

Speakers' Subjective Evaluations of Direct Object Pronouns in Brazilian Portuguese

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Few grammars acknowledge the full variation in direct object pronouns in Brazilian Portuguese (BP), which allows for both normative clitic and non-standard tonic variants. Bagno (2009) notes that clitics are not learned naturally, but only once children go to school, implying the “correctness” but also artificial nature of these pronouns. Perini (2010) describes a prescriptive preference for clitic pronouns and negative attitudes towards their tonic counterparts. Nevertheless, no prior studies have investigated empirically speaker evaluations of these competing pronoun variants. Therefore, in this project we created a perception experiment of direct object pronouns in spoken Brazilian Portuguese, in order to investigate the role of attitudes and social evaluations in language variation (cf. Evans & Iverson 2007; Campbell-Kibler 2009). We hypothesized that it would reveal clear patterns of evaluation towards the variants, and specifically that normative clitic forms would be evaluated more negatively than tonic forms.

Data were collected through an online survey on Qualtrics where participants evaluated fictional speakers in terms of six different adjectives (*educated, intelligent, formal, friendly, irritating, pedantic*), using a five-point Likert scale. These adjectives were used in dos Santos & Mendes' (2019) study of the BP subjunctive and adapted for our project. Participants evaluated 32 survey items (16 target items, 16 distractors). Target items were presented with 16 scenarios varied according to pronoun type (clitic, tonic), and utterance type (monologue, dialogue), in order to assess the role of the language internal factors in sociolinguistic evaluation, as well as respondent age, gender, socioeconomic class, level of education, and state of origin.

The responses of 160 native Portuguese speakers who completed the survey were analyzed using mixed-effects linear regression in R, with survey item and verb as random effects. The dependent variable, survey respondents' evaluation of fictional speakers via the previously-mentioned adjectives, was z-score normalized to account for disparate scale usage. The best-fit model of our data selected pronoun type and utterance choice as significant predictors of respondents' evaluation of speakers. Specifically, fictional speakers are significantly more likely to be evaluated negatively (*irritating, pedantic, formal*) when using clitic pronouns, as well as of higher education status (*educated, intelligent*). By contrast, speakers employing tonic pronouns were consistently rated friendlier and less irritating/pedantic than those using clitics. With regard to specific pronouns, clitic *nos* was evaluated as more irritating than tonic *a gente*, while the accusative use of *lhe* received the most negative evaluations. Regarding utterance type, speakers using clitics were rated more negatively in dialogues than in monologues. None of the external factors were significant.

Given the wide gulf between the grammars of normative BP and actual spoken BP, our study provides a new direction for future research on competing grammatical variants in this variety and their subjective evaluation by native speakers. More generally, our results suggest that the role that social evaluation plays in usage preferences should be re-assessed based on studies linking subjective attitudes with grammatical choices (dos Santos & Silva 2019; Squires 2014).