The syntax/prosody interface in spoken Brazilian Portuguese and Italian: a corpus-based study

Aims

This study, based on the C-ORAL-BRASIL and C-ORAL-ROM *corpora*, concerns the syntax/prosody interface in spoken Brazilian Portuguese (BP) and Italian (IT), within the theoretical frame of Language into Act Theory (L-AcT; Cresti 2000; Moneglia & Raso 2014), an extension of Austin's Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962). According to L-AcT, prosody identifies the unit of reference of speech with the utterance, understood as the minimal linguistic unit interpretable as pragmatically autonomous (i.e. corresponding to a speech act, due to the illocution that it carries). Via prosody the speech flow is segmented into utterances, and also in tonal sub-units of them. Such sub-units can convey different information units, characterized by different prosodic profiles, functions and distribution within the utterance. The most important information unit is Comment, because it carries the illocution of the utterance. L-AcT's conception of syntax is strictly related to the information structure of speech, since it assumes that each information unit represents a syntactic and semantic island: proper dependency relations are then analyzable only within the domain of the same information unit (*linearized syntax*: Cresti 2014). Syntactic structures performed across more than one information units (*patterned constructions*: *ibidem*) cannot be analyzed as syntactically compositional, since their relationship is informational, related to their respective communicative functions within the utterance. A previous analysis of explicit complement clauses in two comparable and informationally tagged sub-corpora of C-ORAL-BRASIL and Italian C-ORAL-ROM had lead to the observation that, while in both BP and IT linearized syntax prevails on patterned constructions, BP display a significantly inferior rate of patterned constructions (16%) with respect to IT (23%; see Author 2014). The aim of this study is to show that such a difference can follow from the rhythmic difference existing between spoken BP and IT.

Methodology

According to the non-discrete conception of rhythm proposed in the Dynamic Model by Barbosa (2000, 2006), BP is a more stress-timed language with respect to IT, which means that in BP the tonal unit can host more phonological syllables than in IT, for its rhythm leads to strong re-syllabification phenomena. In order to prove so, for each simple (i.e. formed by Comment only) and scanned simple utterance (Comment performed across more than one tonal units) in the two sub-corpora, complex syntactic structures (i.e. with a verbal head) were counted, expecting to find more in BP than in IT. Then, for each simple utterance the number of phonological syllable was counted as well, looking forward to prove such a greater capacity of BP tonal unit.

Results

At the outset, BP showed a significantly higher rate of complex syntactic structures than IT: 15% vs. 5% in simple utterances, 18% vs. 9% considering both simple and scanned simple utterances. Only in scanned utterances, i.e. in utterances enlarged with supplemental tonal units, IT displayed a rate of complex syntactic structures (28%) comparable with BP (27%). Actually, according to data BP simple utterances hosted up to 31 phonological syllables (average: 8), while IT up to 20 only (average: 6). The higher rate of linearized syntax in BP, then, can be related to spoken BP rhythm.

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