

HOW MANY LIGHT VERBS TO MAKE A PANCAKE?

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Abstract. This article discusses the structure of pancake sentences in Brazilian Portuguese (BrP), considering, in particular, the properties of light verbs we argue to be present in pancake sentences. Pancake sentences are copular sentences with two central characteristics: a mismatch in phi-features between the subject and the postcopular adjective, and a situation reading ascribed to the noun phrase in subject position. Concretely, a sentence like *Criança-FEM é complicado-MASC* (lit. Children is complicated) means something akin to *Dealing with kids is complicated*. Together with Josefsson (2009), we assume that there is a light verb responsible for generating the situation reading in these sentences. However, we disagree with such author in how this light verb evokes the situation readings. We argue that the light verb in pancake sentences only bears grammatical features and the possible paraphrases for the situation readings are partly evoked by the context as long as they do not clash with the grammatical features in the light verb.

Keywords: pancake sentences, light verbs, Brazilian Portuguese, gender mismatch.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pancake sentences are copular structures which exhibit an apparent agreement mismatch between the subject and the predicative adjective. Sentence (1), from Brazilian Portuguese (BrP), exemplifies such mismatch. While the adjective has masculine and singular features, the subject has feminine and plural features. The copula in (1) is singular, hence it does not agree in number with the subject. Pancake sentences occur in several languages, and are well described in Scandinavian ones. (cf. Faarlund 1977 and much subsequent literature).

- (1) Crianç-a-s é divertid-o³
child-FEM-PL is-3SG fun-MASC-SG
'Situations involving children are fun'

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³ The abbreviations used in glosses are: COMMON = common gender; DEF = definite article; DEM = demonstrative pronoun; FEM = feminine gender; MASC = masculine gender; NEUT = neuter gender; MF = masculine and feminine gender; PL = plural; SG = singular; 3SG = third person singular; 3PL = third person plural; INF = infinitive.

Only relevant information for the discussion was glossed. Whenever we adapted glosses from other authors, this was indicated in the example reference.

In (1), there is a mismatch between gender and number features between the subject and the predicate. However, only the mismatch in gender features is a distinguishing characteristic of these sentences because BrP allows for number mismatch in several cases. In this language, number mismatch is related to a change in progress in morphosyntactic features that does not affect the readings ascribed to pancake sentences.

Sentences in (2) show a variety of patterns of number agreement in copular sentences.⁴ In (2a), the subject, the copula and the adjective share their number specification, characterizing a pattern of full agreement. In (2b), we have a pattern of partial agreement, in which the subject and the copula share their number features, but the adjective remains in the singular. Finally, in (2c), the subject is the only phrase with plural number specification, the copula and the adjective remain in the singular. Importantly, the reading ascribed to the subject remains constant in all these cases: the constituent *the boys* only receives an entity reading, not a situation reading. This indicates that variation in number is not the trigger to the situation reading to the subject of copular sentences.⁵

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|--------|---------------------|---------|---------|
| (2) a. | Os menino-o-s | são | lega-is |
| | The boys-MASC-PL | are-3PL | cool-PL |
| b. | Os menino-o-s | são | legal |
| | The boys-MASC-PL | are-3PL | cool-SG |
| c. | Os menino-o-s | é | legal |
| | The boys-MASC-PL | is-3SG | cool-SG |
| | ‘The boys are cool’ | | |

In contrast, gender features are much less suitable for variation in BrP. Gender agreement is mandatory in sentences in the direct order, as (3) shows.⁶ In (3a) and (3c), the gender of the nominal in subject position agrees with the postcopular adjective, as expected. Conversely, in (3b) and (3d) the gender feature of the subject nominal phrase does not agree with the gender in the postcopular adjective, rendering the sentences ungrammatical.

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|-------|-------------------------|--------|----------------|
| (3)a. | A bolsa | é | bonit-a. |
| | The bag-FEM | is-3SG | beautiful-FEM |
| | ‘The bag is beautiful’ | | |
| b. | *A bolsa | é | bonit-o. |
| | The bag-FEM | is-3SG | beautiful-MASC |
| | *‘The bag is beautiful’ | | |
| c. | O picolé | é | gostos-o. |
| | The popsicle-MASC | is-3SG | tasty-MASC |
| | ‘The popsicle is tasty’ | | |

⁴ There are more intricate patterns than those exemplified in (2). For a recent review of the literature on this matter, see Kato et al. 2023.

⁵ Also, in pancake sentences, both the copula and the predicative adjective disagree in number with the NP subject if it is plural. On the other hand, in cases of linguistic variation as the ones in (2), it is possible that only the predicative adjective disagrees with the subject (2b) or that both elements, the copula and the predicative adjective, disagree with the subject (2c).

⁶ For variation in gender in non-canonical word orders, see Simioni (2011).

- d. *O picolé é gostos-a.
 The popsicle-MASC is-3SG tasty-FEM
 *‘The popsicle is tasty’

It is also important to note that in Brazilian Portuguese, masculine and neuter gender are apparently realized by same morphological exponent (cf. Câmara Junior (1970)). The mismatch in gender values we see in (1) is between a feminine noun phrase in subject position and a neuter adjective in predicative position. This can be easily demonstrated when we consider the sentence in (4), which is two-way ambiguous, as schematized in Reading 1 and Reading 2 below. (4) can either mean that boys in general are complicated (reading 1) or that situations in which boys participate are complicated (reading 2).

- (4) Garoto é complicado.
 Boy is-3SG complicated
 Reading 1: Boys in general is complicated.
 Garoto [g:MASC] é complicado [g: MASC].
 Reading 2: Dealing with boys is complicated.
 Garoto [g:MASC] é complicado [g:NEUT].

As (4) shows, we can relate the readings to the gender specification of the adjective. In Reading 1, the adjective is predicate to an entity in the subject position and must agree with the subject in its gender features. In Reading 2, the adjective does not predicate an entity, but a situation. Consequently, we can deny that boys themselves are complicated, since what is asserted is that situations with boys are complicated. In this case, neuter gender is used. In sum, even though the adjective *complicado* (complicated) seems to be inflected for masculine in both readings, the adjective has neuter gender specification in pancake sentences. For ease of exposition, we will continue glossing the adjectives in pancake sentences with the abbreviation MASC.

This discussion about the phi-feature values of these sentences has also made clear another hallmark property of pancake sentences: they have a special reading. The agreement mismatch is connected to an eventive reading for the subject, as the translation to sentence (1) and the reading 2 in (4) illustrate.

This means that in pancake sentences, the referent denoted by the NP in subject position is interpreted as part of an event. The eventive readings compatible with the subject of pancake sentences can vary considerably. Sentences like (1) can be used in situations compatible with readings like *play with children is fun* or *have children is fun*.

Sentences like (1) are different from copular structures with regular agreement – which we call regular copular sentences –, where the predicative adjective and the noun in subject position agree in gender like in (5). The eventive interpretation for the subject is unavailable in regular sentences, hence (5) can only mean that children are fun, not that situations involving children are fun.

- (5) Criança-a-s são divertid-a-s
 child-FEM-PL are-3PL fun-FEM-PL
 ‘Children are fun’

Although it is clear that a special reading in pancake sentences is related to an apparent disagreement in gender between the subject and the predicative adjective, there are several accounts for how this reading arises. Authors diverge on whether this is a syntactic or a semantic phenomenon. If this is a syntactic phenomenon, it means that there is a covert structure responsible for generating this reading and also responsible for the apparent disagreement between the subject and the predicate. If this is a semantic phenomenon, some element of the sentence is responsible for triggering this special reading.

In this paper, we argue that this reading is obtained by syntactic mechanisms. Drawing on Josefsson's (2009) approach and our own previous account, we focus on one specific part of the covert syntactic structure we assume to be present in these sentences: a light verb. We discuss the structure of this light verb, which we argue to be radically underspecified. Its radical underspecification accounts for the variety of readings compatible with pancake sentences and also for the non-licensed ones. Finally, we assume that the readings for this light verb are identified by the context, not by grammatical means (contra Josefsson 2009).

2. FURTHER PROPERTIES OF BRP PANCAKE SENTENCES

As stated in section 1, the situation reading and the mismatch in gender features are key properties of pancake sentences in BrP and in other languages. In this section, we highlight other properties of pancake sentences that distinguish them from regular copular sentences. These properties throw light in characteristics of pancake sentences that will be useful later in the discussion.

2.1. Basic characteristics of the subject and the predicate in pancake sentences

Firstly, only a subset of the adjectives that can be licensed in postcopular position are allowed in pancake sentences. De Conto (2018)⁷ states that only evaluative adjectives, which she describes as predicates “that express a judgement based on an individual's experience, whether or not identical to the judge of a subjective proposition” (De Conto 2018: 92, our translation)⁸ are possible in pancake sentences.

Consider (6) for exemplification. The adjective *chato* (annoying) in (6) expresses a judgement made by the speaker based on his/her subjective experience. Because of that characteristic, this adjective is licensed in pancake sentences. Thus, a sentence like (6) exhibits the central characteristics of pancake sentences: disagreement in gender and a situation reading for the subject.

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|-----|---|--------|------------------|
| (6) | Atriz | é | chat-o |
| | Actress-FEM-SG | is-3SG | annoying-MASC-SG |
| | ‘Situations involving actresses are annoying’ | | |

⁷ Cf. also Duek, 2012; Rodrigues and Foltran, 2015.

⁸ To some extent, this classification overlaps with Bylinina's (2014) typology of evaluative experienter predicates. For a fine-grained discussion of the adjectives licensed in pancake sentences, see Martin et al. (2020).

An adjective like *chato* in (6) contrasts with *vaidoso* (vain), in (7), which cannot be seen as an evaluative adjective under De Conto's (2018) definition. Even if we have our own subjective parameters to say if someone is vain or not, we also must take into consideration objective parameters in this case. In other words, an adjective like *vaidoso* is not licensed in pancake sentences because it does not describe a situation that is only related to a personal evaluation. Hence, a sentence like (7) is ungrammatical as a pancake sentence because this adjective is not evaluative. This restriction is not present in regular copular sentences, wherein different types of adjectives are possible, not only the evaluative ones. This is exemplified in (8).

- (7) *Atriz é vaidos-o
 Actress-FEM-SG is-3SG vain-MASC-SG
 *‘Situations involving actresses are vain’
- (8) Aquela atriz é vaidos-a
 That actress-FEM-SG is-3SG vain-FEM-SG
 ‘That actress is vain’

As the reader can note, De Conto's (2018) restriction about the licensing of adjectives in pancake sentences is semantic in nature. However, the adjectives in pancake sentences exhibit some syntactic properties in common. They c-select sentences as complements, at least in one of its uses. If we compare *vaidoso* (vain) and *chato* (annoying) again, we will see that the former does not license clauses as complements, while the latter does.

- (9) *É vaidos-o que você tenha feito isso.
 Is-3SG vain-MASC that you have done that.
 *‘It is vain that you did that’
- (10) É chat-o que você tenha feito isso.
 Is-3SG annoying-MASC that you have done that.
 ‘It is annoying that you did that’

Another characteristic differentiates pancakes from regular copular sentences: licensing of definite subjects. Rodrigues and Foltran (2015): analyzing BrP data, convincingly show that only bare nouns and low quantifiers are allowed in the subject position of pancake sentences. Therefore, the nominal phrases in (11) and (12) are licensed in subject position, but a full-fledged DP, as the one in (13), is not.

- (11) Cem convidad-o-s é chat-o
 One-hundred guests-MASC-PL is-3SG annoying-MASC-SG
 ‘Situations involving a group of one hundred guests are annoying’
 (Rodrigues & Foltran 2015: 130, glosses adapted)
- (12) Mulher é complicad-o
 woman-FEM-SG is-3SG complicated-MASC-SG
 ‘Situations involving women are complicated’
 (Rodrigues & Foltran 2015: 130, glosses adapted)

- (13) *A mulher é complicad-o
 The-DEF woman-FEM-SG is-3SG complicated-MASC-SG
 *‘The woman is complicated’
 (Rodrigues & Foltran 2015, 133, glosses adapted)

The sentences in (14) and (15) exemplify the behavior of different quantifiers or quantized subjects in these sentences. Low quantifiers like *a lot* (muito) are licensed in pancake sentences, whereas high quantifiers like *toda* (all-FEM) are not. Also, a distributive element that behaves as a determiner like *cada* (each) is banned, as expected.

- (14) a. Quinze crianç-a-s é complicad-o
 Fifteen children-FEM-PL is-3SG complicated-MASC-SG
 ‘Situations involving fifteen children are complicated’
 b. Uma crianç-a é complicad-o
 One child-FEM-SG is-3SG complicated-MASC-SG
 ‘Situations involving one child are complicated’
 c. Muita crianç-a é complicad-o
 a lot children-FEM-PL is-3SG complicated-MASC-SG
 ‘Situations involving many children are complicated’
 (15) a. *Toda crianç-a é complicad-o
 all-FEM child-FEM is-3SG complicated-MASC-SG
 *‘Situations involving all the children are complicated’
 b. *Cada crianç-a é complicad-o
 each child-FEM-SG is-3SG complicated-MASC-SG
 *‘Situations involving each child are complicated’

Characteristics like those led Rodrigues and Foltran (2015) to postulate that the noun phrase in subject position of BrP pancake sentences are truncated nominals, following Pereltsvaig’s (2006) account of Russian Small Nominals.

Small nominals in Russian lack some or all functional projections, just like nominal phrases in BrP pancake sentences, even though they can be superficially identical to full-fledged DPs. The examples in (16) and (17) show that whereas the phrase *pjat’ izvestnyx aktërov* (five famous actors), in (16), agrees in number with the predicate, the seemingly same phrase in (17) is unable to do so.

- (16) V ètom fil’mе igrali [pjat’ izvestnyx aktërov].
 in this film played-PL five famous actors
 ‘Five famous actors played in this film.’
 (Pereltsvaig 2006: 438)
 (17) V ètom fil’mе igralo [pjat’ izvestnyx aktërov].
 in this film played-NEUT five famous actors
 ‘Five famous actors played in this film.’
 (Pereltsvaig 2006: 439)

Pereltsvaig (2006) defends that the noun phrase in (17) is a small nominal and do not possess the phi-features necessary to agree with the predicate. In contrast, the noun phrase in (16) is a full-fledged DP and because of that, it exhibits regular agreement with the verb. Note that this contrast is very similar to the one between pancake sentences and regular copular sentences.

Pereltsvaig (2006) notes that small nominals in Russian can be identified by the following characteristics: they cannot reference individuals, do not trigger agreement on the verb, cannot be replaced by personal pronouns or be the antecedent for a reflexive anaphor, and cannot be a controller of PRO or have strict scope. Although these small nominals can be generally modified by adjectives, they cannot be modified by adjectives indicating specificity. Finally, when realized as QPs, small nominals cannot have partitive interpretation⁹. As Rodrigues and Foltran (2015) note, the nominals in pancake sentences do not trigger agreement and reference to individuals, as seen in (1), repeated below as (18), and they cannot be replaced by the 3rd person personal pronoun *ela* (19) or be the antecedent of an anaphor like *para ela mesma* (20). Overall, the behavior is very similar to the one Pereltsvaig described for small nominals in Russian.

- (18) Criança-a-s é divertid-o
 child-FEM-PL is-3SG fun-MASC-SG
 ‘Situations involving children are fun’
- (19) *Ela é complicad-o
 she-FEM-SG is-3SG complicated-MASC-SG
 *‘Situations involving her are complicated’
- (Rodrigues & Foltran 2015: 133, glosses adapted)
- (20) *Mulher é complicad-o
 woman-FEM-SG is-3SG complicated-MASC-SG
 para ela mesma
 for herself-FEM
 *‘Situations involving woman are complicated for herself’
- (Rodrigues & Foltran 2015: 133, glosses adapted)

In addition, we note that the noun phrase in subject position of pancake sentences can be modified by adjectives like *pequenas* (small), as we see in (21), but fail to be modified by adjectives encoding specificity, like *específicas* (particular) in (22).

- (21) Criança-a-s pequen-a-s é divertid-o
 child-FEM-PL small-FEM-PL is-3SG fun-MASC-SG
 ‘Situations involving small children are fun’
- (22) *Criança-a-s específico-a-s é divertid-o
 child-FEM-PL specific-FEM-PL is-3SG fun-MASC-SG
 *‘Situations involving particular children are fun’

⁹ Note that attributive adjectives agree with nouns both in Russian and BrP. According to Pereltsvaig, agreement between elements inside the same phrase and agreement between elements in different phrases are based on different sets of features. Attributive adjectives agree with the noun using concord features (responsible for internal agreement), not Index features (phi-features that trigger external agreement that are located higher in a projection).

Also patterning with small nominals in Russian, quantified nominal phrases in subject position of pancake sentences can only have a group reading, not a partitive one, as shown in (23).

- (23) Cem convidad-o-s é chat-o
 One hundred guests-MASC-PL is-3SG annoying-MASC-SG
 ‘Situations involving a group of one hundred guests are annoying’
 (Rodrigues & Foltran 2015: 130, glosses adapted)

In sum, the discussion so far has shown that there is an intricate set of properties in pancake sentences. The postcopular adjective must be evaluative and the noun phrase in subject position is truncated when compared to full DPs.

2.2. Is this really a subject?

Given the lack of agreement between subject and predicative adjective in pancake sentences in BrP, one could entertain the hypothesis that the subject is in a topical position, which would prevent it from agreeing with the postcopular adjective.

Rodrigues and Foltran (2015), based on Danon (2012), defend that the subject is not topicalized in BrP pancake sentences. A piece of evidence for this hypothesis is the fact that the nominal phrase in pancake sentences occupies the same position a regular subject does. If we compare the interrogative sentences in (24) and (25), we will see that the subject *criança* is below the complementizer in both cases. This suggests that apart from differences in agreement, *criança* occupies the same position in both clauses. In contrast, when this constituent is in a topical position, as in (26), it is placed higher than the *wh*-word.

- (24) Quandoi (que) criança-a é divertid-o ti ?
 wheni (that) child-FEM is fun-MASC ti
 ‘When are situations involving children fun?’
 (Rodrigues & Foltran, 2015: 138, hyphens added)
- (25) Quando (que) criança-a é divertida?
 when (that) child-FEM is-3SG fun-FEM
 ‘When are children fun?’
- (26) Criança-a, quando que isso é divertid-o?
 Child-FEM when that this is-3SG fun-MASC
 ‘Children, when that this is fun?’

Moreover, we can compare pancake sentences in BrP to French, a language where the nominal expression in pancake sentences clearly occupies a topical position, as shown in (27). The subject position is filled with a demonstrative pronoun exhibiting default gender and number in these French constructions.

- (27) Les enfants, c’est triste.
 the.PL child-MASC-PL DEM.be-3SG sad.
 ‘Dealing with children is sad.’
 ‘Children are generally sad.’
 (Martin et al. 2020: 156, glosses adapted)

Since *les enfants* is a topic, it has flexible interpretations, as the translations into English indicate. *Les enfants* in (27) can simultaneously be read as an entity or as part of an event. Thus, the reading of *les enfants* as part of a situation is a byproduct of the readings a topic may have, rather than being a dedicated reading, contrasting with the subject in BrP pancake sentences.

Consider now (28) also from French. In this sentence, the pancake reading is not generated because the adjective is not suitable for this reading. However, the sentence is well-formed and the topic has an entity reading.

- (28) Les enfants, c'est généreux/loyal.
 the-PL child-MASC-PL DEM-be.-3SG generous/faithful-MASC-SG
 'Children are (in general/always) generous/faithful'
 NOT: #Dealing, talking... with children is generous/faithful.
 (Martin et al. 2020: 156, glosses adapted)

If the subject of BrP pancake sentences were a topic, we would expect to have sentences comparable to (27) and (28) in this language, i.e. sentences with agreement mismatch between the noun phrase and the postcopular adjective in which the situation and the entity reading are both available to the same subject, as in (27), or sentences in which the subject has an entity reading even though there is an agreement mismatch, as in (28). However, as we have seen in Section 1, this is impossible in BrP. There is always a dedicated situation reading for the subject when the key ingredients for pancake sentences and their predicates — a subset of evaluative adjectives and a feature mismatch between subjects with small nominals — are present. Hence, we argue that the nominal phrases in pancake sentences are really subjects in BrP. With that in mind, we discuss how this reading arises for the subject in BrP pancake sentences.

3. SEMANTIC OR SYNTACTIC AGREEMENT

The apparent agreement mismatch in pancake sentences has been a point of discussion among different authors. Essentially, all authors assume that the apparent agreement mismatch is not a real mismatch. The disagreement stems from what kind of covert structure is responsible for this reading. Either we have an alternative mechanism of agreement: semantic agreement, which is triggered by specific types of noun phrases or a covert semantic structure, or we have regular agreement with a covert sentence.

Enger (2004) represents the point of view that pancake sentences are cases of semantic agreement, while authors such as Faarlund (1977) and Josefsson (2009), propose, using different arguments, that pancake sentences display regular syntactic agreement. We briefly present each approach below before presenting our own account.

3.1. Semantic agreement

The regular pattern for gender agreement in Norwegian, as Enger (2004) discusses, is different from the one in Portuguese (already presented in section 1). In the former language, predicative adjectives do not inflect for gender in the plural. In the singular form, an adjective

kind that cannot be described by syntactic features, would be established when the noun phrase in subject position and the predicative adjective enter into an agreement relationship.

Under this analysis, the pancake sentence is the product of a noun phrase whose reference is low on the individuation scale coupled with an adjective in predicate position. Importantly, the characteristics of the subject disallow it to trigger regular, syntactic agreement, and the neuter gender in the adjective would be the reflex of the semantic agreement with a low individuated noun.

Some basic properties of pancake sentences can be used to reject Enger's analysis. As already pointed out by Rodrigues and Foltran (2015), the subject of pancake sentences is not always inanimate in BrP, as exemplified in (1). In that example, the subject *crianças* (children) is human and bears plural features, being considered high in the individuation scale.

In addition, we point out the occurrence of sentences with apparently the same subject and in which the agreement may or may not be triggered, as we see in the contrast between (1) and (5). If we consider Enger's proposal for BrP, we cannot fully explain these examples, and we would have to say that the same subject can trigger semantic agreement in (1) and syntactic agreement in (5), which is not explanatory.

3.2. Syntactic agreement

In this section, we discuss two proposals that treat the apparent agreement mismatch in pancake sentences as a case of regular, syntactic agreement: Faarlund (1977) and Josefsson (2009).¹⁰ In both accounts, authors assume covert elements are responsible for agreement. However, Faarlund defends the presence of a hidden infinitive clause in the subject of pancake sentences, whereas Josefsson believes that null light verbs are part of these subjects.

3.2.1. Faarlund (1977) and the hidden infinitive

By now, Faarlund's analysis of pancake sentences is the classical one. As observed by Enger, it is essentially a 'transformational analysis' since there is a deletion operation in these sentences. In Faarlund's view, the noun in subject position of pancake sentences is part of an infinitive phrase, as illustrated below by Enger (2004).

- (35)

Pannekakker	er godt	← å ete pannekaker	er godt
pancakes	is good-NEUT.SG	to eat pancakes	is good-NEUT.SG

(Enger 2004:7)

As demonstrated in (35), the pancake sentence on the left would be a reduction of the original sentence with a clausal subject, represented on the right side. A question that remains is why the verb *eat* - and not any other verb compatible with the sentence - is the one chosen in this case.

According to Faarlund (1977), the choice of verbs is dependent from the linguistic or real-world context. That is why in (35) we would use *eat* and not *drink*, since one cannot drink pancakes. The same type of analysis has also been proposed to BrP pancake sentences

¹⁰ For other syntactic approaches, see Carvalho & Alexiadou (2021) and De Conto & Carvalho (2022).

by Martin (1975). Both Faarlund's and Martin's proposals have some weakness pointed out by Enger (2004) and by Rodrigues and Foltran (2015) that cannot be dismissed.

First of all, Enger points out that there are many possible paraphrases of pancake sentences, not only one, like Faarlund defends. For that reason, one could not fully determine which verb would be elided in a pancake sentence with clausal subject.

The problems in Scandinavian languages carry over to BrP as well. The sentences in (36) illustrates a potential counterargument for an ellipsis analysis. The weakness of this proposal is apparent if we add more elements to the sentence in (36a), like a purpose clause, as in (36b). While in (36a), *lavar* (to wash) would be a suitable candidate for the situation reading in the subject position, this same verb would be impossible in a sentence like (36b), since *lavar* is already part of the subordinate clause.

- (36) a. Água mineral é bom.
 water mineral-FEM is-3SG good-MASC.
 'Spring water is good.'
- b. Água mineral é bom para lavar cabelo
 water mineral-FEM is-3SG good-MASC for washing hair
 'Spring water is good for washing the hair'
- (Rodrigues & Foltran 2015: 136, glosses adapted)

In addition, the restrictions for the situation reading to arise, already presented in section 1, cannot be explained by the hidden infinitive hypothesis. Recall one such restriction: subjects are small nominals in BrP pancake sentences, which means they must be smaller than a DP. However, in sentences with infinitival subjects, there is no ban against definite articles, like (37) shows.

- (37) Beijar minha mulher é divertido
 (to) kiss my-FEM-SG woman-FEM-SG is fun-MASC-SG
 'Kissing my wife is fun'
- (Rodrigues & Foltran 2015: 135, glosses adapted)

The fact that a hidden infinitive analysis cannot account for the characteristics of pancake sentences (in BrP and other languages) has led authors to reject the analysis of a covert syntactic structure altogether. Nevertheless, a covert syntactic structure does not necessarily equate to an infinitive clause. Josefsson (2009) argues for a different structure, which, we believe, can account for some key properties of pancake sentences.

3.2.2. Josefsson (2009) and the light verbs

In her analysis of Swedish pancake sentences, Josefsson (2009) agrees with Enger (2004) with respect to the necessity of agreement in pancake sentences, since the canonical agreement operation between the subject and the predicate is not really an option, like exemplified in (33) and (34). However, unlike Enger, she defends that there is regular syntactic agreement in these sentences.

Similarly to Faarlund, she proposes that the noun in the subject position of pancake sentences is part of a clausal-like constituent, the noun being the object of a null verb heading

a vP in subject position. The difference from Faarlund's account lies in the fact that the vP is not lexical in her account. The vP head is occupied by some invisible light verbs and takes an overt noun as a complement. This accounts for the multiple eventive readings the subject of a pancake sentence may have, something that could not be explained in Faarlund's account.

One piece of evidence presented by Josefsson (2009) for such an analysis is the licensing of VP/vP-adverbs in the subject of pancake sentences, as shown in (38).

- (38) Vitlök i kylskåpet är dum-t
 garlic in refrigerator-DEF is silly-NEUT
 'It's stupid to keep/put garlic in the refrigerator'
 (Josefsson 2009: 45, glosses adapted)

If there is no covert verb in (38), we would have to explain why the PP is in the second position of the clause. Since Swedish is a V2 language, non-verbal constituents do not occur in the second position, as exemplified by (39), in which there is an overt verb.

- (39) *Vitlök i kylskåpet har vi inte
 garlic in fridge-DEF have we not
 (Josefsson 2009: 45, glosses adapted)

Even if BrP is not a V2 language, we can adapt Josefsson's test to this language. A temporal NP apparently modifies the subject in (40), but we know this modification cannot really take place. NPs like *todo dia* modify events, not entities. The only way to account for this apparent modification is to propose a concealed verbal structure in the subject of pancake sentences. Consequently, there must be a null element that is modified by the adverb *todo dia* (every day) in this sentence. This becomes obvious when we consider the interpretations we have for a sentence like (40), in which *todo dia* refers to situations involving children, not to children *per se*.

Situation: A person is explaining why she likes to be a teacher. By uttering (40), she means she likes being with kids every day.

- (40) criança-s todo dia é divertid-o
 child-FEM-PL every day is-3SG fun-MASC-SG
 'Situations involving children are fun every day.'

Given the possibility of adverbial modification and the V2 rule in the language, Josefsson could simply assume that the adjective is agreeing with the concealed verbal phrase in subject position, which would explain the apparent mismatch. However, the author defends that the subject position in pancake sentences must be nominal-like, since the gender feature that surfaces in the adjective is a nominal one. In other words, she ends up assuming that there are further projections above the vP in the subject position and they are of a nominal nature. The adjective in predicate position ends up agreeing with the gender projection (named SemP) located at the top of vP, in the subject position.

SemP is responsible for turning the vP into a nominal-like element, as represented in (41). In sum, in her analysis, there would be no disagreement in pancake sentences, since the predicative adjective would agree with a null gender projection in the subject position.

- (41) [SemP ... [vP LIGHT VERB [crianças]]]

Josefsson's analysis of syntactic agreement in pancake sentences can thus be split into two steps: (i) the demonstration of the existence of a vP in the subject position of pancake sentences; (ii) the assumption that there is a gender projection above such vP, since gender agreement occurs between nominal and adjectival categories. Although there is robust indication for a verbal element in the subject position of pancake sentences (eventive readings; constraints on possible readings, cf. section 4), there is no principled reason for a gender projection on top of vP in the subject of pancake sentences.

Note that if we assume that a gender projection is necessary in the concealed vP pancake sentences, we will have to stipulate a gender projection on top of the vP subject in (42) as well, instead of simply assuming that *-o* in *gostoso* (tasty) stands for a thematic vowel that is not an exponent of agreement.

- (42) Comer camarão é gostos-o.
eat-INF shrimp is-3SG tasty-NEUT
'Eating shrimp is tasty.'

Also, the postulation of a SemP projection above vP in subject position of pancake sentences entails the postulation that virtually every vP constituent has a SemP projection. This is so because if we postulate this projection only in sentences like (40) or (42), we have a classic case of look-ahead: the SemP projection is present in the subject position because it has to agree with the predicative adjective. Moreover, there is no principled reason for this gender projection to combine with a null vP, but not with an overt vP. Hence, the vP in the subject position of (42) should be treated in the same way as the subject of pancake sentences, if these two types of clauses have a vP as a subject.

Let us now move to cases in which there is a clausal subject, but no predicative adjective for this subject to agree with in gender. The clausal constituent *comer camarão* in (43) and (44) would also have a SemP projection above the vP as well. While we could postulate that the two SemP in the copular sentence agree with each other in (43), there is no way for the putative SemP projection to have its features valued/checked in (44), since it does not agree with any other nominal-like element. A sentence like (44) should then be ungrammatical, contrary to fact.

- (43) [Comer camarão] é [evitar dor de cabeça].
eat-INF shrimps is avoid-INF pain of head
'Eating shrimps avoids headaches.'
- (44) O João disse [comer camarão].
John said eat-INF shrimp
'John said to eat shrimps'

Because of that, we just keep one ingredient of Josefsson’s analysis: there must be a concealed structure in the subject position of pancake sentences. Because it is not necessary and would fail to be checked in several configurations where clausal constituents are licensed, we do not adopt a SemP projection on top of the vP. We thus assume that because the vP is not a nominal-like structure, the adjective will surface with neuter gender features. In the next two sections, we keep refining the properties of the concealed sentence in subject position focusing on the characteristics of the null light verb.

4. POSSIBLE READINGS

As we said in section 1, the subject in pancake sentences can be licensed as part of many different events. Sentence in (1) repeated below as (45), for instance, can receive the readings listed from (a) to (d), among many others.

- (45) Crianç - a - s é divertid - o
 child - FEM- PL is-3SG fun-MASC-SG
- a. Playing with kids is fun.
 - b. Teaching kids is fun.
 - c. Monitoring kids is fun.
 - d. Paying attention to what kids say is fun.

The list above shows two characteristics of the readings we find in pancake sentences. Firstly, the subject serves as an object or part of an object to the verb that describe the situation in pancake sentences. Secondly, it is relatively common to paraphrase the readings the pancake sentences evoke with verbs that encode some agentivity, i.e. verbs that can potentially have an agent as an external argument.

Note that classifications as “verbs that encode some agentivity” and “verbs that can potentially have an agent as an external argument” lump together many verbal classes. In terms of lexical aspect, all verb classes, except for stative verbs, contain some verbs that have an agent as an external argument. Interestingly, stative verbs are not among the many possible readings for these sentences. If we use a verb like *to hate* as a potential paraphrasis for (46), the result is ill-formed even if it is suitable for the context we see in (46).

- (46) Situation: John always goes to his college classes even though he doesn’t like them. He says that it is important to think carefully before choosing a university because sometimes you can’t leave it even if you don’t like it. When giving advice to a friend about college life, he says:
- Faculdade é complicado
 college-FEM-SG is complicated-MASC-SG
 ‘College is complicated’
 Possible readings: to go to college is complicated; to attend college..., but not: *to hate college is complicated

Likewise, a reading in which the subject of the pancake sentence is object to a verb like *love* is ill-formed, even if a context like (47) allows it.

- (47) Among all the existent animals, my daughter's favorite one is the jaguar, so she asked me if we could have one as a pet. I said:
- | | | |
|------------|----|------------------|
| Onç-a | é | complicad-o. |
| jaguar-FEM | is | complicated-MASC |

Possible interpretations: To raise a jaguar is complicated, To have a jaguar is complicated.

Impossible interpretations: *To love a jaguar is complicated.

(adapted from Carvalho & Torquette 2025: 10)

We believe that the ban on some readings reveals grammatical properties of the structure of the vP in subject position in pancake sentences: it has agentive features. Importantly, for accounts that assume a covert semantic structure (cf. Wechsler 2013; Martin et al. 2020), we would have to assume that this covert semantic structure tolerates agentive little *vs*, but not stative ones. Both agentive and stative little *vs* have overt syntactic counterparts in several languages, which endorses our view that there is indeed a syntactic structure that generates the eventive reading in these sentences, not just a semantic one.

5. THE STRUCTURE OF THE LIGHT VERBS IN PANCAKE SENTENCES

We have been assuming that BrP pancake sentences have a concealed structure in subject position, which is responsible for the eventive reading these sentences have. The presence of this concealed structure can be further exemplified by the licensing of two non-agreeing adverbial elements in pancake sentences (cf. Maruzic & Saucer 2005; Ross 1976; den Dikken et al. 1996).

Consider the example in (48):

- (48) Imagine you are a doorman at a preschool. During the time the kids are arriving at the school, you must be very attentive since they usually fall or stumble on things and get hurt. Because you had problems with that for years, you ask the school principal whether kids could have slightly different time periods to get into the school based on their age. You believe that the accidents would be potentially reduced if you had to deal with fewer kids at a time. The principal accepts the suggestion, but after a meeting with the parents in which he presented your idea, he tells you it will not work because not all parents are available at the designated timeslots for each age. You then say:
- | | | | | |
|-----------|-----------|--------|------------------|----------|
| Criança | sem parar | é | complicado | de novo. |
| Child-FEM | nonstop | is-3SG | complicated-MASC | again |

In this context, the sentence in (48) means something along the lines of *parents bringing kids nonstop again is complicated*. In such context, the two PPs are modifying different portions of the structure. The modifier *nonstop* apparently modifies *children*, however a word like *nonstop* modifies events and *children* is an entity, similarly to the cases we have discussed above. Note, however, that the sentence in (48) has an important property: there are two different modifiers with conflicting information: if something happens nonstop, it cannot happen again. For something to happen again, it must have stopped at some point. The only way these modifiers will not contradict themselves is if they modify two different

vPs (i.e. if they modify two different sentences), which again endorses the analysis of a concealed clausal structure in the subject of pancake sentences.

As anticipated in section 3, we follow Josefsson's (2009) account in assuming that this concealed vP has a light verb as a head. However, there are some differences between our account and Josefsson's about the content and function of this light verb. Josefsson (2009) assumes that 9 light verbs are licensed in Swedish pancake sentences (HAVE, DO, PERCEIVE, SEE, GIVE, HOLD, GO, TAKE, GET). Like *pro*, their readings depend on the identification by some functional projections: (i) the gender projection above vP (recall discussion about this projection in section 3), and (ii) the temporal interpretation of the sentence and PPs. Consider (49) that exemplifies this mechanism of identification.

- (49) Den där **buketten**
 That there **bunch.of.flowers.COMMON.DEF**
till svärmor i lördags var slug-t.
to mother.in.law in Saturday was cunning-NEUT
 'To give your mother-in-law those flowers last Saturday was cunning.'
 (Josefsson 2009:49, emphasis added)

The sequence in bold is a pancake sentence. It exemplary illustrates the two characteristics of this sentential type: a) the subject receives an eventive reading even in the absence of an overt verb or any other overt element that could contribute this reading; b) there is a mismatch in gender between the subject and the predicate. In this example, the PP *till svärmor* (to mother-in-law) supposedly identifies the null light verb. Because this PP can be easily construed as the receiver of the flowers, the null verb would be identified as GIVE. This interpretation is explicitly present in the translation to English of this example.

Even though the presence of the PP influences the interpretation of the event, several other verbs compatible with such PP could presumably be interpreted as part of the subject, such as *harvest* and *take*. As Josefsson (2009) acknowledges herself, there are cases in which the interpretation is unstable, allowing the postulation of different light verbs.

We take this as evidence that these readings are partly contextually generated. In our proposal, the readings available are those that match the structure of the minimally specified null light verb. Since this verb does not have lexical features, several verbs are compatible with such null light verb. In (49), for instance, verbs like *give*, *harvest* and *take* would be licensed, because they are all ditransitive verbs that could have the PP *to mother-in-law* as the indirect complement.

This line of analysis explains both the multiple readings available for the subject in pancake sentences and the ban of some readings (see section 4), a characteristic that is usually overlooked in the literature on pancake sentences. Both the readings allowed and prohibited are dependent on the structure of the null light verb. All the lexical verbs compatible with the minimally specified light verb will be seen as compatible with the eventive reading, whereas all other verbs of a different structural type will not be tolerated as possible descriptions of the event in pancake sentences.

Hence, we do not assume that there is a grammatical mechanism that can identify this null light verb in the functional sequence of the sentence. Rather, the compatibility between verbs and the light verb in the structure is what gives rise to the possible situation readings. Also, this compatibility between grammatical structure and possible verbs evoked by the context is responsible for blocking some readings that would otherwise be compatible with the context.

We have mentioned that there is another strand of analysis in the literature for phonologically null verbs. Marusic & Zaucer (2005) argue that null verbs in Slovenian and in some other languages have no licensors. They argue both theoretically and empirically in favor of this view. From a theoretical point of view, they argue that there is no reason to assume that phonologically null verbs are licensed. Generally, verbs do not require a licensor in syntax. Rather, they are usually the category that license elements (they check/value the case of the object, for instance). Being phonologically null or overt should not interfere with whether a category is a licensor or not. In sum, we can assume that in principle, null verbs behave exactly as overt verbs in not requiring any licensing.

From an empirical point of view, one could argue that null verbs, in the languages they were identified, are found in a specific environment, and this characteristic indicates the need for structural licensing. For instance, van Riemsdijk (2002) argues that the null GO in some dialects of German only occurs under *sollen* (must). One could also say that inflection is mandatory whenever you have a null verb, but Marusic & Zaucer (2005) discuss some environments without inflection in which null verbs are licensed. Overall, they assume that what are called identifiers of null verbs by some authors are only flags for recoverability of these verbs. Null verbs usually occur under inflection because they occur inside sentences, and sentences are usually inflected for tense.

Pancake sentences clearly demonstrate that at least some null verbs do not require a licensor. Contrasting with GO in Germanic languages, null light verbs in pancake sentences appear in the subject position of a sentence with an uninflected tense, therefore they are not under inflection or any element that could license the verb. In sum, if null light verbs invariably require a licensing in every language, we should be able to find them in an environment where such licensor invariably appears.

This does not seem to be the case for some null verbs that have already been very well described (several null verbs in Slovenian) and it is definitely not the case in pancake sentences, in which the null light verb appears in the subject position of an uninflected sentence. In (51), an example from Slovenian, drawn from Marusic & Zaucer (2005), shows that a null light verb is interpreted even in the absence of inflection since there is no other verb (besides the null one) to carry the inflection. (52) shows that a similar analysis applies to pancake sentences. There is an overt light verb in the sentence (the inflected copula *be*). The null light verb is buried inside a verbal projection and inaccessible to agree operations and does not interact with T in any way. It is part of a constituent that checks the EPP in Spec, TP and is, therefore, out of reach of inflection (as schematically represented in (52b), with English words).

- (51) Takoj v posteljo!
 immediately to bed
 ‘Go to bed right now!’ (Marusic and Zaucer 2005: 244)
- (52) a. Crianç - a - s é divertid-o
 child - FEM- PL is-3SG fun-MASC-SG
 b. [vP LIGHT verb children] T [3SG]

We thus concur with Marusic and Zaucer that flags for recoverability of meaning in sentences with null light verbs must be distinguished from structural licensors. The potential licensors for the null light verb proposed by Josefsson are, in our view, flags for

recoverability of meaning. The diversity of elements that she posits makes it clear that there is no clear licenser for the null light verb in pancake sentences. These elements are actually hints for possible eventive readings that match the agentive little *vs* in pancake sentences.

We argue that null light verbs require these flags for recoverability because their meaning is not the same as the meaning of lexical verbs. Drawing in a discussion in Marusic and Zaucer (2005), (53) below shows that with phrases that can convey both literal and idiomatic meaning, the only meaning that can be evoked in pancake sentences is the literal one. In its idiomatic reading, *catar coquinho* roughly means ‘get lost’. The idiomatic meaning is absent in pancake sentences, as shown in (54), an ill-formed sentence. Crucially, we would not expect such reading to be absent if the null verb had the same content as the overt one.

- (53) A gardener is hired to pick up any fruits he finds in a garden that has been abandoned for quite some time. Seeds have been spread and small trees have been planted in this garden a year ago. When cleaning the garden, he collects bananas and watermelons very easily, because he can see these types of fruits from afar. However, he has a hard time picking up some little coconuts because they are very small and sometimes indistinguishable from leaves in bushes. In this context, he says:

- Coquinho é complicado.
 little coconut is complicated

Possible meaning (among others): picking little coconuts is complicated.

- (54) John was angry with his brother and argued with him. After some time, he tried to apologize but his brother was still hurt. When discussing the episode with John, his brother said that he got specially upset when he heard that he should ‘*catar coquinho*’:

- # Coquinho é complicado

Impossible meaning: #Get lost is complicated.

Because the null light verbs in pancake sentences cannot have all the readings an overt verb has, the lightness of the verbs in pancake sentences relate to their poor specification in terms of features. Consequently, they match several lexical verbs that could be evoked in the context. Such matching is only possible because the null light verbs are highly underspecified, not because they have the identical structure of the verbs evoked by the context. However, the reason why these light verbs are so common in pancake sentences across the languages, but are not so common in other constructions, awaits further research.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have discussed the structure of BrP pancake sentences. Even though the situation reading in the subject position of pancake sentences has been much investigated throughout the years, there is no consensus on how this reading is obtained in the absence of a verbal structure. We briefly revised some analyses in the literature and argued that those that postulate a syntactic covert structure (rather than a semantic covert one) fare better with their behavior. We partially adopted Josefsson’s analysis of an implicit light verb, although we suggest that this light verb is not identified by any grammatical licenser present in the

sentence. Rather, since it is minimally specified with grammatical agentive features, it will evoke several possible verbal meanings as long as these meanings do not clash with its featural specification. The analysis of possible and impossible readings evoked by these null light verbs help throw light in their constitution and properties.

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