

Nominal constructions in (non-)standard Brazilian Portuguese: A case of contact? But with which languages?

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It is widely known that standard Brazilian Portuguese (BP), despite having plural morphology and definite and indefinite determiners which inflect for gender and number, allows non-referential bare singular count nouns (BN) in argument positions (see Schmitt & Munn, 1999; Müller & Oliveira, 2004; more recently, Cyrino & Espinal, 2015; Brito & Lopes, 2016; Ferreira & Correia, 2016; among many others), as in (1). However, BNs are not found in other Romance Languages, including European Portuguese.

(1) a. Rosa é uma flor.

rose is a flower

‘Roses are flowers’

b. Tem maçã na cesta.

have apple in-the basket

‘There is/are “one or more apples” in the basket.’

Bare referential constructions are found in very specific pragmatic conditions in the standard variety (see Lopes, 2019; Wall, 2013); nonetheless, they are extremely productive in non-standard varieties, in communities which were historically forged by the presence of Brazilian indigenous people and enslaved people from Africa.

It seems natural to consider that BNs in BP are a product of contact with other languages, but which? By examining two non-standard varieties of BP – a riverine community in the middle western part of the country (Baixada Cuiabana) and an AfroBrazilian community that lived in Bahia, a northern state, in the 19th century (Helvécia) – we will show that different and specific historical conditions produced the same results in the grammar.

As has been presently discussed by many (Avelar, 2019; Negrão & Viotti, 2014; among many others), BP owes much of its grammar to the contact with African languages, especially of the Bantu family. But we will show that the historic processes that came to constitute BP are deeply connected to economic conditions that determined social interaction, which seems crucial to understand the shaping of the language.

The emergence of Baixada Cuiabana (BC) was due to the discovery of gold in the 18th century by *paulistas* – natives of Sao Paulo state, who spoke *Lingua Geral*, a Tupi-based lingua franca. The region was disputed by Spain and Portugal, which motivated the Portuguese government to establish villages and encourage the formation of families. For the gold exploration, enslaved men were brought, but populational maps of the 18th and 19th centuries show high percentages of indigenous people, mainly women. BC is a nice case for the study of BP due to the diversity of its population. The corpus we analyzed was recorded between 1995 and 1996 and is composed of 9 speakers, all of which had none or very little schooling and ranged from 53 to > 90 y.o. (Santiago-Almeida corpus, 2001). 1,468 nominal constructions were analyzed, being 34.6% cases of bare constructions.

Semantic interpretation	Presence of a determiner		bare		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
Specific/definite	542	82.1	118	17.9	660
Non-specific referential	279	73.8	99	26.2	378
Proper names	29	35.4	53	64.6	82
Generic	81	34.3	155	65.7	236
Existential	7	13	47	87	54
Attributives	22	37.9	36	62.1	58
<i>TOTAL</i>	960	65.4	508	34.6	1,468

There are similarities between the BC variety and standard BP, especially with respect to the presence of generic and existential bare singular count nouns in argument position, as in (2-3), and with proper names, which varies geographically even in standard varieties.

(2) Criança é bicho danado. (A.G.S., male, 66 y.o.)

Child is animal naughty

‘Children are naughty creatures’

(3) Ainda não tinha dotô (A.M.S., female, > 90 y.o.)

yet not have doctor

‘There were no doctors yet’

However, 44.1% of the BNs were referential, which is not found in standard BP:

(4) Aí soldado pegô nós pra carregá esse defunto. (A.B.C., male, 73 y.o.)

then soldier got we to carry this corpse

‘Then the policeman made us carry the corpse’

Comparing these results from BC, which benefited from the contact with indigenous languages, to those of Helvécia (Ribeiro & Lopes, 2012, a.o.), an isolated rural community, we find very similar results. Helvécia was established in 1818 as a Swiss coffee plantation and, according to Lucchesi et al. (2009), was composed of 200 Europeans and 2000 African and Afrobrazilians. There are generic (5) and existential (6) BNs but also definite, specific referential ones (7):

(5) Boca é pá botá pirão.

‘mouth is to put *pirão*’

A mouth is made to eat *pirão* [*manioc mash*]

(6) Tenho fiado, minha irmã, eu tenho é fiado!

have godchildren, my sister, I have is godchildren!

I have lots of godchildren!

(7) Operação deu em cima

‘surgery gave in up’

The surgery was a success.

According to Baxter & Lopes (2009), over 40% of nominal constructions in Helvécia were determinerless, including referential instances as (7). Thus, it is clear that in both varieties the only constraint to use a determiner is to bear a plural mark, otherwise inexistent in nouns and adjectives, a feature spread throughout non-standard varieties. In standard varieties the plural mark is redundantly found in all elements of the nominal construction.

The reasons why the referential BNs did not make it into standard BP are yet to be explained. However, data from BC and Helvécia show how different social historic processes can produce similar grammars. One of the reasons could be the fact that Bantu and several Brazilian indigenous languages do not have overt determiners. We assume, nevertheless, that the mere coincidence of linguistic features among these languages is not enough to converge into a sole language contact hypothesis for BP. It seems crucial to understand the social historic conditions that made possible the emergence of Brazilian dialects.

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