

The meaning of inchoative *se* in Brazilian Portuguese: a reapplication of Lundquist et al.'s (2016) experiment

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The causative alternation is widely studied in Linguistics. In this alternation, a change of state verb may appear in two forms: a causative/transitive one: *o menino quebrou a janela*, or an anticausative/intransitive one: *a janela (se) quebrou*. The anticausative form can be marked with a reflexive clitic in languages such as Norwegian and Brazilian Portuguese (BP), but is unmarked in others, such as English. There are two main proposals to explain the alternation: a lexical-derivational one (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995), in which a lexical rule is responsible for the demotion of the cause argument; and a syntactic-derivational one (Koontz-Garboden 2009), in which in a type of reflexivization the patient is construed as responsible for causing the event. A third type of approach explains that the alternation emerges when a verb can be found in two different constructions, and there is no derivation involved (Piñón 2001).

Following Lundquist et al. (2016), the present experimental study investigates which proposal is adequate to explain the alternation in BP. Contrasting marked (Norwegian) and unmarked (English) anticausatives, Lundquist et al. (2016) conducted an experiment in which participants were shown videos of caused events (e.g. a person breaking a window); each event had two versions: a causative (theme-focus) and an agentive (agent-focus) version. After each video, they were given a Yes-No question built with the anticausative form of the verb used to describe the scene (e.g. *did the window break?*). Their results showed that English speakers always say “Yes” (the anticausative can be used to describe causative scenes), regardless of agentivity, but Norwegian speakers say “Yes” only about half the time (the anticausative does not describe properly the causative scenes), with strong effects of marking and agentivity (“Yes” answers decrease if the video is agent-focus, and if the anticausative is reflexive-marked). Thus, they argue that in English the alternation is explained by a lexical-derivational process, whereas in Norwegian, it is explained by a reflexivization process (i.e. the marked anticausatives have a reflexive meaning).

Differently from English and Norwegian, BP allows marked and unmarked anticausatives with the same verb. In view of this specific behavior of BP, we conducted a reapplication of Lundquist et al.'s (2016) experiment. We had the same two versions of each video, but instead of comparing two languages, in our version of the experiment we compared the two forms for anticausatives with the same verbs.

To answer our initial question, we fitted the mixed-effects models using the package “lme4”. As a criterion for the selection of models we used the AIC (Akaike information criterion), where the chosen model had a lower value in relation to the others. We found a strong effect of

both reflexive marking and agentivity in our data. Speakers had a higher tendency to answer “Yes” for unmarked verbs than for marked verbs; this effect is especially visible in the agent-focus context ($\beta = -0.22081$, $SE(\beta) = 0.05201$, $p < 0.001$). Also, the theme-focus videos yielded more “Yes” answers for both marked and unmarked verbs. Unmarked verbs in a theme-focus context were highly accepted (89.3%). But for agent-focus videos, there was a significant decrease in “Yes” answers ($\beta = 0.23716$, $SE(\beta) = 0.05132$, $p < 0.001$). The effect of agentivity was numerically smaller for the reflexive unmarked verbs, but the interaction between agentivity and marking was not significant ($\beta = 0.02702$, $SE(\beta) = 0.7296$, $p = 0.694$).

Our results show that BP has distinct meanings for the two forms of the anticausative. From these results, we conclude that *se* indicates that the change of state described in the anticausative sentence was not caused by an agent, describing a type of spontaneity of the event; the clitic *se* contributes significantly for the meaning of the anticausative sentence, as proposed also by Jorge (2016), following Negrão and Viotti (2008). A theoretical proposal which accounts for the alternation, thus, must consider that change of state verbs can occur in both types of anticausatives, with significant semantic distinction between them. This theoretical analysis is provided by a non-derivational account, which allows a single verb to be able to occur in distinct syntactic configurations, with distinct meaning implications.

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