Perceptual vs. grammatical constraints and social factors in subject-verb agreement in Brazilian Portuguese

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The earliest studies of variable subject/verb concord in Brazilian Portuguese showed that some sorts of verbs tend to show more frequent use of concord than others. Specifically, according to the saliency hypothesis (Naro 1981) when there is little difference in phonetic realization of plural with respect to singular, use of non-agreeing forms is much more frequent. Thus, in eles come/comem feijão ‘they eat beans,’ where the singular differs from the plural only in nasalization of the final vowel, lack of agreement is much more frequent than in eles fez/fizeram as pazes ‘they made up’, where the two forms are very different.

The distribution of saliency is highly overlaid with tense/mood: most high saliency forms are preterit, whereas most low saliency forms are present or imperfect. But there are exceptions, such as high saliency present é/são ‘is/are’ and dá/dão ‘gives/give’.

In an attempt to discover whether saliency or tense is the most important variable, we made a very detailed coding of both saliency and tense/mood of over 7,000 tokens in two random samples of the speech community separated by an interval of about twenty years (Silva & Scherre 1996; Paiva & Duarte 2003). Both saliency and tense/mood are highly significant in separate analyses, but saliency overcomes tense/mood when both are posited in the same analysis, showing that a cognitive/perceptual factor is stronger than a grammatical factor.

Furthermore, our social results in real time suggest that, in a counter-flow to earlier tendencies of loss, resurgence in use of concord is underway, with women in the lead, independently of social orientation as measured by contact with media, a possibility foreseen in Naro 1981, over thirty years ago.

Thus, language external factors take on importance in the analysis and interpretation of flows and counter-flows in the dynamics of verbal concord in Brazilian Portuguese.

References