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?
1. (Mostly) the L1 (e.g., Bower 2000, Leung 2006)
2. Only the L2 (e.g., Bardel and Falk 2007; Bohnacker 2006)
3. Both the L1 and the L2 (Flynn, Vinnikskaya and Foley 2004)
4. 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.
2. b. The cats like milk.

Spanish: definite plurals, not bare plurals:
3. a. *Gatos adoran la leche. [ungrammatical reading]
4. b. Los gatos adoran la leche. [+generic reading]

BrP: both bare and definite plurals:
5. a. Gatos adoran la leche. [+generic reading]
6. b. C. Gatos adoran la leche. [ungrammatical reading]
7. c. Gato adora leche. [+generic reading]

Theoretical framework:
- *Plural generics*: the definite article can lexicalize kind-reference obligatorily (Spanish), optionally (BrP) or not at all (English) (Daly 2004; cf. Ionin, Mottil and Santos 2011 for experimental evidence)
- *Single generics*: bare singulars in BrP are either indefinite which can have generic readings (Muller 2002) or kind-derogating number-less DPs (Schmitt & Munn 2002; Dobrovie-Sorin & Pires de Oliveira 2008).

Research questions

1. Do L1-English L2-Spanish L3-BrP learners of BrP possess in the acquisition of generic NPs in BrP?
2. If yes, then is transfer from the L1 only, from the L2 only, or from both, or from the language that learners perceive as structurally closer to the L3?
3. 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Native English learners of BrP</th>
<th>Native Spanish learners of BrP</th>
<th>Native BrP speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence during testing</td>
<td>7 in Illinois; 12 in Brazil</td>
<td>4 in Illinois; 21 in Brazil</td>
<td>All 22 in Brazil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other languages (Romance vs. English)</td>
<td>10: Spanish before BrP Spanish + Italian / French before BrP; 5: Other language</td>
<td>24: English before BrP 1: no other language</td>
<td>1:{}</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proficiency score out of 50 (cloze test + vocabulary test)</td>
<td>34.5 (8.2) range: 24 to 48</td>
<td>41.3 (5.9) range: 25 to 48</td>
<td>48.9 (1.1) range: 47 to 50</td>
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Acceptability Judgment Task

- Each item is a story followed by a sentence
- Focus here on the Generics
- 12 test items: 4 each with target sentences containing definite plurals, bare plurals, bare singulars
- 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.

AJT Results

The cats adore milk.

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(2,48) = 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.

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?

Selected references