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The Economy Principle: 17 Characteristics that make the English language economical…in comparison to Portuguese – a pedagogical perspective

ABSTRACT

We believe that all languages in the world use the Economy Principle in some way or other. The principle states that "languages tend to express ideas as economically as possible". This means that the speaker tends to leave out unnecessary words and not to repeat concepts that have been previously expressed.

In the Portuguese language, such expressions as "recuar para trás", "ambos os dois", and "preferir antes" are justifiably viewed as poor, since they unnecessarily repeat ideas ("para trás" is implied in "recuar", "ambos" includes the idea of "os dois", "preferir" encompasses the concept of "antes"). This type of expressions is anti-economical, and grammar books classify them as pleonasms, i.e. redundancies.

English is so easy to learn by foreigners partly because it is one of the languages that most efficiently use the economy principle. In this brief note we present several perspectives that justify the previous statements, with examples from English and Portuguese.

Keywords: English language, Portuguese language, contrastive linguistics, foreign language teaching, language structure

WHERE IS ENGLISH SO ECONOMICAL?

1. Certainly in the use of a definite article *the*, which is good for masculine, feminine, and neuter, both in the singular and plural. This is not a mere detail! Portuguese, Spanish, French, for example, have four different forms for the definite article: masculine, feminine, singular, and plural. Broadly speaking, it could be said that

German has 16 (sixteen) different forms: four each for masculine, feminine, and neuter, plus another four for a common plural. Fabulously, English has only one! And the English language eliminates it when nouns are viewed as universal or abstract items.

This has predictable costs, which, however, do not really penalize the language in terms of difficulty. They just oblige the speaker or writer to be more disciplined. The English speaker does not enjoy the same freedom as a German, for example, as far as word order is concerned. But this is in fact a minimal cost and it may even be looked upon as an asset. Speech becomes very clear and linear; the vocabulary is immensely rich and is being constantly enriched by new words from other languages that are easily anglicized.

The verb+object inseparable block of the English structure, and the real need of using a subject in verb forms are the (low) price English pays for its simplicity, e.g. The class is over! (Either *Over is the class*, or *Over the class is* would be awkward ways of expressing the simple, linear *The class is over* - subject (the class) + verb (is). In Portuguese, you can vary more; you can either say *A aula terminou!* or *Terminou a aula!* without any change in the meaning. The English language could not accept a sentence of the type *Terminou a aula!* because most verb forms are alike, without any difference between themselves).

2. Predictably enough, the English indefinite article has only one form, too. *A* (or *an* to avoid the formation of hiatuses) is enough to cover all the cases. This means extraordinary savings!

3. Although English has singulars and plurals, it shows a strong tendency to use singulars with a plural meaning whenever possible. Whereas the Portuguese say *todos os dias*, *todos os anos*, *todas as pessoas*, *todas as coisas*, i.e. they use plural forms, the English language prefers *every day*, *every year*, *everybody*, *everything*. This is also an example of economy.

4. In the same connection, whereas in a language like Portuguese you say *quatrocentos*, *três milhões*, *quatro biliões*, in English you say *four hundre**d**, three millio**n**, four billio**n***. And also, *two thousan**d***, of course. If *three* already implies a plural, why should you anti-economically repeat the idea of a plural by saying *three millions*? That would be wrong.

5. It is the same economical concept that you find in *Cascais is 18 miles from Lisbon*. Many Portuguese learning English tend to say *Cascais is 18 miles far from Lisbon*, since the question leading to this answer would normally be *How far is it from Lisbon to Cascais*? In fact, *far* is left out in the answer because it is absolutely unnecessary: the economy principle at work once again!

6. Alongside the single forms of the definite and indefinite articles above referred to, one of the great sources of economy is no doubt provided by the fabulous adjectives, which remain unchanged and precede the nouns. This eliminates all the problems of agreement between the noun and the adjective that exist in most languages. It is an extraordinary solution. The noun -- feminine or masculine, abstract or concrete, singular or plural -- just has to dive into the water of the quality that is expressed before it and absorb it. It is difficult to find a more economical way of creating a language than this. Not surprisingly, if two adjectives precede the noun, they need not be connected by means of "and", as happens in many other languages. Additional economy!

As said above, the adjective is not viewed as something variable, but rather as a constant. The fact that it is a quality, something synthetic, makes it unable to change its form. This quality precedes the nouns, thus "painting" them before they are even mentioned. This is completely different from the Portuguese system:

um	homem	ALTO.
uma	mulher	ALTA.
uns	homens	ALTOS.
umas	mulheres	ALTAS.
uns	homens e mulheres	ALTOS.

Table 1: Portuguese adjective placement

a	TALL	man.
a	TALL	woman.
	TALL	men.
	TALL	women.
	TALL	men and women.

Table 2: English adjective placement

As can be seen, the Portuguese system offers four different versions of the adjective, whereas the English system offers only ONE. What's more, the English system does not have to make any masculine-feminine option in cases of masculine and feminine together, e.g. men and women. The Portuguese language has to do it.

7. As if this were not enough, English offers another spectacular, highly economical language solution by using nouns as adjectives! Following the language pattern of preferring singular to plural forms, the adjective-clad nouns remain singular. So you say *bus-stop* for *A paragem de autocarro**s***, *road map* for *O mapa da**s** estrada**s***, *ticket collector* for *O cobrador de bilhete**s***. Simple and efficient. Thanks to this ingenious method, you manage to avoid sophisticated adjectives, e.g. *Os assuntos eclesiásticos* are simply *church affairs*, *A estação ferroviária* is *railway station*, *A torre sineira* is *bell tower*, etc. Could it be much simpler?

8. Adjectivation is probably the most characteristic and at the same time the most economical language-making process to be found in English. As seen above, both adjectives and nouns can be used as adjectives; they are both reduced to their most synthetic form, i.e. they are as short as possible. Synthetisation is a typical facet of the English language.

Mention should be made here of the fact that languages are usually divided into two great groups: those that are predominantly synthetic, and those that are predominantly analytical. Synthetic languages tend to avoid the use of prepositions; analytical languages specify the various relations between words by means of prepositions. As English is, by and large, a brilliant mix of German and French, it combines synthetic aspects with analytical ones. An adjective like *easy* becomes *easier* in its comparative and *the easiest* in its superlative form, i.e. by acting in a synthetic

way this adjective does not use any additional word (like *more* or *the most*). This happens with all adjectives of German origin. An analytical language like Portuguese adds other words to the adjective, e.g. *mais fácil*, *o mais fácil*.

English also uses a synthetic form in the so-called Possessive Case, e.g. *Peter's friends*. You do not use "of", a preposition, something that Portuguese needs (os amigos do Peter).

But apart from these well-known cases, English synthetizes expressions by reducing them to their simplest expression. Now, between the singular and the plural the former is no doubt more synthetic. For this reason, you should not find it strange that English should have *every day*, for *todos os dias*, *every winter* for *todos os invernos* and *everybody* for *todas as pessoas*. As an analytical language, Portuguese prefers plural to singular (the singular is contained in the plural form); by being a predominantly synthetic language, English prefers the singular form, because the synthetic form contains all other forms: singular and plural, masculine, feminine and neuter.

Significantly, English often feels that its singularised, synthetised forms actually imply a plural, as can be seen in (incorrect but common) sentences like *everybody has their own problems* (grammarians insist that it should be *everybody has his own problems*, but they also admit that it is an error commonly found in both speech and writing, probably arising from the lack in the English language of a relative pronoun meaning his-or-her. Agatha Christie in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* writes: *It was rather like a jigsaw puzzle to which everyone contributed their own little bit of knowledge.*)

This tendency clearly shows that *everybody* is meant as a synthesis of a plural like *all*. But *everybody* is the favourite form and not *all people*. Now, this synthetic aspect of English is also what you find in the common adjective, what you find when the noun is used as an adjective, and in blocs of ideas or qualities that precede nouns. As this is very common, English tends to be classified as a qualitative language: it is the quality of the noun that is expressed before it, sometimes by three or four different words.

As far as the degrees of comparison of adjectives are concerned, English had a problem to cope with. English was a Germanic language when the Normans invaded and conquered Britain in the 11th century. The Normans spoke French. As the conquerors, they introduced a very large number of French words into English, but had to accept to keep many Anglo-Saxon words, too. English is the result of this cohabitation, seasoned with some Nordic vocabulary left in Britain by the Vikings and the Danes.

If you were the winner, would you keep the longer or the shorter adjectives? Only if you were a masochist would you keep the longer ones. So, the Normans chose the shorter German adjectives and introduced some of their own. When you have an adjective like "easy", it is of Germanic origin; of its two common opposites, "hard" and "difficult", the latter is easily recognisable as a French word. To get around this problem of a double origin of its adjectives, English found a simple solution. Although it kept their main characteristics - German is a synthetic language and French an analytical one - it allowed the German *-er* ending to match the word *more* in adjectives of French origin, and regarded this as similar characteristics, which they in fact are. In this way, *easier than* corresponds to *more difficult than*; *cheaper than* cohabits perfectly with *more expensive than*; *older than* combines with *more modern than*. The same pattern is adopted for superlatives, this time using "-st" as an ending. Thus, we find *the easiest* and *the most difficult*, *the cheapest* and *the most expensive*, etc.

We must admit that to say *more easy* and *more difficult*, *the most easy* and *the*

most difficult would further simplify the language. So far it has not happened. Anyway, the *-st* ending used in superlatives is identical for all, e.g. “the best”, “the worst”, “the last”,”the first”, “the youngest”, “the most”, “the least”.

9. Verbs are traditionally one of the most complex parts in any language. Not in English. Also, here the language decided to economize. With very few exceptions, the verbs have the same forms for all persons in every tense. For example, the past of *to bring* is

I	brought
you	brought
he	brought
she	brought
it	brought
we	brought
you	brought
they	brought

Table 3: past tense of the verb to bring

Is there any possibility of making it simpler and more economical? The answer is obviously no. What´s the price you pay for this simplicity? You must not forget to express the subject *that´s all* because if you do nobody knows who you are talking about. As a price, it is extremely moderate, we must admit. But English has a lot more to offer in its anti-wastage campaign.

10. Even with all its simplicity of verb forms, English can afford to have the same form for both 2nd persons, in singular and plural! Where in Portuguese you have *tu* for the second person singular, *vós* for the second person plural, and an extraordinary array of forms for those people you neither address as *tu* or as *vós* - “você”, “o senhor”, “a senhora”, “o senhor engenheiro”, “o senhor doutor”, “a senhora professora”, etc. - English has one single form: *you*. Brilliant!

11. English has an interesting way of building interrogative sentences. It uses an auxiliary verb, except with the most common verbs, such as *to be, can, may, will*. Can we speak here of the economy principle or should we rather speak of an economical way of escaping the simplicity of verb forms?

Unlike Portuguese verbs, which usually have distinctive forms not only for every single person but also for tenses, e.g. “escrever, escrevi, escrito”; “falar, falei, falado”, English often has total coincidence between the verb form in the past and in the past participle: “to bring, brought, brought”; “to make, made, made”; “to study, studied, studied”. If no auxiliary verb were used, it might turn out somewhat confusing in terms of communication.

It is useful to bear in mind that the way of formulating questions in Portuguese is so easy - because the clearly distinct verb forms allow it - that even if you don´t invert the standard subject+verb order and, what´s more, even if you don´t mention the subject, the questions are perfectly understandable, e.g. “*Foste ao supermercado?”* “*Gostam de chocolate?”* In these two questions, *tu* is unnecessary in *foste, vocês* or *os senhores, as senhoras directoras*, etc. can be left out in the case of *gostam*.

In English, however, as all verb persons have the same ending and the past is often identical with the past participle, a solution had to be found to make speech clear. The "architects" of the language found the right solution in the use of an auxiliary verb that would distinguish between the present and the past (the future and conditional would also have auxiliary verbs). That auxiliary verb would, of course, have the same form for all persons, except for the third person singular of the Present - in keeping with what happens with most verbs. *To do* was the auxiliary verb chosen. The forms are *do* and *does* for the present, *did* for the past. A standard formula was created: Auxiliary Verb+Subject+Verb, e.g. "do+you+like (it?)", "did+you+see (her yesterday?)". The listener or reader automatically realizes when he hears *do* that he is going to be faced with a question related to a present, *did* to a past. He will answer in the present or past, but this time without making use of the auxiliary verb, which would be absolutely unnecessary.

The economical part of the English interrogative form lies in the important fact that what the auxiliary verb says is not to be repeated by the main verb. Once said it was a present or a past, the main verb remains unchanged in its infinitive form (without "to"). We call this "reference form".

Some Portuguese students who do not understand this economical structure tend to repeat with the main verb what the auxiliary verb already points out, e.g. "Did she *knew?"*. To understand the economy and the logic of the principle is half-way to mastering the way of asking questions in English.

12. What was said above for the interrogative holds true for the negative form. Also here there are two main ways: one for the *to be*, *can*, *may*, *must*, *shall*, *will* group; the other to be used with all other verbs. Again, there are standard formulas. With the *to be* group you add *not* to the verbs, e.g. *you are / you are not*. (Subject+verb+not) With the other verbs, you use the following formula: subject+auxiliary verb+not+verb, e.g. *she does not know*.

Predictably enough, the main verb is identical with the infinitive (without *to*), thus complying with the economy principle. There are many Portuguese students who fail to understand the role of the auxiliary verb and use *don´t* as if it meant *não*. Owing to this fact, they use the structure of the negative only apparently. They tend to say things like, *I don't imagined* (*eu não imaginei*), *I don´t knew* (*eu não sabia*). They certainly do this for two reasons: first, because they don´t understand the formula; secondly, because *don´t* sounds somewhat like the Portuguese *não*.

13. The multiple-use infinitive form is remarkable in English for what it represents in terms of economy. If we look at English verbs, (with the exception of modal verbs, because they have no infinitive form) we shall notice that the infinitive form without *to* ("reference form"), e.g. "go", "bring", "write", is economically used (1) in the present, (2) in all questions present, past, future, and conditional (3) in all negatives present, past, future, and conditional (4) in the future, (5) in the conditional, (6) after modal verbs. What further uses could we expect of a mere infinitive form? It could hardly be more economical.

Let us illustrate this stroke of genius of the English language with simple examples: (1) I **go**, I **bring**, I **write**; (2) Do you **go**, do you **bring**, do you **write**? did you **go**, did you **bring**, did you **write**? will you **go**, will you **bring**, will you **write**?; would you **go**, would you **bring**, would you **write**? (3) he doesn´t **go**, he doesn't **bring**, he doesn´t **write**; he didn´t **go**, he didn´t **bring**, he didn´t **write**; he will not **go**, he will not **bring**, he will not **write**; he would not **go**, he would not **bring**, he would not **write**;

(4) she will **go**, she will **bring**, she will **write**; (5) she would **go**, she would **bring**, she would **write**; (6) we can **go**, we can **bring**, we can **write**; we must **go**, we must **bring**, we must **write**.

Two tables, one with examples in the interrogative, the other with examples in the negative form, will illustrate the mere presential role of the infinitive (a constant) and will at the same time show the crucial role of auxiliary verbs, which point out the various situations (variables).

Negative		Form		Interrogative		Form
I	Don´t	**know.**		Do	I	**know?**
He	Doesn´t	**know.**		Does	He	**know?**
I	Didn´t	**know.**		Did	I	**know?**
I	Shall not	**know.**		Shall	I	**know?**
I	will not	**know.**		Will	I	**know?**
I	Shouldn´t	**know.**		Should	I	**know?**
I	Wouldn´t	**know.**		Would	I	**know?**
I	Can´t	**know.**		Can	I	**know?**
I	May not	**know.**		May	I	**know?**
I	Mustn´t	**know.**		Must	I	**know?**

Table 4: interrogative and negative forms examples

14. In accordance with the economical pattern we have been dealing with, the English language uses the infinitive verb form (without *to*) in emphatic sentences. It is a practical way of laying emphasis in some sentences. Again, it is the auxiliary verb that plays the variable role; the main verb remains unchanged, as seen in other instances above, e.g. *she was afraid of not passing the exam, but she did manage to pass with a high mark*.

When this emphatic form is the result of a sentence that begins with a negative or half-negative word, it is the same structure that is used but with a little variation in the formula: auxiliary verb+subject+main verb. E.g. *Not only did she pass, but she got a good mark as well*.

So, with slight variations but never abandoning the pattern of keeping the main verb invariable, leaving all the expenses to the auxiliary, the English language shows once again its tremendous economical character.

15. The economical characteristics of the English language are perfectly visible in the fact that negative verbs must not be followed by negative words; alternatively, negative words are not to be followed by verbs in the negative form. It is the same principle we find in the examples above, which embodies the economy principle: “do not repeat

ideas that have already been expressed".

You do not find the same degree of economicity in Portuguese. For one thing, the use of *não* and *nada* in the same Portuguese sentence is viewed as correct, although it may be argued that the structure is anti-economical, since *nada* implies the idea of *não*. In fact, não *vi nada* is not different from *nada vi*; still, in Portuguese *não vi nada* is as correct as *nada vi*.

Similarly, *não* and *ninguém*; *não* and *nunca*; *não anda nenhum* are standard Portuguese structures, e.g. "não vi ninguém na rua"; "ela não foi nunca uma verdadeira amiga"; "nós não fomos nenhuma vez passear juntos".

Could we expect English to adopt this uneconomical repetition? Only if we were not aware of the general structure of the language. This is the reason why in English you find the following:

NO DOUBLE NEGATIVE (ECONOMY PRINCIPLE)

Item	**Without a negative word**	**With a verb in the negative**
nenhum (adj.)	no	Any
nenhum (pron.)	none	Any
nenhum (de dois)	neither	Either
ninguém	nobody; no one	anybody, anyone
nada	nothing	Anything
Nunca	never	Ever
nem ... nem	neither ... nor	(either ...) or

Table 5: Portuguese and English negative form

16. Another economical expression of the English language is the fact that two clearly different verbs in Portuguese - *ser* and *estar* - are expressed in English by one single verb: *to be*. It should be stressed, however, that whenever English needs to render the physical position of *to be* - corresponding to the Portuguese verb *estar*, it does not hesitate to express that position, if necessary: *to be standing*, *to be sitting*, *to be lying*, *to be hanging*. e.g. "*A policeman **is standing** at the door of the Ministers residence"*; "*twenty students **are sitting** in the room"*; "*the poor old lady **was lying** on the floor"*; "*the picture we were looking for **is hanging** on the wall of his bedroom"*.

17. An additional example of English economicity is the fact that the Subjunctive mode has virtually been eliminated. Whereas in Portuguese there are expressions like *embora eu seja*, *conquanto nós tenhamos*, *para que nós façamos*, *para que fizéssemos*, etc., English sends all that to the much simpler Indicative mode, e.g. "*although I **am",*** *even though we **have", "**so that we may **do", "**so that we c**ould do"***.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this brief survey of the economy principle, let us say that something that does not comply with this principle is the existence of the **-s** ending in the 3rd person singular of the Present Indicative Mode. There is obviously a reason for that: in old English, as still happens in present-day German, that form contained a **-t-**; to be more precise, it finished in *th*, e.g. doth, taketh, giveth. It was this *th* sound that evolved into

an -*s* sound a few centuries ago. To foreigners, the -*s* is misleading and often forgotten. An -*s* is even illogical, since the -*s* is typically connected with plurals and this is quite the opposite: the 3rd person singular.

As a sort of compensation for its simplicity, in English the relative and interrogative pronouns are slightly more complex than in Portuguese, where *que* solves most problems (singular, plural, masculine, feminine). The existence of *that*, *who*, *which*, *whom* evidences a more complex system, which is probably the result of the absence of clearly identified masculine, feminine and neuter nouns, and of the single definite article *the*.

English really *is* an economical language. If teachers can make students understand this great framework of simplicity, students will learn English much more easily because they will grasp the logic of the building; they will be studying not only isolated pieces; they will be able to see the puzzle in its structural form, i.e. its guidelines. This will hopefully bring simplicity both to language learning and language teaching.

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