“Copula Deletion” in Restructured Portuguese

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Brazilian linguists have taken to discussing what Ribeiro (2009:220) calls “o apagamento da cópula na construção de clivagem” [=the deletion of the copula in cleft constructions] in reference to sentences in Brazilian Vernacular Portuguese (BVP) like “Ela que sabe” (=‘She’s the one who knows’; cf. Brazilian Standard Portuguese [BSP] ‘É ela que sabe’). However, the term is also applied to constructions like BVP “Quem que foi lá?” (=‘Who is it that went there?’ (Márcia Oliveira, personal communication). From the perspective of European Portuguese (EP) and SBP, in which this structure is unacceptable without the copula é (=’Quem é que foi lá?’), the BVP construction certainly seems to involve the deletion of the copula. Labov used this term for a different structure in African American English (AAE): “He ___ fast in everything he do.” (Labov 1972:67). However, there is a problem in calling any of these sentences examples of “copula deletion”, which means that they lack a syntactic feature that should be present in a different variety, suggesting that they are in this sense deficient. This problem is not unusual in comparing non-standard varieties with those that are standardized, but the deeper problem is that this terminology suggests that there might be some simple rule for “copula deletion” to account for such a phenomenon without taking into account the facts surrounding the development of such constructions, particularly when they seem likely to be the product of language contact.

Considering BVP constructions with question words followed by que rather than é que, which also occur in the Portuguese-based creoles of West Africa, Mello (1997) concluded that in Brazil “this structure was reinterpreted during the restructuring of Portuguese as question word + highlighter” (1997:172), referring to the highlighters (HL) or focus particles (FocP) used to emphasize fronted elements in many West African languages (Holm 1988:179 ff.). We confirm Mello’s hypothesis by demonstrating the parallel use of highlighters in Guinea-Bissau Creole Portuguese and one of its primary substrate languages, Balanta. We conclude that while the incorporation of que as a focus marker into such BVP in structures was likely to have been facilitated by the existence of the Portuguese emphatic structure é que for native speakers of that language, its original motivation was more likely to have been the obligatory marking of focus on fronted elements for native speakers of Portuguese creoles and their substrate languages.

Keywords/Palavras-chave: Brazilian Vernacular Portuguese, copula deletion, highlighter, focus particle, fronting, question words, substrate influence, West African languages.
1. Introduction

Ribeiro (2009:220) discusses “apagamento da cópula na construção de clivagem” ['the deletion of the copula in cleft constructions'] in reference to sentences in Brazilian Vernacular Portuguese (BVP) like “Ela que sabe” ‘She’s the one who knows’ (cf. Brazilian Standard Portuguese [BSP] “É ela que sabe”). However, the term apagamento da cópula is also used in constructions with question words like the following BVP example:

(1) Quem que foi lá?
    who FocP went there
    ‘Who went there?’ (Oliveira, personal communication)

From the perspective of European Portuguese (EP), in which this structure is unacceptable without the copula é (“Quem é que foi lá?”), sentence (1) certainly seems to involve the deletion of the copula. This term apparently follows its earlier use by Labov for a different structure in African American English (AAE):

(2) He ___ fast in everything he do. (Labov 1972:67)

As a matter of fact, some rural varieties of BVP can also have non-verbal predicates consisting of an adjectival phrase:

(3) Ela ___ loka pur eli.
    3s-F crazy for 3s-M
    ‘She’s crazy about him.’ (McKinney 1975:15)

However, there is a problem in calling any of these sentences examples of “copula deletion” because they lack a syntactic feature that is present in a different variety, implying that they are in this sense deficient. This problem is not unusual in comparing non-standard varieties with those that are standardized, but the deeper problem is that this terminology suggests that there could be some simple rule for “copula deletion” to account for such a phenomenon without taking into account the facts that that were likely to have motivated the development of such constructions, particularly when they seem to be the product of language contact.

This study provides an overview of focus particles or highlighters, first in African languages (section 1) and creoles (section 2) and then in studies of Brazilian Vernacular Portuguese (section 3). The conclusion (section 4) is that while the incorporation of que as a focus marker into BVP in structures like sentence (1) above may well have been facilitated by the existence of the Portuguese emphatic structure é que for native speakers of that language, its motivation was more likely to have been an
obligatory rule for speakers of many African and creole languages requiring that fronted elements be highlighted or marked for focus.

2. Focus markers in African languages

Rowlands (1969:189 ff.) points out that Yoruba, a Nigerian language, has what he calls “an emphasising word ni” used to highlight words that are fronted or moved to the beginning of the sentence:

\[(4) \quad Mo \ rà \ aṣọ \quad \Rightarrow \quad Aṣọ \ ni \ mo \ rà \]
1s buy cloth cloth HL 1s buy

‘I bought cloth.’ \(\Rightarrow\) ‘It was cloth I bought.’ (Rowlands 1969:25)

Intonational languages like English or Portuguese can simply stress the word intended to be emphasised, but since stress requires a change of pitch, this would disrupt the tone patterns of a language like Yoruba, in which pitch or tone determines meaning. Thus tone languages use free morphemes called highlighters (HL) or focus particles (FocP) to focus the words they either precede or follow. In Yoruba, the highlighter ni must also be used after question words like ta ‘who?’ or ki ‘what?’ (ibid. 26):

\[(5) \quad Kí \ ni \ nwón \ tà \ fún \ u? \]
what HL 3p sell to 3s

‘What did they sell him?’ (Rowlands 1969:26)

Note that Yoruba word order is subject-verb-object, so the object in sentence (5) is kí ‘what’, which has been fronted and then followed by the highlighter ni to give it prominence. One of the most salient uses of the highlighter ni in Yoruba is when a verb is focused: it is fronted and prefixed by its initial consonant plus í, followed by ni, and then recopied in its original position:

\[(6) \quad Nwòn \ pa \ á. \quad \Rightarrow \quad Pípa \ ni \ nwón \ pa \ á \]
3p kill 3s kill HL 3p kill 3s

‘They killed it.’ \(\Rightarrow\) ‘They killed it.’ (Rowlands 1969:189)

The resulting construction (literally ‘Killing it-was they killed it’) is called predicate clefting.

3. Focus markers in creole languages
Creolists working on individual languages were aware of predicate clefting and highlighters by the 1960s, although they may not have used these terms. For example, in her 1966 *Jamaican Creole Syntax: a Transformational Approach*, Beryl Loftman Bailey discussed what she called inversion:

“All of the following...may be given prominence by inverting the sentence, and bringing the constituent into fronted position. Inversion is accomplished by an introductory *a* (equivalent to to English ‘it is’ or French ‘c’est’ and possibly identical with the equating verb) which is immediately followed by the prominent item. All other constituents of the sentence then follow in their normal order.” (Bailey 1966:85)

She illustrated this with the following Jamaican Creole examples (all from Bailey 1966:86), where each (b) sentence (and sentence (8)c) contains a fronted constituent:

(7) a. wi a taak bout Jan
   1p PROG talk abou John
   ‘We are talking about John.’

   b. a Jan wi a taak bout
      HL John 1p PROG talk about
      ‘It’s John we’re talking about.’

(8) a. Mieri waan di buk
    Mary want the book
    ‘Mary wants the book.’

   b. a Mieri waan di buk
      HL Mary want the book
      ‘It’s Mary who wants the book.’
An alternative to (8)b is the following:

c. a di buk Mieri waan
   HL the book Mary want
   ‘It’s the book that Mary wants.’

(9) a. Jan tiif di mango
   John steal the mango
   ‘John stole the mango.’

   b. a tiif Jan tiif di mango
      HL steal John steal the mango
      ‘John stole the mango.’

(10) a. Samwel sik
     Samuel sick
     ‘Samuel is sick.’

     b. a sik Samwel sik
        HL sick Samuel sick
        ‘Samuel is really sick.’

Bailey (1966:88) noted that in forming questions with interrogative words, “If any of the constituents is nominal, manner, locative, and time as well as the nominal modifiers determiner and specifier, is to be the focus of the question, the sentence is inverted, with the focus moved to the fronted position, and, as above, preceded by a”. The following Jamaican Creole sentences exemplify this:

(11) a-huu put _ de
    HL-who put it there
    ‘Who put it there?’ (Bailey 1966:88)

(12) a- wa Anti sen fi mi
    HL wha Auntie send for me
    ‘What has Auntie sent for me?’ (ibid.)

She notes that “the introductory a is often omitted in questions, probably as the result of competing English forms” (1966:90) and that equative a (i.e. introducing an inverted sentence) has the geographical variant da and an English-influenced (i.e. mesolectal) variant iz (1966:139).

Not long afterwards, Hancock (1969: 66, 67) compared seven different English-based creoles, revealing that the Jamaican word for ‘who?’ could also be hu or hudat, the latter a form also found in Guyanese CE, Gullah CE and Sierra Leone Krio. To
these could be added African American English who-dat (Arthur Spears, personal communication). Hancock’s study also revealed a phonological resemblance among the English creoles for the highlighter and the word for ‘that’; the latter can take forms ranging from a to da to dat in Guyanese, with an alveolar nasal replacing the alveolar stop in Krio na. Although the grammatical function of a highlighter is unfamiliar to those who speak standard English only, they can interpret hudat as ‘Who’s that?’

Subsequently, Bynoe-Andriolo & Sorie Yillah (1975) provided examples of predicate clefting in three Niger-Congo languages (Yoruba, Temne and Kikuyu–each from a different subfamily) and in a variety of Atlantic creoles lexically based on English (Trinidadian, Jamaican, Sierra Leonean Krio and Nigerian Pidgin), French (Haitian) and Spanish/Portuguese (Papiamentu). In doing so, they not only made creolists aware of the widespread nature of predicate clefting, but also of highlighters.

They pointed out that the subcategory of verb corresponding to adjectives in European languages could undergo predicate clefting in both African and creole languages, as in the Jamaican Creole example (10b) above (Bynoe-Andriolo & Yillah 1975:235) and that the fronted element has lost its verbal nature and been nominalized. They proved this by showing that the fronted form could not co-occur with a tense/aspect marker (ibid. 237), as in the following examples from Trinidadian:

(13)  a. iz wuk _ wukin
      HL work 3s working
     ‘He’s really working.’

      b. * iz wuk-in _ wukin
         HL working 3s working

Finally, they pointed out that the highlighter, which they called a nominal introducer (ibid. 238), could also introduce other elements fronted for focus, as in the Jamaican Creole sentences (7b), (8b) and (8c) above.

In 1980 Holm published an article linking the African and creole highlighter to African American English i’s and da’s as well as to Guinea-Bissau Creole Portuguese ki as in:

(14)  Baka ki si pápe
      cow HL 3s superior
     ‘Le boeuf, c’est lui qui est son supérieur’ (Chataigner 1963:46, cited by Holm 1980:372)

Even though ki appears to be a relativizer, its function as a highlighter was later confirmed by Kihm (1994:229), who identified the Guinea-Bissau CP highlighting structure as the copula _ followed by the relative ku (or its allomorph ki). In Guinea-Bissau CP the copula is optional if the sentence is not negated:
(15)  ___ Pis garandi son  **ku**  _ ta da -n pa n kume.
    COP  fish big only REL 3s HAB give 1s for 1s eat
    ‘It’s only big fish that he gives me to eat.’ (Kihm 1994:229)

By this time an entire book entitled *Focus and Grammatical Relations in Creole Languages* (Byrne & Winford, 1993) had been published. In it, Kihm made it clear that Guinea-Bissau CP disallows fronting without clefting, showing that (16)a is acceptable, but not (16)b:

(16)  a.  (i) **kin**  **ku**  Jon  gasija  na si kasa
    it who that John put-up in his house
    ‘Who did John put up in his house?’ (Kihm 1993:141)

    b.  *kin ___ Jon  gasija  na si kasa
    who John put-up in his house  (ibid.)

Finally, the occurrence of *ki* or *ku* in what is clearly a predicate cleft construction leaves no doubt that whatever its origin, it has taken on the focusing function of a highlighter:

(17)  **Bonitu**  **ki**  mininu  bonitu.
    handsome COMP child handsome
    ‘The child is really handsome.’ (Holm & Intumbo 2009:246)

Chataigner (1963:46) notes that the West African languages spoken in the same area as the creole have a similar highlighter between the subject and verb: Mandinga *le* and Wolof *a*. Interestingly, another substrate/adstrate language, Balanta, example (18), has a complementizer in the position of creole *ki* in (17) above with a highlighter at the end of the sentence:

(18)  **Boñ**  **te**  mbi nace  boñ  **ni**.
    Handsome COMP child that handsome HL
    ‘That child is really handsome.’ (Holm & Intumbo 2009:246)

Later Souza & Oliveira (2009:255) established that while the majority of Cape Verdain sentences beginning with question words like *kem?* ‘who?’ are followed by *ki ~ ku*, this was not always the case, so the rule disallowing fronting without clefting was not actually categorical in that creole. Similarly, an optional focus marker is found in the Gulf of Guinea creoles in São Tomense:
Andji (ku) bô be
Onde FOCO 2s ir
‘Onde (que) você vai?’ (T. Hagemeijer, cited in Oliveira & Holm 2010)

4. Focus markers in Brazilian Vernacular Portuguese

Lemle (1976) noted that in her study of the urban Brazilian Portuguese of Rio de Janeiro, she had recorded eight different equivalents of the English question “Where did you fall?”, ranging from *Onde você caiu?* (rated the most formal by native speakers) to *Onde que você caiu?* (most informal). Discussing this, Holm noted that “The surprising result of Lemle’s survey is that *Onde você caiu?*—one of the constructions judged most formal and thus presumably standard—is not possible in European Portuguese” (Holm 1992:62). Later his EP-speaking students at Coimbra University confirmed that subject-verb inversion was required here in EP (*Onde caiu você?*—although they preferred *Onde é que você caiu?*), but the question without the copula *é* (*Onde que você caiu?*) was also unacceptable. This is the copula deletion in sentence (1) above, the topic of this study. Its acceptability in spoken Brazilian Portuguese seems to be unquestioned, even among educated speakers: Oliveira notes that “No tocante ao fenômeno em destaque—perguntas-QU fronteadas, seguidas de que—atesta-se ampla exemplificação em grande parte do país, tanto em meio a falantes cultos (PB) como a não cultos (PVB).” [‘Regarding the phenomenon under consideration–fron ted WH-questions followed by que–they are widely attested in much of the country among educated speakers (BP) as well as the uneducated (BVP)” (Oliveira & Holm 2010).]

In her 1997 dissertation on BVP, Mello discusses such structures:

(20) Quem que chegou?
who [that] arrive-PRF
‘Who arrived?’ (Mello 1997:171)

She adds that such questions can be embedded:

(21) Eu sei onde que ela mora.
1s know where [that] 3s live
‘I know where she lives.’ (ibid.)

She notes “...the pervasive presence of the so-called that-t effect [footnote: this term originated in Government and Binding theory and refers to doubly-filled COMP.]” (ibid. 170). In their discussion of EP, Brito and Duarte note that the position at the beginning of the sentence that WH-words move to is the same position occupied by complementizers in subordinate clauses, observing that “in Portuguese, as in many other languages, complementizers and interrogative morphemes do not co-occur” (2003:466), making a sentence like (20) above ungrammatical. However, Brito and Duarte add that
when they do co-occur, interrogative morphemes move to the position before complementizers, and that the co-occurrence of interrogatives and complementizers is subject to certain conditions, which vary from one language or variety to another. They mention that in “colloquial Mozambican and Brazilian Portuguese” a sentence such as the following, which is ungrammatical in European Portuguese, can be produced:

(22) Onde que foste?
   where REL go-PRF.2s
   ‘Where did you go?’ (Brito & Duarte 2003: 466)

The generativist approach to this construction as a doubly-filled COMP seems to have gained ground in Brazil, although it offers no explanation as to why it should be so widespread in the spoken Portuguese of Brazil but absent in European Portuguese. In their 2002 study, Kato et al. describe it in neutral terms as a “...cleft question....the WH-word appears at the beginning of the sentence followed by é que (which is a usual construction in other languages and in EP) or only by que, the last being an option typical only in Brazilian Portuguese, derived from a cleft clause without a copula” (2002:316). However, in a 2009 article, Braga et al. reassess it as a doubly-filled complementizer. More surprisingly, given her co-editors’ contatista approach to BVP, Ribeiro in Lucchesi, Baxter and Ribeiro (2009:203) also considers it “duplo preenchimento do sintagma complementador”:

(23) nonde que nósis nasceu é bonito, né?
   where [that] lp be-born be beautiful TAG
   ‘Where we were born is beautiful, isn’t it?’ (Ribeiro 2009:203)

Going back to Mello’s analysis of this construction in 1997, she notes that “constructions in which that-t effect is present in BP seem to have ultimately been derived from the emphatic form que é que ‘wh-is-wh’ present in EP since the archaic period of the language (from the twelfth to the sixteenth century). It seems likely that this structure was reinterpreted during the restructuring of Portuguese as question word + highlighter by speakers of African languages” (Mello 1997:172-173).

5. Conclusions

We agree with Mello that the most likely origin of the uses of BVP que after question words and other elements fronted for focus was the interlanguage variety of Portuguese spoken in Brazil during the early colonial period by native speakers of African and creole languages that have an obligatory rule requiring such elements to be highlighted, such as the Creole Portuguese of Guinea-Bissau discussed above in relation to sentences (16a) and (16b). As Holm tried to point out some 30 years ago,
“There seems to have been a syntactic category ‘highlighter’ in the mother tongues of many of the first West Africans who reanalyzed Portuguese, English and French into the pidgins that became the Atlantic creoles. In the same way that the ‘need’ of English and French speakers for an expressed subject will lead them, in speaking Spanish, to keep on using personal pronouns as the subjects for verbs whose conjugational inflections render the subject quite clear and its expression in the form of a pronoun completely unnecessary and ultimately wrong, there seems to have been a ‘need’ for a highlighter among Africans that was so great that words were found to fill this slot despite the lack of any such syntactic category in the European languages in question” (Holm 1980:372).

Of course the incorporation of que as a focus marker into BVP in structures like sentence (1) above was facilitated by the existence of the Portuguese emphatic structure é que for native speakers of that language, but its original motivation was the need for native speakers of Portuguese creoles and West African languages to highlight a fronted element.

References

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