

## **Language Acquisition and variable input: An outlook on number agreement in Brazilian Portuguese**

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There are two possible patterns for the realization of number agreement in Brazilian Portuguese (BP). In one of them, all items that license a plural mark receive it – redundant number agreement (RNA); in the other one, this mark is present in only some (or even in one) of the elements of the sentence – non-redundant number agreement (NRNA). The alternation between the presence/absence of the plural marks can occur both in the nominal phrase (NP) as well as with subject-verb agreement (SV). This phenomenon is known in the local literature as Variable Number Agreement in BP and it has been the focus of several works on Sociolinguistics. This work aimed to investigate whether the variable agreement had an impact on the acquisition of BP and, if so, whether nominal and verbal agreement would have the same impact, considering the implications that exposure to a variable input could have on the acquisition process (see Yang, 2002, a.o.). To accomplish such goals, it was applied an elicited production task to 75 children aged 3 to 5. The dependent variable considered was the pattern of number agreement used by the participant: redundant or non-redundant; the independent variables considered were: (i) the school the child attended: public or private; (ii) participant's age; (iii) locus of agreement: nominal or verbal. Participants were students from schools in the outskirts of Juiz de Fora, a major city in Minas Gerais state. To control children's SES (Socioeconomic status), the school they attended was considered: students from public schools have lower SES than those from private ones (Alves, Soares & Xavier, 2014). Data from 11 children, who couldn't perform the requested task, were excluded from this analysis. Therefore, data from 64 children were considered here. The task was also applied to a control group of 20 adults. Because SES has been pointed out as one of the most relevant factors on the type of agreement in speakers' productions (Lemle & Naro, 1977; Naro & Scherre, 2006; Mendes & Oushiro, 2015, a.o.), the hypothesis assumed here was that children with higher SES would produce fewer utterances with non-redundant number agreement. Results found showed a clear preference for RNA in the adult group, with only 13% of the plural utterances exhibiting NRNA. In children's speech, there were more cases of NRNA (65% of the cases found) than with RNA (only 35% of the cases found) – the difference between the adult and the child behaviors was statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). In children's results, there were no statistically significant differences between NP and SV agreement and, against the initial hypothesis, SES was also not a relevant factor to determine the agreement pattern present in the participant's speech. Children's age, though, was a relevant factor in determining the type of agreement in verbs but not in the NP. When considering participants' behavior individually, children of 3, 4 and 5 years showed variation in their plural productions for the NP – only 14% of the participants showed RNA categorically in their production; the other 86% of them used both forms in their productions. Results for SV agreement showed different individual behavior and children behaved more categorically when their data were analyzed individually: out of 51 participants, 57% of them only used one of the patterns for SV agreement: 13% of the children only used RNA; and 43% of them only used NRNA. The remaining 43% of the participants showed both patterns in their productions. The logistic regression model used in the analyzes identified that 3-years-old tended to overregularize to the non-redundant pattern; 4-years-old tended to vary in their choice of the agreement pattern; and 5-years-old tended to overregularize to the redundant pattern (following the pattern observed for the adults, that showed utterances with 100% RNA for SV agreement in their speech). It is safe to conclude, thus, that children exhibit variation in the patterns of agreement present in their speech between the NP elements

and between subject and verb. However, in different ways: wrt NP, children seem to be, in fact, acquiring the two variant patterns; but, regarding subject-verb agreement, the child variation observed seems to be a result of the acquisition process. Therefore, the results found show that there is a clear difference between the two processes: One is an inherent variation in the language while the other, although observed as variant, seems to be more restrictive; in this case, children showed an expected acquisitional path wrt subject-verb agreement.