

Plural NP interpretation in third language acquisition of Brazilian Portuguese

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Introduction

Goal: to investigate how English-speaking and Spanish-speaking learners of Brazilian Portuguese (BrP) as a third language (L3) interpret nominals in generic contexts.

Motivation:

- English, Spanish and BrP present a three-way distinction in this domain, allowing us to investigate what transfers in the L3-acquisition of semantics.
- Prior studies of L3-acquisition have focused primarily on morphosyntactic phenomena, rather than on interpretation.

What transfers in L3-acquisition?

- Only/mostly the L1** (e.g., Bouvy 2000, Leung 2006)
- Only/mostly the L2** (e.g., Bardel and Falk 2007; Bohnacker 2006)
- Both the L1 and the L2** (Flynn, Vinnitskaya and Foley 2004)
- Only the language structurally closer or perceived as being structurally closer to the L3** (e.g., Montrul, Dias and Santos 2011; Rothman 2011)

Background: generic interpretation

English: bare plurals, not definite plurals:

- (1) a. Cats like milk. [√generic reading]
b. The cats like milk. [#generic reading]

Spanish: definite plurals, not bare plurals:

- (2) a. *Gatos adoran la leche. [ungrammatical]
b. Los gatos adoran la leche. [√generic reading]

BrP: both bare and definite plurals:

- (3) a. Gatos adoram leite. [√generic reading]
b. Os gatos adoram leite. [√generic reading]
(Schmitt & Munn 2002, 2005; M uller 2002)

Additionally, BrP allows bare singulars with generic readings

- (4) a. *Cat likes milk. [English: ungrammatical]
b. *Gato adora la leche. [Spanish: ungrammatical]
c. Gato adora leite. [BrP: √generic reading]

Theoretical framework:

- Plural generics:** the definite article can lexicalize kind-reference obligatorily (Spanish), optionally (BrP), or not at all (English) (Dayal 2004; cf. Ionin, Montrul and Santos 2011 for experimental evidence)
- Singular generics:** bare singulars in BrP are either indefinites which can have generic readings (M uller 2002) or kind-denoting number-less DPs (Schmitt & Munn 2002, 2005; Dobrovie-Sorin & Pires de Oliveira 2008).

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Research questions

- Do L1-English L2-Spanish L3-BrP learners and L1-Spanish L2-English L3-BrP learners exhibit transfer in the acquisition of generic NPs in BrP?
- If yes, then is transfer from the L1 only, from the L2 only, from both, or from the language that learners perceive as structurally closer to the L3?
- Which language (English or Spanish) do the learners perceive as structurally closer to BrP, and is this related to their interpretation of generic NPs?

Methodology

Tasks: Acceptability Judgment Task (in BrP); Proficiency test (cloze test + vocabulary test, in BrP); Language distance questionnaire (in English)

Participants: background information

	Native English learners of BrP	Native Spanish learners of BrP	Native BrP speakers
N	19	25	22
Residence during testing	7 in Illinois, 12 in Brazil	4 in Illinois, 21 in Brazil	All 22 in Brazil
Other languages (Romance vs. English)	10: Spanish before BrP 3: Italian or French before or after BrP 5: Spanish + Italian / French before BrP 1: no other language	24: English before BrP	n/a
Proficiency score out of 50 (cloze test + vocabulary test)	34.5 (8.2) range: 24 to 48	41.3 (5.9) range: 25 to 48	48.9 (1.1) range: 47 to 50

Acceptability Judgment Task

- Each item is a story followed by a sentence
- Focus here on the Generic story
- 12 test items: 4 each with target sentences containing definite plurals, bare plurals, bare singulars
- 3 test scripts, with counterbalancing of stories across scripts

Sample item (English translation):

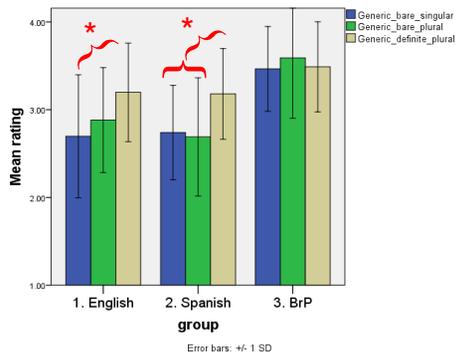
I have too many mice, and I don't have a cat. Maybe I'll put out a saucer of milk; perhaps this will attract some good hunters of mice. I'm basing this on common knowledge.

Cat adores milk. / Cats adore milk. / The cats adore milk.

Predictions for AJT ratings of BrP generic NPs by speakers of English and Spanish

	Cat adores milk	Cats adore milk	The cats adore milk
Target in BrP	Acceptance	Acceptance	Acceptance
Transfer from English only	Rejection	Acceptance	Rejection
Transfer from Spanish only	Rejection	Rejection	Acceptance
Transfer from both English and Spanish	Rejection	Acceptance	Acceptance

AJT Results



Within-group comparisons:

- L1-English learners of BrP:** significant effect of NP type ($F(2,36) = 5.2^*$); definite plurals rated significantly above bare singulars; definite plurals also rated above bare plurals, but this difference doesn't reach significance.
- L1-Spanish learners of BrP:** significant effect of NP type ($F(2,48) = 8.0^*$); definite plurals rated significantly above both bare plurals and bare singulars.
- Native BrP speakers:** NO effect of NP type ($F(2,42) = .62$).

Between-group comparisons:

- Native BrP group significantly different from the two learner groups on both bare singulars ($F(2,63) = 11.8^*$) and bare plurals ($F(2,63) = 12.4^*$), but not on definite plurals ($F(2,63) = 2.4$).**
- No differences between the two learner groups, on any NP type.**

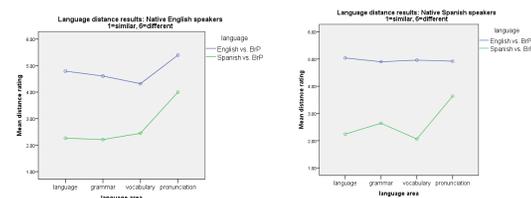
Language distance questionnaire

Participants rated the similarity of BrP to English vs. Spanish (questionnaire from Santos 2013).

14 questions, 7 per language pair, on language in general, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Scale from 1 to 6 (1=similar, 6=different).

Sample question: "Portuguese language and English language are... similar/different".

Results: BrP was rated as significantly more similar to Spanish than to English by both learner groups, for all language areas.



Discussion

Summary of AJT results:

- Both learner groups are target-like on definite plurals, but rate both bare plurals and bare singulars too low.
- Evidence for transfer from Spanish, but not for transfer from English.

Possible explanation:

Learners transfer the expression of genericity from Spanish to BrP.

- Native Spanish speakers transfer from their L1.
- Native English speakers transfer from their L2 (Spanish for most learners, French or Italian for some).

And, both learner groups perceive BrP as more similar to Spanish than to English.

These results are most compatible with the view that learners transfer only from the language perceived as being structurally closer to the L3 (e.g., Montrul, Dias and Santos 2011; Rothman 2011)

Alternative explanation:

Definite plurals are rated higher than other NP types because they are the most common/frequent way of expressing genericity in BrP.

Further research needed:

- Testing of learners of BrP who do not know any other Romance language: do they still rate BrP definite plurals high?
- A more implicit measure of language distance: the language distance questionnaire is an explicit measure; do learners perceive BrP and Spanish as more similar on an implicit level as well? And does this directly affect their judgments?

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