Strategies of subject indetermination in English and in Brazilian Portuguese

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In usage-based cognitive linguistics it is widely accepted that language operates on two complementing functions, namely, the symbolic and the communicative functions (Evans and Green, 2006). These functions, specially the communicative one, foreground the importance that specific usage-events and communicative intentions have in determining the linguistic structures we conceptualize. This characteristic can be evidenced in a number of constructions whose form-function relations cannot be fully accounted for without a thorough analysis of their corresponding pragmatic factors. Such is the case of indeterminate subjects, which we aim to examine in this paper.

From a discursive standpoint, pragmatic factors such as the speaker's communicative intentions are believed to be the driving force for different grammatical constructions, that is, speakers can make use of different syntactic strategies to codify their intentions linguistically. In CxG (Goldberg, 1995), this view is also captured by the Principle of No Synonymy (Corollary B) according to which, two or more syntactically distinct and pragmatically synonymous constructions must not be semantically synonymous. We believe this analysis can comfortably accommodate constructions such as passives, actives with generic pronouns (e.g. you, one, someone, etc.) and the Brazilian Portuguese indeterminate subject construction (e.g. deixaram um bilhete para você / they left you a message).

In light of the discussion above, this paper, which is part of an ongoing PhD research project, aims to provide a quantitative account of the strategies of subject indetermination both in Brazilian Portuguese and in English in two representative corpora, The Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008-) and Davies and Ferreira's (2006-) Corpus of Portuguese. The frequency descriptions are meant to display speakers' preferred strategies of subject indetermination in both languages paving the way for a more robust explanatory account of the reasons why speakers of these two languages use different strategies for the same pragmatic intention.

References

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