpreting the influence of conditioners on the choice between variants. This approach enables the researcher to identify patterns of use, relationships between competing forms and, above all, to map signs of linguistic changes in progress.

Finally, Variationist Sociolinguistics is also intertwined with other dimensions, such as linguistic attitudes, the social prestige attributed to certain variants, and the perception of the

"error" or the "norm". Thus, the need to understand variation not only as a descriptive phenomenon, but as an expression of social identities, discourses about language, and symbolic disputes around linguistic legitimacy is reaffirmed.

3 FILLING IN THE SUBJECT IN BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE

From the variationist perspective, several studies have pointed to an ongoing process of change in Brazilian Portuguese (BP), which progressively distances it from European Portuguese (EP), especially with regard to the completion of the pronominal subject. According to Duarte (1993, 1995), BP, traditionally classified as a null subject language (*pro-drop*), has been assuming characteristics of a full subject language, with increasing use of explicit pronouns even when the context already offers sufficient clues for their omission.

This change has been attributed to the loss of strength of the verbal inflectional paradigm in BP, which makes the subject less recoverable only by verbal endings. Studies such as those by Galves (1987), Kato (1993, 1994), Nunes de Souza *et al.* (2010) and Lucchesi (2009) reinforce this hypothesis, observing a higher frequency in the use of completed subjects in oral and written productions.

Lucchesi (2009) starts from the notion of "null subject parameter" (*pro-drop*) within the theory of generative grammar (i.e.: in some languages the pronominal subject may not appear if it is retrievable by the verb or context). He applies this notion to the Afro-Brazilian rural varieties (communities in Bahia: Helvécia, Cinza, Barra/Bananal) to see to what extent the subject can or cannot appear ("be realized") or remain erased ("zero subject") in these speeches. One of the relevant findings: of the 4,599 occurrences of pronominal subject in these communities, in 1,255 of them the subject was erased, which corresponds to about 27% of null subject realization.

According to the researcher, the level of null subject in these communities is not so far from what is found in cultured urban varieties of Brazilian Portuguese, which contradicts initially more extreme expectations for these Afro-Brazilian-speaking communities. He points out factors that favor the null subject in this variety: for example, when there is a co-reference with an antecedent or when the verb has an inflectional ending capable of recovering the subject. Also the discursive context (for example: if the subject was already "implicit" in the previous sentence) favors the cancellation of the subject pronoun. In addition, the author distinguishes two types of "fitting": linguistic (i.e., factors internal to grammar and speech)

and social (social variables such as age group, education, stay outside the community) to explain variation in the realization of the pronominal subject.

This phenomenon is also often related to processes of syntactic and pragmatic restructuring of the language, influenced by internal factors (such as the erosion of inflectional marks) and external factors (such as the pressure of the cultured norm and the school). Kato (1999), for example, points out that the increase in the use of personal pronouns is linked to the need for greater communicative clarity, especially in contexts where there is greater referential ambiguity. Galves and Farinheira (2000) indicate that the tendency to fill in the subject is more pronounced in urban varieties of Brazilian Portuguese, especially among speakers with less formal schooling.

In addition, authors such as Lopes and Cyrino (2005) point out that the change underway in BP does not occur homogeneously in all varieties of Portuguese spoken in Brazil. In some communities, especially in the North and Northeast regions, there is a more accentuated coexistence between null and fulfilled subjects, which highlights the complexity and diversity of the process of change.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, the variation in the use of the pronominal subject also reflects patterns of prestige and linguistic stigmatization. As observed by Duarte (2004), the use of the filled subject, even when grammatically unnecessary, tends to be associated with a more "correct" speech on the part of speakers, especially in the school environment. This shows that the phenomenon cannot be understood only at the grammatical level, but also at the level of representations and linguistic attitudes.

In summary, the completion of the subject in Brazilian Portuguese reveals an ongoing syntactic change that dialogues with morphosyntactic, pragmatic and sociocultural factors. Such a change not only brings BP closer to non-pro-drop languages, such as English and French, but also points to the reconfiguration of the relations between orality and cultured norm in the Brazilian scenario.

4 METHODOLOGY

The research was developed based on the theoretical-methodological assumptions of Variationist Sociolinguistics (Labov, 2008), prioritizing the observation of the language in use in real contexts of interaction. The corpus consists of 72 interviews conducted with speakers from the urban area of Caxias, Maranhão, participants in the project "Linguistic Attitudes of

Speakers of Maranhão" (ALFMA), under the coordination of Prof. Dr. Antônio Luiz Alencar Miranda.

The informants were stratified according to three social variables: sex (male and female), age group (18–30, 31–49, 50 years or older), and education (lower elementary, higher elementary, high school, and higher education). The sampling followed the triple cross model (2 x 3 x 4), resulting in 24 combinatorial profiles, with three individuals per profile, totaling 72 participants.

The interviews, of a semi-structured nature, addressed various topics and were conducted spontaneously, with an average duration of one hour. The data were transcribed and organized according to the "envelope of variation" method, including:

- **Dependent variable:** filling in the subject in the 3rd person plural (they/them ~ the personal ~ Ø).
- **Linguistic independent variables:** subject-verb proximity, verb tense, number of verb syllables, sentence type.
- **Independent social variables:** age group, education and gender.

The quantitative analysis was carried out with the aid of the *GoldVarb X program*, which calculates the relative weights of the variables to determine the conditioning factors for the application of the variant. The data were coded according to the criteria established for statistical processing, in order to identify patterns and trends in the realization of the pronominal subject in the investigated community.

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study revealed that filling in the subject in the third person plural is the predominant form in Caxias speech, with a frequency of 61.2% of the occurrences, compared to 38.8% of null subjects. These data reinforce the hypothesis of an ongoing change in Brazilian Portuguese, as proposed by Duarte (1993), suggesting a tendency towards the increasing use of explicit pronominal subjects.

Table 1

Frequency of completion of the subject they, they and the staff

Pronoun	Application	Total Occurrences	Frequency
Filled	563	920	61,2%
Not Filled	357	920	38,8%

Source: The authors.

The statistical analysis of the data, conducted using the *GoldVarb X program*, identified five variables as significant for the choice of the subject filled in the third person plural: the presence of an element between subject and verb, the verb tense, the number of syllables of the verb, the type of sentence and the speaker's education. Next, these variables are discussed in the light of the foundations of Variationist Sociolinguistics.

Regarding the subject-verb proximity variable, completion was favored when there was an element between the subject and the verb, with a relative weight of .63. This data indicates that the syntactic distance between the constituents contributes to the explanation of the subject, possibly by facilitating the processing of information by the listener.

The insertion of elements between the subject and the verb, such as adverbial adjuncts or objects, was one of the conditions that most favored the use of the completed subject. This finding is in line with the principles of economics and information processing. According to Givón (1983), when there is a distance between the central constituents of the sentence, the filling of the subject becomes a strategy to maintain referential cohesion and avoid ambiguity. On the syntactic-discursive level, it is a resource that favors the anchoring of the referent in the flow of speech, ensuring its cognitive salience (Duarte, 1995).

Table 2

Filling in the subject in the 3rd person plural and Proximity of the subject to the verb

Proximity of the subject to the verb	Application	Total Occurrences	%	Relative Weight
Subject linked to the verb	404	705	57,3	.45
Element between the subject and the verb	159	215	74	.63
Total	563	919		Input. 629

Source: The authors.

In the variable verb tense, the use of the filled subject was more frequent with verbs in the gerund with .82 of relative weight and in the infinitive .67, followed by the present .54 of

relative weight. This result suggests that more marked verb forms favor completion, reinforcing the search for communicative clarity.

Table 3

The completion of the subject in the 3rd person plural and the verb tense

Verb Tense	Application	Total Occurrences	%	Relative Weight
Past	158	287	55,1	.38
Present	376	594	63,3	.54
Future	15	23	65,2	.49
Infinitive	5	6	83,3	.67
Gerund	9	10	90,0	.82
Total	563	920		Input. 629

Source: The authors.

Verbs in the gerund and infinitive showed higher rates of pronominal completion. These verb forms, due to their non-finitive form, carry less inflectional load and, therefore, make it difficult to clearly identify the subject through verbal morphology. This data reinforces the hypothesis that the loss of inflectional marks in BP has a direct impact on the subject's recovery (Galves & Farinheira, 2000; Kato, 1999). In finite tenses, such as the present and the past tense, a certain recovery is still observed through verbal ending, but the use of the pronoun is maintained as a form of referential reinforcement.

Regarding the variable number of verb syllables, disyllabic verbs had the highest .65 completion rate of relative weight, followed by .55 polysyllables. This data contradicts the expectation that longer verbs would require more explicit subjects, pointing to a complex interplay between prosody and syntax.

Table 4

The completion of the subject in the 3rd person plural and the number of syllables of the verb

Number of Verb Syllables	Application	Total Occurrences	%	Relative Weight
Monosyllable	146	297	49,2	.32
Disyllabic	225	295	76,3	.65
Trisyllable	118	210	56,2	.49
Polysyllabic	74	118	62,7	.55
Total	563	920		Input .629

Source: The authors.

Completion was favored by disyllabic verbs and, to a lesser extent, by polysyllabic verbs. This variable may be associated with prosodic and rhythmic speech issues. The results found in this research reinforce the observations of Scherre and Naro (1991) by showing that

prosodic and rhythmic aspects play a relevant role in the organization of speech and, consequently, in the choice between variants. The tendency to fill the subject in shorter verbs indicates that the speaker seeks to maintain a balanced and natural cadence in enunciation, which confirms the hypothesis that linguistic variation is not limited to morphosyntactic conditioning, but also reflects phonological principles of economy and rhythm. Thus, the data presented here contribute to the broadening of the discussion proposed by the authors, demonstrating that the prosodic pattern can influence not only verbal and nominal agreement phenomena, but also the realization of the pronominal subject in Brazilian Portuguese.

In the variable type of sentences, the interrogative sentences favored the completion of the subject with .76 of relative weight, suggesting that the intonation and the interrogative structure intensify the need for explicitness. Declarative sentences had .49, while exclamatory sentences were not statistically significant.

Table 5

The completion of the subject in the 3rd person plural and the type of sentence

Type of sentence	Application	Total Occurrences	%	Relative Weight
Declarative	547	900	60,8	.49
Interrogative	16	19	84,2	.76
Total	563	919		<i>Input. 629</i>

Source: The authors.

Interrogative sentences showed a strong tendency to complete. The marked intonation of the questions, combined with the expectation of an answer and the need for clarity, contributes to the subject's explicitness. According to Bortoni-Ricardo (2004), in situations of greater interaction or informational demand, speakers tend to use more explicit forms to ensure communicative effectiveness. In addition, the interrogative structure, by breaking with the canonical subject-verb-object (SVO) order, favors syntactic highlighting strategies.

Finally, the most relevant social variable was schooling. Informants with elementary education had a higher frequency of completion of the subject .61 of relative weight, followed by those with high school education of .52). Participants with higher education, on the other hand, had a lower relative weight of .44, a result that is in line with the findings of previous studies (Duarte, 1993; 2004; Naro and Scherre, 1991), in which more educated speakers tend to employ fewer explicit subjects, possibly due to the influence of the cultured norm and greater linguistic vigilance.

Table 6

Filling in the subject in the 3rd person plural and schooling

Schooling	Application	Total Occurrences	%	Relative Weight
Ens. Fund. Minor	140	245	57,1	.45
Ens. Fund. Bigger	124	175	70,9	.61
Middle school	156	252	61,9	.52
Higher education	143	248	57,7	.44
Total	563	920		<i>Input. 629</i>

Source: The authors.

Among the social variables, schooling was especially relevant. The data revealed that speakers with higher elementary education had the highest rates of pronominal completion. This result can be interpreted from two complementary perspectives: on the one hand, it suggests an approximation of these speakers to the urban oral pattern characterized by favoring the subject's explicitness; on the other hand, it may reflect a process of linguistic surveillance, resulting from the internalization of a normative model that associates clarity with the idea of "correct speech". As highlighted by Bortoni-Ricardo (2004) and Duarte (2004), contact with the school and with the written pattern directly influences linguistic choices, especially in contexts of greater speech monitoring.

In summary, the results obtained show that the realization of the pronominal subject in Brazilian Portuguese results from the interaction between linguistic and social factors. Aspects such as the verbal form, the rhythm of speech and the level of education of the informants proved to be determinants for the behavior of the variable, confirming the multifactorial character of the variation. The analysis indicates that the fulfillment of the subject is favored by contexts with less morphological marking and by social groups more exposed to the influence of urban and school norms, which reinforces the role of structural and social pressures in the current configuration of spoken Portuguese. These findings, in line with authors such as Duarte (1993, 2004), Scherre and Naro (1991) and Lucchesi (2009), contribute to the understanding that the ongoing process of change reflects both internal tendencies of the linguistic system and mechanisms of social and stylistic regulation present in speech communities.

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results of this research confirm the predominance of pronominal realization in the third person plural in the speech of the Caxias community, pointing to a frequency of 61.2% of explicit subjects compared to 38.8% of null subjects. Such data corroborate the hypothesis

of linguistic change proposed by Duarte (1993), according to which Brazilian Portuguese would be transitioning from a language of null subject to a language of full subject.

The statistical analysis revealed that the explicitness of the subject is favored by linguistic factors such as the presence of elements between the subject and the verb, the use of verb forms in the gerund and infinitive, verbal disilabicity and interrogative intonation. In the social field, the schooling variable showed a significant influence, especially among speakers with higher elementary education.

It was also observed the predominant preference of speakers for the traditional pronominal form *they/them*, as well as the attribution of prestige to this form in the acceptability judgments. These results show not only patterns of use, but also linguistic beliefs and attitudes that contribute to the maintenance and spread of the variant in formal and informal contexts.

It is concluded, therefore, that the phenomenon of the completion of the subject configures a case of stable variation with indications of change in progress. The research reaffirms the importance of the analysis of spoken language in real contexts of use and highlights the role of linguistic attitudes in the consolidation of emerging patterns. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the mapping of pronominal variation in Brazilian Portuguese, especially in the Northeast region, where there are still significant gaps in sociolinguistic description.

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