

Talking about Agents and Beneficiaries in Brazilian Portuguese

It is well known that the agent is the most prominent thematic role in relation to the others for fulfill the subject position. For instance, the verb *cut* has an agent and a patient in its argument structure and it is the agent that goes to the subject position. In most languages, it works like that:

(1) The hairdresser cut John's hair.

Although, if we want to give prominence to the beneficiary inside the NP patient of this action, most languages have some strategies like using auxiliary verbs:

- (2) John had his hair cut. (English)
- (3) Jean s'est fait couper les cheveux. (French)
- (4) Gianni si è fatto tagliare i capelli. (Italian)
- (5) Ich lasse mir die Haare schneiden. (German)

However, in Brazilian Portuguese (hereafter BP), if we want to promote the beneficiary to subject position, we do not use the strategy pointed above. There is a thematic role phenomenon where we can extract the beneficiary inside the NP patient to the subject position and put the agent in the adjunct position or just exclude the agent, in a violation of the Principle of Thematic Hierarchy, a presupposed universal:

- (6) a. O cabelereiro cortou o cabelo de João.
'The hairdresser cut John's hair.'
- b. João cortou o cabelo.¹
 John cut the hair

In (6b), John is the beneficiary of the cut action, and it is in the subject position. This occurrence is very productive in BP and when the agent is not present in the sentence, the sentences below can be ambiguous between the agent and beneficiary readings. The sentences below can mean:

- (7) João xerocou o artigo.
'João had his paper photocopied.'
- (8) Dr. João operou o nariz.
'Dr. John had his nose operated.'
- (9) Maria lavou o carro ontem.
'Maria had her car washed yesterday.'

Also, the sentences in (6) to (9) are not examples of some type of ergative alternations and those verbs cannot have this alternation. One interesting point of those sentences is that the beneficiaries that appear in subject positions must also have a kind of initiative or control over the process, as observed by Franchi (1997). See the example:

- (10) Sansão cortou o cabelo com a Dalila.
'Sanson had his hair cut by Dalila.'

The sentence in (10) is surely grammatical, but pragmatically it is unacceptable by the speakers. This is due exactly because we know that Sanson did not have any participation in the Dalila's action.

To conclude, I propose that these BP facts are evidence that there are no thematic roles such as agent, beneficiary, and so on. We can only think about thematic role as a set of semantic properties entailed by a relation between lexical items, following Dowty's idea, in part. And what are relevant for the linking between lexical semantic structure and syntactic structure are the semantic properties which compose the thematic roles, but not the thematic role *per se*. And for this linking, the control property is a very prominent one, even if it is not part of an agent.

¹ Maybe there are some few and specific examples like this in other languages; however, it is important to notice that this is a very productive phenomenon for BP.