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A Cognitive and Constructionist Approach to the Portuguese Grammar

The Case of Superlative Construction and Body Expression

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Overview

1. Introduction
2. Theoretical point of view
3. Methodology
4. SCBE
5. Final Remarks

1. Introduction

(1) Isto lhe **rasgava de dor o coração.**

This PERSON.PRON.3SG **rip.PAST.3SG** GEN.PREP **pain.N** the heart
It made his heart suffer very much. /The pain tore at his heart.

(2) Esse cara **morre de ciúme de mim.**

This guy **die.PAST.3SG** GEN.PREP **jealousy.N** GEN.PREP me
This guy is terribly jealousy of me.

(3) **Estou farto de aturar** aquele maçador.

be.PRES.1SG **gorge-N** GEN.PREP **tolerate-INF** that boring_guy
I'm tired of putting up with that boring guy[...]

- Background:
 - “Superlative Constructions of Brazilian Portuguese: A study about scale semantics” project (Miranda, 2008 – CNPq).
 - Igor Costa’s M.A. dissertation: “Superlative Construction and Body Expression: A constructionist approach” (Costa, 2010).
 - Frames and Constructions, FrameNet Brasil.

- Context of the investigation:
 - Sampaio (2007): polysemy of the lexicon related to death concept in Portuguese.
 - “Morrer de” (“**Morro de** *saudade dos meus alunos*”/I miss my students to death): a constructional pattern, metaphorically motivated, in great usage.

- Main research questions:
 - Is the Superlative Construction and Body Expression a significant pattern of Portuguese, with specific form, meaning and use?
 - What can a cognitive/constructionist analysis bring to this research?
- Objectives:
 - Describe, organize and explain the node of the vast network of Portuguese Superlative Constructions (MIRANDA, 2008 – CNPq) named SCBE.

- Relevance:
 - (1) description of Portuguese;
 - FrameNet Brasil Construction (with a specific notation)
 - (2) language translation.

2. Theoretical point of view

- **Cognitive Linguistics** (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 2002[1980], 1999; Salomão, 2009; among others).
 - **Cognitive Construction Grammar** (Lakoff, 1987; Goldberg, 1995, 2006; among others).
 - Constructions as a form-meaning pair
 - Constructions as basic units of language
 - “constructions form a network and are linked by inheritance relations which motivate many of the properties of particular constructions” (Goldberg, 1995:67)
 - **Frame Semantics** (Fillmore, 1977, 1982; among others).
 - Meanings as relativized to scenes

3. Methodology

- Corpus-based approach (Gries & Divjak, 2003; Stefanowitsch, 2006; among others).
- Corpus used:
 - **Corpus do Português** (Davies & Ferreira, <http://www.corpusdoportugues.org/>): 45 million words.

4. SCBE

- **Productivity**

- 19 different types in Corpus do Português.

1. acabar(-se) “to cease”
2. borrar(-se) “to take a shit”
3. cagar(-se) “to take a shit”
4. cair “to fall”
5. cansar(-se) “to get tired”
6. chorar “to cry”
7. contorcer(-se) “to contort”
8. dobrar(-se) “to bend”
9. escangalhar(-se) “to break”
10. estourar(-se) “to cause to burst”

11. fartar(-se) “to gorge”
12. finar(-se) “to die”
13. mijar(-se) “to piss”
14. morrer “to die”
15. não se aguentar “cannot stand to”
16. rachar(-se) “to crack”
17. rasgar(-se) “to tear”
18. rebentar(-se) “to burst”
19. torcer(-se) “to twist”

- **Conventionalization:**

- 1,726 token: 44% of the use of these 19 verbs followed by the preposition “de” in the corpus (.0388).

	SCBE Constructional Types	Tokens
01	MORRER de Y	674
02	FARTAR(-SE) de Y	381
03	CANSAR(-SE) de Y	372
04	CHORAR de Y	112
05	CAIR de Y	96
06	REBENTAR(-SE) de Y	34
07	ESTOURAR(-SE) de Y	17
08	TORCER(-SE) de Y	10
09	ACABAR(-SE) de Y	08
10	FINAR(-SE) de Y	05
11	RASGAR(-SE) de Y	05
12	BORRAR(-SE) de Y	04
13	CAGAR(-SE) de Y	02
14	MIJAR(-SE) de Y	01
15	ESCANGALHAR(-SE) de Y	01
16	CONTORCER(-SE) de Y	01
17	DOBRAR(-SE) de Y	01
18	NÃO SE AGUENTAR de Y	01
19	RACHAR(-SE) de Y	01
	TOTAL	1,726

– Range in the conventionalization of construction types:

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1) “Morrer de Y” | 5) “Cair de Y” |
| 2) “Fartar(-se) de Y” | 6) “Rebentar(-se) de Y” |
| 3) “Cansar(-se) de Y” | 7) “Estourar(-se) de Y” |
| 4) “Chorar de Y” | |

- **Form domain:**

João morria de medo/rir
[X_V de Y_(N/V)]

João die.PAST.3SG GEN.PREP fear.N/laught.INF

- **X**: an **ergative verb** that evokes the **Physical_Impact** frame (“cair”, “contorcer(-se)”, “dobrar(-se)”, among others) or **Physiological_impact** frame (“morrer”, “fartar(-se) de Y”, “mijar(-se)”, etc.).

– Y: typically, an abstract noun:

[...] criança tem essa capacidade de se espantar com o mundo. Por
isso **ela não morre de tédio**.

s/he not **die-PRES.3SG GEN.PREP boredom**

[...] child has this ability to be amazed by the world. So she doesn't die if
boredom.

[...] o Rui ficou comigo por piedade, pra **não morrer de culpa**[...]
not **die.INF GEN.PREP guilty**

[...] Rui stayed with out of pity, to not feel too guilty [...]

- Or a verb in the infinitive form:

Maria do Carmo Borges, a presidente em exercício,
não **se cansou de valorizar** esta festa [...]

not REFLEX.PRONOUN tire-PAST.3SG GEN.PRON valorize-INF this party.N

Maria do Carmo Borges, the acting president, never tired of valuing this party [...]

Estou farto de aturar aquele maçador [...]

be-PRES.1SG gorge.N GEN.PREP tolerate-INF that boring_guy

I'm tired of putting up with that boring guy [...]

- **Semantic dimension:**

- SCBE profiles a basic (metaphorical) scene: a **cause** (Y) of superlative intensity unleashes a **physical or physiological impact** (X) over the body of an **affected**:

O **Leo** **morria** **de** **ciúmes** **do** **Ivan**.

The **Leo** **die-PAST.3SG** **GEN.PREP** **jealousy** **GEN.PREP+the** **Ivan**

Leo was dying of jealousy of Ivan.

- Force as Intensity.

– The Position_on_a_scale frame:

O Leo **morria** **de** **ciúmes do Ivan.**
Affected/Item Effect/Value Cause/Variable
Leo was very jealous of Ivan.

– Reanalysis:

- X: Degree modifier;
- Y: Gradable Core, modified by X.

- An interesting fact about the form-function mapping:

João morria de medo/rir.

João **die-PAST.3SG GEN.PREP fear.N/laught-INF**

João is dying of fear/laughter.

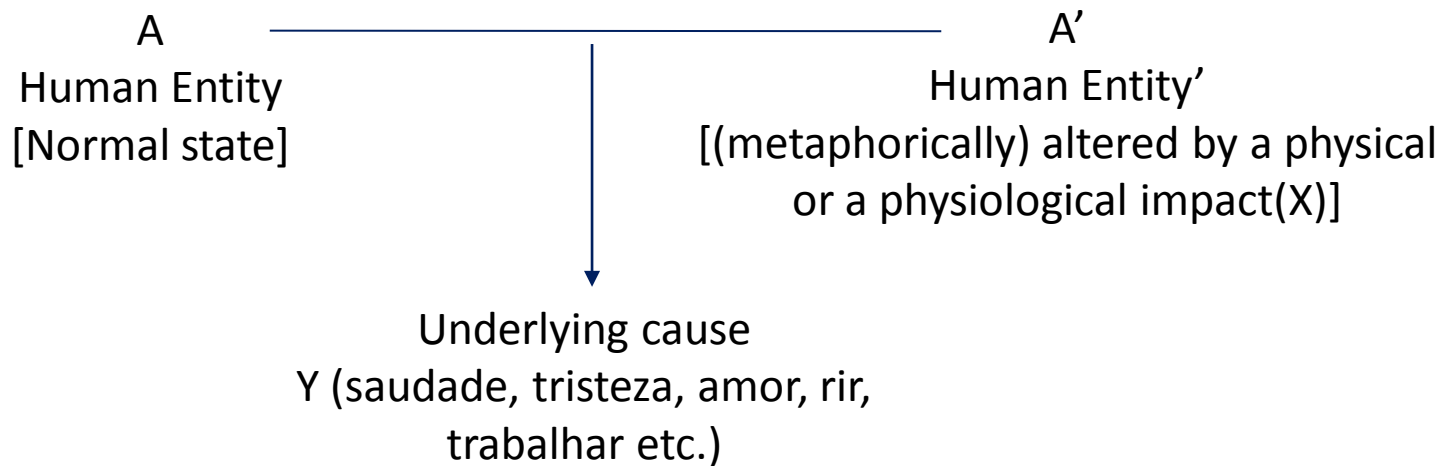
- Mismatch (cf. Michaelis, 2002; Traugott, 2007): X element, in the Verbal Variant of the SCBE.
- Emergence of a “new thing”, which we called (semi)auxiliary verb.

– Two functions of X in Verbal SCBE:

- (1) it indicates the notions of mood, tense, person's speech and singular/plural, as any auxiliary verb;
- (2) it places the instance of the construction on a scale of pragmatic force.

- **Conceptual motivation:**

- Causality concept (Tomasello, 1999).



- COMPULSION image schema (Johnson, 1987);
- **“Cause Is Physical Force”** primary metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 53):
 - In SCBE, the Cause Y imposes itself in such a way over the Affected as to initiate a metaphorical physical or physiological impact, which commonly cannot be controlled.

[...] esses chapéus de pluma que **fizeram rebentar de medo o**
Imperador da China [...]

made-PAST.3PL **burst-INF GEN.PREP fear.N** emperor GEN.PREP+the China
[...] these plumed hats that caused the Chinese Emperor to burst with fear [...]

Foi quando, **quase se mijando de medo**, o moleque o cutucou com a
coronha do bacamarte [...]

almost **REFLEX.PRON piss-GER GEN.PREP fear.N**

It was then, almost pissing with fear, the kid nudged him with the butt of the
gun [...]

Domain of use

- The construction belongs to discursive contexts in which the speaker/writer has more liberty of subjective expression.
- SCBE is typically present in narrative sequences and dialogues (87% of the occurrences are found in works of fiction).

5. Final remarks

- The analytical findings presented here suggest that SCBE is an independent construction of Portuguese, with a proper form, meaning and use.
- Wealth of a Cognitive-constructionist analysis.
 - Material for other researches.
 - Evidences of language/mind phenomena.

- Metaphor in grammar.
- Mismatch.
- (Semi)auxiliary verb.
- (Grammaticalization.)

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