

The Real-Time Construct in Turma da Mônica Comics: An Analysis of the Anaphoric Third-Person Direct Object Phenomenon from the 1970s to the 2010s

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Abstract

The real-time construct aims to observe the variation and change of a certain sociolinguistic phenomenon in different synchronic time frames. In this work, we examine how this occurs in the variation of the third-person anaphoric direct object. Although traditional grammars prescribe only the clitic pronoun as a possible option to occupy the direct object space in sentences, pioneering works such as Omena (1978) and Duarte (1986) have already shown a significant decline in the use of this variant and an increase in others such as the lexical pronoun, the nominal phrase, and the null object. Therefore, our goal is to analyze its rate in Turma da Mônica comic books from the 1970s to the 2010s. The results obtained corroborate the aforementioned research: there is a 52% decrease in the percentage of the clitic pronoun between the first and last synchronic periods and an emergence of the lexical pronoun in publications previously dismissed as a direct object. The conclusion is that the comics follow the same pattern as the vernacular Brazilian Portuguese (PB), aiming for the extinction of the clitic pronoun and the gradual increase of the other variants.

Keywords: real-time; anaphoric direct object; comic books.

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OPENING WORDS

Variationist Sociolinguistics (Labov, 2008), a branch of Linguistics that aims to study variation and change from historical, social, and cultural aspects, is based on the principle that transitions occurring in language are inherent to the linguistic system itself, denying the immanence postulated by formalist theories of language such as Structuralism and Generativism. When change is underway, it can be observed from two constructs to determine if there is indeed progress in the process: apparent time and real-time (Labov, 1994).

In this work, our proposal is to analyze the phenomenon of the third-person anaphoric direct object in Brazilian Portuguese (hereafter BP) based on short duration real time, using for this purpose comic books from Turma da Mônica, created by Brazilian cartoonist Maurício de Sousa. In BP, this phenomenon can occur in four main ways:

- 1) clitic accusative as in: “Opa! Esse *homem* parece que está ferido! Vou socorrê-**lo!**” (Mônica, 1970, p. 5);
- 2) lexical pronoun as in: “Tem mais um *gato* nesta casa! Mas eu pego **ele!**” (Magali, 1994, p. 27);
- 3) nominal phrase as in: “Pergunte ao *Cascão!*... Cascão? Bem que eu queria achar **aquele moleque!**” (Cascão, 1985, p. 8);
- 4) null object as in: “Eu encontrei o *Sansão* perdido no campinho e guardei **ø** pra você!” (Cebolinha, 2013, p. 31)

This phenomenon has already been analyzed from this construct by Cyrino (1997), who used a *corpus* of plays dated from the 16th to the 20th century. The author observed a decrease in the full form, mainly the clitic pronoun, a variant considered conservative, and an increase in the null object.

Pinto and Coelho (2016) attest to the same result with samples of speakers from the most urban area of Florianópolis, capital of the Brazilian state of Santa Catarina, observed at two points: in the 1990s and the 2010s. The authors confirm that there is a slight increase in the null form and a consequent decrease in the full forms from one synchronic period to another. It is important to note that these two studies are in a *continuum* between speech and writing (Marcuschi, 2010), closer to orality.

Thus, we understand that the phenomenon in question presents a wide variation within BP,

¹ Translated by: Laura Scaramussa Azevedo.

especially if observed diachronically. Equipped with publications dated between the 1970s and 2010s, we aim to attest to the decrease of the clitic pronoun, a variant already obsolete in speech as observed in studies like Omena (1978), Duarte (1986), Malvar (1992), and Lauar (2015), and the increase of other forms, with emphasis on the personal pronoun in the nominative case, which use is considered "wrong" in the object position by grammatical compendiums (Bechara, 2004; Cunha; Cintra, 2013; Rocha Lima, 2011).

To this end, we divided the work as follows: the second section details the representation of the direct object in Portuguese in traditional grammars, contrasting with the results of sociolinguistic research on the phenomenon. Then, in the third section, we make some considerations about the real-time construct, the methodology that rules this work. Moving on to the fourth section, we will address a bit about the textual genre we focused our research on, comic books, and also point out our research *corpus*. In the fifth section, we will show our results and discussion. Finally, in the sixth section, we will outline our final considerations.

THE ANAPHORIC DIRECT OBJECT PHENOMENON: DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Traditional grammar emphasizes the function of oblique case pronouns occupying the object position in a sentence. The personal pronoun in the nominative case is recommended for the subject position. Rocha Lima (2011), for example, is only concerned with this definition, not addressing any other exceptional cases where pronouns may occupy different functions within Brazilian Portuguese syntax.

Cunha and Cintra (2013) go further, considering the use of the nominative case pronoun as an object an "error and inaccuracy," in a section of the grammar devoted to uses that deviate from the standard norm in Portuguese. According to the authors, this use comes from the "vulgar and familiar speech of Brazil" (Cunha; Cintra, 2013, p. 302)² and can only be accepted when preceded by a preposition, repeating the direct object indicated by the clitic form (o, a, os, as), and when preceded by the words "todo" or "só" (Cunha; Cintra 2013, p. 303).

Bechara (2004) also considers that there are exceptional cases where the nominative case pronoun can be used as an object: when it is preceded by "todo" or "só" – as Cunha and Cintra also do – or when there is an emphatic accentuation.

However, grammars intended to prescribe linguistic uses establish rules to guide speakers' uses but do not describe the vernacular variety as it truly is.

In the investigated phenomenon, for example, studies with speech *corpora* such as the aforementioned Omena (1978), Duarte (1986), Malvar (1992), and Lauar (2015) confirm the near disappearance of the clitic pronoun in speech – with rates of 0%, 49%, 1%, and 0,5%, respectively – and the preference for the null object. The lexical pronoun, the form not recommended by grammars to occupy the direct object position, presents usage between 13% and 25%. Some factors favor the use of the null object, such as the antecedent being [-animated] and being in a simple syntactic structure. Another variant with a strong presence is the anaphoric nominal phrase – in studies where it is quantified, it behaves similarly to the null form, even occupying a preference position among the variants.

In writing, however, the use of the clitic pronoun is still persistent – although it is not the only form accepted as prescribed by grammarians. Othero *et al.* (2018), in research with comic books and Twitter posts, find in the first textual genre a total of 25% of clitic pronouns in the total occurrences. The authors thus understand that

² All citations have been translated by the authors of this paper.

[...] the texts found in the comic book corpus represent monitored written discourse (they are revised texts published by a publishing house with its quality standard of publications). Therefore, the dialogues present, even if they intend to represent speech – and children's speech – are published in a written medium and carry the weight of literary written grammatical tradition (Othero *et al.*, 2018, p. 78).

Duarte and Freire (2015), analyzing journalistic texts in European Portuguese (EP) and BP, find an even higher rate of clitics than in the previous study in this second variety: 57% of the total occurrences in the *corpus* obtained in BP. There is the presence of the lexical pronoun, its use is concentrated in the chronicle genre, seen by the authors as more permeable to forms used in speech. Duarte and Freire believe that the clitic only occurs in BP in the context of school education, while in EP, the variant is indeed part of the vernacular.

However, this is not what Pereira and Coelho (2013) find. In a study analyzing the anaphoric direct object in school essays of students from the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th grades of four public schools in Florianópolis, they observed the presence of only 7% of occurrences as an oblique pronoun, used mainly by female students.

These studies with written *corpora*, however, do not study the phenomenon from the real-time construct. Our goal in this work is to conduct such an investigation and understand how variation occurs in each synchronic period, given that the textual genre we analyze is based on written scripting but aims to reproduce speech. We will discuss this further in the next section.

THE REAL-TIME CONSTRUCT

When analyzing ongoing change in a language, we encounter two methods of doing so: apparent time and real-time.

The apparent time construct aims to analyze a certain sociolinguistic phenomenon in different age groups to verify the stage of change. It understands that if a variant is preferred by older speakers and is disused in the language of younger ones, a change in the language may be occurring. Tavares (2011, p. 397) states that in summary:

The possibility of studying change in apparent time depends on the validity of the assumption that the individual linguistic system is stable, that is, the vernacular of an individual of a certain age group remains essentially the same despite the passage of years, allowing the comparison of the speech of people of different ages to observe different stages of the language.

However, this type of analysis has two main problems, as pointed out by Paiva (2016): the first is the fact that data collection may or may not be representative of that speech community in question. The second is that when analyzing different age groups, we frame speakers who may be in periods of life where the use of a more cultured variety, for example, may be the most frequent option.

On the other hand, the real-time construct examines variation in a speech community at different points in time (cf. Labov, 1994). This can be done in two ways: trend studies and panel studies. According to Paiva and Duarte (2003, p. 17),

“Panel studies, by comparing speech samples from the same speakers at different points in time, allow capturing changes or stability in individual linguistic behavior and can provide the necessary elements to distinguish between generational change and community change”.

The authors further explain,

Trend studies, on the other hand, compare random samples of the same speech community, stratified based on the same social parameters, at two points in time. If the requirement that each sample is indeed random is met, the recorded speakers can be considered representative of the community at the time of recording, and the result of the comparative study of the samples will, statistically, be equivalent to the study of the entire community.

However, concerning research with comic books, we conclude that the definitions of trend and panel studies are not applicable. If we understand the work as a trend study, we comprehend the class of comic book writers behind each story. These writers, even if they change over time, belong to the same community of practice³ that reflects the change within that community in the language. However, if we understand it as a panel study, considering the character as the speaker, we have the same "person" who does not change age – children will always be children, adults will always be adults, and so on. Thus, we propose not to fit into either type of study.

Using this real-time methodology, we constituted our analysis *corpus* with comic books from various synchronic periods, as we will discuss in the following topic.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE COMIC BOOK GENRE AND THE RESEARCH *CORPUS*

Textual genres are, according to Marcuschi (2007, p. 19), "historical phenomena deeply linked to cultural and social life". Therefore, it is undeniable that comic books have been cultural products for many decades – their emergence dates back to the mid-19th century in Europe – and by this factor, they change according to the society in which they are established.

It is a genre where the narrative is grouped into frames, and all the plot and actions take place within these frames. Besides the verbal, present mainly in speech balloons, there are various non-verbal features such as images, illustrations, and engravings. It is, therefore, a highly multimodal genre where various literacies, beyond reading, are necessary for comprehension.

Regarding the language adopted in the publications, Marcuschi (2008), when elaborating his definition of discursive domain, places the comic book in the leisure domain, where genres such as jokes, games, riddles, crossword puzzles, and horoscopes are also found. In his *continuum* of speech and writing, the author understands that narratives and jokes are closer to writing – thus, we could also place comic books at this point. Mendonça (2007, p. 196) also concludes that the genre is more likely to have a written base, since according to the author, the so-called "scripts" – verbal narratives that guide the illustrator's work – precede the comicization.

Therefore, in this work, we aim to investigate whether the linguistic variety used in comic books is indeed closer to writing, using the clitic accusative form prescribed by normative grammars for direct object retrieval, or if it aligns more with studies addressing the vernacular, such as the aforementioned Omena (1978), Duarte (1986), Malvar (1992), and Lauar (2015), which found the near disappearance of the clitic pronoun and an increase in other forms. We understand, as Biazolli (2009, p. 655) states, that "the changes that occur in textual genres are inseparable from changes in social life, which, in turn, among other aspects, condition changes in the language".

Othero *et al.* (2018, p. 78) believe that comic books continue to have a linguistic direction in which, upon being scrutinized by editors, they maintain a language based on traditional grammar.

³ In a nutshell, community of practice is a study, proposed by Eckert (2000), in which individuals belonging to certain groups that share equal social practices also share a similar linguistic repertoire.

To verify this assertion, we analyzed 180 Turma da Mônica publications distributed between the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. We ensured that the language of the comics corresponded to the decade of their publication, thus using only magazines where the publication years ended between 3 and 7.

In each of these synchronic periods, we computed 440 to 450 occurrences to ensure data equivalence in each. This computation was not random but generated by the number of anaphoric direct object cases from the 1970s: as the magazines from this period were difficult to access, we gathered all we could, coded them, and ultimately obtained 445 cases of anaphoric direct objects, which served as a standard for the other decades. This synchronic period does not follow the rule of only analyzing publications between years ending in 3 and 7 because, for this decade, the only available material was published between 1970 and 1974.

Table 1 presents the number of occurrences and magazines per analyzed period.

Table 1 – Number of publications and occurrences per analyzed synchronic period

DECADE	NUMBER OF PUBLICATIONS	NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES
1970	21	445
1980	45	441
1990	46	442
2000	33	445
2010	35	445
TOTAL		2218

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The number of publications related to the 1970s is smaller because, besides the already mentioned magazines, we used a special edition book that featured the first stories of Turma da Mônica (Sousa, 2002). After gathering the *corpus*, we coded the occurrences and performed the necessary statistical treatment using Google Sheets, a spreadsheet program offered by Google.

Thus, after discussing the textual genre of analysis and the *corpus* available for the work, we proceed to the real-time analysis of the anaphoric direct object phenomenon with our research results.

REAL-TIME ANALYSIS OF THE ANAPHORIC DIRECT OBJECT PHENOMENON IN COMICS

In this section, we present the results of the study, based on the percentages found in the occurrences of the anaphoric direct object. For Guy and Zilles (2007, p. 26), percentages are important as they "provide a very useful global summary of the distribution of ternary or n-ary variables.

Our initial hypothesis, as previously stated, is that the clitic pronoun would be in significant decline in comic books, being replaced by innovative forms such as the null object, the nominal phrase (NP), and the lexical pronoun. In the general round with all synchronic periods together, we obtained the results described below, in Table 2.

Table 2 – General distribution of third-person anaphoric direct object variants in the *corpus* of Turma da Mônica magazines in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s and 2010s

VARIANTS	NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES	PERCENTAGE
Nominal phrase	589	44,4%
Null object	534	24,1%
Clitic accusative	431	19,4%
Lexical pronoun	228	10,3%
Demonstrative pronoun	41	1,8%

Source: Prepared by the authors.

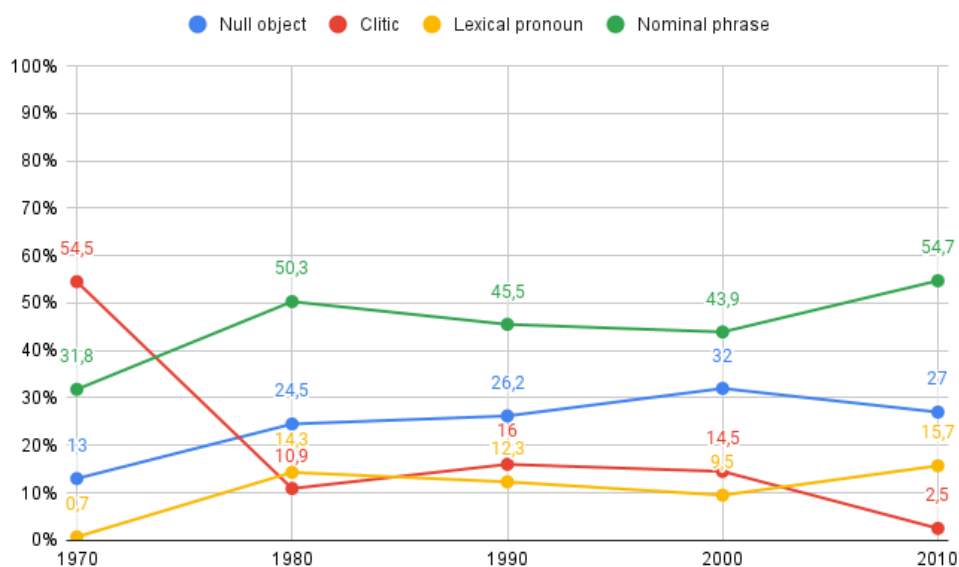
As observed, the nominal phrase is the most preferred variant among the anaphoric direct object occurrences found in comic books. This result can be explained by the genre's characteristics, structured in frames with written features. For the target audience of the publications, children, this would be the best way to retrieve the referent more easily. The null object, preferred in speech, appears next, with 24,1% of the occurrences.

The clitic accusative appears with a high index – 19,4% of the occurrences. This result, as we will see below, is entirely skewed by the decade of analysis. Nonetheless, the high percentage shows that even if the editorial medium tries to bring a reproduction of speech in the magazines, there is still an underlying pursuit of linguistic precision, possibly guided by the quest for a "good language" for children, as Ramos (2017) points out.

The other pronominal form, the lexical pronoun, has 10.3% of the occurrences, while the demonstrative pronoun accounts for less than 2% of the uses found in the analyzed *corpus*. This result is very close to other studies, including those dealing with the vernacular.

The result of the lexical pronoun is also skewed, as we can see in Figure 1 below, showing the real-time data obtained in this research – it is important to mention that for this analysis, we removed the few cases of demonstrative pronouns from our *corpus*.

Figure 1 - Path of the relative frequency of variants of the anaphoric direct object in the *corpus* of Turma da Mônica magazines between the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000 and 2010



Source: Prepared by the authors.

In an initial analysis of the obtained data, both in the table and the graph, we can see that the 1970s differ the most from the other periods – for example, the preferred variant is the clitic accusative, not the nominal phrase as seen in other synchronic periods. In this form of direct object retrieval, there is a total of 54,5% of the occurrences. In the subsequent decades, the use of this form drops drastically, going to 10,9% in the next decade, the 1980s, and increasing slightly in the following synchronic periods. However, in the 2010s, it reaches its lowest number with only 2,5% of the total occurrences.

The lexical pronoun also shows a significant change in this period compared to others. In the 1970s, there are only three occurrences of this variant: in a speech by Cebolinha: “Minha mãe está lá em cima com meu *pai*! Se não for embora, eu chamo **ele**, hem?” (Mônica, 1970, p. 29); in a speech by Thuga, Piteco's prehistoric suitor: “Estou com tanta saudade do *Piteco* que “vejo **ele**” por toda parte!” (Mônica, 1971a, p. 31); and in another speech by Cebolinha: “Puxa! Quando cheguei lá e não vi *a estátua*, pensei que tinham roubado **ela**!” (Mônica, 1971b, p. 06). It is interesting to note that only in Thuga's case, depicted in the comics as an adult and primitive woman, is the personal pronoun in the object position placed in quotation marks as a deviation from the standard norm.

In the 1980s, however, there is a significant increase in this variant, reaching 14,3% – a rate surpassed only by the last analyzed decade, the 2010s, with a total of 15,7% of occurrences.

How can we interpret this distinct behavior of the 1980s compared to other periods? Should this decade be closer to the vernacular, or should the clitic variant, for example, decrease gradually? There are hypotheses that can guide us to a possible answer, such as the sociopolitical context of Brazil at the time: the Military Dictatorship in Brazil, which lasted from 1964 to 1985, causing changes in all areas of society – and language would be no different. Although Cirne (1982 *apud* Fernandes, 2015) states that Maurício de Sousa, creator of Turma da Mônica, remained politically neutral at the time, following the editorial line of the newspaper in which he published – which cost him his job as a cartoonist at Folha da Tarde (cf. Batistoti, 2018) for refusing to take a stand in the movement – it is likely that the transformations altered his writing style.

Andrade, Melo and Scherre (2007), also using a *corpus* of Turma da Mônica comic books, sought to verify this fact through the phenomenon of the grammatical imperative. In the 1970s, at the beginning of the dictatorial period, the imperative is associated with the indicative in 7% of occurrences. In the 1980s, this number abruptly rises to 51% of occurrences. More interestingly, in a year-by-year analysis, 1983 shows a figure around 18%. With the end of the repression in 1985, this index rises to 53% of occurrences.

They conclude that "an event of such great proportion and intensity cannot have passed without leaving marks on the language, especially the written language, whether in the imperative or other structures of Brazilian Portuguese" (Andrade; Melo; Scherre, 2007, p. 5). We also apply this conclusion to the anaphoric direct object phenomenon: with the relaxation of repressive measures and later the end of the Dictatorship, there was a significant decrease in the prestige variant, the accusative clitic, and an increase in the lexical pronoun, a form disregarded by normative grammars in the object position.

Moving on to the analysis of the other variants, the nominal phrase and the null object, we see that both also increase from the 1980s and maintain a standard index in subsequent periods – the NP becomes the most used variant in the publications, ranging from 43% to 55%, and the null object, preferred by the vernacular, takes the second position, ranging from 24% to 32% of occurrences. This result is similar to that found by Othero *et al.* (2018), who found that 25% of

occurrences in the comic book *corpus* they observed were of null objects – the average of what we found in our results.

Given all the results, we now proceed to our final considerations.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is undeniable that the real-time methodology is a good parameter for observing variation in a sociolinguistic phenomenon. In the third-person anaphoric direct object in *Turma da Mônica* comic books, the construct proved valuable in demonstrating the decrease in the rate of clitic pronouns, considered by normative grammars the only possible form to occupy the direct object position – while in the 1970s, at the beginning of the magazine's publications, this form obtained 54,5% of the total occurrences, in the following decade, it obtained only 10,9%, a decrease of more than 43 percentage points. In the last analyzed decade, the 2010s, the clitic occupies only 2,5% of the total anaphoric direct object retrievals.

On the other hand, the lexical pronoun, almost nonexistent in the 1970s with only 3 occurrences in 445, gains prominence from the 1980s onwards, maintaining its rate in the subsequent decades between 9,5% and 15,7%. As we reported, these changes may have occurred due to transformations in society with Brazil's path to redemocratization post-Military Dictatorship.

The anaphoric nominal phrase is the preferred form in the overall result, with 44,4% of occurrences. This index can be explained by the configuration of the comic book genre – being divided into frames, the retrieval through a definite description would facilitate the referent's apprehension. The null object, preferred by the vernacular, occupies the second place in the "preferred retrieval" of the anaphoric direct object, with the index increasing from the 1980s, peaking in the 2000s.

Thus, we conclude that the written language, often understood as maintaining the standard norm, also shows wide variation in the textual genre investigated, the comic books. Moreover, we understand that due to the use of this textual genre, the short-duration real-time investigation became possible, yielding fruitful results. We hope these findings will aid future studies.

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