Reference to kinds in Brazilian Portuguese: definite singulars vs bare singulars

The paper explains the distribution of the generic readings of bare singulars (BSs) and singular definites (SDs) in Brazilian Portuguese (BrP), accounting *inter alia* for the following contrasting data:

(1) *O pedreiro / Pedreiro é preguiçoso.*
    The bricklayer / Bricklayer is lazy.

We will first provide evidence in favor of the hypothesis that BSs in BrP may refer to kinds (in line with Schmitt & Munn (1999) and Pires de Oliveira et al. (2006), and *contra* Müller (2002)). We will then show that kind-denoting BSs in BrP behave on a par with kind-denoting bare plurals (BP) in English, which will lead us to redefine Chierchia’s (1998) down operator so that it can apply not only to pluralities but also to number-neutral expressions. Kind-referring SDs, on the other hand, are built, in both English and BrP, by applying the *iota* operator to a property of kinds (Kleiber & Lazzaro (1987), Dayal (2004), Beyssade (2005)).

1. Brazilian Portuguese BSs are names of kinds
The analysis of generic (readings of) BSs in BrP is controversial, partially because of divergent grammaticality judgments: Schmitt & Munn (1999) proposed that generic BSs are names of kinds, an analysis rejected by Müller (2002) on the ground that BSs cannot combine with kind-predicates. This generalization was disconfirmed by Pires de Oliveira et al (2006), who provide attested examples of the type in (2) from corpora (Santolin (2006)). Compare the use of singular indefinites (SI), which gives rise to unacceptability or engenders the taxonomic reading:

(2) *Uma baleia / Baleia está em extinção.*
    A whale / Whale is on the verge of extinction.

Moreover, BSs allow the generic reading even when they combine with episodic predicates:

(3) *Um carro / Carro foi introduzido no Brasil no início do século.*
    A car / Car was introduced in Brazil in the beginning of the century.

Further evidence in favor of the kind analysis of generic BSs in BrP and against Müller’s (2002) proposal that they are to be analyzed as indefinites is given in (4) vs (5), where it is shown that generic BSs can be attributed not only essential, but also non-essential properties, whereas SIs can get a generic interpretation only if they are attributed an essential property:

(4) *Um samba / Samba é polifônico.*
    A samba / Samba is polyphonic.

(5) *Um samba / Samba é popular.*
    A samba / Samba is popular.

In this paper we will show that Müller’s denial of kind-denotation is correct if we use the term ‘kind’ in a restricted way, to refer to primitive entities in the ontology (expressed by SDs in both English and BrP), but incorrect if we use ‘kind’ to also refer to intensional maximal sums (expressed by BPs in English and by BSs in BrP). In what follows, we will use the terms ‘taxonomic kind’ and intensional maximal sum, respectively.

2. BSs and Singular Definites (SDs): intensional maximal sums and taxonomic kinds
With respect to the above tests, SDs show the same behavior as BSs:

(6) *A baleia / Baleia está em extinção.*
(7) *O carro / Carro foi introduzido no Brasil no início do século.*
(8) *O samba / Samba é popular.*

However, BSs and SDs contrast in the object position of kind-predicates, and with respect to the test of ‘well-established kinds’:

(9) *João inventou o computador / *computador.*
    João invented the computer / computer.

(10) *A garrafa verde/ Garrafa verde tem gargalo estreito.*
    The green bottle / Green Bottle has narrow neck.

In what follows we show that the difference between BSs and SDs illustrated in (9)-(10) parallels the difference between BPs and SDs in English: although both these types of nominal expressions refer to kinds, this denotation is obtained by applying different semantic operations: kind-denoting

SDs are built by applying the *iota* operator to a property/set of kinds (Kleiber & Lazzaro (1987), Dayal (2004), Krifka (2004)), whereas kind-denoting BPs are constructed by applying the Down operator to a property/set of pluralities, which yields the maximal sum of individuals in that domain (Chierchia (1998)). In sum, generic SDs (in both English and BrP) denote primitive taxonomic entities (kinds) in the domain of reference, whereas English generic BPs refer to intensional maximal sums of individuals, which can be viewed as ‘derived’ kinds. We will argue that this analysis of English BPs can be extended to BSs in BrP provided that we redefine Chierchia’s down operator so that it may apply not only to pluralities but also to number neutral expressions (BSs in BrP are uncontroversially number-neutral, see Schmitt & Munn (1999), and Müller (2002)). This modification is not stipulative, but it constitutes a natural extension of Chierchia’s own definition: since the down operator picks up the maximum sum of individuals, it is irrelevant whether the lattice contains atomic elements in addition to pluralities. As in English, the down operator is covert in BrP.

The difference between taxonomic kinds and intensional maximal sums allows us to explain the contrasts between BSs and SDs in BrP. As in English, SDs in BrB can only refer to well-established kinds:

(11) O homem é uma espécie inteligente.
The man is a species intelligent.

The example in (1) is unacceptable because there is no well-established bricklayer kind, in contrast with *o homem* ‘the man’: to be a well established kind is to be part of a taxonomy of kinds, which is not the case for *o pedreiro* ‘the bricklayer’ nor for *a garrafa verde* ‘the green bottle’ (see (1) and (10), respectively) Compare the variants of (1) and (10) built with the BSs *pedreiro* ‘bricklayer’ and *garrafa verde* ‘bottle green’: these examples are grammatical, because according to our proposal, BSs in BrP refer to intensional maximal sums, which can be built from any kind of number-neutral (or plural) expression, by applying the down operator.

Let us now observe that the variant of (1) built with a SD becomes acceptable if the SD is modified, or bears contrastive stress:

(12) a. O pedreiro jovem é preguiçoso.
The bricklayer young is lazy.
b. O PEDREIRO é preguiçoso.
The BRICKLAYER is lazy.

We will propose that these examples are acceptable because modification and contrastive stress are means of supplying the taxonomy that is necessary for the use of SDs.

Turning finally to (9), the unacceptability of *computador* ‘computer’ is due to the fact that a BS denotes a sum, and it is not possible to invent a sum of individuals, but only the prototype (an atomic entity), hence the acceptability of the corresponding SD.

Selected references


