

A Trend and Panel Study of Number Agreement in Brazilian Portuguese:
Structural Dimensions

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In this paper, we concentrate on structural dimensions governing variable subject/verb concord (SV) and noun phrase concord (NP) in Brazilian Portuguese. What we find is a remarkable and striking uniformity of effect, both for NP, studied in the short term, over about twenty to thirty years, and for SV, with results for both the long term, over more than five centuries, and the short term.

For both SV and NP concord, we use a random sample of 64 speakers of Brazilian Portuguese recorded in the 1980's (denoted as S80), a Panel sample in which 16 speakers, originally recorded for S80, were recontacted in 1999/2000 (denoted as S00 Panel) and a Trend sample in which 32 further speakers were randomly chosen from the same community and recorded in 1999/2000 (denoted as S00 Trend). For SV specifically, we also make reference to results on a sample of Brazilian Portuguese of illiterate speakers recorded in the 70's and a Medieval European Portuguese sample.

One of the most solidly established effects in subject/verb concord is that of phonic saliency of the realization of the singular/plural opposition (Naro 1981; Naro & Scherre 1996:6-7). Briefly put, if there is only a small difference between the two verbal forms (example: *bebe/bebem* 'he drinks/they drink', where the only distinction is nasalization of the final unstressed high vowel) use of the singular form in plural contexts is much more frequent than if there is a large difference (example: *falou/falaram* 'he spoke/they spoke', where the stressed syllables are entirely different and an extra syllable is added in the plural). The results for our diverse samples are:

	S80 sample		S00 samples			
			trend		panel	
	Frq	Weight	Frq	Weight	Frq	Weight
[- salient]	<u>1552</u> =63% 2483	0.31	<u>786</u> =76% 1018	0.35	<u>502</u> =77% 652	0.37
[+ salient]	<u>1834</u> =85% 2152	0.70	<u>845</u> =91% 932	0.61	<u>467</u> =87% 535	0.65
	1970 sample		Medieval sample			
	Frq	Weight	N	Weight		
[- salient]	<u>972</u> =27% 3568	0.22	204	0.33		
[+ salient]	<u>2030</u> =74% 2742	0.78	31	0.75		

The saliency effect is also strikingly uniform for NP concord in the S80 and S00 samples, as be shown below (examples: *casa/casas* 'house/houses', with addition of *-s*, for low saliency; *avião/aviões* 'airplane/airplanes', with addition of *-s* and change of stressed vowel, for high saliency):

	S80 sample		S00 samples			
	Frq	Weight	trend		panel	
	Frq	Weight	Frq	Weight	Frq	Weight
[- salient]	$\frac{7969}{11571}=69\%$	0.45	$\frac{5703}{6445}=88\%$	0.46	$\frac{3217}{4053}=77\%$	0.44
[+ salient]	$\frac{1287}{1528}=84\%$	0.83	$\frac{595}{631}=94\%$	0.84	$\frac{433}{465}=93\%$	0.91

We also present similar results for the effect of position of subject with respect to verb for SV, as well as for relative and linear position for NP. These two variables consistently show a highly favorable effect on explicit concord for leftward position: in the case of SV, subjects to the left of the verb correlate with more concord; for NP, elements to the left exhibit more explicit plural marking.

Our results are strong evidence about the phonic salience principle (Naro 1981), the leftward control hypothesis (Scherre & Naro 1995), the constant rate hypothesis (Kroch 1989) and the uniformitarian principle (Labov 1994:21).

References

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