Null Subject Behavior in the Attrition of Brazilian Portuguese

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The syntax of referential null subjects in Brazilian Portuguese (BP) is the topic of much recent work (Kato & Negrão 2000; Ferreira 2000, 2004; Martins & Nunes 2005, 2010; Modesto 2000; Rodrigues 2002, 2004, and references therein). Most contemporary analyses of BP referential null subjects agree that main and embedded null subjects are to be analyzed distinctly. The literature is divided on whether BP referential third-person null subjects of embedded finite clauses are to be analyzed as "partial pro" (as in Barbosa, Villa-Garcia), or as the result of movement of the main clause subject out of the embedded finite clause (as in Ferreira 2000, 2004; Martins & Nunes 2005, 2010; Rodrigues 2002, 2004) The different predictions that these two lines of analysis make with respect to the language attrition of BP under the influence of English are investigated here. (for discussion of attrition in syntax, see Filiaci, F., I.M., Sorace, A., Heycock, C.2004; Rothman 2005).

Under the movement analysis of embedded null 3rd person referential finite clause subjects, BP is distinct from English in that, due to the properties of BP Tense, it licenses raising out of finite contexts, whereas English Tense does not (Martins and Nunes 2006). Therefore, speakers of BP who show attrition under English with respect to the presence of null 3rd person embedded finite clause subjects are also predicted to show attrition with respect to hyper-raising with seem-type verbs, illustrated in (1) in BP, and illustrated in (2) as unacceptable in English . The non-movement analysis does not make this prediction.

(1)   a.   Parece que o João comprou um carro novo.

              seems that the João bought a car new

              'It seems that João bought a new car.'

        b.   O João parece que comprou um carro novo.

              the João seems that bought a car new

              'João seems to have bought a new car.'

(2)   a.   It seems that John bought a new car.

        b.   *John seems (that) bought a new car.

The movement analysis also predicts that speakers of BP who have attrited grammars under the influence of English in the domain of embedded null subjects should also show attrition in their grammar of inflected infinitivals, since this is due to the difference in BP versus English Tense as well (Martins and Nunes 2010). Inflected infinitivals are illustrated in BP in (3), and are lacking in English:

(3)   a.   Eu lamento eles não comprar**em** a casa.

I regret they not to buy-3PL the house

b.   Eu lamento (ec) não comprar**em** a casa.

I regret (ec) not to buy-3PL the house

'I regret that they didn't buy a house.'

I conduct elicited production and grammaticality judgment tasks in these domains in native monolingual BP speakers, and in native BP speakers living in the United States for over seven years. The parallel behavior of null 3rd person embedded finite subjects and hyper-raising and inflected infinitival constructions in the attrited grammars of BP speakers under the influence of English is predicted by the movement analysis of this construction, and not predicted by the non-movement analysis of this construction.

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