Brazilian Bare Nouns: Experiments and Adult Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Experiments (Bevilaqua 2019 for a review) show that Brazilian Bare Singulars - mesa in quem tem mais mesa? - is counted (Schmitt & Munn, 1999, Müller, 2002) and measured (Pires de Oliveira & Rothstein, 2011). Bevilaqua & Pires de Oliveira (2020) data from 4 languages led them to claim that Bare Singulars is a locus of semantic variation (Chierchia, 2010, 2015). In judgment tasks, English speakers never count the BS table in who has more table?; they measure. Brazilians oscillated: measure and count. Bare Singulars in English are atomic predicates. Pires de Oliveira (2020) argues that Brazilian BSs are not atomic; the noun denotes the kind. These results point to atomicity as a grammatical feature (Rothstein 2010, 2017); objecthood is cognitive. Since all languages count 1, language variation is where this happens: in the noun or in the determiner. ??much table, if interpretable, must be massified; muita mesa is acceptable and its interpretation oscillates depending on the context, because muito and mesa are not atomic. In BrP, atomicity is mandatory in the determiner. The prediction (assuming Slabakova 2017) is that Brazilian learners' interlanguage has a “foreign” use of much. English learners of Brazilian will overuse bare plurals mesas where Brazilians use bare singulars. Adult language acquisition might be a window into our theoretical predictions.

Key-words: Bare Nouns, language variation, Adult language Acquisition, Experimental Semantics