

Indefinite objects in Brazilian Portuguese: evidence for number neutrality and semantic incorporation

In article languages of the Romance or Germanic type, semantic incorporation analyses of verb-object constructions generally involve bare objects (1) or weak definites (2) (Aguilar-Guevara 2014). Yet, it has also been argued that some indefinite objects are ambiguous and can be subject to semantic incorporation (3c) rather than to standard compositional interpretations under which the direct object corresponds to an existentially bound variable (3b) (Carlson 2003, 2005, 2006).

- (1) Pedro jogou **bola**. #Ela estava murcha.
Pedro play.PRF.3SG ball 3SGF be.IMPF.3SG flat
'Pedro played football. #It was flat.' (Brazilian Portuguese, Taveira da Cruz 2008: 95)
- (2) Mary plays **the trumpet**. ~ trumpet-play(m)
- (3) a. John fed **a dog**. (Carlson 2003, adapted)
b. $\exists x \text{ dog}(x) \wedge \text{John fed } x$
c. dog-feed(j)

The Carlsonian approach and subsequent work argue for a semantic incorporation analysis of weak indefinite object NPs (3c). Under this analysis, indefinite NPs are not interpreted compositionally as the combination of the meaning of a verb X and its argument Y. Instead, the verb + noun combination is treated as event type-denoting. Klein et al. (2013: 191) note that such weak indefinite interpretations are in many respects similar to other readings of indefinites (in contrast, e. g., to weak definites, which are strikingly distinct from regular definites). This similarity is hypothesized to be the reason why incorporation-like interpretations of indefinite objects have largely escaped scholarly attention.

This paper provides empirical evidence for a semantically incorporated verb-noun construction with weakly indefinite nominals in Brazilian Portuguese that has not hitherto been noted in the literature. We argue that certain indefinite direct objects (4), when adjacent to a particular group of verbs, are interpreted as semantically incorporated, receiving non-quantified atelic activity readings.

- (4) Vamos assistir uma televisão, jogar vídeo game,
go.PRS.1PL watch.INF indef.FSG television play.INF video game
e depois comer uma boa abobrinha recheada. (attested blog post)
and afterwards eat.INF indef.FSG good zucchini filled
'Let's watch some TV, play some videogames, and after that eat some good filled zucchini.'

In (4), a list of activities is proposed, one of them using a bare object (*jogar vídeo game*) and two using indefinite objects (*assistir uma televisão*, *comer uma boa abobrinha recheada*). Neither of the activities involves an individual TV, video game, or zucchini, respectively, but instead refers to the event type TV-WATCHING, VIDEO-GAMING, and ZUCCHINI-EATING. We show that despite being a rather infrequent type of nominal in Brazilian Portuguese, speakers do have robust intuitions about such underresearched *assistir uma televisão*-structures, treating them on a par with bare incorporated objects. Evidence comes from an Acceptability Judgment Tasks (AJT) and a Truth Value Judgment Task (TVJT) with 42 native speakers from Rio de Janeiro, the first corroborating broad acceptability, and the second ensuring that speakers actually obtain the event type reading. Figure 01 shows the results of the AJT on a seven-point Likert scale, higher ratings reflecting higher acceptability. C1-C4

are the critical conditions, which were tested against a set of fillers of different degrees of acceptability. C3 and C4 are the indefinite object conditions, C1 and C2 are their bare counterparts.

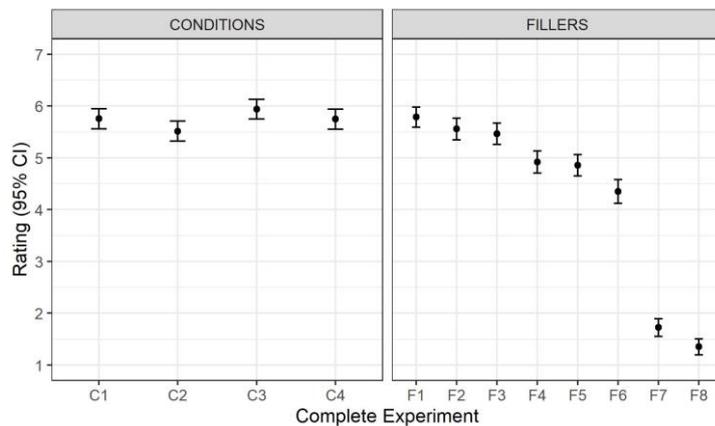


Figure 01: Results of the AJT.

As for the TVJT, participants had to judge bare and indefinite objects making reference to events in a context that explicitly referred to several or partial events. Participants judged bare object sentences to be true in 91% of the cases and indefinite object sentences in 84%, whereas only around 35% were judged true in control contexts.

In addition, following the incorporation analysis based on event types, we predict that nominals in *assistir uma televisão*-structures are restrained to *kind-level* modifiers, as in the contrast in (5).

- (5) Nada melhor do que curtir uma sauna finlandesa / # uma sauna do meu tio.
 nothing better than enjoy.inf a sauna Finnish a sauna of-the my uncle
 ‘Nothing better than enjoying a Finnish sauna / #a sauna of my uncle.’

Whereas modification with regard to different types of saunas should be freely available, object-level modifiers identifying particular saunas should be ruled out in the incorporation interpretation. We argue that object-level modification blocks the number-neutral interpretation and can give rise to partitive ones. We are currently conducting a further AJT testing the availability of modification of the object in these structures, further corroborating the idea of semantic incorporation.

References

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