

Ellipsis Where *(You Don't Expect It): Sluicing in Free Relative Clauses in Brazilian Portuguese

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1. Introduction

Clausal ellipsis in interrogatives, dubbed *sluicing* in Ross 1969, silences everything except the *wh*-phrase in constituent questions:

- (1) She cooked something—guess what!

Across many languages and presumably universally, sluicing is licensed in interrogative clauses; but it has generally been recognized to not be felicitous in other kinds of *wh*-constructions, such as relative clauses. As noted by Rodrigues et al. (2009), Brazilian Portuguese appears to be a typological exception, permitting sluicing in free relative clauses:

- (2) O João beijou alguém, mas eu não conheço quem.
the João kissed somebody but I not am.acquainted who
'João kissed somebody, but I don't know the person who he kissed.'

The verb in the above example selects for a nominal complement, showing that the elliptical clause here is a free relative rather than an interrogative as in (1).

In this paper, we intend to show that sluicing in Brazilian Portuguese free relatives is true PF-deletion of syntactically realized material, and suggest that it can be understood as a kind of NP-internal ellipsis licensed by D. We first provide some background on sluicing and free relatives (Section 2) before presenting further relevant data, which we show must be analyzed as involving deletion (Section 3). Finally, in Section 4 we sketch a tentative proposal for analyzing the phenomenon.

2. Background

2.1. Sluicing

Since Ross 1969, the term *sluicing* has come to denote clausal ellipsis in interrogatives, as in the following:

- (3) Someone did the dishes, but I don't know who.

Following standard practice in the literature, we will label the key ingredients of this construction the *sluice* (= the entire reduced clause), the *remnant* (= the surviving *wh*-phrase), and the *sluicing site* (= the omitted material).

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Importantly for our purposes here, it is generally taken to be definitional of sluicing to apply in *wh*-interrogatives only (as in (1) and (3) above). This generalization is based on the observation that sluicing is not licensed in other kinds of *wh*-constructions, such as headed and free relative clauses:

- (4) a. *Someone did the dishes, but I don't know the person who.
 b. *She cooked something, and I ate what(-ever).

The only available reading of the surface string in (4b) with attached *-ever* is the free-choice reading; it does not have the interpretation of *I ate what(-ever) she cooked*, which would indicate actual ellipsis.

In his influential treatment of sluicing, Merchant (2001) proposes that sluicing is IP/TP-deletion licensed by a $C_{[+Q,+WH]}$ head that can optionally bear an E(llipsis)-feature, which licenses PF-deletion of its complement (deletion indicated by strikethrough):

- (5) I don't know [_{CP} who $C_{[+Q,+WH,E]}$ [~~TP *t* did the dishes~~]]

Since, by lexical stipulation, E is incompatible with C-heads of any other featural specification, deletion in contexts other than *wh*-interrogatives is not licensed.

- (6) a. *the person [who $C_{[-Q,+WH]}$ ~~*t* did the dishes~~]
 b. *I ate [what $C_{[-Q,+WH]}$ ~~*t* she cooked~~]

Note that Merchant's E-feature implements constraints on ellipsis *licensing*; we will not deal with the distinct issue of *identification* in this paper (on which see Merchant 2001 and much subsequent work, including Chung 2013 and Barros 2014).

2.2. Free relatives

Free relatives (FRs) are headless relative clauses with nominal distribution (for overviews and key facts, see Caponigro 2003 and van Riemsdijk 2017). Two main accounts have crystallized in the literature on FRs: the *COMP Account*, primarily associated with Groos and van Riemsdijk 1981, and the *Head Account* of Bresnan and Grimshaw (1978); most more recent approaches are descendants of the former (see, e.g., Caponigro 2003; Donati 2006; Ott 2011).

The COMP Account is based on the assumption that FRs are structurally largely isomorphic to relative clauses and *wh*-interrogatives, with the *wh*-phrase/relative pronoun occupying the edge of CP:

- (7) [_{CP} what(-ever)_{*i*} [_{TP} she cooks *t_i*]]

The resulting structure must be nominalized in some way in order to account for the nominal distribution of the clause in the absence of an external head (so that (7), for instance, winds up as a suitable complement for a verb like *eat*). Caponigro (2003) suggests that this is best achieved by assuming that the CP is the complement of a null D, which in turn attracts the *wh*-phrase to its specifier:

- (8) [_{DP} what(-ever)_{*i*} \emptyset_D [_{CP} *t'_i* [_{TP} she cooks *t_i*]]]

The COMP Account thus formalizes the intuition that FRs are indeed relative clauses without a properly external head, and that the *wh*-pronoun originates within the FR.

By contrast, the Head Account assumes that FRs are not truly headless, but relative clauses with an external head, the latter being the *wh*-phrase (which is thus not a relative pronoun). That is, the *wh*-phrase does not originate within the FR but is base-generated outside of it, and the remainder of the clause is adjoined to it just like an ordinary headed relative:

- (9) [_{DP} [_{DP} what(-ever)] [_{CP} ~~*wh_{*i*}*~~ she cooks *t_i*]]

The CP here is a null-operator relative clause adjoined to the *wh*-head (the null operator is rendered above as ~~*wh*~~; on Bresnan and Grimshaw's original approach, it is the result of deletion under identity with the external head). This approach has the obvious advantage of avoiding the postulation of a null D-head to account for the nominal nature of the overall construction, but it struggles to explain why the adjoined clause transparently behaves unlike an adjunct in not being optional (**I eat what*; see below).

3. Sluicing in free relatives

3.1. Some key facts

In their discussion of sluicing in Brazilian Portuguese (BP), Rodrigues et al. (2009) observe that BP appears to permit sluicing in free relatives. In the following example (repeated from (2) above), the main-clause verb *conhecer* 'be acquainted with' is such that it requires a nominal complement; yet, the result is superficially analogous to an ordinary interrogative sluice.

- (10) O João beijou alguém, mas eu não conheço quem.
 the João kissed somebody but I not am.acquainted who
 'João kissed somebody, but I don't know the person who he kissed.'

This differs from 'ordinary' sluicing in BP, where the sluice-embedding verb selects for an interrogative complement, as in the following:

- (11) O João foi explorar algo, mas eu não sei o quê.
 the João went explore something but I not know what
 'João went out exploring something, but I don't know what (he went out exploring).'

Their concerns lying elsewhere, Rodrigues et al. do not investigate the FR-sluicing construction in detail. Adding to their empirical observation, we note that this kind of FR-internal sluicing is possible in BP with object and subject FRs alike regardless of the argument/adjunct status of the *wh*-pronoun and the addition of (the equivalent of) *-ever*, as shown in some of the examples below. Note that in all cases, the embedding predicate requires a nominal complement, ruling out the option of 'standard' (interrogative) sluicing. (For the sake of readability, and unless noted otherwise, we will henceforth render the sluicing remnant in boldface and enclose the FR sluice in square brackets and the sluicing site in angled brackets.)

- (12) a. A Maria recomendou algo para o João, mas eu não consegui encontrar [
 the Maria recommended something to the João but I not could find
(seja lá) o quê < ela recomendou para ele >].
 what(ever) she recommended to him
 'Maria recommended something to João, but I couldn't find {the thing/whatever} she recommended to him.'
- b. Um certo alguém vem nos visitar, mas [**quem** < vem nos visitar >] não é minha
 a certain someone comes us visit but who comes us visit not is my
 pessoa favorita.
 person favourite
 'Someone is coming to visit us, but the person who is coming to visit is not my favourite person.'
- c. Van Gogh pintou esse quadro de uma certa maneira, e o falsificador duplicou [
 Van Gogh painted this painting of a certain manner and the forger duplicated
(seja lá) como < ele pintou esse quadro >]
 how(ever) he painted this painting
 'Van Gogh painted this painting in a certain way, and the forger duplicated {the way/whatever way} he painted it.'

- d. Alguma coisa estava nos perseguindo, mas [**(seja lá) o que** < estava nos perseguindo >]
 some thing was us chasing but what(ever) was us chasing
 não nos alcançou.
 not us reached
 ‘Something was chasing us, but {the thing that/what(ever)} was chasing us didn’t reach us.’
- e. Ela mora em algum lugar agradável, mas [**(seja lá) onde** < ela mora >] é muito
 she lives in some place pleasant, but where(ever) she lives is very
 agitado.
 busy
 ‘She lives somewhere pleasant, but {the place where/wherever} she lives is very busy.’

These and similar data were informally presented to a number of native speakers of BP, who reacted with either wholesale acceptance or rejection. We have no insights to offer in this paper on the nature of and reasons for this significant variation across speakers, which certainly warrants further investigation.

In view of the general confinement of sluicing to interrogative contexts, cases such as those above are surprising, although it remains to be elucidated just how typologically unusual they are. Be that as it may, what makes FR sluicing in BP even more puzzling is that such sluicing is not licensed in corresponding *headed* relatives, even though the same relative pronouns can appear here:

- (13) a. *Ela mora em algum lugar agradável, mas a cidade [**onde** < ela mora >] é muito
 she lives in some place pleasant but the city where she lives is very
 agitada.
 busy
 ‘She lives somewhere pleasant, but the city where she lives is very busy.’
- b. *Um certo alguém vem nos visitar, mas a pessoa [**quem** < vem nos visitar >]
 a certain someone comes us visit but the person who comes us visit
 não é minha pessoa favorita.
 not is my person favourite
 ‘Someone is coming to visit us, but the person who is coming to visit is not my favourite person.’

That is, when it comes to headed relatives BP aligns with the generalization standardly assumed in the literature, *viz.* that these do not permit sluicing. It is thus not the case that BP simply permits sluicing to apply in *wh*-constructions; it appears to be licensed specifically in *wh*-questions and free relatives.

Let us turn next to an analysis of the FR-sluicing data. The first question to answer is whether this kind of construction is in fact an instance of *bona fide* sluicing. We turn to this question in the following subsection, where it will be answered affirmatively.

3.2. Analysis

The observation that BP permits sluicing in FRs is surprising enough to warrant skepticism. After all, the superficially incomplete nature of a given construction is not in and of itself conclusive proof of deletion, and we want to be sure we are not dealing with some other form of incompleteness.

To put this in somewhat more concrete terms, recall that a traditionally observed weakness of the Head Account of FRs is the fact that the clause adjoined to the *wh*-phrase is not optional, contrary to the expectation generated by the analysis:

- (14) (She cooked something, and) I ate what *(she cooked).

One could turn this bug of the Head Account into a feature by claiming that BP FRs have just the structure assumed by this approach, and that apparent FR sluicing is nothing other than omission (non-

generation) of the adjoined clause. On this analysis—call it *Analysis A*—an example such as (12e) would be analyzed simply as follows, with no deletion (English words used for simplicity of exposition):

- (15) [DP where] is very busy

Let us contrast this hypothesis with what we will call *Analysis B*, i.e. true sluicing (clausal ellipsis) within the FR. This is illustrated below:

- (16) [CP/DP where [~~she lives t~~]] is very busy

A further option, namely sluicing over a copular clause or cleft-like source structure (dubbed ‘pseudo-sluicing’ in Merchant 1998 and Rodrigues et al. 2009), will not be explicitly considered here as its predictions with regard to the facts to be discussed presently are largely in line with those of Analysis A.

The predictions of the two analyses diverge most sharply with regard to connectivity effects: roughly speaking, Analysis A predicts that the *wh*-remnant of the sluice could never depend on anything in the sluicing site for its licensing (simply because there would be no structure in the sluicing site at all); conversely, Analysis B predicts such connectivity effects to obtain.

The most straightforward connectivity test, based on case, cannot be applied here due to the absence of morphological case in BP (see Ross 1969 on German sluicing, and Barros 2014 for additional nuanced discussion). However, we can test for binding connectivity, following the example of Lasnik (2001); see Sportiche 2013, 2017 for a more general exposition of the heuristics used here.

The following example shows that the remnant can contain a reflexive element that depends for its interpretation on a sluicing-site-internal binder:

- (17) Os políticos_{*i*} esconderam algumas fotos das pessoas envolvidas no escândalo, mas eu the politicians hid some photos of.the people involved in.the scandal but I não consegui arranjar [[quaisquer (fotos) deles **mesmos**_{*i*}]_{*k*} < **eles**esconderam *t_k* >]. not could obtain whichever photos of.them themselves they hid
‘The politicians hid some photos of the people involved in the scandal, but I couldn’t obtain whichever photos of themselves they hid.’

This is as predicted by Analysis A; on Analysis B, none of the structure in angled brackets would be present, leaving open how the reflexive is bound and thus licensed.

Conversely, a name contained in the remnant cannot be construed as coreferential with a pronoun contained in the ellipsis site in a position that c-commands the remnant’s base position:

- (18) A testemunha_{*j*} anotou rumores sobre as pessoas envolvidas, mas eu não encontro [the witness.FEM wrote.down rumours about the people involved but I not find [quais (rumores) sobre **Mary**_{*i*}]_{*k*} < **ela**_{*/*i*} negou *t_k* >]. whichever rumours about Mary she denied
‘The witness denied some rumours about the people involved, but I am not familiar with whichever rumours about Mary she denied.’

This is (again) as predicted by Analysis A; on Analysis B, none of the structure in angled brackets would be present, leaving open why coreference of name and pronominal should not be an option.

Finally, a pronominal contained in the remnant can receive a bound interpretation provided that a quantifier is contained within the ellipsis site in a c-commanding position:

- (19) Cada psicólogo recomendou vários livros, e eu comprei [[quaisquer dos seus_i each psychologist recommended various books and I bought whichever of his livros]_k < cada psicólogo_i recomendou t_k >].
 books each psychologist recommended
 ‘Each psychologist recommended various books, and I bought whichever of his books each psychologist recommended.’

This is (again) as predicted by Analysis A; on Analysis B, none of the structure in angled brackets would be present, leaving open how the pronominal receives its bound interpretation.

Similarly, we can test for connectivity using idioms: Analysis A predicts that the remnant can reconstruct into the ellipsis site to form an idiomatic unit with material contained therein; Analysis B rules out this possibility. The following example shows that Analysis A makes the right prediction:

- (20) Eles sempre armam barraco em festas, e tem gente que concorda com [[seja lá qual they always set.up shed at parties and there are people that agree with whichever barraco]_i < eles armam t_i >].
 shed they set.up
 ‘They always start trouble at parties, and there are people that agree with whatever trouble they start.’

This is (again) as predicted by Analysis A; on Analysis B, none of the structure in angled brackets would be present, leaving open how the remnant could receive the interpretation it has as part of the corresponding V-O idiom.

In sum, connectivity effects reveal that sluiced FRs in BP contain silent syntactic structure, hence support Analysis B over Analysis A. We conclude that BP FR sluicing is *bona fide* sluicing, i.e. deletion of clause-internal material at PF, rather than mere adjunct omission.

4. Proposal

In this section, we sketch an analysis of BP FR sluicing based on the conclusion, reached in the preceding section, that such sluicing must involve PF-deletion. We emphasize that our proposal will remain tentative, the intention being to establish a baseline proposal for future work.

The general intuition we want to pursue is that BP FR sluicing is akin to NP-ellipsis. We follow Caponigro 2003 and others in assuming that FRs are CPs embedded by a null definite/maximalizing D-head, which attracts the *wh*-phrase/relative pronoun to its specifier. Under this analysis, (12e) can be schematically rendered as follows:

- (21) [DP where_i D_[+WH,+C] [CP t'_i [TP she lives t_i]]] is very busy

In terms of Merchant’s (2001) featural approach to ellipsis licensing, FR sluicing is then simply the version of this derivation in which D is additionally equipped with an E-feature:

- (22) [DP where_i D_[+WH,+C,E] [~~CP t'_i she lives t_i]~~] is very busy

Note that deletion here targets an entire CP, akin to the relative-clause deletion postulated in Collins 2015. If correct, the analysis entails that sluicing is not universally TP-deletion (as argued on unrelated grounds by Yoshida 2010, Bruening 2015, and Ott and Struckmeier 2018).

On this approach, FR sluicing is essentially a variety of nominal ellipsis licensed by D, except that what is deleted is CP instead of NP. Regular NP-ellipsis is freely available in BP:

- (23) o/um (carro) azul
 the/a car blue
 ‘the/a blue (car)’

What makes BP special is that its lexicon contains a D-head that licenses *wh*-movement, takes CP complements, and is compatible with E (i.e., $D_{[+WH,+C,E]}$); all three features converge to yield FR sluicing. Languages such as German or Hebrew, which likewise permit free regular NP-ellipsis but no FR sluicing, lack the option of adding an E-feature to a $D_{[+WH,+C]}$; we leave open here whether this is due to some property of D or E. Note, however, that the presence of agreement in D is not the decisive property permitting addition of E (as might be expected on the approach to licensing pioneered in Lobeck 1995), as both BP and German display such agreement in gender/number, and yet only the former permits FR sluicing.

This approach can encode the fact that sluicing in FRs is possible whereas it is ruled out in headed relatives even in BP, on the assumption that these are never complements of D (Borsley 1997, *pace* Kayne 1994). This requires the lexical stipulation that E in BP is compatible with $C_{[+WH,+Q]}$ and $D_{[+WH,+C]}$, where +C is a selectional feature licensing D's CP-complement, but never with the $C_{[-Q,...]}$ that heads headed relatives. Why and how this should be the case is, of course, an altogether different matter, and one on which this technical implementation is entirely silent.

We add one further speculation to this analysis. Rodrigues et al. (2009) claim that prepositions are obligatorily omitted from the relative pronoun in sluiced FRs even when the latter is selected as a PP internally to the FR. That is to say, according to them, *com* 'with' is obligatorily absent from the remnant in the following case:

- (24) Eu tenho que dançar com alguém na festa, e eu já arrumei [(com) quem < eu
I have to dance with someone at.the party and I already fixed with who I
vou dançar na festa >].
will dance at.the party
'I have to dance with someone at the party, and I already found the person who I will be dancing
with at the party.'
(adapted from Rodrigues et al. 2009)

We were not able to reliably replicate this claim with informants; in fact, it appears that some speakers prefer retention of the preposition. Be this as it may, one might speculate that speakers whose intuitions conform to those of Rodrigues et al. insist on the relative pronoun's 'bareness,' so that it can label the FR as nominal under some sort of category-dependent agreement with the embedding D-head that leads to the overall FR being labeled as nominal (following ideas in Chomsky 2013). Other speakers might be more liberal in accepting a semi-nominal PP relative pronoun to label the FR jointly with D, for reasons that will require elucidation in future work.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, we have expanded on Rodrigues et al.'s identification of sluicing in free relative clauses in Brazilian Portuguese. Confirming their original finding, we showed that such sluicing exists in FRs of all kinds, and that connectivity effects reveal the construction to be a *bona fide* instance of deletion, rather than mere omission, of the interior of a free relative.

Our preliminary investigation undoubtedly leaves open a host of empirical questions. As noted, there appears to be sharp disagreement about the acceptability of sluiced FRs among BP speakers, with some not accepting sluiced FRs at all. With regard to those speakers who do accept sluiced FRs, the obligatoriness of P-stranding appears to be less robust than Rodrigues et al. (2009) suggested. And finally, the reason for why some nominal-selecting verbs appear to figure more naturally in this construction than others (as alluded to in Rodrigues et al. 2009's discussion) remains elusive. At this point, we can only voice our hope that these issues will be carefully investigated in future work.

On the theoretical side, we advanced a preliminary proposal that relates FR sluicing in BP to the availability of NP-ellipsis in the language. On this approach, the reason for why BP is special in allowing sluiced FRs is purely lexical: the BP lexicon contains a D-head that takes CP complements and licenses *wh*-movement to its specifier, and is furthermore capable of hosting an ellipsis-licensing feature. Critics might argue that this proposal amounts to nothing more than a brute-force encoding of the problem in technical terms, leaving it as a purely accidental feature of the language. We would have to agree with

our imaginary critics on this point but hope that our proposal can nonetheless serve as a baseline for more satisfying forthcoming solutions.

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