

***VERBAL AGREEMENT DIFFERENCES IN SPOKEN  
AND WRITTEN BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE AND  
THEIR CONSEQUENCES FOR THE TEACHING OF  
COMPOSITION<sup>1</sup>***

**1. Introduction**

This study will attempt to show to what extent the written language is influenced by the structural patterns of spoken language with reference to the phenomenon of verbal agreement with inverted subjects. From an analysis of data obtained in recordings of informal conversations between students and university teachers, I will attempt to show that the alleged "errors", which are made by our students in their school compositions and are attributed to their incapacity to assimilate certain rules, are nothing more than a simple reflection of the spoken language of Brazil.

First, I will describe the phenomenon of verbal agreement with inverted subjects attempting to emphasize its main characteristics in the spoken and written language. I will present the results of my investigation of written language made by examining compositions of primary, secondary and college-level students, in order to show to what extent they reflect structures belonging to the spoken language.

Next, I will present the results of my investigation of spoken language made from tape recordings of members of the academic community, especially teachers and students of the Faculty of Letters, who will be responsible for the teaching of Portuguese in our primary and secondary schools. The description of this code is important in

itself and in its pedagogical relevance to the extent that it can serve as a basis not only for the formulation of contrastive exercises of the spoken and written language (which will allow the student to improve his use of the written code) but also, and principally, for a possible change in attitude of the teacher in relation to language phenomena.

Finally, I will present hypotheses for the interpretation and analysis of these data, with the hope of contributing to the creation of an adequate methodology for the teaching of composition.

## 2. The analysis of the problem

### 2.1. Sentences like the following:

- (1) "Acabou as férias"  
v. sing. NP plural  
"The holidays have ended"
- (2) "Saiu as notas de matemática"  
v. sing. NP plural  
"The grades in mathematics were posted"
- (3) "Na Pecado Original chegou roupas linhas"  
v. sing. NP plural  
"Lovely clothes have arrived at the "Original Sin Boutique"
- (4) "Outro dia eu fiz um bolo e sobrou quatro claras"  
v. sing. NP plural  
"The other day I made a cake and four eggwhites were left over"
- (5) "Nessa minha pesquisa vai entrar tópicos"  
v. sing. NP plural  
"Topics are treated in my research"
- (6) "Está em discussão as áreas da pós-graduação"  
v. sing. NP plural

when they appear in school compositions, would surely be marked as "errors" by a Portuguese teacher, because of faulty agreement of the verb with its respective inverted subject. The above sentences would correspond in written "good portuguese" to the following sentences:

- (1') "Acabaram as férias"  
V. pl. NP plural
- (2') "Saíram as notas de matemática"  
V. pl. NP plural
- (3') "Na Pecado Original chegaram roupas lindas"  
V. pl. NP plural
- (4') "Outro dia eu fiz um bolo e sobraram quatro claras"  
V. pl. NP plural
- (5') "Nessa minha pesquisa vão entrar tópicos"  
V. pl. NP plural
- (6') "Estão em discussão as áreas da pós-graduação"  
V. pl. NP plural

Frequently, the native language teacher tries to "correct" these "errors" through structural exercises which present an adequate context for the production of the agreement, and through other corrective mechanisms which are based on notions of "correct" and "wrong", "good usage" and "bad usage", in an attitude which valorizes "grammatical correction". Most of the time, this attitude reflects a frequent tendency to subordinate linguistic fact to certain traditional doctrines established "a priori", and a denial of demonstratable linguistic phenomena. That is what typically happens in the phenomenon of verbal agreement with inverted subjects. Normative Grammar established, in general terms, that verbs should agree in number and person with subjects, whether they come after or before the verb. This, however, is not what is found in the material that I have examined, 200 college entrance examination papers, 130 compositions at the primary school level (*Primeiro Grau*) and 40 compositions at the secondary level (*Segundo Grau*). Sentences (7) – (10) below were taken from such compositions and examination papers, which show frequent lack of agreement with inverted subjects for verbs such as *começar* ('to start'), *acontecer* ('to happen'), *surgir* ('to appear'), *chegar* ('to arrive'), *ocorrer* ('to occur'), *aparecer* ('to appear'), *sumir* ('to disappear'), *sair* ('to leave'), *entrar* ('to enter'), *terminar* ('to end'), *acabar* ('to finish'), *faltar* ('to lack'), *sobrar* ('to be left over'), among others. For example:

- (7) ... "aí então começa os maiores problemas"  
V. sing. NP plural
- "Then the biggest problems begin"

- (8) . . . "ficamos às vezes temerosos quando acontece esses momentos"  
V. sing. NP plural

"At times, we get scared when these moments happen"

- (9) . . . "e é por isso que surge as brigas". . .  
V. sing. NP plural

"and, for this reason, the arguments come to surface"

- (10) . . . "quando chegou ao engenho suas primas francesas". . .  
V. sing. NP plural

"When his french cousins arrived at the plantation"

In cases of agreement for such verbs as *existir* ('to exist'), for which the post location of the subject is virtually always obligatory, the occurrence of the lack of agreement is far more prevalent, as exemplified in sentences (11) and (12):

- (11) . . . "existe poucas vagas"  
V. sing. NP plural

"There are few places"

- (12) "Um indivíduo não pode conseguir êxito, quando não existe meios para consegui-lo".  
V. sing. NP pl.

"An individual cannot achieve success, when there are no ways to achieve it"

In examining the material I observed three categories of compositions:

a) compositions which presented the "correct" verb form whenever the verb was followed by a plural subject NP; b) compositions which did not contain a single case in which the agreement was "correct" in accordance with established grammatical norms; and, between these two extremes, c) compositions which showed both cases of agreement and non-agreement with the same verb in the same paragraph, as shown in example (13):

- (13) "Mas já pensou, se só existisse escolas particulares (. . .) mas  
V. sing. NP Plural

graças a Deus existem as escolas estaduais". . .  
V. pl.      NP plural

"But have you thought, if there were only private schools (. . .) but thank God there are state schools". . .

This could be attributed to a variation of the rule, which fluctuates in accordance with the degree of formality of the situation. This was not, however, the case of these compositions. The situation was formal by definition; as an exercise in which a grade would be given, the students tend to write in a style as close to the formal as they can manage. It can be argued that the student isn't aware of this formality, and consequently mixes the oral and the written codes. Or it could be stated that the student is simply transposing the oral code onto paper without bothering about "correctness". However, I believe that these suppositions do not invalidate the results of my research. If this phenomenon had been detected only in compositions produced by elementary school pupils, in which the use of the written code might still be considered a novelty for the student, then yes, one could come to one or the other of the conclusions above. Yet this phenomenon continues to appear in compositions throughout the secondary and at the university levels after at least eight years of continual exposure to the norms of the written code, and thus cannot be attributed to the inconsistency or incapacity of the student to perceive the formality of the situation.

On this point, it should be emphasized that all the written language texts which I examined can be considered formal style. It is known that the written code itself is more formal than the oral code, even though varying degrees of formality exist in both. However, no informal written language text (messages, personal letters, etc.) was examined (and in these it is expected that more cases of the phenomenon in discussion appear). For that which I proposed in this study, I will consider sufficient the examination of formal style texts, since, in these, the phenomenon was satisfactorily detected. In other words, even in the use of a formal style in written form, in which one tries for clarity, precision and "correctness", the student still fails to make the verb agree with the inverted subject.

I will now describe the contexts for occurrence of the inverted subject in the compositions examined, in order to demonstrate the behavior of the verbal agreement rule in specific contextual situations. First, I verified that all the verbs with which the inverted subjects occurred could be arranged in two major semantic groupings: a) that of verbs which express affirmation or negation of existence, such as *existir* ('to exist'), *surgir* ('to appear'), *acontecer* ('to happen'), *aparecer*

('to appear'), *ocorrer* ('to occur'), *entrar* (fazer parte de, meaning 'to come to be'), *sair* ('to be out in the sense of appear'), *sobrar* ('to be left over'), *faltar* ('to lack'), *restar* ('to be left over in small quantities'), etc. And still verbs like *nascer* ('to be born'), *despontar* ('to come out'), and *morrer* ('to die'), *terminar* ('to end'), *acabar* ('to finish', 'to cease to exist'); b) that of verbs which indicate movement such as *entrar* ('to enter'), *sair* ('to leave'), *chegar* ('to arrive'), *ir* ('to go'), *passar* ('to go by'), and others.

The verb *estar* (which indicates temporary condition) can be included within the first semantic field when occurring with an adjective (or participle) or an adverbial phrase like in sentences (14) – (16):

- (14) "Está iniciada a vida nos estudos"  
 V. sing.                      NP singular

"His student career has begun"

- (15) "Teve uma época que estava em crise aquelas espingardas"  
 V. sing.                      NP plural

"There was a time when those rifles were fashionable"

- (16) "Aqui estarão mil candidatos com o mesmo objetivo"  
 V. pl.                      NP plural

"Here there will be a thousand candidates with the same objective"

Passive constructions present another context which is worth mentioning. The verbs cited until now are, on the whole, considered by normative grammar as intransitive. According to normative rules only intransitive verbs are permitted inverted subjects. However, besides this not being true for reasons that are not worth mentioning here, in the compositions examined the inverted subject occurs with passive constructions (superficial subjects, of course), mainly when the NP agent is not present. For example:

- (17) . . . "lá foram servidas as bebidas"  
 V. pl.                      NP plural

. . . "The drinks were served there"

- (18) . . . "quando são realizadas as provas dos vestibulares"  
 V. pl.                      NP plural

... "When the college entrance examinations take place"

As for the NPs which are placed after those verbs cited above, there are two considerations to make: 1) with verbs in the same semantic field as *existir* ('to exist'), the NPs do not possess the semantic function of AGENT, according to Jackendoff 1972: "The Agent NP is identified by a semantic reading which attributes to the NP will or volition toward the action expressed by the sentence"<sup>2</sup>. The same happens with some movement verbs, such as *cair* ('to fall') in the sentence below:

(19) ... "e caiu todos os pratos no chão". . .  
V. sing. NP plural

... "and all the dishes fell on the floor" . . .

In this case the NP subject possesses the feature [— animate], obviously not having the semantic function of agent; 2) the marked/non-marked opposition as to the number of inverted NPs should take on the singular or plural form of the verb, in accordance with established Portuguese normative grammar. However, in the compositions examined, when the inverted NP is marked as to its number (i.e. plural), in general the agreement is not made. Let's compare, for example, sentence (19), in which the inverted NP *todos os pratos* ('all the dishes') is marked, with sentence (20), in which the inverted NP *o ar de velhice* ('the smell of old age') is unmarked:

(20) "Outrora muito cheia (a cidade), mas com o passar dos anos foi deixando cair<sup>3</sup> o ar de velhice dentro das casas"  
V. sing. NP sing.

2.2. I will now discuss my examination of recordings of informal conversations (in a total of six hours of these recordings) among persons with university background. In these, the occurrence of the same contexts encountered in the written language were observed. However, for the spoken language, there are other verbs which fall into the same semantic category as those already cited for the written language, which are though by nature more informal (perhaps slangy). Among them are *pintar* ('to appear'), *michar* ('to disappear'), *bater* ('to happen'), as in the sentences (21) – (24):

(21) "Hoje pintou uma grana"  
V. sing. NP sing.

"today I had a windfall"

- (22) "pintou as lembranças daquele tempo"  
V. sing. NP plural

"I was struck by memories of that time"

- (23) "bateu saudades e eu vim"  
V. sing. NP plural

"I suddenly felt I missed you, so I came"

- (24) "michô o negócio lá em casa sábado"  
V. sing. NP sing.

"Our plans didn't come off at home on Saturday"

This difference, however, is irrelevant, since all these verbs fall into the semantic field of *existir* ('to exist'). What is important to mention here is that in spoken language the same phenomenon found in the written language – the lack of agreement of verbs with inverted NPs – is verified. Note that there is a difference between these two registers with respect to the degree of stylistic formality, which results from the greater or lesser formality of the situation. However, not even this factor served to determine whether or not the verb would agree with its inverted NP subject. In other words, in the spoken language, informal situations also occur in sentences in which the agreement of the verb with the NP subject was made, as well as sentences in which the agreement was not made, as we can see in sentences (25) and (26) below:

- (25) "Faltaram livros"  
V. Pl. NP plural

"There weren't enough books"

- (26) "Está faltando mesmo condições de alimentação"  
V. sing. NP plural

"There really weren't conditions for a healthy diet"

In order to test this factor of the formality of the situation and to compare with the register presented in the recordings, I observed the speech of persons on television programs, which, by their nature, present a more formal situation than the recorded conversations. An interesting fact emerged. A football commentator, when narrating a



game, frequently used the inverted subject, without incurring in the so-called "error" of agreement. When, however, he made a commentary with a person who was by his side, he produced the following sentence:

- (27) "O juiz tá aí prá apitá direito como manda as regras do futebol"  
 V. sing. NP plural

"The referee is here to see that the rules of the football game are followed"

Immediately after the enunciation of the sentence, the announcer corrected the form of the verb to *mandam* ('dictate'), calling attention to the correction. It is observed, then, his preoccupation in producing the "correct" form, when, in fact, in spontaneous speech, it was natural for him not to worry about this problem.

2.3. Returning to the phenomenon presented in written language, we could ask why the student in this situation does not normally effects verb agreement, when he should be worrying about correctness, according to the nature of this code.

A first hypothesis raised as an answer to this question is that the student is "erring" in ignorance of the agreement rule, especially the primary school student, who would not have totally assimilated the rule. However, when compositions of primary, secondary and college students were compared, the same incidence of the phenomenon was verified, with the same characteristics. Moreover, a counter-argument to the hypothesis would be that the agreement is made when the NP subject is located before the verb, as can be shown from sentences (28) and (29) below:

- (28) . . ."pois poucas vagas surgem nas Universidades de nosso meio  
 NP plural V. pl.

. . ."for few places open up at our Universities"

- (29) . . ."e é por isso que surge as brigas, as desavenças entre pais e filhos"  
 V. sing. NP plural

. . ."and for this reason the arguments, the irritations between parents and children come to surface".

The same type of result can be obtained on comparing sentences of spoken language from the recordings, which were made, I repeat, with persons of university background, and whom we would expect to have assimilated the rule.

A second hypothesis to explain this phenomenon could employ the analysis which Lemle and Naro (1977) presented on the spoken language of lower socio-economic levels of Brazilian society. According to the analysis, the verbal agreement with the subject is a case of linguistic variation caused by various factors: a) a morphological factor might explain the variation of agreement in relation to the degree of phonic difference between the singular and plural form of the verb. This explanation, however, is not satisfactory to explain the difference in verb agreement of *surgir* ('to emerge') in sentences (28) and (29) above; b) according to Lemle and Naro, the stylistic factor could also explain the phenomenon, attributing the position of the NP subject the responsibility for the verb agreement. This also is unsatisfactory, at least in these terms, because we have already seen that, in a single composition, cases of inverted subjects have appeared in which the verb sometimes agreed and sometimes did not, as sentence (13), which I repeat here, shows:

- (13) "mas já pensou, se só existisse escolas particulares (. . . )  
   V. sing.    NP plural  
       mas graças a Deus existem as escolas estaduais". . .  
   V. pl.                NP plural

"But have you thought, if there were only private schools (. . . ) but thank God there are state schools". . .

A third hypothesis for the explanation of this common phenomenon of the spoken code and the written code of Portuguese in Brazil is based on the thematic functions that the NP can assume. Among them, the function of AGENT is the most utilized by our grammarians to define the subject of a sentence. The frequently used methodology by teachers in classrooms is many times limited to the use of questions such as "Quem fez isso?" ('Who did this?'), "Quem praticou a ação de. . . ?" ('Who practiced the action of. . . ?'), etc. However, the student does not recognize equally as agents the NPs *o dia do vestibular* ('the entrance examination day') and *umas primas suas* ('some of his cousins') in sentences (30) and (31) below:

- (30) "chega o dia do vestibular"  
           V. sing.        NP sing.

"The day of the university entrance examination has arrived"

- (31) "Um dia chegou à fazenda umas primas suas"  
                           V. sing.                NP plural

"One day some of his cousins arrived at the ranch"

The greater part, if not all, of the NPs that occur with verbs mentioned here do not manifest the semantic function of *agent*. Consequently, the student, accustomed to identifying the *functional notion of subject* with the *semantic function* of *agent*, cannot recognize those NPs used as subjects, and, therefore, would not effect verb agreement.

If it is intended to maintain the analysis of these inverted NPs as being subjects (a solution which I do not consider satisfactory), it is necessary that the teacher explain to the student the other semantic functions that a NP subject can take on, for example, *THEME*, *SOURCE*, etc. This, however, will not solve, in my opinion, the question of lack of agreement with the inverted subject, since other NPs can occur in other sentences with the function of *theme*, for example, and even so will still not be considered as subjects. The same is valid for the function of *AGENT*.

A fourth hypothesis – one that I consider more satisfactory, at the moment, to explain this phenomenon (and consequently as a basis for the methodology of teaching composition) – is based on the proposal of Perlmutter (1976) for Portuguese, which states that there is a loss of the “status” of subject on the part of the inverted NP. The lack of verbal agreement in these cases is a strong indication in favor of Perlmutter’s theory. Besides the evidence presented by the data collected in compositions and recordings of informal conversations, I tested some speakers to verify this hypothesis. Sentences were presented to them like the type of (23) (which I repeat) and (32):

(23) “Bateu saudades e eu vim”  
V. sing. NP plural

“I suddenly felt I missed you, so I came”

(32) “Pintaram uns grilos na minha cuca”  
V. pl. NP plural

“I had a bad head”

I asked them to choose the subject of these two sentences. I received answers like “eles” (‘they’), “alguém” (‘someone’), “sujeito indeterminado” (‘undetermined subject’), “sujeito inexistente” (‘non-existent subject’); I did not receive answers, however, that identified the NPs *saudades* and *uns grilos* as subjects of the two sentences, as is postulated by normative grammar.

A possible explanation for the fact is perhaps related to the speaker’s strategy for recognizing the NP object, which would be every

NP which comes after the verb. This, in a certain way, reinforces Perlmutter's theory. These downgraded NPs, that is, the inverted NPs, are no longer subjects (in whatever definition of subject). And if this is the case, there is no longer any reason to make agreement; and that is what the data suggest.

There is yet another hypothesis to be raised: on inverting the subject NP, the focus of interest of the speaker no longer concentrates on the subject, but on the predicate, that is to say, on the fact itself. This is more easily perceived in passive constructions, even if the verbs presented here are not employed. If the student does put that which he wishes to emphasize at the beginning of the sentence, it is no longer necessary for him to worry about what will come afterwards, when writing or speaking. Consequently, there will be no agreement of the verb with any NP which follows it.

As for the occurrence of some cases of agreement in the compositions, or even in the recordings, they can be explained as *consequences of the imposition of normative grammar*. The preoccupation with "talking right", or "writing right" frequently influences the inflexion of verbs that grammar defines as impersonal — that is, verbs which have no subject — which reflects the attitude of hypercorrection on the part of the person speaking or writing. This is the case of constructions with the verb *haver* ('there to be'), with existential meaning, as in sentence *b* of (33), whose form is "wrongly" inflexioned (according to normative grammar):

(33) a. Houve dúvidas na escolha dos candidatos"  
V. sing. NP plural

"There were doubts about the choice of candidates"

b. Houveram dúvidas na escolha dos candidatos"  
V. pl. NP plural

"There were doubts about the choice of candidates"

But, at the same time that one demands of the student agreement of verbs like *existir* ('to exist'), *acontecer* ('to happen') with the inverted NP, by considering these NPs as subjects, the student is prohibited to conduct himself in a similar manner with the verb *haver* ('there to be'), when the latter pertains to the same semantic field of *existir* ('to exist'). The sentence structure is the same, the meaning of the verbs is the same, as is shown by comparison of (33a–b) with (34a–b):

(34) a. Existiu dúvidas na escolha dos candidatos  
V. sing. NP pl.

b. Existiram dúvidas na escolha dos candidatos  
V. pl. NP pl.

In this manner, the strategy of correction of compositions will depend on the analysis of this fact. If the NP which follows the verb is considered a subject, the agreement should be effected in the two cases (if it is decided that there must be agreement); or, on the contrary, it should be effected with neither of the verbs; therefore, correction by the teacher is not proper.

### 3 – Conclusion

We have seen, in this paper, that important aspects of the spoken code of Portuguese in Brazil are neglected by grammarians and consequently, by school teachers in their methodology of teaching composition. The phenomenon here presented is manifested in the written code as a reflex of the reality of the fact in the spoken code. Certain corrections made by teachers on the students' compositions many times are not based on scientific knowledge of the reality of the spoken language, but reflect an attitude of subservience to precepts established "a priori". There is not a strategy of comparison, on the part of the teacher, of the written code with the spoken code, to the end that both, teacher and student, come to a reflection about the facts of the language. The normative character, which imbues the task of teaching, prevents the teacher from perceiving typical phenomena of the spoken language which are manifested in written language.

The awareness of spoken language, as well as redefinition of such terms as "subject of" based on this spoken reality of language, are essential conditions for any methodology in teaching composition. The exercise of written language in the classroom cannot continue to be enclosed in this normative character, without corresponding in the first place to spontaneous manifestations of the language, that is, spoken manifestations. It is this spoken reality of the language that must serve as a matrix for the teaching of other linguistic modalities, which will reduce, without doubt, inhibitions or aversions on the part of the student, when he comes to writing a language which he feels he has already mastered. It is vital that we develop a methodology for teaching composition, which finds its roots *within language as it exists*, and not outside of it.

### NOTES

1. This work, accomplished with the financial assistance of the CNPq, was presented at the Sixth Congress of the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée – AILA 81, Lund, Sweden, in

August, 1981.

2. Jackendoff, 1972, op. cit., p. 32.
3. The verb *cair* ('to fall') has an existential sense here, signifying *aparecer* ('to appear'), fitting, therefore, into the semantic group of the verb *existir* ('to exist').

## REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX

*Verbs which occurred with inverted NP subjects in the compositions and tapes examined*

abrir	estar	+ adjetivo + particípio + gerúndio	provar
acabar(se)			quebrar
acender(se)			reatar
achar-se	estourar		sair
acontecer	estragar		sobrar
alternar-se	estudar		sobreviver
apresentar-se	existir		sujar
aproximar-se	faltar		sumir
atrasar	fazer falta		surgir
aumentar	ficar		ter
bater (= acontecer)	importar		terminar
bastar	iniciar		vencer
cair	ir		verificar-se
chatear	inscrever-se		viajar
chegar	instaurar		vir
circular	levantar		voltar
(re)começar	mandar		
constar	michar		
correr	morrer		
crescer	nascer		
dar	ocorrer		

descer  
desmanchar-se  
diminuir  
encontrar-se  
entrar  
escapar

ocupar  
pagar  
passar  
pensar  
persistir  
pintar (= aparecer)