



## PRONOMINAL SUBJECT IN ALAGOAS: A CASE OF CHANGE IN PROGRESS

### O SUJEITO PRONOMINAL EM ALAGOAS: UM CASO DE MUDANÇA EM PROGRESSO

*Maria Auxiliadora da Silva Cavalcante<sup>1</sup>*

#### ABSTRACT

Several studies demonstrate that Brazilian Portuguese is in a process of change in relation to the way in which pronominal subjects are carried out. There is a clear preference for full achievements over null subjects. However, these studies are mostly based on speech samples from the Southeast Region, which does not invalidate the research, but leaves room for some questions, especially if we take into account the large Brazilian territory and its social and cultural complexity. Thus, using a sample of the speech of 12 informants from Alagoas, of both sexes, distributed in three age groups, this research aimed to analyze 616 occurrences of pronominal subjects of the language spoken in Alagoas, with the intention of observing whether the process of variation and change linguistics already detected by Duarte (1995) in Rio de Janeiro would also be occurring in Alagoas. We adopt a theoretical foundation based on the Theory of Linguistic Variation (LABOV, 1983). The methodology also follows the guidelines of the aforementioned theory. The results revealed that the language spoken in Alagoas is also in a process of change, in relation to the form of realization of the pronominal subjects, since, in the studied corpus, the Alagoas speakers performed 69% of the subject position in its full form and that this process of Linguistic change is affecting Brazilian Portuguese on a very regular basis.

**KEYWORDS:** Linguistic variation; Subject pronouns; Linguistic change

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1 Professora Titular do Centro de Educação e do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação, da Universidade Federal de Alagoas-UFAL, [maria.cavalcante@cedu.ufal.br](mailto:maria.cavalcante@cedu.ufal.br).

## RESUMO

Diversos estudos demonstram que o Português Brasileiro está em processo de mudança com relação à forma de realização dos sujeitos pronominais. Observa-se uma clara preferência pelas realizações plenas em detrimento dos sujeitos nulos. Entretanto, esses estudos são baseados, em sua maioria, em amostras da fala da Região Sudeste, o que não invalida as pesquisas, mas dá margens a alguns questionamentos, principalmente se levarmos em conta a grande extensão territorial brasileira e sua complexidade social e cultural. Assim, utilizando uma amostra da fala de 12 informantes alagoanos, de ambos os sexos, distribuídos em três faixas etárias, esta pesquisa objetivou analisar 616 ocorrências de sujeitos pronominais da língua falada em Alagoas, com a intenção de observar se o processo de variação e mudança linguística já detectado por Duarte (1995) no Rio de Janeiro também estaria ocorrendo em Alagoas. Adotamos uma fundamentação teórica baseada na Teoria da Variação Linguística (LABOV, 1983). A metodologia também segue as orientações da citada teoria. Os resultados revelaram que a língua falada em Alagoas também está em processo de mudança, em relação à forma de realização dos sujeitos pronominais, pois, no *corpus* estudado, os falantes alagoanos realizaram 69% da posição sujeito na sua forma plena e que esse processo de mudança linguística está afetando o português brasileiro de uma forma bastante regular.

**Palavras-Chave:** Variação linguística; Pronomes sujeitos; Mudança linguística.

## Introduction

Over time, natural human languages have undergone a process of linguistic variation and change; Brazilian Portuguese is no different. Various studies (CAVALCANTE, 2001; DUARTE, 1993, 1995, 1999; ROBERTS, 1993, to name but a few) show that our language is currently going through several changes, among which this study focuses on the ones pertaining to the expression of pronominal subjects, which consequently affect subject position. According to the aforementioned authors, in the first half of the 19th century null pronominal subjects accounted for 80% of subject position expressions, and this did not change significantly until the 1920s, when two simultaneous processes were detected: a marked decrease in null subject usage, and an increase on overt subjects, encompassing both specific reference and arbitrary reference pronominal subjects.

In some Brazilian regions, the current rate of phonetic expression of pronominal subjects is 70%, which means that over the last 100 years there have been changes in how the subject position is filled. Some scholars regard this as a process of linguistic change (DUARTE, 1993, 1995, 1999; ROBERTS, 1993; SHERRE et al. 2015, among others).

However, it is worth mentioning that the process of linguistic variation is not recent, as it Marroquim (1934; 2008 edition), when analyzing the language of the Northeast: Alagoas and Pernambuco, observed that the Brazilian Portuguese spoken in this region was undergoing a process of transformation in inflectional paradigms, both in nominal inflection (absence of the plural mark in nouns and adjectives) and in the verbal inflections, which were presenting a uniformity. That is: the 2nd and 3rd persons had only one form. For Marroquim (2008, p.86), “the absence of nominal inflection will be completed with the abolition of verbal inflections,

affecting mainly persons and tenses, with the role of determining them being reserved almost exclusively for pronouns”. At that time, in the 1930s, the people of Alagoas and Pernambuco still used the pronoun “vos”, however, keeping the verb in the 3rd person singular.

Thus, based on Marroquim (2008) and the research carried out by Duarte (1995), the following questions are raised: is spoken language in Alagoas also undergoing changes in pronominal subject usage? And, if that is the case, are those changes influenced by the same linguistic and extralinguistic factors detected by Duarte (1995) in Rio de Janeiro, and are they happening at a similar rate? Does this possible change affect specific reference and arbitrary reference pronominal subjects at the same rate? Which social factors could be more relevant to this process of linguistic change?

Faced with these questions, this article aims to present the results of a survey carried out from 1997 to 2001, which aimed to analyze 616 occurrences of pronominal subjects in the language spoken in Alagoas, with the intention of observing whether the process of linguistic variation and change, already detected by Duarte (1995) in Rio de Janeiro, would also be occurring in Alagoas. For that, we adopted a theoretical foundation based on the Theory of Linguistic Variation (LABOV, 1983). The methodology also follows the guidelines of the aforementioned theory. In this perspective, the corpus was submitted to the computer program Varbrul (SHERRE 1992/1993).

This study operates on the premise that linguistic change (in this case, involving pronominal subjects) is motivated not just by linguistic factors (phonetic, phonologic, morphologic, syntactic, and semantic ones), but also by extralinguistic ones (gender, age group, education, location, social and historical aspects, etc.). Consistent with this perspective, we subscribe to the Theory of Language Change’s principles and methods; thus, this is a quali-quantitative research, as proposed by Labov (1983).

It is our belief that this type of research can provide valuable contributions to the study of variable linguistic phenomena in Brazil by detecting not only those that seem to be undergoing language changes, but also those that present stable variation.

On one hand, variationist sociolinguistics-based research can contribute to a greater understanding of variable linguistic phenomena, and on the other hand, by electing speech as our object, we are focusing on a modality that was long neglected by cutting-edge linguistic research. According to Moura (1995), the most significant consequence of this neglect is a gap of scientifically-proven studies aiming to shorten the distance between the language spoken by children and the written language taught at schools.

### **Theoretical and methodological aspects**

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is Weinreich, Labov & Herzog’s (1968) Theory of Language Change (see also LABOV 1983; and DUARTE 1993, 1995, 1999a, 1999b), whose method consists of using statistical data to support variable rule linguistic analysis

by assigning different weights to the various factors that might interfere with the probabilities of either form being chosen. The analysis was conducted using Varbrul software.

### **Variationist tenets**

The theory of language change is based on a set of theoretical tenets that broke away from linguistic premises that were firmly established at the time, such as the association between homogeneity and structure. Moreover, many of its postulates introduced great changes to linguistic research, such as the idea that variation is inherent to the linguistic system and that it occurs both in speech communities and in different enunciations produced by a same speaker, according to the social role he or she is playing at the moment. From this standpoint, heterogeneity occurs normally in human languages.

Along with breaking away from Saussurean structuralist postulates, the theory of language change introduced a number of innovations in Linguistics, especially by acknowledging that linguistic variation analyses must consider not only a language's structure, but also social structures, since it is precisely the interaction between social and linguistic aspects that sheds light on matters not previously regarded as linguistic research objects, as this Theory seeks to describe and explain linguistic variation based on the interaction between linguistic and extralinguistic variables, such as a speaker's gender, age group, education, mobility, culture, and history.

Thus, the study of language changes in a variationist perspective implies considering that social factors play a significant role in linguistic variation and linguistic change. Therefore, our investigation of the Brazilian Portuguese pronominal paradigm variation process (and possible linguistic change) requires considering that social factors may be at the source of this process.

According to Weinreich, Labov & Herzog (1968, p.101), “the key to a rational conception of language change – indeed, of language itself – is the possibility of describing orderly differentiation in a language serving a Community”. Weinreich, Labov & Herzog's (1968, p.187-188) general principles to capture language change are of the utmost importance to understand the possible ongoing change process involving pronominal subjects in Alagoan spoken language, and thus are quoted below. From this perspective, linguistic change begins when the generalization of a given alternation in a certain subgroup of the speech community comes into play and assumes the character of differentiation.

Linguistic change is not to be identified with random drift proceeding from inherent variation in speech. Linguistic change begins when the generalization of a particular alternation in a given subgroup of the speech community assumes direction and takes on the character of orderly differentiation.

The association between structure and homogeneity is an illusion. Linguistic structure includes the orderly differentiation of speakers and styles through rules which govern variation in the speech community; native command of the language includes the control of such heterogeneous structures.

Not all variability and heterogeneity in language structure involves change; but all change involves variability and heterogeneity.

The generalization of linguistic change throughout linguistic structure is neither uniform nor instantaneous; it involves the covariation of associated changes over substantial periods of time and is reflected in the diffusion of isoglosses over areas of geographical space.

The grammars in which linguistic change occurs are grammars of the speech community. Because the variable structures contained in language are determined by social functions, idiolects do not provide the basis for self-contained or internally consistent grammars.

Linguistic change is transmitted within the community as a whole; it is not confined to discrete steps within the family. Whatever discontinuities are found in linguistic change are the products of specific discontinuities within the community, rather than inevitable products of the generational gap between parent and child.

Linguistic and social factors are closely interrelated in the development of language change. Explanations which are confined to one or the other aspect, no matter how well constructed, will fail to account for the rich body of regularities that can be observed in empirical studies of language behavior (WEINREICH, LABOV & HERZOG, 1968, p. 187-188).

According to Labov (1983), change usually propagates throughout a set of structural environments and is progressively disseminated over more favorable environments. Hence, the matter of social evaluation also bears considerable importance in the study of linguistic change, for it is connected to the degree of attention paid by speakers to the way they speak: certain linguistic change stages can be predicted based on how a speaker evaluates the speech of a given community, because that evaluation allows us to suppose what sort of aspirations that speaker has regarding his/her linguistic behavior, as well as his/her community. Labov (1983, p. 31) posits that the evolution of linguistic change cannot be understood without considering the social life of the community in which it occurs, since language is continuously influenced by social pressures.

As should be clear from above, Weinreich, Labov & Herzogs's (1968, p.187-188) general principles and the five aforementioned matters play a key role in understanding linguistic change phenomena, especially when it comes to data collection. In Labov's (op.263-264) eyes, using a mathematical model or electronic sound devices is not enough, and each data collection step must be executed as properly as possible.

Another, no less important contribution to the study of linguistic variation and change is the development of a suitable methodology to work with linguistic data produced by real speakers in real situations, in keeping with a theoretical framework that does not focus exclusively on linguistic factors, but also considers social ones. This methodology had a formidable impact on speech studies by allowing researchers access to procedures heretofore employed by other sciences, such as the use of mathematical models to aid both the description and the understanding of variable linguistic phenomena.

Regarding the phenomenon already verified by Duarte (1993, 1995) in Rio de Janeiro speech - a process of variation and change in subject position in Brazilian Portuguese involving overt pronouns, we believe that Theory of Language Change tenets can help us detect whether or not this process is occurring in Alagoas at the same rate as in Rio de Janeiro.

## Method

This is a quantitative and qualitative research, whose main objective is to compare and analyze, in the light of the Theory of Linguistic Variation, data from the language spoken in state Alagoas, referring to the realization of pronominal subjects, from a synchronous sample of oral language, with data analyzed by Duarte (1995) which also referred to the realizations of pronominal subjects in carioca speech .

The corpus used in this research, which gave origin to this article, is part of the database of the LUAL<sup>2</sup> Project (Língua Usada em Alagoas) of the Postgraduate Program in Letters and Linguistics at the Federal University of Alagoas. It consists of transcripts of speech recordings of 12 informants from Alagoas, 06 female and 06 male, distributed in three age groups, the first from 15 to 25 years old, the second from 26 to 49 years old and the third from 50 to 80 years old.

The data referring to the 06 informants residing in the interior of the state of Alagoas were collected in the period from 1991 to 1997, by students who participated in the LUAL project; while the recordings of the speeches of the 06 informants residing in Maceió were recorded and also transcribed by the author of this article in 1999 .

The average speech sample duration is of 30 minutes per speaker, recorded in cassette tapes. During a pre-analysis stage, transcripts were screened for the presence of subject pronouns (overt or null) with either defined or arbitrary reference. The next step was selecting 616 sentences with overt and null subject pronouns. The data selection and codification stage were preceded by a pre-analysis in which the linguistic data were submitted to a denaturalization process: rather than using the full transcripts, we selected the excerpts that would comprise our data set. The following step consisted of sentence delimitation; this involved the presence of the factors we intended to analyze and also software parameters - for example, at the time Varbrul did not accept sentence inputs longer than 120 characters.

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2 The Lual project was coordinated by Professor Maria Denilda Moura.

Sentences were codified according to independent variable groups, or factor groups. For the purpose of this article, the following linguistic factors were applied: a) reference (defined and arbitrary), verbal inflection and grammatical person; and the following extralinguistic factors: gender, age group, education, and location (whether or not the speaker resided at the state capital). These factors were fed to Varbrul. The software received linguistic information as code and calculated the weight of each independent variable over the dependent binary variable overt pronominal subject vs. null pronominal subject. In addition to each factor's weight or probability, Varbrul also made a statistical selection.

According to Naro (1992), probabilities higher than 0.50 indicate that a factor exerts a positive impact on the variable rule; probabilities under 0.50 indicate a negative impact, and probabilities close to 0.50 indicate that a factor exerts neutral influence over the dependent variable. Naro also explains that Varbrul's analyses involve several levels, as the software compares the probabilistic values assigned to the various factors under study. The first level of analysis is called 'level zero', or rule input; and in each following level, Varbrul calculates probabilities and selects the most relevant ones - the ones most likely to occur.

This statistical treatment of whether or not subject position is filled by an overt pronoun in Alagoan speech is justified when we consider that this phenomenon consists of a choice between two possibilities (overt and null), which may or may not be influenced by several linguistic and extralinguistic factors.

The main goal of the research that originated this study was to analyze Alagoan speech data based on Duarte's (1995, p. 141) research and her claim that "Brazilian Portuguese has lost the characteristic property of pro-drop languages as a result of the impoverishment of its inflectional paradigm". [...] However, "language usage does not reflect that loss as a completed change", which means that Brazilian Portuguese is undergoing a linguistic change process.<sup>3</sup>

According to Duarte's (1995, p. 48) data, null subject rates from lowest to highest are: 2<sup>nd</sup> person 20%; 1st person 33%, and 38% for 3rd person. She believes these results suggest that the change process involving subject position began with the 2nd person singular and plural pronouns "tu/vós", that were substituted by variants "você/vocês" respectively, which combine with 3rd person verbal agreements – thus, verbal inflection alone no longer provided enough information to identify grammatical persons, as the same inflection now applied to both the 2nd and the 3rd persons.

The following tables provide an overview of the current pronominal paradigm in Brazilian Portuguese spoken in Rio de Janeiro and in Alagoas, with their respective verbal inflections:

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<sup>3</sup> Languages characterized by the possibility to fill the subject position either by a null (hidden) or by an overt pronoun.

**Table 01.** Pronominal and inflectional paradigm of Brazilian Portuguese as spoken in Rio de Janeiro

Person/no.	Pronoun	Paradigm 1	Paradigm 2	Paradigm 3
1 <sup>st</sup> p. singular	eu	am o	am o	am o
2 <sup>nd</sup> p. singular	tu	am a s	-	-
	você [var.]	am a s	-	am a
3 <sup>rd</sup> p. singular	ele/ela	am a	am a	am a
1 <sup>st</sup> p. plural	nós	am a mos	am a mos	-
	a gente [var.]	-	am a	am a
2 <sup>nd</sup> p. plural	vós	am a is	-	-
	vocês [var.]	am a m	am a m	am a m
3 <sup>rd</sup> p. plural	eles/elas	am a m	am a m	am a m

(DUARTE, 1995, p.32)

As seen in Table 01 (1995, p.32), Brazilian Portuguese has evolved from a system comprising six specific verbal inflections (person and number) to a four-inflection system. Moreover, in some regions, the new system has also lost the 2nd person, represented by the “tu” [singular] and “vós” [plural] pronouns. Thus, the pronominal and inflectional paradigm has suffered a rather significant reduction that compromises subject identification to a degree, given that this task can no longer be accomplished exclusively by verbal inflection.

**Table 02.** Presents the pronominal and inflectional paradigm found in the Alagoan speech sample:

Person/no.	Pronoun	Paradigm 1	Paradigm 2	Paradigm 3
1 <sup>st</sup> p. singular	eu	am o	am o	am o
2 <sup>nd</sup> p. singular	tu	-	-	-
	você	am a	am a	am a
3 <sup>rd</sup> p. singular	ele/ela	am a	am a	am a
1 <sup>st</sup> p. plural	nós	am a mos	am a mos	am a
	a gente	am a	am a	am a mos
2 <sup>nd</sup> p. plural	vós	-	-	-
	vocês	am a m	am a m	am a
3 <sup>rd</sup> p. plural	eles/elas	am a m	am a m	am a

As shown in Table 02, pronominal and inflectional paradigms in spoken language in Alagoas have also suffered a reduction, with the partial loss of the direct 2nd person “tu” [s.] and “vós” [pl.]. The loss of the pronoun “vós” [2nd p. pl.] seems consolidated in Alagoan speech, but the same cannot be said for “tu” [2nd p. s.]; even though it was absent from the sample, its presence can be empirically verified in informal contexts, such as exchanges between father and son, siblings, and teenagers of a same group. However, in these occurrences, verbal inflection usually follows the 3rd p. s. paradigm.



As argued by Duarte (1995, p.33), as a consequence of this reduction in its pronominal and inflectional paradigms, Brazilian Portuguese has come to have “a defective null subject system, in which there is a loss of the overt and null pronominal subject complementarity characteristic of pro-drop languages, as they become interchangeable”. Such interchangeability does not, however, interfere with subject identification and licensing, as subjects are still “licensed and identified according to the same mechanisms used in romance pro-drop languages”. This shows that verbal inflection continues to allow the usage of null pronominal subjects.

In light of this fact, we have chosen to use most criteria employed by Duarte (1995) to organize our data set. Hence, the selected sentences involve time, and a subject position accomplished by an overt or null pronoun (eu, tu, você, ele, ela, a gente, nós, vocês, eles, elas [I, you [s.], you [s. var.], he, she, we [var.], we, you [pl. var.], they [masc.], they [fem.], etc.) of either specific or arbitrary reference.

It is important to stress here that the subject notion should present relationships of dependence and order with the predicate’s central verb; in other words, the analysis must involve the subject pronoun’s agreement with and position in relation to the predicate’s central verb.

A specific reference pronominal subject refers to an identifiable entity that can be mentally recognized by the speaker’s interlocutor; in other words, it corresponds to an image that has been clearly defined by the speaker (CASTILLO, 1987), such as the one in example 01:

(01) - Ah sim tá é, na verdade eu não sô muito de lê jornal não, viu!  
[- Oh yes, yes, I’m actually not much of a newspaper reader, you see!] E quando eu leio eu leio a Folha de São Paulo [...] eu prefiro ver televisão, ver as notícias [...] as coisas locais / mais, mas/ é difícil (L3/PNS-5:61) <sup>4</sup>.  
*And when I do read I read Folha de São Paulo [...] I prefer to watch tv, to see the news [...] local stuff / but / it’s hard.*

In example 01, when the speaker uses the pronoun “eu” [1<sup>st</sup> p. s.] he is referring to himself (a being that exists in time and space), a referent that can be recognized by his interlocutor and, consequently, this pronoun can be interpreted as a defined reference pronominal subject.

Unlike defined reference pronominal subjects, those with arbitrary reference ones are the those whose referents cannot be recognized by one’s interlocutor as they consist of entities that cannot be identified in time and space, are unrecognizable, generic, or hypothetical – in other words, referents of which the speaker does not produce a clear image; this can result either from an intentional choice, or from lack of knowledge about grammatical representation. Arbitrary reference pronominal subjects are illustrated by the following occurrences of pronoun “você” [2<sup>nd</sup> p. s. var.] in example 02.

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4 Examples are coded as follows: L3, L4 etc. identify the speaker; the capital letters after the slash are the speaker’s initials, followed by the report page number quoted in the example.

(02) -- Hoje Dora, eles vê a religião às vezes como um meio de viver [...] Ø<sup>5</sup> não estão entendendo o que Deus é para cada ser humano [...], porque você não pode viver sem uma religião você tem ter .... você tem que obedecer a Deus ou de uma maneira ou de outra ... você tem que viver pra Deus algum minuto de sua vida (L4/GCP-8225)

-- *Nowadays, Dora, they sometimes sees [sing.] religion as a way to live [...] Ø don't understand what God means to each human being [...], because you can't live without a religion you gotta have... you've got to obey God one way or another... you've got to live for God at least a moment of your life*

Occurrences of pronoun “você” in example 02 do not refer to any specific entity, but instead to a generic being for which the speaker does not produce a clear image. In addition to pronoun “você”, we have verified that arbitrary reference subject pronouns also occur in overt pronoun usages involving pronouns “eu” [1<sup>st</sup> p. s.] and “nós” [1<sup>st</sup> p. pl.].

### Overt pronominal subject vs. null pronominal subject in Alagoan speech

The dependent variable overt vs. null pronominal subject was also controlled for different linguistic factors – reference (defined or arbitrary), verbal inflection, grammatical person, and verb tense, in addition to social ones – speaker gender, age group, education, and location (whether or not they resided in the state capital).

The specific/arbitrary reference variable was included in the study to allow for a twofold investigation: 1) whether the change in specific reference pronominal subjects detected by Duarte (1995) in Rio de Janeiro speech was also affecting arbitrary reference pronominal subjects in Alagoan speech, and 2) whether the conditioning factors that promoted overt pronoun usage in arbitrary reference subjects were the same ones driving the ongoing change observed in specific reference pronominal subjects.

The following tables present pronominal subject occurrence rates in Alagoan and Rio de Janeiro speech, respectively.

**Table 03.** Pronominal subjects in Alagoas speech

Overt pronominal subject		Null pronominal subject	
Defined reference	Arbitrary reference	Defined reference	Arbitrary reference
69%	69%	31%	31%

**Table 04.** Pronominal subjects in Rio de Janeiro speech

Overt pronominal subject		Null pronominal subject	
Defined reference	Arbitrary reference	Defined reference	Arbitrary reference
71%	65%	29%	35%

(DUARTE, 1995, p. 47-48)

5 The Ø symbol indicates that the subject position is null, that is, not phonetically filled.

Out of 616 cases selected among our Alagoan speech sample, 514 (83%) are defined reference pronominal subjects. Out of those 514, 353 (69%) are overt subjects while 161 (31%) are null. Arbitrary reference pronominal subjects represent 17% of the speech sample; from this group, 69% are overt subjects while 31% are null.

Duarte's (1995, p.47-48) results from her analysis of Brazilian Portuguese in Rio de Janeiro speech are as follows: 71% specific reference overt pronominal subjects, and 29% null ones. Arbitrary reference pronominal subjects represent 19% of her speech sample; from this group, 65% of occurrences phonetically express subject position, while 35% are null.

A comparison between Tables 03 and 04 reveals some regularity in the numbers. They seem to indicate a degree of uniformity on the ongoing linguistic change process, given that the occurrence rate of specific reference pronominal subject is 69% in the Alagoan speech data, and 71% in Duarte's data. Null pronominal subject occurrence rates are equally similar: 31% in the Alagoan data and 29% in the Rio de Janeiro data. This relative symmetry also applies to the occurrence rates of arbitrary reference pronominal subjects: 69% and 65% for overt pronominal subjects, and 31% and 35% for null ones.

Such data regularity seems to indicate that, although those studies were conducted in different contexts (Alagoas and Rio de Janeiro), there are many similarities in Brazilian Portuguese spoken across different regions - and those similarities appear to be more evident in terms of syntax.

Furthermore, results show that the change process affecting specific reference pronominal subjects is also impacting arbitrary reference ones. Indeed, when those types of pronominal subjects are analyzed separately, controlling the dependent variable for the chosen linguistic and extralinguistic factors, results indicate which factors have the greatest impact on overt pronominal subject occurrences in both specific reference and arbitrary reference constructions.

Regarding specific reference occurrences, Varbrul selected **verbal inflection** and **grammatical person** as relevant factors of the ongoing linguistic change involving pronominal subjects in Alagoan speech. Among social factors, the location variable stands out as the one bearing the greatest weight: .59. The software detected the same linguistic factors as most significant for arbitrary reference occurrences, while **gender** and **location** were the social factors with the greatest impact on this set of occurrences.

## Linguistic data analysis<sup>6</sup>

From a linguistic standpoint, the independent variable verbal inflection ranked first in relevance to overt pronominal subject expression both in the specific reference occurrence set and in the arbitrary reference one.

Table 05 below presents the results of controlling the dependent variable verbal inflection for specific reference pronominal subjects in the Alagoan speech data set.

**Table 05.** Specific reference pronominal subject vs. verbal inflection

Inflection/person	-o, -i 1 <sup>st</sup> p. s.	-mos 1 <sup>st</sup> p. pl.	-m 3 <sup>rd</sup> p. pl.	-0(zero) 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> , and 3 <sup>rd</sup> p. s./pl.
Occurrences	294	10	35	170
Overt subject	189	7	21	133
Null subject	105	3	14	37
Weight	.44	.51	.40	.67
Significance level = .000				

The mathematical values depicted in Table 05 show that although affixes **-o** and **-i** (1<sup>st</sup> p. s.) are used on many overt pronominal subject occurrences, the .44 weight indicates that this factor does not positively impact them. This low weight value seems to suggest that 1st person singular null pronominal subject occurrences will last for a long time in Alagoan speech.

Unlike the 1st person singular morpheme **-o (i)**, which has a high occurrence rate (294 cases, 189 overt and 105 null), the 1st person plural **-mos** affix is used in only 10 occurrences (7 overt subjects and 3 null subjects); in other words, while the **-o (i)** affix is present in nearly half the sentences in our sample, the **-mos** affix is present in less than 2% of them, indicating that it will not integrate spoken Brazilian Portuguese for long.

As for the **2nd and 3rd** persons plural **-m** affix, in our data set it only occurs with 3rd p. pl. expressions. Notably, although 60% of the subjects in this group are overt, the .40 weight indicates that the **-m** verbal inflection does not positively impact overt pronominal subject occurrences. This does not mean that there is no change in progress, merely that the process involving this particular affix appears to be taking place at a slower pace.

These **-m** affix results are quite compatible with Duarte's (1995) and also with Monteiro's (1994), whose study shows a 60% rate of overt third person plural subjects.

<sup>6</sup> We would like to stress the fact that this study reports part of the findings of a more comprehensive research in which overt specific reference pronominal subjects were controlled for 13 factors, from which 7 were found to impact overt subject occurrence. However, in this paper we only analyze the variables selected by Varbrul software as the most significant, according to their weights.

Whilst the three aforementioned affixes had frequency rates above 60% but their insignificant weights indicated a negative impact on speeding up the linguistic change under analysis, the **-0 (zero)** affix, which can express all grammatical persons, presents not only the highest frequency rate (78%) in overt pronominal subject occurrences, but also the highest weight: .67. This leaves no doubt about its influence in the linguistic change process affecting pronominal subjects in Alagoan speech.

According to Duarte (1995), the high frequency of the **-0 (zero)** affix shows an ongoing impoverishment of the Brazilian Portuguese inflectional paradigm. She goes so far as to argue that this phenomenon can contribute to make null pronominal subjects progressively rarer over time, or even marginal. Examples 03, 04, 05, 06, 07, and 08 below illustrate **-0** affix occurrences.

- (03) Exato eu fazia **(-0)** curso até por correspondência (L2/JVS-12:328)  
*Exactly, I even took (-0) correspondence courses.*
- (04) Olha – você é **(-0)** daqui (L6/AFM-22:552)  
*Look – you're (-0) from here*
- (05) Ela é já hoje – já mora **(-0)** com um home (L8/EGM-33:842)  
*Nowadays she is – she already lives (-0) with a man*
- (06) Como professor a gente já pega **(-0)** muita experiência (L4/GCP-08:211)  
*As teachers we gain (-0) a lot of experience*
- (07) Nós comprou **(-0)** geladeira (L11/NEC-29:58)  
*We bought (-0) [3rd p. s. inflection] a fridge*
- (08) Eles me atende **(-0)** bem né? (L3/FJS-02:23)  
*They serve (-0) [3rd p. s. inflection] me well, right?*

As examples 03 through 08 make clear, the **-0** affix is being used to express all grammatical persons in the Alagoan speech sample. The sentences in examples 07 and 08 were chosen to demonstrate that the **-0** affix does not exclusively accompany pronouns with singular verbal agreements, but also plural-marked pronouns (we, they). The examples also stress the fact that the **-0** inflection ranks among the factors with the greatest positive impact on the linguistic change process affecting subject position expression in the Alagoan speech data set, hence Varbrul selecting it as the most significant variable.

According to Roberts (1993, p. 415), French was also a null subject language once, but the process that eventually led to the loss of that property lasted for 150 years. During that period, French had a defective null subject system that allowed for null pronominal subject expression only in certain syntactic contexts and involving certain grammatical persons.

Aside from **verbal inflection**, overt and null pronominal subjects were also controlled

for the **grammatical person** variable in order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between this variable and verbal inflection; we believed that analyzing the grammatical person variable could provide further elements to show how the relationship between verbal inflection and grammatical persons affected the linguistic change process under analysis (overt vs. null pronominal subject expression). Table 06 below presents the results of controlling specific reference pronominal subjects for **grammatical persons**.

**Table 06.** Defined reference pronominal subject vs. grammatical persons in Alagoan speech

Person	eu [1st p. s.]	você [2nd p. s. var.]	ele/ela [3rd p. s. masc./fem.]	nós [1st p. pl.]	a gente [1st p. pl. var.]	eles/elas [3rd p. pl. masc./fem.]
Occurrences	355	21	60	10	28	35
Overt subject	239	11	40	7	27	26
Null subject	116	5	20	3	1	14
Weight	.47	.48	.48	.50	.92	.44
Significance level = .000						

As shown in Table 06, overt subjects are preferred across all grammatical persons in Alagoan speech. The 1st person has the highest occurrence rate; this demonstrates its relationship with 1<sup>st</sup> p. s. verbal inflection **-o (-i)**, which was also the most productive. 1st p. s. pronoun “eu” has the highest occurrence rate in our sample, despite being associated to an exclusive affix that could, in principle, convey grammatical person through verbal inflection and thus favor null subjects. However, its .47 weight indicates that that variable has no significant impact on the linguistic change investigated in this study.

Paradigmatic 1st p. pl. pronoun “nós” also bears neutral weight on the pronominal subject change process; data shows that it is seldom used. Speakers heavily favor the innovative pronoun “a gente” [1st p. pl. var.], whose .92 weight makes it indisputably relevant to the linguistic change process.

The preference for “a gente” over “nós” was also verified by Vianna and Lopes (2015, p. 109) in their analysis of linguistic variation involving pronouns “nós” and “a gente” in Brazilian Portuguese. According to the authors, this phenomenon “may be regarded as a linguistic change process in which the innovative option increasingly gains terrain over the older one”.

Lopes (1992) also found a high rate of overt subject constructions for pronouns “nós” and “a gente” in her analysis of the occurrence of those pronouns in Standard Brazilian Portuguese. In her sample, the rate of overt subjects involving “nós” and “a gente” was 67% and 81%, respectively. Example 09 below illustrates specific reference cases using the pronoun “nós”.

(09) a vida como é ... como se apresenta a nós...eu fui aluno dele... depois nós fizemos concurso pra...pra escrivão de Coletoria Federal...nós fomos nomeados e ele passou a ser meu colega ... e eu colega dele (L6/AFM-24:608). *such is life... so it happens... I was his student... then later we both applied for... for Federal Tax Clerk positions... we were accepted, and he became my coworker... and I, his coworker.*

Both instances of pronoun “nós” in example 09 show that the speaker prefers to fill the subject position with a pronoun even when using the exclusive 1st p. pl. affix **-mos**. Interestingly, the sentence in example 09 was produced by a 72-year-old male informant with a middle-school education; this suggests that the ongoing linguistic change process also affects senior speakers.

2nd p. s. pronoun “você” originated from honorific “vossa mercê” then proceeded to evolve into the sole 2nd p. pronoun in most Brazilian Portuguese dialects, especially given the partial disappearance of 2nd p. s. pronoun “tu” and the definitive, irreversible loss of 2nd p. pl. pronoun “vós”. Scherre’s (2015, p. 171) analysis of pronominal variation involving “tu” and “você” verified that there are already reduced variants of the second – “cê” and “ocê”. While the latter is characteristic of certain regions/social contexts, “cê” is used in practically all Brazilian speech communities studied by the author across the country.

According to Duarte (1995, p. 48), 2nd p. pronoun “você” has the lowest null subject rate, around 11%, and correspondingly, the highest rate of filled subject positions.

That author believes that the low occurrence rate of 2nd person null subjects in Rio de Janeiro speech indicates that it “triggered off the linguistic change process – due to its substitution by “você” [...], which combines with 3rd p. verbal agreement – while also being the grammatical person to soonest present the effects of that change”.

Whilst there were no occurrences of 2nd p. pl. pronoun “vocês” in our sample, our empirical experience allows us to verify that it is indeed the sole pronoun used in Alagoan speech to indicate 2nd person plural, since “vós” is no longer in use.

The null subject rate for 3rd p. s. masculine and feminine pronouns “ele/ela” was also low: 37%, with the corresponding high rate of overt subjects being 67%; this suggests that 3rd p. s. pronominal subjects follow the same trend observed in pronouns “eu”, “você”, and “a gente”. There were few occurrences of 3rd p. pl. constructions in our sample. Despite the prevalence of overt subjects, this grammatical person has the highest null subject rate.

### **Social variables**

The dependent variable overt vs. null pronominal subjects was also controlled for the following social factors: **gender**, **age group**, **education**, and **location** (whether or not the speaker resided at the State capital). Varbrul has selected **gender** and **location** as the variables with the most relevant impact on overt subject occurrence.

Controlling the dependent variable for extralinguistic factors is of the utmost importance; several variationist sociolinguistic studies prove that aside from playing a significant part in linguistic variation and change, social factors can also be the ones to trigger off a change process (LABOV, 1983; MOLLICA, 1992; SHERRE, 1992, 1996; NARO, 1992; PAIVA, 1992; SILVA-CORVALAN, 1989, among others).

Hence, based on Duarte (1995), Paiva (1992), and Votre (1992), we posit that female Alagoan speakers tend to use overt pronominal subjects significantly more often than male speakers.

Women were found to use overt subjects at a .55 probability rate and 70% frequency rate, against men's respective rates of .43 and 59%.

We chose to control for location with the aim of investigating whether there was a quantitative difference in overt pronominal subject occurrence rates between speakers who reside at the capital city and elsewhere in the State.

Varbrul results show a considerable difference: the overt subject rates of non-capital speakers are 74% frequency and .59 probability, against capital speakers' 58% frequency and .41 probability.

It is important to stress that we did not set out to conduct an in-depth, exhaustive analysis of all possible causes of the predominance of overt pronominal subjects in the speech of non-capital informants; that task would exceed the scope of this study, since different sorts of factors (linguistic, social, psychological) likely contribute to have non-capital folk spearhead the linguistic change process.

## **Conclusion**

This paper reports part of the findings of a more comprehensive research that analyzed 616 pronominal subject occurrences in Alagoan speech in order to verify whether the process of linguistic variation and change detected by Duarte (1995) in Rio de Janeiro was also happening in Alagoas. To that end, the theoretical framework underpinning this study is Labov's (1983) Theory of Language Variation, which also informs the research methodology. The corpus was analyzed using Varbrul software (SHERRE 1992/1993) and the results show that Alagoan speech is also undergoing a change in pronominal subjects: the overt subject rate found in our sample was 69%.

Results also show that most of the conditioning factors influencing linguistic change in Alagoas are the same as those found by Duarte (1995) in Rio de Janeiro. Moreover, we have also verified that the change process affects both specific reference and arbitrary reference pronouns: they have the same overt pronominal subject rate of 69%.



At the morphologic level, verbal inflection was selected by Varbrul as the variable with the most significant impact on linguistic change. The most significant factors at that level are inflection “0” (zero) and pronoun “a gente” [1<sup>st</sup> p. pl. var.], both of which present the highest frequency and probability rates of overt pronominal subjects in the analyzed Alagoan speech sample. In addition, we have verified that verbal inflection “0” is combined by speakers with all grammatical persons; hence, this factor contributes unequivocally and significantly not only to disseminate the usage of overt pronominal subjects, but also to implement a change in the Brazilian Portuguese pronominal paradigm.

Finally, gender and location were selected by Varbrul as the extralinguistic variables with the most relevant impact on overt pronominal subject usage. This indicates that the linguistic change has progressed further off-capital, and that women are leading this implementation.

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