Arts, Linguistics, Literature and Language
Research Journal

SEMANTIC CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE PHENOMENON OF CRASIS

Nize da Rocha Santos Paraguassu Martins

Rivanildo da Silva Borges

Abstract: Assuming that linguistic descriptions play an important role in the teaching and learning of the mother tongue, the present work discusses the behavior of the crasis in contexts of bare nouns in Brazilian Portuguese (BP). In BP, in the study of written language, we are faced with the crasis, commonly defined as the fusion of the preposition 'a' with the article 'a', graphically represented by the grave accent (`). According to traditional grammars, this phenomenon occurs whenever before feminine words there is a verb or a devebal word governing the preposition 'a'. This definition, however, does not take into account an important feature of BP: the occurrence of bare nouns, that is, nouns unaccompanied by determinants, in an argument position. Müller (2000) understands the bare nouns as a generic indefinite. According to the author, this is the canonical form in BP for the expression of genericity in which bare names participate due to their indeterminacy. This way, our objective is to analyze the crasis phenomenon from the semantics of bare nouns and propose a vision about the crasis that takes into account the semantic level. Therefore, we developed an exploratory and bibliographical research about the crasis and the denotation of naked names in BP. We conclude that the occurrence or not of a crasis depends, mainly, on the semantics of the name that follows the preposition 'a' and that theories about the denotation of bare nouns in BP can equip the Portuguese language teacher to teach the crasis from the linguistic analysis and reflection.

Keywords: Formal semantics; Mother tongue teaching, Naked names; Crasis; Brazilian portuguese.

INTRODUCTION

The semantic analysis of natural languages of a formal nature has, since its inception, disseminated extremely useful diagnoses for understanding the functioning of human languages. In this work, we reflect on the phenomenon, widely studied for the written modality of Brazilian Portuguese (BP), denominated crasis.

According to traditional grammars, crasis occurs whenever before feminine words there is a verb or word devebal governing the preposition 'a'. The question we raise here is whether this definition takes into account an important feature of BP: the occurrence of bare nouns, that is, nouns without phonologically realized determinants, in an argument position. Thus, our objective is to analyze the crasis phenomenon from the semantics of bare nouns and propose a vision about the crasis that takes into account the semantic level.

There are many attempts to demonstrate the lack of linguistic reflection in discussions of prescriptive grammars, after all this is not its purpose, but it is not (or must not be) a simple record of inconsistencies in traditional analysis, but rather the recommendation of exits for such, as well as the incitement to an effective linguistic analysis of the linguistic facts, in our case in particular, to a semantic analysis.

Our article is organized as follows: in section 2, we present the works of Müller (2000, 2001b) on the expression of genericity in BP and the participation of bare nouns in generic sentences; in section 3, we discuss the expression of number in BP, according to Paraguassu (2010); in section 4, we discuss traditional considerations about the backlash; in section 5, we analyze the behavior of bare names in contexts that, according to the traditional analysis, would be the occurrence of crasis; and we conclude our article with

final remarks.

THE EXPRESSION OF GENERICITY IN BP

Müller (2000, 2001b) investigates the expression of genericity in Brazilian Portuguese (BP). Before moving on, let's see what the author says about genericity:

> Generic sentences are both an important and a common way in which human beings store and exchange information, as these sentences express (what for us present themselves as) more general regularities or laws. They express generalizations about entities, events, or states. And we, quite naturally, attribute them to truth or falsity [...] (MÜLLER, 2000, p. 4).

Based on Krifka *et al.* (1995), the author demonstrates that there are two ways in which this genericity is manifested in natural languages: through expressions referring to species and generically quantified sentences. For the purposes of this work, we are only interested in the second case – the reference to the species will be the subject of further studies.

The basic difference between one mechanism and another is that while, in the reference to species, the generalization originates in the syntagma itself, in generically quantified sentences the regularity comes from the sentence as a whole and not exclusively from the syntagma, just like in (1):

(1) Brazilian leaves everything to the last minute.

The analysis of the sentence above can be done according to Müller (2000, 2001b)[1]. The proposal says, in short, that a sentence with a generic indefinite is a tripartite structure, in which a generic operator, embedded in the imperfective aspect of the verbal predicator, takes two arguments – a Constraint and a Matrix. It is, therefore, from the operation performed by the generic quantifier that genericity results. The generic operator GEN, of an adverbial nature, is made explicit in BP through adverbs such as *generally*, *usually*, *typically*, among other adverbs that are markers of genericity. Thus, applying to the sentence in (1) the scheme in (2a), we have:

(2) a. GEN[x] (Restrição[x]; Matriz[x])

b. GEN[x] (*Brazilian* [x]; *leave everything to the last minute* [x])

c. *(Generally) Brazilian leaves everything to the last minute*.

In order for a name to be the Constraint of this tripartite structure, it must have a free variable[x], who will be arrested by GEN. This is the case of the generic indefinite (3), the bare singular (4) and the bare plural (5). To all these sentences we can submit the analysis in (2):

(3) A school needs a library.

(4) Man doesn't cry.

(5) Politicians talk a lot.

In sentences (3) to (5) we can explain an adverb that is a marker of genericity, which assures us that we are dealing with a generic quantification:

(3') *Normally a school needs a library.*

(4') *Usually men don't cry.*

(5') Politicians always talk a lot.

Next, we talk about naked names and their indeterminacy.

THE EXPRESSION OF NUMBER IN BP AND THE INDETERMINATION OF NAKED NAMES

We explained above how generic quantification takes place in BP, based on Müller (2000, 2001b). We show that, according to the author, the naked nouns in BP all work as an indefinite, in the sense of Heim (1982), when participating in generic sentences. But naked nouns appear in episodic sentences in governed position (object position). What,

---

1 The author uses for BP the proposal of Heim (1982) of indefinite phrases, developed in Diesing (1992), Kratzer (1995), Krifka et al. (1995), among others.

3

then, must be the contribution of these names in these sentences?

Many studies in Formal Semantics, since Carlson's (1977) analysis of bare plurals in English, investigate the semantic behavior of these nouns. In BP, there is a consensus that these names occur with fewer restrictions than other romance languages:

(6) a. *Brazilian dances well.*

b. Brazilians usually dance well.

(7) a. *women like flowers.*

b. Women usually like flowers.

(8) a. João bought potato.

b. #João *usually bought potatoes.*

(9) a. It gave *bee in the garden.*

b. # *Generallye* gave bee in the garden.

The sentences in (6) and (7) are analyzed according to the analysis of the previous section: they are generically quantified sentences[2]. This is not the same case in (8) and (9). Here we do not have a generic quantification and the naked name, which occupies an object position, that is, it is generated within the Verbal Syntagma (SV) – unlike the apparent subject position[3] –, it has an existential and non-generic reading, so it is impossible to explain an adverb that is a marker of genericity in (8b) and (9b).

Barbosa, Müller and Oliveira (2001), developing Diesing's proposal (1992), show how bare names in BP that have an existential reading are mapped. While in generic quantification the bare names are mapped to the Constraint of the tripartite structure, in episodic predicates bare names are in the Matrix, since there is no Constraint on these predicates, and the free variable of the names is bound by the existential quantifier, not the existential quantifier. Thus, we analyze a sentence like (8a) as follows:

(8a) João bought potato.

i) $\exists x$ [Undefined $(x) \wedge$ predicate (x)]

ii)   Exists x [(x) it's potato and João bought it (x)]

The big question that arises with the BP data – which, unlike other Romance languages, allows the bare singular in these syntactic contexts – is about the expression of number of the bare singular: how many potatoes must João have bought for (8a) to be a true sentence?

Paraguassu (2010) argues that BP is a language of general number, that is, the denotation of common names is neutral and it is the classification and determination operations carried out in the sentence that account for these names. An evidence of this is the difference in the interpretation of a bare noun phrase (SN) for an indefinite determiner phrase (SD) i) with negation and ii) with intensional predicates:

i)   Negation:

(10) Pedro didn't see a stain on the floor

a. *There is a (specific) spot that Pedro could have seen but did not.*

b. *Pedro didn't even see a stain on the floor, as the floor was completely clean.*

Pedro did not see *staina* in floor.

b. *Pedror didn't even see a stain on the floor, as the floor was completely clean.*

(11) Intensional Predicates:

(12) Pedro wants to buy *a house* on this street.

a. *There is a house (specific) what Pedro want to buy on this street.*

b. *Pedro wants to buy any house on this street.*

(13) Pedro wants to buy *house* on this street.

b. *Pedro wants to buy any house on this street.*

As in (10) and (12), with the singular

---

indefinite, we have two readings – one specified (a) and one unspecified for number (b) –, in (11) and (13), with the name bare, only unspecified read is available.

The reading specified for number in (a) concerns the possibility of phrases *a stain and a house* denote a single object. On the other hand, the reading in (b) of the bare names spot and *house* do not license an interpretation that only a single object is at issue. Similarly, the sentence in (8a) does not mean that João necessarily bought a single potato – proving that the singular here is only morphological and not semantic João may have bought more than one potato (or even parts of a potato), but still (8a) would be a true sentence.

What interests us here, in short, is the following fact: naked names license only indeterminate reading, not specified for number. And it is this indeterminacy that we resort to in many of our linguistic uses.

THE STUDY OF CRASIS

the crasis [4], phenomenon typically studied by prescriptive grammars and textbooks in the written modality of BP, is defined as the fusion of the preposition 'a' with the article 'a' or pronoun 'aquele' (and variants), graphically marked by the grave accent (`). The basic requirement for the occurrence of backtick is the fact that some verbs (such as verbs of movement and bitransitives) and Verbal nouns, adjectives and adverbs (as *arrival, going, referring, inherent, favorably etc.*) "require" the presence of the preposition 'the'. If the word that appears next is preceded by a determiner such as 'a' or 'that', then we are dealing with a case of crasis.

Traditional analysis tells us that in the following sentences there is a merger called crasis:

(14) Pedro go *the* party.

(15) The book I bought references *the/* to that school.

(16) Experience is inherent to older people.

The study of the crasis is, in general, distributed according to the obligatoriness, prohibition and optionality of occurrences. We are led to conclude that only the phonology and morphosyntax of the elements are considered to attest whether or not there is a crasis.

Some questions we raise about this traditional study are: i) are the considerations about the phenomenon the result of a complete linguistic analysis?; ii) are only phonological and morphosyntactic principles that govern this phenomenon?; and iii) to what extent are semantic criteria essential for understanding the functioning of the crasis?

We have already presented our negative answer to the first question here, since treating a linguistic phenomenon through a list of permissions, prohibitions and optionalities does not satisfy the scientific rigor of linguistic science. The other questions we will try to answer below.

BARE NAMES, PREPOSITIONED SYNTAGMS AND CRASSIS

As we have already mentioned, the semantic criteria involved in the crasis are not traditionally taken into account. One of them is the semantics of naked names that we have been presenting here. What would be our judgment about the sentences in (17) and (18):

(17) Maria goes __ to the store when she is stressed.

(18) Pedro goes __ parties on Friday.

(19) One of the tricks given to assert whether or not crasis occurs is the exchange of the female name for a male name. Substituting the feminine names of (17) and (18) (' store ' and ' parties') for masculine ones (' Marketplace ' and ' prom', respectively), there

4 We restrict here the term 'crasis' referring to the fusion of the preposition with the determiner in current written BP. The crasis is not our target as a metaplasm, a diachronic phenomenon, or a prosodic phenomenon..

are two possibilities, one with a determinant and the other without a determinant, each with different interpretation:

(20) a. Maria goes *to the market* when she is stressed.

b. Maria goes to *the market* when she is stressed.

(21) a. Pedro goes to the dances on Friday.

b. Pedro go *the dances* day of friday.

If what follows the preposition 'a' in (19) is an SD, the interpretation is specific, determined – in (19a) Maria usually goes to the same market when she is stressed; but when what appears is an SN (a bare name), the interpretation is non-specific, undetermined – in (19b) whenever she is stressed, Maria goes to any market. The same analysis extends to the examples in (20).

Thus, also in (17) and (18) the use or not of grave accent seems to be subordinated to the type of reading that we wish to give to the internal argument: if specific, we mark the crasis by means of the grave accent; if indeterminate, we cannot use the accent, as there is no article to merge with the preposition.

It seems to us, however, that the preferred reading in these generic contexts is always the non-specific one – examples in (b) –, that is, without an accent indicating a crasis, this because when we want to specify something in generic contexts, we do so by means of the modification (cf. Chierchia, 2003) – as in the examples in (a):

(17') a. Maria goes to her friend's store when she is stressed.

b. Maria goes to the store when she is stressed.

(18') a. Pedro goes to the parties at nightclub Z on Friday.

b. Pedro goes to parties on Friday.

The non-specific reading, presented in the cases in (17'b) and (18'b), indicates the neutrality of the typical number of the naked singular, according to Paraguassu (2010), as presented in section 3.

We verified, then, that if the reading we want to assign to the prepositional phrase (SP) headed by the preposition 'a' is specific, we will have an SP dominating an SD (21); if the desired reading for the SP is undetermined, we will have an SP dominating an SN (22):

(22)
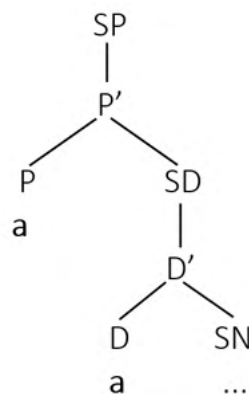
(23)
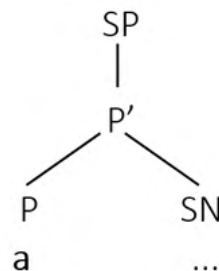
We are assuming, for the didactic purposes of this article, that phrases with an explicit determiner are SD, while bare phrases are SN. We will not enter into the vast discussion, still without consensus, about the true syntactic structure of naked nouns[5].

The view that an indeterminate interpretation inhibits the occurrence of the crasis is timidly indicated (but not developed) by Bechara (2010). There the author says:

> If the noun is used in an indefinite sense, it

5 For this discussion, we recommend Taveira da Cruz (2009), Pires de Oliveira & Mezari (2012) and Mezari (2013) to the reader.

will not be preceded by a definite article and therefore will not occur **the**, but yes simple **the**, which will be a mere preposition, as in the example: Ipanema will lose another house by the sea. The property was sold to the construction company and will be demolished to make way for a building (BECHARA, 2010, p. 302, author's emphasis).

It was only in this small space that the author took into account what we are defending to be the most prominent criterion for the occurrence or not of a crasis: the semantics of the name that appears after the preposition. What we defend here is that the use or not of the grave accent is a semantic problem: it depends on whether the internal argument of the predicator is an SD or an SN.

In contexts where we have two built-in arguments, the prepositional argument also seems to suffer from the semantic restrictions we have been advocating:

(24) a. Asking the finance company for money is a mistake.

b. Asking for money from finance is a mistake.

(25) a. John only pays his bill to the seller.

b. João only pays his bill to the seller.

In the sentences above, it is evident that the presence/absence of a determinant is extremely significant. In (23), we have: in (a), there is a finance company x and it is only this finance company x that it is a mistake to ask for money; in (b), asking any finance company for money is a mistake. The same analysis serves for (24). Thus, in the presence of the determinant (SD), we have the specific reading available (there is a financial institution x and there is a seller y) and in the absence of the determinant (SN), only the non-specific reading, typical of bare names (any financial institution, any seller).

When we consider, therefore, that bare nouns (SN) always have an indeterminate reading, we keep in mind that the occurrence of crasis does not depend only on the regency of the predicator - whether or not he selects the preposition 'a' - and the gender of the noun. after the preposition 'a', that is, it is not enough to know if the name that follows the preposition is feminine, since, even if it is feminine, if the name is naked, we can have an indeterminate/nonspecific reading, with no determinant for merge with the preposition. To attest to the occurrence of a backtick, the definitive criterion is the semantics of the name after the preposition.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The proposal that we present here, based on studies in Formal Semantics about genericity in natural languages and the semantics of naked nouns, discussed a phenomenon that occurs in BP only in writing and which is widely studied in Portuguese Language classes. What we have seen in the traditional approach to the phenomenon is a lack of linguistic considerations in its analysis, not finding even a mention of any of the notions that we discuss here, being, for us, the most prominent semantic criteria for the occurrence or not of crasis.

Finally, it is not our intention to expose a view contrary to that already presented in textbooks and prescriptive grammars, but, far beyond that, to demonstrate that the study traditionally undertaken has phonological and morphosyntactic foundations, with problems only at the semantic level, for which we propose a vision here.

We also do not advocate the use of terms as presented here. Just considering the semantics of bare names in the context of teaching the crasis would already be a great advance in the analysis and reflection of one of the many resources available in our language.

REFERENCES

BARBOSA, Pilar; MÜLLER, Ana & OLIVEIRA, Fátima. Nomes Simples: Questões Sintáticas e Semânticas, Boletim da ABRALIN 26, 410-414, 2001.

BECHARA, Evanildo. **Gramática escolar da Língua Portuguesa**. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2010.

CARLSON, Gregory. Reference to kinds in English. Tese de doutorado, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1977.

HEIM, Irene. The Semantics of Definite Noun Phrases. Tese de doutorado, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1982.

KRIFKA, M.; PELLETIER, F.J.; CARLSON, G.; ter MEULEN, A.; CHIERCHIA, G & LINK, G. Genericity: an Introduction In: CARLSON, G & PELLETIER, F. J. (orgs) **The Generic Book**. Chicago e Londres: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 1-124, 1995.

MÜLLER, Ana. Sentenças Genericamente Quantificadas e Expressões de Referência a Espécies no Português do Brasil. Cadernos de Estudos Linguísticos, Campinas, v. 39, p. 141-158, 2000.

_____ . A Expressão da Genericidade no Português do Brasil. Revista Letras, Curitiba, PR, v. 55, p. 153-165, 2001.

MÜLLER, Ana; OLIVEIRA, Fátima. Bare Nominals and Number in Brazilian and European Portuguese. Journal of Portuguese Linguistics, Portugal, v. 3, n. 1, p. 9-36, 2004.

PARAGUASSU, Nize. A contabilidade dos nomes no português brasileiro. Tese de doutorado, USP, São Paulo, 2010.

PIRES DE OLIVEIRA, Roberta; MEZARI, Meiry Perucchi. (orgs.). **Nominais Nus**: *um olhar através das línguas*. Campinas: Mercado de Letras, 2012, p. 149-184.

TAVEIRA DA CRUZ, Ronald. O singular nu e a (pseudo) incorporação no PB. Tese de doutorado, UFSC, Florianópolis, 2009.

VIOTTI, Evani; MÜLLER, Ana. O comportamento sintático e semântico de sujeitos indefinidos no PB. Revista Letras, Curitiba, n. 60, Editora UFPR, p. 435-453, jul./dez. 2003.