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CHILDREN'S DISCOURSE
IN EUROPEAN PORTUGUESE NARRATIVES:
**Expression of existence versus expression of action
in narrative setting constructions***

In the present study that constitutes a continuation of our previous research on European Portuguese narratives (Batoréo, 1996,1998a,b; Batoréo & Duarte, 1998a,b; Batoréo & Faria, 1999), we focus our interest on expression of existence in contrast with expression of action. This contrast is observed in spatial anchoring, i.e. all the spatial information provided throughout the narrative but especially in the setting of spatial frame, i.e. in the linguistic constructions that present new information at the very beginning of the story. Our corpus is composed of 332 setting constructions that occurred in the corpus (Batoréo, 1996) composed of 120 narratives produced by 60 monolingual European Portuguese subjects, both adults and children. The study shows how existential, locative and movement expressions are used in this specific context in the process of language acquisition of European Portuguese.

Introduction

In the theoretical framing presented for space by Talmy (1983, 1985) and for language acquisition by Berman & Slobin (1994), Bowerman (1996), Hendriks (1993) and Hickmann (1995), our previous studies (Batoréo, 1996,1998, Batoréo & Faria, 1999) focused on expression and reference to space in European Portuguese narratives in the absence of mutual knowledge. Typological differences, such as lexicalization patterns proposed in Talmy's studies, were shown to affect what spatial information is focused upon and how the information in discourse is organized both on the local and on the global level. General development progression was confirmed, while relatively late development progression in discourse organization was noticed. In Batoréo & Duarte (1998a, b) we showed that very significant syntactic and semantic variety can be observed across narrative settings. This variation can be studied with respect to the variables of (i) language, (ii) story – type

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of story and type of protagonist and its place in the hierarchy of narrative characters – and (iii) age of the story-tellers acquiring European Portuguese as the first language.

Our research

The data used in this study are composed of 332 setting constructions that occurred both in spatial frame and in spatial anchoring in the corpus of narratives (Batoréo, 1996). The Batoréo *Corpus* (see also: Batoréo, 1998) is composed of 120 narratives produced by 60 monolingual European Portuguese subjects: 30 adults and 30 children (half males and half females) of 5, 7 and 10 years of age, ten children in each age group. The children were tested in a kindergarten and a primary school in the centre of Lisbon. All the data used in this study were recorded, transcribed and codified in the CHILDES System (MacWhinney, 1994; Faria & Batoréo, 1994). Narrative productions were elicited with two picture stories: *Horse Story* and *Cat Story*¹ (Appendix).

Narrative setting: syntactic and semantic analysis in European Portuguese

The setting of a new narrative implies the introduction of new referents which means that this information is to be treated as indefinite. From the syntactic point of view, introductory structures can be characterized as existential, locative marked by unaccusative or unergative verbs of movement. Being a pro-drop language of SVO order, European Portuguese is expected to have setting constructions with (X)VS(Y) order where the verb precedes the subject denoting a new referent. Therefore, the paradigmatic narrative setting construction is expected to have an indefinite subject in verb postposition denoting a new referent (Example 1).

Example 1. (Data from Batoréo, 1996 – adults)

V+ Subject (constructions of (X)VS(Y) type)

V	Subject
<i>Era uma vez</i> (once upon a time there was	<i>um passarinho que ...</i> a birdie that)
<i>Havia</i> (there was	<i>um cavalinho que ...</i> a horsie that)
<i>Estava</i> (was located	<i>um passarinho em cima de ...</i> a birdie on the top of)
<i>Chegou</i> (came	<i>um gato.</i> a cat)

¹ Described in Hickmann's studies (Cf. Hickmann, 1995) and developed, among others, by Hendriks (1993) and Smoczynska (1992).

The Horse Story: (1) A horse is running in the field near a fence; (2) The horse looks across the fence at a cow; (3) The horse jumps the fence with the cow in the background and a bird on the fence; (4) The horse stumbles on the fence and falls. The cow and the bird watch; (5) The cow bandages up the horse's leg. The bird brings a first aid kit. The Cat Story: (1) A bird is sitting in a nest which is on a limb of a tree; (2) The bird flies away and the cat comes up to the tree; (3) The cat sits watching the empty nest; (4) The cat climbs the tree as a dog watches; (5) The dog pulls the cat's tail, as the bird flies back; (6) The dog chases the cat away, as the bird hovers over the nest.

The hypothesis presented above is strongly supported by linguistic research on syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic level.

From the semantic point of view, there are at least three conceptual primes (Wierzbicka, 1996, 1998; see also: Goddard 1998) that are suggested to cover the space area: (i) the prime of space, (ii) action, event and movement, and (iii) existence and possession. The prime of existence and possession corresponds to the linguistic universal THERE BE and HAVE, correspondence that in Portuguese is instantiated by four verbs '*ser*' and '*estar*' (THERE BE) and '*haver*' and '*ter*' (HAVE), showing the convergent character of the areas of existence and possession, on one hand, and of existence and location, on the other.

From the syntactic perspective, at least four points of convergence² can be proposed (Batoréo & Duarte, 1998a): (i) existential constructions with BE are considered inverted copulatives, (ii) existential constructions with BE and existential constructions with HAVE are considered syntactically close, being the existential verb of possession seen as an instantiation of the copulative, (iii) existential and locative constructions (both inverted and non-inverted) are considered syntactically close, (iv) the analysis of existential and locative constructions as types of copulative sentences can be extended to sentences with unaccusative verbs such as '*aparecer*' (appear, turn up), '*chegar*' (arrive), '*vir*' (come) and unergative ones, such as verbs of movement '*andar*' (go), '*correr*' (run), '*passar*' (walk) or '*saltar*' (jump).

From the pragmatic point of view, and focusing specifically on the latest experimental psycholinguistic research (Batoréo, 1996; Hendriks, 1993 and Hickmann, 1995), it has been suggested that three factors are decisive for the development of the organisation of spatial information in discourse: language, story (type of story and type of character) and age.

Data presentation and results

All the 332 narrative settings found in the Batoréo Corpus (1996) were evenly distributed (Table 1) (Example 1 above).

As shown above, the subjects of all ages prefer the non-stative settings to any other constructions (nearly two-thirds at the global level), though the hierarchy of the preference varies according to the age. Therefore, we can observe that the adults produce more non-stative constructions (92) than existential (40) and locative ones (35) together, the order of preference being: non-stative – existential – locative. This order is achieved only by older children, at 7 and 10 years of age. Only at age 5 a clear preference for locative in relation

² "Many languages exhibit phenomena in sentences with location denoting expressions, as well as in existential constructions. There is a clear relation between these two, as claiming that an entity is at a certain location implies a claim that an entity exists. Small wonder, therefore, that many languages introduce existential sentences with an adverb that is essentially a location denoting adverb like English *there*. It seems plausible that if a rather unspecific location adverb is used in a locational sentence, the implication of existence interpretively takes precedence over the claim of location. Similarly, location and possession are two closely related notions (cf. *France has mountains in the east* and *In the east of France there are mountains*), so that it should also not surprise us to find existential sentences featuring a verbal expression that essentially denotes possession, like Chinese *you*, French *il y a*, Spanish *hay*. Again, if the claim of possession is not foregrounded, the implication of existence may interpretively take precedence" (Hoekstra & Mulder, 1990, p. 1).

to existential is noted. This shows that although all the speakers have a strong preference for the non-stative setting, small children (5 year-olds) are still relatively closer to the stative representation than any other age group, whereas older children (age 7 and 10) almost eliminate the stative construction from their setting production.

Table 1. Narrative setting corpus (percentages approximate)

AGE/CONSTRUCTIONS	Existential	Locative	Non-stative
ADULTS	40 (24%)	35 (21%)	92 (55%)
5-year-olds	7 (12,5%)	19 (34%)	30 (54%)
7-year-olds	16 (29%)	4 (7%)	35 (64%)
10-year-olds	16 (30%)	5 (9%)	19 (61%)

Acquiring the narrative competence for the spatial setting of a story means that from the very beginning of the time they are able to construct a story (i.e. at about age 5) children have the language material at their disposal to do so but they need to “test” this material in the proper narrative context, ascertaining the syntactic and semantic construction by its subjection to certain pragmatic examination in order to achieve the adult standard of hierarchy organisation.

From the quantitative point of view, at the age of 5 the occurrences of non-stative constructions nearly equal existential and locative ones together, whereas at 7 (and 10, as there is hardly any percentage difference between these two age groups) this proportion achieves almost twice this number. The non-stative construction predominates in the adult group, although not as strongly as in the group of older children. When at 7 children learn to use existential rather than locative constructions, this predilection tends to be very determinative (four times at 7) but decreases with age (only three times at 10) to achieve quite a stable situation at the adult age when the number of locatives nearly equals the number of existential.

In the process of language acquisition the following tendencies can be shown as predominant (Cf. Batoréo & Duarte, 1998a, b):

(i) If percentages are calculated by age the existential constructions are even more present in the 7- and 10-year-olds than in the adults: 24% in adults, 12,5 in 5-, 29 in 7-year-olds and 30% in 10-year-olds.

(ii) As expected, in all existential constructions at all ages only indefinite constructions were found.

(iii) Contrary to expectation, however, and in all age groups, both definite and indefinite constructions were found in the group of locative and non-stative settings, both with SV and VS order (Example 2). The number of definite constructions was much greater in

small children than in the older ones and clearly decreasing in the adults in the process of language acquisition. In the adult group definite settings were rare: 10 per cent in locative settings and 25 per cent in non-stative settings.

Example 2 (Data from Batoréo, 1996 – 5-year-olds)

SUBJECT V

Definite Subject + Verb

O cavalo estava a galopar sempre, sempre, sempre.
(the horse was galloping always, always, always)

Indefinite Subject + Verb

Um passarinho estava no ninho.
(a birdie was located in the nest)

V SUBJECT

Verb + Definite Subject

Chegou o cão.
(appeared the dog)

Verb + Indefinite Subject (standard adult)

Encontrou um gato.
((he) found/met a cat)

(iv) In the non-stative group quite a variety of verb choice was observed across age. It was shown that at the age 5 children prefer unergative verbs of action (40 per cent of all occurrences at this age), whereas at 7 they prefer verbs of visual perception (also 40 per cent) such as 'ver' (*see*) or 'olhar' (*look at*). At 10 the preference goes to adult choices of unaccusative appear-in-the-stage verbs (50 per cent of all occurrences at this age). The tendencies shown in the older children are maintained in the adults although with different hierarchies: 40 per cent of unaccusative appear-in-the-stage verbs, 26 per cent of verbs of perceptual vision, 12 per cent of action verbs, 3 per cent of physical encounter verbs and 18 per cent of other verbs.

(v) – Starting at 5 years of age, in the situation of lack of mutual knowledge children lose their deictical markers progressively (e. g. *I, here, now*). Nevertheless, at this age, half of the settings is still of the 'here + is + NP' type (Example 3), a non-standard narrative construction, absent from other age productions.

Example 3. (Data from Batoréo, 1996 – 5-year-old)

Aqui é um passarinho com filhotes.
(here is a birdie with little ones)

Aqui é um gato.
(here is a cat)

(vi) At 7 and 10 years of age a very specific phenomenon of the reduction of the existential construction '*era uma vez*' (*once upon a time there was*) can be observed. It appears reduced to a simple Past Imperfect Tense '*era*' (*was*) or, even, restructured in the Present Tense as '*é*' (*is*), as illustrated in example 4. At this age, no constructions with '*haver*' (*there be*) occurred, though this verb – strongly preferred by the adults – appears in smaller children.

Example 4. (Data from Batoréo, 1996 – 7- and 10-year-olds.)

Era um cavalo que ia a correr (7 and 10)
(was (Imperf.) a horse that was running))

É um cavalo que está a correr (7 y.)
(is (Present) a horse that is running)

Cf. European Portuguese standard:

Era uma vez um cavalo que estava a correr/ ia a correr
(once upon a time there was a horse that was running)

(vii) – Even small children mark the locative Prepositional Phrase at least in two possible sentence positions: front and final with different types of verbs (Example 5), proving that they are sensitive to the word order in European Portuguese as a global factor of space marking.

Example 5. (Data from Batoréo, 1996)

(a)

<i>Do outro lado</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>sebe</i>	<i>havia</i>	<i>uma</i>	<i>vaca</i>
(on the other side	of the	fence	there was	a	cow)

<i>Do lado de lá</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>cerca</i>	<i>estava</i>	<i>uma</i>	<i>vaca</i>
(on the other side	of the	fence	was located	a	cow)

(English) *On the other side of the fence there was a cow.*

(b)

<i>Do outro lado</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>cerca</i>	<i>viu</i>	<i>uma</i>	<i>vaca.</i>
(on the other side	of the	fence	saw (3rd sing.past)	a	cow).

(English) *On the other side of the fence he saw a cow.*

(c)

Encontrou *uma* *vaca* *dentro de* *uma* *sebe.*
 (met (3rd sing.past) a cow in a hedge)

(English) *He met a cow in the corral.*

Discussion

In the very first global approach to our data, analysing the importance of the age variable in the language acquisition process, the age of 6–7 years seemed to be a determinant for significant changes on cognitive and linguistic levels (cf. Batoréo, 1996, 1998a). At that age children start to reorganise their discourse and begin to use cognitive and linguistic structuring strategies in an adult way. This shows up, clearly at the level of existential/locative syntactic structure, as it takes quite a lot of time to acquire the adult realisations, i.e. the preference for the 'have' (there be) constructions. Smaller children of 7 and 10 still show very clear preference for other strategies, using, for instance, a partially synonymous – on a systemic level – verb *ser* 'to be' in non-standard constructions.

Our study shows that children have difficulties with establishing and maintaining spatial frames according to the rules of the standard target grammar (adult sample in our study) until late, i.e. around the age 7–10. The interesting thing is that children at the age of 5 actually do have all the basic morphosyntactic and lexical information at their disposal. Even the marked introductory VS constructions that violate the canonical syntactical order of an SVO language – and marked strongly for information introduction – are in large part mastered at this age. "Master" here means that European Portuguese children at 5 are able to construct meaningful Portuguese sentences built with Portuguese lexico-morphological material, some of them perfectly acceptable in the standard language out of the discourse context. In an appropriate context only some of these syntactically correct and well-built utterances are really adequately used at the discourse level. The strategies the children use to verify the contextual adequacy of the expressions produced is constant and starts at the time when they are really able to construct a successful narrative, which in our sample occurs approximately at the mean age of 5;7. With the morphosyntactical material at their disposal they "test" different uses in different contexts and "stick" to those that the input shows them as contextually adequate and "successful". All the others (as examples 2 and 3 show) are dropped or retested, competing in different contexts till they prove "successful" in at least one.

Contrary to our initial hypothesis of the special importance of the age of 6–7 years, processes of testing and retesting of competing structures do not happen at particular age. They continue in the process of acquiring narrative competence after 5. More studies are needed to determine what happens between 10 years and adulthood, a period that has generally been neglected in the studies of language acquisition.

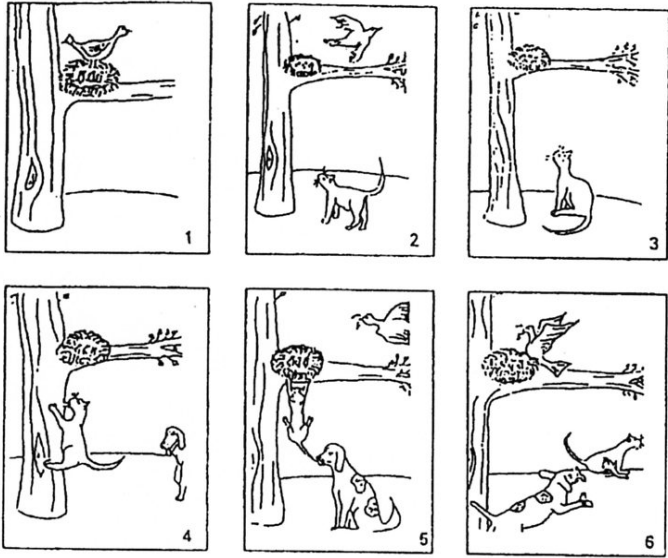
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Appendix

The Cat Story



The Horse Story

