

Experimental investigations into nominal interpretation in native and non-native Brazilian Portuguese

Tania Ionin, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Brazilian Portuguese (BrP) has a number of unique properties that distinguish it from other Romance languages. These include the syntax and semantics of nominal expressions in BrP: specifically, (i) BrP allows bare singular count nouns in argument positions; and (ii) BrP uses both definite plurals and bare plurals for generic/kind interpretation. There are many theoretical accounts of these properties (see, among others, Schmitt and Munn 1999, 2002; Munn and Schmitt 2001, 2005; Müller 2002, 2003; Müller and Oliveira 2004; Dobrovie-Sorin and Pires de Oliveira 2008; Dobrovie-Sorin 2010; Pires de Oliveira and Rothstein 2011, 2013; and Pires de Oliveira 2012). The goals of my research, conducted in collaboration with Elaine Grolla, Hélade Santos and Silvina Montrul, are (i) to investigate the distribution and interpretation of BrP nominals experimentally, with a focus on those areas where there is debate or disagreement in the theoretical literature; and (ii) to examine how learners of BrP as a second or third language acquire nominal interpretation, with a focus on transfer from their previously acquired languages. In this talk, I will give an overview of our experimental studies on this topic, which examine the distribution of generic, existential and kind-denoting interpretations available to definite and bare NPs in the BrP of native speakers and learners. I will focus primarily on our most recent study with native speakers of BrP, which addresses the observation in the literature that bare singular NPs in BrP are degraded in the subject position of episodic sentences. Our experimental study uses a factorial design to examine whether this property of bare singulars is a result of a grammatical constraint, or arises from a combined effect of unrelated extra-grammatical factors (such as stylistic considerations and the role of information structure). We argue in favor of the latter, and show that bare singulars have the same range of existential and generic interpretations available to them as bare plurals, consistent with the theoretical account of Schmitt and Munn (1999, 2002) / Munn and Schmitt (2001, 2005).