Borderline behavior of *mesmo(s)* and *mesma(s)* in academic writing

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Introduction

Academic writing is a main concern to students' academic success. Specific syntactic structures and processes required in more formal contexts, as in academic genres, need to be intentionally scaffolded to improve writing development (Caels et al., 2019). In many cases, issues in the interface syntax-semantics-pragmatics may be related to late acquisition, and are of most interest for educational linguistic matters. This may be the case of the overuse of *mesmo(s)/mesma(s)* in scholarly adult writing performance.

The aim of this study is to analyze non-canonical and borderline uses of *mesmo(s) and mesma(s)* that affect the general quality of referential cohesion in undergraduate students' written essays.

In European Portuguese, *mesmo(s)/mesma(s)* is a highly multifunctional item, not only because it belongs to different word classes, but also because it may assume different roles as a pronoun in referential chains. The following examples put in evidence uses of *mesmo* as a noun (1)-(2), an adverb (3), an adverbial conjunction (4), a pronoun (5), and a determiner (6).

(1) Podes seguir pela esquerda ou pela direita que vai dar ao **mesmo**.
(2) Mudou o Governo, mas ficou tudo na **mesma**.
(3) O condutor travou **mesmo** a tempo.
(4) **Mesmo** antecipado o problema, ela não o pôde evitar.
(5) As alunas de 3.º ano denunciaram os abusos de autoridade dos docentes e as **mesmas** fizeram queixa à reitoria.
(6) As alunas de 3.º ano denunciaram os abusos de autoridade dos docentes. Estas **mesmas** estudantes fizeram queixa à reitoria.

The items *mesmo(s)/mesma(s)* may be preceded by other determiners such as articles, demonstratives, possessives, as in (7)-(9), or personal pronouns, as in (10).

(7) Entro à **mesma** hora no trabalho há dez anos.
(8) Entrei por esta **mesma** porta há dez anos.

(9) O Xavier saiu da escola e tu **mesmo** mo disseste.

According to Brito (2003), determiners like those above express an emphatic contrastive value.

In a text, referential chains are formed between nominal expressions, in which the first element is an expression that introduces a new referent and the remaining elements are expressions that recover that reference. The first element works as the antecedent and the others are the anaphoric expressions. The formation of referential chains can be conditioned by grammatical and extra-grammatical factors.

In Lobo (2013), *mesmo(s)/mesma(s)* are also considered anaphora expressions, facilitating a reading dependent on a pronoun, such as *ela* ou *em si* in example (10).

(10)   A Ana perdeu a confiança nela / em si **mesma**.

In the anaphoric relations with *mesmo(s)* and *mesma(s)*, there is always referential dependency of the anaphoric term concerning its antecedent, which, in turn, always needs to occur first. This means that they cannot be used cataphorically. Moreover, *mesmo(s)* and *mesma(s)* must agree in gender and number with the antecedent.

Based on syntactic information, Binding Theory (Chomsky, 1981) distinguishes nominal expressions by their referential status, depending on their ability to be referentially autonomous. Other theoretical proposals have emerged, like the Reflexivity Theory (Reinhart & Reuland, 1993), which also considers the role of the semantic information of predicates. In turn, Grodzinsky & Reinhart (1993), based on acquisition studies, defend that coreference and binding are not governed by the same module of grammar, proposing a rule of pragmatic nature that regulates coreference within the domain of the sentence and relating it to a complex computation task. Psycholinguistic proposals such as the Accessibility Theory (Ariel, 2001) or the Position of Antecedent Hypothesis (Carminati, 2002) seek not only to address differences between anaphoric expressions, establishing a relation between an anaphoric form and the properties of its antecedent, but also try to identify different factors involved in the processing of anaphoric expressions at the sentence and at the discourse level.

Methodological Approach

Following a naturalistic approach, data were collected from real classroom tasks. Participants were 1rst year undergraduate students of the course Language and Textual Practice (LTP), in Media Studies, and 1rst year students of a Workshop on Portuguese for Academic Purposes (WPAP), from different faculties in a higher education institution. The texts gathered in the corpus may be classified as academic genres (Caels et al., 2019), since they were produced for academic purposes.

Table 1 – *Corpus*

Source	Number of texts	Number of words
LTP	75	18297
WPAP	35	5404
Total	**110**	**23701**

We searched for all the occurrences of *mesmo(s)/mesmas(s)*, distinguished canonical, non-canonical and borderline uses, and classified each item in terms of parts of speech. The analysis of the syntactic and discourse context of the items underpinned the categorization proposed in the following section.

Preliminary results

We found canonical uses of *mesmo*, in different syntactic contexts, belonging to diverse parts of speech categories. Major problems, affecting referential chains, are related to the pronominal functioning of *mesmo(s)/mesmas(s)* in textual / discourse units.

We propose four categories to describe non-canonical uses (as in A.11), in which the lack of agreement is agrammatical, and borderline uses (as in B.12-D.14), in which disfluent chains are due to supra-syntactic issues:

A. Disfluency in antecedent retrieval due to lack of agreement

(11)   O planeta está a ser prejudicado semanalmente com crises climáticas, no entanto, os meios de comunicação não estão a dar grande destaque aos **mesmos**.

B. Disfluency in antecedent retrieval

(12)   Existem duas perspetivas diferentes acerca da comunicação na construção do Homem e do mundo. Uma delas é que foi o único meio para a construção do Homem e do mundo, ou   seja, um instrumento totalitário, e a outra é que foi apenas um instrumento no meio de muitos outros que ajudou na criação dos **mesmos.**

C. Unnecessary filling of reference chain (it would be recoverable as a null subject)

(13)   Apesar de o autor realçar o poder da comunicação, o **mesmo** expõe duas opiniões em relação ao assunto que divergem.

D. Adequate (it can be replaced by a pronoun)

(14)   No que diz respeito a Portugal, durante a revolução de Abril o estado através da comunicação tentou representar a **mesma** como uma revolução cultural.

When *mesmo(s)* and *mesma(s)* uses are adequate, it can be replaced by different types of pronominal forms: personal (strong and null in subject positions, strong and clitic in object positions), demonstrative or possessive pronouns. In this case, its repetition throughout the text weakens the quality of referential cohesion mechanisms. Example (15) illustrates how borderline uses of *mesmo(s)* and *mesma(s)* affect text quality due to an overuse of *mesma/mesmo* and to the absence of the antecedent (the head of the chain) in the paragraph.

(15)   Quando **a mesma** fizera 15 anos, as cartas que havia escrito vieram [*] atona [*], e foram enviadas para todos os apaixonados através da sua irmã mais nova que queria que a **mesma** arranjasse alguém. E no *mesmo* espaço de tempo Larajin deparou com uma situação em que tinha de disfarçar ser a namorada de um dos seus apaixonados da infância, que já havia recebido a carta, para que o **mesmo** fizesse ciúmes [*] a ex-namorada, para que pudessem reatar, uma troca justa que fizeram para que o **mesmo** não revelasse a carta a seus colegas.

The non-canonical or borderline use of *mesmo(s)* and *mesma(s)* seems to be similar to the behavior of overt strong pronouns (following the terminology of Cardinaletti & Starke 1999). Therefore, we may argue that the establishment of the referential dependency of these structures also occurs post-syntactically, as it was observed in children's acquisition of overt strong pronominal forms (Silva, 2015). In this case, we may consider there is a division of labor between syntax, semantic and/or pragmatic constraints and processing limitations when expressing coreference, related to the computation of alternative derivations at the interface level.

Silva (2015, p. 250) generalizes "that, in the pronominal system, the more pronouns are syntactically licensed, the less problematic their acquisition becomes.". Consequently, we may assume that the pronominal functioning of *mesmo(s)* and *mesma(s)* is of late acquisition and subject to diaphasic, discursive or stylistic variation. A writing pedagogy in higher education should pay specific attention to this phenomenon.

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