

The Role of Sentence Complexity in Variation: A Cross-linguistic Study of Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese

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Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese (BP) display tense-aspect-mood variation in the main verb of conditional sentence apodoses. In both languages the prescriptive form is the synthetic conditional. The most common non-prescriptive form in Spanish is the imperfect subjunctive and in BP the past imperfect indicative. Previous research on Spanish conditionals focus on the effects of social variables, i.e. speaker's age, social class and gender, on the verbal tense choice in conditionals (Serrano & Almeida, 1994; Silva Corvalán, 1984, Gutiérrez, 2003). As for Brazilian Portuguese, Barbosa (2005), Tesch (2011) and Santos da Silva (1998) claim that formal parallelism, the type of text/ discourse genre, and phonic salience of the verb conjugated in the apodosis have a significant effect on verbal tense choice in conditionals. Previous research, however, has not considered apodosis variation cross-linguistically.

The present study examines the linguistic conditioning of verb tense variation in the apodosis. In order to systematically analyze this variation, we limited our analyses to tokens whose main protasis verb is conjugated in the imperfect subjunctive. This allowed us to draw data from the Corpus do Português (Davies & Ferreira, 2006) and the Corpus del Español (Davies, 2002), using the search criterion “*se/si(if) + Imperfect Subjunctive.*” Of the 2703 occurrences of this search term in the 1900s Spanish corpus, we extracted all conditional sentences containing both a protasis and apodosis (N = 677). We used the same criterion to extract tokens for analysis from the Brazilian Portuguese corpus (N = 281).

Resting on previous research and preliminary analysis, we coded the tokens for genre (written/ oral), order (canonical/ non-canonical), apodosis verb complexity (presence of auxiliary/ simple verb), protasis verb complexity, apodosis verb complexity and protasis verb frequency. The dependent variable under study was the conjugated verb form in the apodosis, which was classified as canonical (conditional form) or non-canonical (imperfect subjunctive in Spanish, imperfect in BP). Using *R*, we performed a logistic regression analysis to study variable impact, using conditional inference trees to determine interactions among independent variables.

In both languages, prescriptive apodosis verb conjugation was most prevalent. In Spanish a complex apodosis verb predicted the non-prescriptive verb form in the apodosis. This effect was shown to be strongest in oral tokens. In both languages, order also had a significant effect. Non-canonical order—that is, sentences in which the apodosis appears before the protasis—predicted a greater use of prescriptive verb forms. These results lead us to propose that cognitive processing may play a role in apodosis verb variation. Following the analysis of Lavandera (1976), conditional constructions involve complex cognitive processes, and as these constructions become more complex, our data suggest that there is greater deviance from prescriptive forms. A cognitive processing interpretation would also predict the cross-linguistic effect of order. This study contributes to the understanding of the factors which condition variation, which may include statistical grammatical factors as well as variation induced by cognitive load. Future study may focus on the role of cognitive processing in linguistic variation.

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