The acceptability of subject bare singulars in Brazilian Portuguese

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The goal of this study is to investigate the judgements of Brazilian Portuguese native speakers with respect to subject bare singulars (bare singulars), since there is disagreement in the literature with respect to the acceptability of constructions like (1) and (2).

1. ? **Baleia** está extinta. (Kind-denoting predicate)
    Whale is   extinct   "*Whales are extinct.*"
2. ? **Homem** falou de política na   festa. (Stage-level predicate)
    Man   talked of politics at-the party "*Men talked about politics at the party*"

Studies on the judgement of acceptability of sentences like (2) have already been done (Pires de Oliveira et al. 2010, Ionin et al. 2015), however, the results suggest that bare singulars within these sentences are not widely accepted among native speakers of the language. With respect to kind-predicates (1), the matter is still exploratory, but the status of the grammaticality of constructions like this is contradictory in the literature (Müller 2002, Pires de Oliveira et al. 2010). Additionally, it is proposed that a factor responsible for the increase on the acceptability rate of sentences with bare singulars like (2) is the presence of a context preceding the construction, for example, a question or a statement involving the entity that the nominal denotes (Menuzzi et al. 2015). However, this proposal lacks quantitative evidence. Taking this factor into consideration, we designed a grammaticality judgement task in which participants (20 native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese) were asked to judge the acceptability of the constructions - with and without the presence of a context.

Bare singulars were presented only in subject position of 3 types of sentences: (i) generic sentences (control) ((3) below), (ii) episodic sentences (stage-level predicates) (4), and (iii) sentences with kind-denoting predicates (5):

3. Limão é uma fruta azeda. (Generic sentence)
    Lemon is a   fruit sour   *Lemons are sour fruits.*
4. Menino jogou   bola no   recreio. (Stage-level predicate)
    Boy   played ball in-the break   *Boys played soccer during the break time.*
5. Passarinho é comum   em todo lugar. (Kind-denoting predicate)
    Bird   is common everywhere   *Birds are common everywhere.*

They were presented either after a context or out-of-the-blue. Subjects were divided into two groups: one listened and judged a list of sentences stated out-of-the-blue during the first day of testing and sentences with a previous context – a short story - on the second day (Out-of-the-blue-group, n=10), while the other group had the reverse order of presentation (Context-group, n=10). Both groups judged in total 12 sentences from each type, half preceded by a short story and half presented without any context. The difference between the groups was only regarding the order in which the context was presented (first day of testing or second day of testing) to investigate if any variation could be observed.

Results. With respect to generic sentences and sentences with kind-denoting predicates, it was observed that there was no statistical significance between the presentation of the sentences in the presence or absence of a context. The constructions were widely accepted. Unlike the findings for the previous conditions, the rate of acceptance for sentences with episodic predicates

- in presence/absence of context- was not high, and there is no statistical difference between the results for both groups.

   Discussion. The results suggest that bare singulars are acceptable with kind-denoting predicates, a new piece of evidence that can contribute to the description of these elements in the language. This study has also unveiled that the presence of context is not a factor that can improve the acceptability of bare singulars, as proposed by Menuzzi et al. (2015). With respect to sentences with bare singulars heading episodic sentences, the results indicate that they are ungrammatical, even after the presentation of a context. It seems to be the case that subject bare singulars are governed by syntactic and semantic restrictions, that cannot be accommodated by pragmatic factors such as the presence of a context.

References

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