



Grammatical gender in the interlanguage of English-speaking learners of Portuguese

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Abstract

Second-language acquisition strategies are a result of the cognitive processing second-language learners go through in order to make sense of the language they are learning, including the usage of lexical items – borrowing – as well as structural features from L1 to L2 or an additional language. One way to categorize this kind of interference is to conceptualize it as a feature of the learners' interlanguage or their developing second language knowledge (Gass & Selinker 2008; Lightbown & Spada 2006). Depending on the level of structural proximity between L1 and L2, grammar, especially morphology, constitutes one of the most difficult linguistic features to be acquired by a second-language learner (DeKeyser 2005). For example, nouns phrases constitute a major cause of cross-linguistic influence in the L2 or L3 of English-speaking learners of Portuguese because of their distinct representation in these two languages, especially the difference in gender and number agreement, word order, among other factors. Using the interlanguage theoretical framework and current understandings of cross-linguistic influence, the present study aims to analyze grammatical gender agreement in the written production of English-speaking learners of Portuguese.

Grammatical gender in the interlanguage of English-speaking learners of Portuguese

Introduction

Grammatical gender agreement represents one of the major difficulties English speakers encounter when learning a richly inflected language like Portuguese. This problem arises from the fact that English does not require as many inflections in its nominal system as Portuguese does. Due to this difference, learners may take longer to use effectively the grammatical gender rules in the target language. With this in mind, I used the interlanguage theoretical framework (Gass & Selinker 2008; Lightbown & Spada 2006) to analyze the features of grammatical gender agreement in the written production of English-speaking learners of Portuguese. By doing so, I also looked at some of the strategies learners used to make sense of noun phrases (NPs) in the target language, considering the issue of cross-linguistic influence. The analysis of the corpus suggests that gender mismatch tends to be motivated by structural transfer from English to Portuguese, as the word classes mostly affected by it were adjectives, articles, and possessive pronouns, which are not inflected for gender in the learners' L1. In addition, NPs with a relatively simple representation (two lexical items) represented the majority of non-target-like gender agreement cases. Moreover, three out of four cases of non-target-like gender agreement occurred in words that had a gender marker of masculine (-o) or feminine (-a). Although not conclusive, these findings are important as they shed light on some of the important elements that need to be taken into account by instructors planning to help their students excel in the learning of the grammatical gender rules of Portuguese.

The study of language contact has led to the idea that second-language acquisition (SLA) strategies represent one of the mechanisms by which contact-induced language change occurs. Thomason (2001) discusses at least four strategies learners use in trying to make sense of their

second language. The first one is negotiation, a process by which “learners change their language (A) to approximate what they believe to be the patterns of another language or dialect (B)” (p. 142). The second strategy has to do with the gap-filling approach, which consists in using material of the native language whenever there is a lack of knowledge of how to speak something in the target language (TL). Another strategy is to transfer structural patterns from the learner’s native language to construct their version of the grammar of the target language. The final strategy discussed by Thomason “is to ignore distinctions, especially marked distinctions, that are present in the TL but opaque to learners at early to middle stages of the learning process” (p. 148). In discussing these strategies, Thomason is considering a more general language contact situation, in which these mechanisms lead to shift-induced interference in a bilingual or multilingual context. In other words, although she is not focusing specifically on the role of formal instruction, Thomason’s discussion sheds light on one of the basic points that will be dealt with in the present paper, which is the fact that these strategies should not be viewed simply as errors; rather they are an important part of the language learning process.

A considerable number of scholars in the field of SLA view the strategies presented above as a result of the cognitive processing L2 learners go through in order to make sense of the language they are learning, including the usage of lexical items – borrowing – as well as structural features from the native language to the target language. One way to categorize this kind of interference is to conceptualize it as a feature of the learners’ interlanguage or their developing second language knowledge (Gass & Selinker 2008; Lightbown & Spada 2006). Gass and Selinker define interlanguage as “the language produced by a nonnative speaker of a language (i.e. a learner’s output). [It] refers to the systematic knowledge underlying learners’ production” (p. 518-9). Adding to this definition, Lightbown and Spada point out that

“interlanguages have been found to be systematic, but they are also dynamic, continually evolving as learners receive more input and revise their hypotheses about the second language” (p. 80).

Taking the concept of interlanguage as a starting point, the strategies learners use to make sense of their second or additional language —e.g. negotiation, the gap-filling approach, transfer, and avoidance— can be described as features of learners’ interlanguage in the sense that they are an essential part of how second-language acquisition takes place. Moreover, these strategies are also analyzed in relation to the role of the native language in the process of second-language acquisition. Within this view, learners’ errors are sometimes referred to as *developmental errors* because of their similarities with the developmental stages that characterize first-language acquisition. Lightbown and Spada discuss at least four types of developmental errors:

Overgeneralization – application of a certain grammatical rule in contexts where the rule does not apply; Simplification – “where elements of a sentence are left out or where all verbs have the same form regardless of person, number, or tense” (p. 81); Transfer or interference – the use of structural elements of the native language into the second language, and; avoidance – when learners “avoid using features of language that they perceive to be difficult for them” (p. 82).

The term ‘cross-linguistic influence’ was introduced in mid-1980s in the field of SLA as a more neutral term to account for all these types of possible influences on the target language. For De Angelis (2007, p. 19), “the study of crosslinguistic influence (CLI) seeks to explain how and under what conditions prior linguistic knowledge influences the production, comprehension and development of a target language.” This concept is very useful to the present study because it can be linked to the idea of interlanguage to describe learners’ strategies or attempts to make sense of a target language. In this sense, my standpoint is aligned with that of S. Pit Corder

(1992, p. 20), who argues that “acquiring a language is a creative process in which learners are interacting with their environment to produce an internalized representation of the regularities they discover in the linguistic data to which they are exposed.”

In the process of second or third language acquisition, grammar, especially morphology, constitutes one of the most difficult linguistic features to be acquired by a second-language learner (DeKeyser, 2005). However, the level of structural proximity between L1 and L2 represents a significant factor in how learners’ make sense of the morphological system of the second language. According to DeKeyser, at least three factors are involved in determining grammatical difficulty in L2 acquisition: Problem of meaning, problem of form, and problem of the form-meaning relationship. DeKeyser describes the problem of meaning by saying that “regardless of the form used to express a meaning, the meaning itself can constitute a source of difficulty, because of novelty, abstractness, or a combination of both” (p. 5). Generally, if the learner’s L1 lacks elements such as articles, classifiers, grammatical gender, and verbal aspect, or uses them in a different way, they will be hard to acquire due to the degree of abstraction they express. The problem of form is normally bigger in richly inflected languages, which have a number of morphological (morphemes or allomorphs) options to express a certain meaning. Finally, the form-meaning relationship is an issue when there is no transparency between form and meaning. DeKeyser argues that this lack of transparency is caused by at least three factors: Redundancy – the form is seen as unnecessary because its meaning is expressed by other elements of the sentence; Optionality – the form-meaning link is hard to establish because presence and absence of certain elements does not change the meaning, and; Opacity – correlation between form and meaning is weak, i.e. different forms express the same meaning or same form stands for different meanings.

It is undeniable that these complexities play a major role in the acquisition of Portuguese morphology by English-speaking learners. In the case of Portuguese, one also has to consider that in the United States and in many other countries this language is often learned at the college level, after students had been exposed to other languages in elementary or high school, or even in their home or community. Thus, the Portuguese language has been acquired as a third language (L3) or an additional language. Therefore, it could be argued that languages other than the native language can be a source of cross-linguistic influence.

In view of the level of difficulty that acquiring the morphological system of a second, third, or additional language represents and the role played by the languages previously learned, this study hypothesizes that NPs constitute a major cause of influence for the L2 or L3 learners of Portuguese, especially those who have English as their first language. This is so because NPs have a distinct representation in these two languages. Unlike the English language, Portuguese requires that nouns and their modifiers be inflected for gender and number, as can be seen in example 1 below.

Example 1: Random representation of NPs across languages.

Portuguese:	Casa bonita
Interlanguage:	Casa bonita / Casa bonito / Bonito casa / Bonita casa
English:	'Beautiful house'

The above example shows two of the most common features of the interlanguage of English-speaking learners of Portuguese in early stages of acquisition, namely the non-target-like word order and gender marking. Considering the cases where the grammatical gender rule was not applied, it is possible to argue that the learner is strategically transferring the structure of his/her native language to the target language. In the next section, I review some of the studies that dealt with some issues related to grammatical gender in the written production of Portuguese learners.

Portuguese as a Foreign Language

The interest in Portuguese as a foreign language has increased in the last decade, especially due to the growing importance of Brazil and its role as a representative of the Lusophone cultures in the global community. As a member of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), Brazil's recent economic development has made the country an important player in the international arena. In addition to that, the fact that Brazil hosted the 2014 World Cup and will host the 2016 Summer Olympics guarantees enough media coverage to place the country constantly in the international spotlight. A positive outcome of this increasing media coverage is the creation or development of existing Portuguese programs in many campuses around the globe.

The study of Portuguese as a foreign language, second language or additional language has a long history and has been examined with a variety of approaches (see, for example, Biaconi 2012, Cohen 1989, Cowels, Oliveira, & Wiedemann 2006, and Tesser 2005); however not much attention has been paid to the study of the oral and/or written production of the English-speaking learners of Portuguese (English-Portuguese interlanguage) using the interlanguage framework. This is certainly not the case of Portuguese-English interlanguage, English-Spanish interlanguage, Spanish-Portuguese interlanguage, and LIBRAS-Portuguese¹ interlanguage, which have been extensively explored by the research community. Even though studies such as those of Rottava (2009), Baldé (2011) and Sousa (2011) have provided insightful accounts for the study of Portuguese L2 or L3 acquisition, at least two studies were conducted from a perspective that is more compatible with the one I am considering for this paper.

¹ LIBRAS is the Brazilian sign language.

One of these studies was conducted by Jensen (2004), who looked at the interlanguage of Spanish/English bilingual students of Portuguese. Unrevised written compositions of university students in their second year of Portuguese were examined for evidence of negative transfer from Spanish and English and analyzed for four categories of error type (morphology, syntax, spelling, and vocabulary) as well as apparent source (Spanish, English, or non-transfer). Jensen found that non-transfer was the most frequent source of error, accounting for 864 instances (63%), followed by 385 occurrences (28.3%) of Spanish transfer, and 110 occurrences (8.1%) of English transfer. The fact that the majority of the non-transfer errors (78.5%) in his data were related to morphological problems made Jensen corroborate with Dulay, Burt and Krashen's idea that "the majority of errors made by second language learners are not interlingual, but developmental" (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982, quoted by Jensen, 2004, 76). When examining error type, Jensen found that lexical errors accounted for 545 occurrences (40.1%) of the error types, compared to errors related to morphology at 303 (22.2%), syntax at 284 (20.8%), and vocabulary at 227 (16.7%).

Pinto's (2012) analysis of the written production of Moroccan undergraduate students also provides some important insights although he is not focusing specifically on English-Portuguese interlanguage. Pinto points out that when these students start learning Portuguese they are already proficient in two or three languages besides their native language. As far as cross-linguistic influence is concerned, Arabic, French, and Spanish are the major sources of structural and lexical transfer to Portuguese in the context he studied. When analyzing gender marking and agreement in students' written production, Pinto found that there were at least three major causes of problems. Even though Arabic is also a two-gender system like Portuguese, it was the main cause of gender mismatch in this language. There was also some difficulty in

applying the rule for gender agreement when the Portuguese words did not have a morphologic mark of masculine –o or feminine –a. For example, words such as *dente* ‘tooth’ (masculine) and *paz* ‘peace’ (feminine) can be challenging for learners because of their ambiguous form. A considerable number of mistakes were also attributed to students’ lack of knowledge or lack of attention.

Even though the two studies described above do not address the variety of the aspects associated with the representation of morphological features in the interlanguage of Portuguese learners, they are useful because they highlight important elements that will be very helpful for the understanding of the issue at hand. With this in mind, the present study presents an analysis of the written production of English-speaking learners of Portuguese, describing some of the strategies they use to make sense of grammatical gender in the new linguistic system. In the next section, I give detailed information of the methodological choices made for the present study.

Method

Participants

The participants were adult college-level students enrolled in a first-year Portuguese language program. All students were native speakers of English. Most of these students also reported having at least a basic proficiency level of a second or third language. The most common second languages spoken by the students were Spanish and French, but there was at least one student who spoke one of the following languages: Yoruba, Korean, Italian, Japanese, Italian, Greek, and American Sign Language. Most of these students have had previous exposure to Spanish, but as far as cross-linguistic influence is concerned, there was not a significant amount of (lexical or structural) transfer from this language in the students’ compositions, probably because of the fact that students may have used different resources to write them.

Conversely, what previous studies have found is that learners tend to rely more on their second or last language as the major source of transfer for their oral and written production, especially when the languages involved are typologically perceived as close (Cenoz, 2001; De Angelis, 2005, De Angelis & Selinker, 2001; Dewaele, 1998; Kellerman, 1983; Selinker & Baumgartner-Cohen, 1995; Selinker & Lakshmanan, 1992; Shanon, 1991). In addition, as the grammatical structure of Portuguese and Spanish is very similar, it is hard to see the extent to which students' performance in writing is simply transfer from their previous knowledge of Spanish or their learning of Portuguese. On the other hand, Spanish and English are obvious sources of interference in students' Portuguese speech. This idea is actually related to the point made earlier about the fact that in the United States and other parts of the world the Portuguese language has been taught in situations where it has the status of a third or additional language.

Materials

The data analyzed in the present study consisted of 13 unrevised compositions, which were required as take-home assignments. After students received the instructions in English, they had about a week to turn in their written assignments. Students were asked to write a postcard message to a Brazilian friend talking about how they were doing, what classes they were taking, and their free time activities. Students were totally free to use any printed or online resources they could find in order to complete this task, and so it is hard to determine whether they used these resources or relied solely on their own knowledge of Portuguese. The only piece of advice that was added to the list of instructions of the composition was about the use of online translators. Students were advised to use caution when translating whole sentences, as usually the result is something that does not make sense in Portuguese.

The main category considered in this study as a unit of analysis was the noun phrase (NP). All NPs with target and non-target-like gender marking were included in the corpus. The only exception to this rule was the case of adjectives, which were added to the corpus if they were an element of nominal sentences such as *Ela é bonita* ‘She is beautiful’. Non-target-like gender agreement was defined here as any case in which one or more elements of a NP did not follow the grammatical gender rule expected for a specific context. To limit the number of factors influencing the gender agreement in the examples collected, I did not consider NPs initiated with a contracted form of pronouns and articles or preposition and article. In addition, NPs that are formed by an invariable cardinal number and a noun were not included in the corpus. An example of this would be the case of *três meninas/três meninos* ‘three girls/three boys’. This certainly does not happen with numerals such as *um/uma* ‘one’, *dois/duas* ‘two’, *duzentos/duzentas* ‘two hundred’, which must be agree in gender with the noun they are modifying. All NPs and adjectives were then coded based on the kind of lexical items that constituted them. For example, an NP such as *o menino* ‘the boy’ was coded as AN (article noun) and *menina bonita* ‘beautiful girl’ as NAD (noun adjective). In the next section I present the results, which are followed by the discussion on some of the major issues encountered in the data.

Results

Table 1 below gives detailed information of different types of NPs collected from the data.

Table 1. Categorization of Grammatical Gender Agreement in English-Portuguese Interlanguage

Noun Phrase Type	Gender Agreement	Non-Gender Agreement	Total
Adjective Example: <i>Paula é introvertida</i>	27	6	33
Adjective, Article, Noun Example: <i>todos os dias</i>	2	0	2
Adjective, Article, Possessive Pronoun, Noun Example: <i>todas as minhas aulas</i>	1	0	1
Adjective, Noun Example: <i>boas notas</i>	15	5	20
Adjective, Noun, Adjective Example: <i>todos meninos bonitos</i>	2	0	2
Adjective, Possessive Pronoun, Noun Example: <i>querida minha amiga</i>	1	0	1
Article, Adjective, Noun Example: <i>um grande almoço</i>	3	1	4
Article, Noun Example: <i>a cantina</i>	57	2	59
Article, Noun, Adjective Example: <i>a vida adulta</i>	13	3	16
Article, Noun, Possessive Pronoun Example: <i>o desafio dele</i>	1	0	1
Article, Numeral, Noun Example: <i>o primeiro semestre</i>	1	0	1
Article, Possessive Pronoun, Noun Example: <i>a minha casa</i>	5	0	5
Article, Possessive Pronoun, Noun, Adjective Example: <i>o meu curso preferido</i>	1	0	1
Demonstrative Pronoun, Noun Example: <i>este semestre</i>	7	0	7
Interrogative Pronoun, Noun Example: <i>quantos cursos</i>	1	0	1
Noun, Adjective Example: <i>dias quentes</i>	10	1	11
Numeral, Noun Example: <i>duas aulas</i>	5	1	6
Possessive Pronoun, Adjective, Noun Example: <i>minha última aula</i>	2	0	2
Possessive Pronoun, Noun Example: <i>minhas aulas</i>	27	6	33
Possessive Pronoun, Noun, Adjective Example: <i>minha rotina diária</i>	8	1	9
Possessive Pronoun, Numeral, Noun Example: <i>minha primeira semana</i>	0	1	1
Total	189	27	216

As can be seen in the table, the data consisted of 216 NPs and adjectives, of which 189 (87.5%) presented target-like gender agreement, i.e. the rule for grammatical gender matches that produced by native speakers of Portuguese, while 27 (12.5%) were non-target-like. Gender agreement errors were mainly associated with three word classes, namely adjectives in nominal sentences or as elements of a NP, articles, and possessive pronouns. Adjectives are the source of error in 13 cases or 48 percent of the all non-target-like examples. The gender of the article did not match that of a native Portuguese speaker in 6 out of 27 examples. In addition, possessive pronouns were not used with the appropriate gender agreement in 7 cases. Four categories of NPs accounted for the majority of the non-target-like occurrences (16 out of 27). They consisted of NPs formed by adjective-noun (ADN), article-noun (AN) and article-noun-adjective (ANAD), and possessive pronoun-noun (PPN). I will concentrate on these cases for the rest of the analysis. Examples of these noun-phrase types are shown below.

Example 2: ADN Noun Phrase

Portuguese: **Cara** Paula
 Interlanguage: **Caro** Paula
 English: **'Dear** Paula'

Example 3: AN Noun Phrase

Portuguese: **a** cantina
 Interlanguage: **o** cantina
 English: **'The** cafeteria'

Example 4: ANAD Noun Phrase

Portuguese: **um** local de música
 Interlanguage: **uma** local de música
 English: **'A** place of music'/ 'A music place'

Example 5: PPN Noun Phrase

Portuguese: **minha** aula
 Interlanguage: **meu** aula
 English: **'my** class'

As the examples illustrate, the cases of non-target-like gender marking affect mainly modifiers, which include but are not limited to adjectives, articles, and pronouns. This is probably due to the fact that in Portuguese these word classes are required to be inflected for gender and number and such a requirement does not exist in English. As mentioned before, because of the way grammatical gender works in these two languages, native English-speaking learners of Portuguese may take longer to make sense of this difference. Other issues will be considered in the next section.

Discussion

This study was guided by the goal of describing some of the features of the interlanguage of English-speaking learners of Portuguese in relation to grammatical gender. The results presented in the previous section suggest that gender agreement mismatch in the English-Portuguese interlanguage seems to be influenced by the structural transfer from English to Portuguese. In the case of grammatical gender, cross-linguistic influence from Spanish can be discarded because it is not salient enough given the fact that both Spanish and Portuguese have very similar morphological systems. In any case, this kind of cross-linguistic influence is certainly more noticeable in the speech of the students. Another point to be made is that the majority of non-target-like gender agreement cases occurred in NPs with a relatively simple representation (two lexical items), suggesting that the source of the problem may be the nature of the NP constituents, especially modifiers, and not necessarily the number of elements that form them. Also, the fact that modifiers are usually the items that do not match target-like grammatical gender representation points to the idea that the source of the difficulty is the inflected morphology of Portuguese. Corroborating with DeKeyser's discussion, as articles, adjectives, and pronouns are not inflected for number or gender in English, when learners are

trying to systematize these word classes in richly inflected languages like Portuguese, the expectation is that it will take longer for them to acquire the morphological rules.

A further analysis of the data seems to point to the fact that the morphological gender mark of a noun should be taken as the cue for gender agreement in the NP; however, this does not seem to hold in all cases and students in initial stages of acquisition tend to analyze words in isolation. For instance, 74 percent of the cases of non-target-like NPs in the data had morphological gender marking, either *-o* (masculine) or *-a* (feminine), which could be used as a cue to gender agreement. This is actually different from what Pinto found in the written production he analyzed, where learners had difficulty with gender agreement when the morphological gender mark was not represented by the *-o* or *-a* morphemes. The fact that he was analyzing the interlanguage of learners who were native speakers of Arabic certainly must be taken into consideration.

Another finding from Pinto's study was that inconsistencies in students' production could also be attributed to lack of knowledge or lack of attention. There are resemblances of these problems also in our data. In addition, at least in the case of the present study, one could also argue that translation played a major role in how students approached words or phrases that they did not know how to deal with when writing their compositions. It seems plausible that some of the learners would prefer to trust online translators rather than their own linguistic intuition in order to make sense of difficult grammatical features of the target language. However, dictionaries or translators should be used with caution since they are usually used for finding the base form of words, which should be inflected by the users, if necessary. In any case, it is hard to determine how much cross-linguistic influence can be attributed to lack of knowledge without

control over the resources learners use to write. This is certainly a limitation that future studies should take into consideration.

Final Considerations

The goal of the present study was to describe the features of grammatical gender representation in the interlanguage of English-speaking learners of Portuguese. The data analyzed for this study consisted of 13 compositions written by college-level students enrolled in a first-year Portuguese language program. From the 216 NPs collected from the data, 27 (12.5%) were non-target-like occurrences of gender marking. In other words, learners did not use the rule for grammatical gender agreement in at least one of the lexical items that formed the NPs. Using the interlanguage conceptualization (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Lightbown & Spada 2006) and the theoretical framework of grammatical difficulty (De Keyser, 2005), the results suggest that the non-target-like NPs produced by the Portuguese learners were a linguistic influence of English. However, it would be necessary to analyze a larger data set in order to make this argument a generalizable and conclusive one. Cross-linguistic influence from Spanish was not evident in the cases analyzed in this study but this could be due to the relative proximity between the two languages. The fact that I was analyzing written data also contributes to the imperceptibility of influence from Spanish.

In addition, gender morphological form was the most probable cause of difficulty, especially because I was dealing with grammatical structures of Portuguese that were absent in English, and so there is a possibility that the strategy used by learners to make sense of this feature was to use structural transfer from the native language to the target language. This point actually brings us back to the idea that the second language acquisition strategies discussed by Thomason, namely negotiation, the gap-filling approach, transfer, and avoidance, fit well into the

conceptualization of interlanguage as this model takes into account learners' creativity and agency in the process of second acquisition. Thus, these strategies should be seen as resources used by learners to communicate in diverse and multilingual communities, and not as imperfect features of unachievable linguistic goals.

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