

BP “OBRIGADO EU!” AND “OBRIGADO VOCÊ!” IN COUNTER SERVICE UTTERANCES

Bruna Karla PEREIRA (UFMG, UFPA)

This paper aims at analyzing, within a formal approach, structures such as “Obrigado você!” (*thank you*) and “Obrigado eu!” (*thank I*). They are commonly used as responses to “Thanks!” in contemporary Brazilian Portuguese (BP). With this in mind, we will check these structures in a corpus containing utterances produced by members of staff and customers.

In BP, there are many different ways to reply to “Thanks!”: “De nada!”, “Por nada!”, “Às ordens”, “À disposição”, “Disponha!”, “Estamos à disposição!”, “Estamos aí pra isso!”, “Eu é que agradeço!”, and so forth. In English, we find several options as well: “You are welcome!”, “No problem!”, “Not at all!”, “My pleasure!”, “No worries!”, etc.

Nonetheless, in contrast to English in which “Thank you!” is used with a pronoun, BP “Obrigado!” is closer to French “Merci!” which is independent from pronominal categories. Recently though, in BP, variants other than those listed above have drawn attention especially due to their pronominal make up, as follows: “Obrigado **você!**” (*thank you*) and “Obrigado **eu!**” (*thank I*). These expressions mean, respectively, “It is **to you** that I have to say ‘thanks’” and “It is **me** who has to say thanks”.

However, they sound a bit strange for some speakers probably because “Obrigado!” is primarily an independent interjection having neither complement “*obrigado (a)” (*thanks to*) nor external argument “*(eu) obrigado” (*I thanks*).

Taking a brief look at dictionaries, “obrigado” is sometimes classified as an adjective, such as “reconhecido” (*acknowledged*) or “grato” (*thanked*) as follows: “Fico-lhe muito obrigado pelo que me fez” (FERREIRA, 1999) (*I am very ‘pleased’ by what you did for me*). Nevertheless, this kind of data is not common at all in contemporary BP. In other words, rather than an adjective, “Obrigado!” is an interjection, e.g.: “Como vai? Bem, obrigado!” (*How are you? I am fine, thanks!*). Therefore, we do not believe that an explanation for the use of pronouns in the expressions so far considered can be derived from a link between “obrigado” and adjectives like “grato”.

In contrast, we hypothesize, in a very preliminary proposal, that the speaker might be reanalyzing an interjection “obrigado” (*thanks*) as a verb “agradeço” (*I thank*). By the translation into English, it is worthwhile pointing out that, while “thanks” and “to thank” are cognate, “obrigado” and “agradeço” are not. Despite this, it seems that BP speakers are attributing grammatical patterns of “agradecer” to “obrigado”.

To understand this hypothesis, let’s observe (1a, b) and (2a, b) below. They are uttered in a situation where a salesperson replies to a customer “Thank you!”.

- (1) a. Obrigado (**a**) **você!**
Thanks to you
‘You are (more than) welcome!’
b. (Eu que) Agradeço **a** **você!**
(I who) thank to you
‘You are (more than) welcome!’

- (2) a. Obrigado **eu**!
Thanks I
 ‘You are (more than) welcome!’
 b. Agradeço **eu**!
I thank I
 ‘You are (more than) welcome!’

For (1a), we suggest that the speaker might be transferring the arguments from “agradecer” (*to thank*) to “obrigado” (*thanks*). As a result, it turns out that a prepositional complement “(a) você” (*to you*) is allowed in (1a) just like in (1b). In the same fashion, an external argument “eu” (*I*) is allowed in (2a) just like in (2b). Besides, this argument would undergo subject inversion as in (2b) for focus purposes.

According to Belletti (2003), in structures with subject inversion, the verb raises while the post-verbal subject goes to a focus position in the low left periphery, as stated below:

the focus interpretation of the postverbal subject should optimally come out of the syntactic configuration in which the subject DP is inserted. As I have shown that the subject is low in the clause structure, this naturally leads to the proposal that it should fill a low Focus position (BELLETTI, 2003, p. 22).

As such, in (2b), post-verbal “eu” (*I*) bears an emphasis indicating that, much more than the customer, it is the salesperson “eu” who has the obligation/need to thank the former (for the preference, the payment, the presence, etc.). That is why in (2a), “eu”, as in (2b), is possibly being understood as an inverted subject.

To support this claim, we may observe (2c). In this sentence, ‘mim’ (*me*), an accusative pronoun, is prevented from co-occurring with “obrigado”. So, apparently, only a nominative pronoun “eu” (*I*) is accepted.

- (2) c. *Obrigado mim.
Thank me.

According to Harris & Campbell (1995, p. 72), for a reanalysis to take place, the structure “must be open to the possibility of multiple analyses, where one potential analysis is the old one [...] and the other potential analysis is the new one”. In either (1a) or (2a), two readings may be identified, that is, “Obrigado eu!” is an interjection, on one hand, which seems to be used with verbal arguments, on the other hand. Additionally, according to Roberts & Roussou (2003), grammaticalization involves a change from lexical to functional item. If “obrigado” is undergoing a change from “interjection” to “verb”, it may also change from maximal projection to head.

In order to investigate this hypothesis, we aim at cataloguing responses to “Thanks!” in counter service conversations. Half of this data will be made available for this research by NUPEVAR (UFMG). The other half may still be recorded and transcribed, in case this database does not provide us with the expected sample. Therefore, from examples effectively produced, we will be able to check more efficiently our hypothesis.

Following Kennedy (1998, p. 271),

In contrast to Chomskyan approaches to language, corpus-based descriptions are based on non-elicited linguistic performance as the source of evidence for theories of language, and so far have largely focused on particular languages rather than universals of language. However, although the goals and focus of study have typically differed, the two approaches can be seen as complementary rather than conflicting.

To sum up, based on data uttered in commercial counter conversations, we will investigate the hypothesis according to which “Obrigado eu!” and “Obrigado você!” may be undergoing a reanalysis where grammatical properties of “agradeço” are being transferred to “obrigado”.

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