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CHILDREN'S METALINGUISTIC ACTIVITY
IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF LINGUISTIC EXISTENCE[*]

In this paper we examine the construction of first entities in narratives produced by children of 5, 7, 10 years and adults[1]. The study demonstrates that when children reformulate they try to construct entities detached from the situation of enunciation, which means that they construct a detached or a translated plane and they construct linguistic existence of entities. Entities must first be introduced into the enunciative space and then comments will be made in subsequent utterances. Constructing existence supposes extraction. This consists of "singling out an occurrence, that is, isolating and drawing its spatio-temporal boundaries" (Culioli, 1990, p. 182). Once the occurrence of the notion is constructed (which means it has become a separate occurrence with situational properties), children can predicate about it. However, there are children who do not construct the linguistic existence of entities.
I hypothesize that the mode of task presentation influences the success of constructing linguistic existence. Sharing the investigator's knowledge about the stimulus images, children do not ascribe an existential status to the occurrence of the notional domain.

Introduction

In the present article I will first describe the construction of existence in Portuguese. This study is based on A. Culioli's linguistics of enunciative and predicative operations. Within this theoretical framework, linguistic forms are markers of operations performed by the enunciator, which means that those forms are instructions to the co-enunciator for reconstruction. When one speaks, one shares representations of something. The "thing" to be shared can be present in the situation of enunciation and to talk about it is to point to it. Communication by pointing would be the easiest and earliest form of communication. Subsequently, one can talk about an absent object or a set of possible objects, i.e., the linguistic activity, by representation, allows us to distance ourselves from the reference by ostension.

To share a representation supposes its introduction into enunciative space, that is, to construct its existence. Constructing a space, orienting, determining, establishing a network of referential values, in short, a system of location (Culioli, 1995, p. 89) is a prerequisite for linguistic existence.

[1] The *corpus* has been constituted by H. Batoréo at the Laboratory of Psycholinguistics, University of Lisbon (see Batoréo 1996).

Some theoretical issues on the construction of existence

In Portuguese, the existential structure typically consists of a verb – *haver, existir, ser, estar* – followed by an indefinite noun group. Whereas the verb is a trace of location with respect to the situation of enunciation (henceforth referred to as Sit_0), the indefinite is a trace of the isolation of an occurrence from a notional domain (Valentim, 1998).

The basic function of existential structures is to establish new, typically indefinite entities in an enunciative space. Bringing into existence an entity supposes categorizing it, locating and differentiating it from other possible entities. Given that the assignment of existence combines a verb and a noun group, there must be compatibility between verbal and nominal determination: the linguistic devices to assert the unboundedness of existence must be stative verbs (without an inherent endpoint) and imperfective tenses which express an internal perspective of the events (in Portuguese, present [presente] and imperfect [imperfeito] tenses) and indefinite noun groups (Sousa, 1999).

There are a few stative verbs that can predicate existence: *ser, estar haver, existir*. The specificity of these verbs is that they cannot be bounded. The specificity of the indefinite article is that it supposes a homogeneous set of elements. When one uses an indefinite noun group in an existential structure one chooses one element of this set similar to any other. According to Culioli, (1995, p. 141) «the indefinite article *a* functions as a marker of the operation of scanning with Extraction». The semantics of *ser* and *haver*[2] and the operations of the "imperfeito" signal that there is no partition or heterogeneity; the occurrence has the same properties at all phases of the situation (see Comrie, 1976). The verb *ser* and *estar* are the most used by subjects to construct existence. The operation marked by *to be* (identification) enables it to function as introductory to existence: the first operation of identification (Culioli, 1995, p. 150) «indicates that an occurrence is located with respect to its predicate: x is x = is what it is (x é o que é); the second, that an occurrence is located with respect to an abstract, spatial localization: *is in the spot where it is*».

In Portuguese, as in Spanish, there are two verbs for *to be*: *ser* and *estar*. In the opening of stories, *ser* participates in existential structure while *estar* introduces also an entity into the enunciative space and has in general a locative value. In Portuguese the two operations correspond to two different verbs:

x is x = is what it is x (*ser*) é o que é

is in the spot where it is (*estar*) está onde está

One cannot predicate about *x* if *x* has not been already constructed, that is, the speaker cannot assign properties to an entity if this entity is not known to the interlocutor. Thus the sentence:

(1)   A boy is in the garden
       (um rapaz está no jardim)

is not an proper utterance because the term *boy* is not constructed in a previous sentence. One cannot predicate a property about *boy* (in this case *is in the garden*) if the interlocutor

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[2] There is a common assumption that there are two kinds of existential utterances: utterances of general existence that express absolute existence *God exists* and utterances of specific existence where one constructs a universe in order to provide a frame to assert the existence of an entity (see, among others, Kaczorowa, 1994). In Portuguese, the former are expressed by *existir* (to exist) and the latter by *ser, estar* and *haver*.

does not know about him. Thus existence construction and predication of properties are in a restricted order of succession, because one cannot process information about an entity if one is unaware of its existence.

The Portuguese word order is SVO. However the syntactic organization of existentials is a particular one: Vx, that is, verb + indefinite noun group. The word order structure of existentials is indicative of the operations underlying the linguistic construction of existence: localization and introduction of an entity.

The indefinite article supposes a homogeneous set which is constituted of elements of the same specie. Thus when one introduces an entity one operates a delimitation. This is the idea of making something appear. Hence something cannot appear from nothing, one must locate it. This is the function of *there is*, *let's talk about*, *I have*…. Thus existence supposes: fragmentation of a notional domain, isolation of an occurrence of a notion, delimitation and localization with respect to a situation. In the expression *Era um cavalo* we have the locator *era* which is a fictitious locator, and a new entity *um cavalo*. This structure introduces a new referent that is available for further specification. Thus, in (2):

(2)   Era um cavalo que estava num prado
       (there was a horse which was in a meadow)

the relative pronoun *que* refers back to *horse* and introduces more information about *horse*. After the delimitation of the first occurrence of *horse,* one must then construct the differential properties of this entity by constructing existential stability (Culioli, 1990, p. 182).

Children's construction of existence

The corpus consisted of narratives elicited with two pictures stories: *Horse Story* and *Cat Story*. The subjects were 60 monolingual Portuguese, 30 adults and 30 children (half boys and half girls) in the following three age groups: 5, 7, 10 years old (10 children in each age group). The children were attending a school in central Lisbon. The corpus is composed of 120 narratives (60 produced by adults and 60 produced by children) (Batoréo, 1996; Batoréo & Faria, 1998).

Let us now examine how the subjects construct the opening of their stories (Table 1).

Table1. Subjects' constructions of the opening of stories

	G1 (5)	G2 (7)	G3 (10)	G4 (adults)
present	45%	25%	5%	40%
imperfect	55%	75%	95%	60%
ser	35%	60%	80%	45%
estar	50%	25%	5%	26.7%
indefinite noun group	45%	80%	95%	91.7%

As can be seen, the age group that constructs the opening of stories in the canonical way is G3, the ten-year-old group. This group signals that we are dealing with a story (temporal translation, performed by the imperfect[3]), and so the entities are presented as new (indefinite

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[3] In Sousa (1999) it is argued that the Portuguese imperfect is a marker of an operation of translation.

noun group). The seven-year-old group (G2) is not very different with regard to the construction of the entities of their stories. But the five-year-old children (G1) present some differences: they are less concerned about translation, and only 9 of them signal that they are introducing a new entity into the enunciative space. It should be pointed out that whereas G1 is far behind all groups in the use of indefinites regarding translation, it is not so distant from the adult group.

When subjects locate the story in relation to the here and now situation they use present tense and deictic forms. Examples of present and deictic forms are given in (3):

(3) a O cavalo está a correr
       (The horse is running)
    b Aqui há um passarinho no ninho
       (Here there is a little bird in the nest)
    c Está um passarinho no ninho
       (There is a little bird in the nest)

The verbs *está a correr, está* and *há* are in the present tense. Whereas *está a correr* expresses an ongoing situation in relation to the time of speech, *está* and *há* express an extended present. The former co-occurs with a definite noun group that signals that the entity has already been constructed or participates in the situation of speech[4] . In (3b) *há* co-occurs with *aqui*[5], which points to the situation of speech. Although utterances (3a) and (3b) are constructed in relation to Sit_0, there is a major difference in the assumption of the status of the information given by the noun group: the definite article operates a re-identification (Culioli, 1995; Correia, 1997) and as such it presupposes that knowledge about *horse* is shared by the interlocutor, the indefinite article marking, as stated above, the newness of the entity.

(3c) presents an interesting structure. Although it has a locative value, its function is to introduce an entity into the discourse. In a typical locative construction, the grammatical subject (when it appears – Portuguese is a language of null subject) precedes the verb and is definite[6] . As we can see, the syntactic organization of (3c) is similar to *Era um cavalo*. We can conclude that the informational status of the utterance is more important than the meaning of the verb. Hence having a locative value, the syntactic organization of the utterance is an existential one like that signalled by the indefinite noun group and its postverbal position[7] .

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[4] Lyons (1975) states that the definite article and demonstratives presuppose existence and uniqueness.

[5] The deictic operation points to an entity (or an event) present in the situation of enunciation. By pointing one does extraction, i.e., one isolates an element from the whole situation.

[6] If we compare (3a) with (3c) we conclude that the operation underlying the definite article constrains the syntactic organization of the utterance.

[7] In Portuguese grammars, usually, one distinguishes existential from locative structure by certain criteria: *ser, haver* verbs, *estar* verb, word order (Vx/SVO), indefinite/definite noun group. If we compare with the Polish language where word order is a very important marker of the existential vs locative function of utterance (Kaczorowska, 1994) – see below:

(a) *Książki są na stole*   (b) *Na stole są książki*
    The books are on the table   There are books on the table
    Os livros estão sobre a mesa   Há livros sobre a mesa

it should be emphasized that in the opening of narratives Portuguese subjects use a locative verb *estar* with the same syntactic organization of the existential structure, i.e. signalling that they are introducing a new entity.

Reformulating as a sign of epilinguistic[8] activity

In this section, we will discuss some false starts of children. We assume that reformulation is a signal of a epilinguistic activity which supposes that the child is able to decenter from her own language activity (Culioli, 1990, p. 35). Studying language activity we are dealing with processes, having nothing at our disposal but outputs. If we consider that the outputs are solutions to cognitive problems, with reformulation one can observe the representational problems themselves, i.e. the emergence of the very process of language activity. So we are dealing not with the end product (text) but with problem situations:

(4) É uma vez um pato (ANT 5;11:08)
(Once there is a duck)
(the child is asked to talk louder)
Era uma vez um pato # que estava no ninho # numa árvore
(Once upon a time there was a duck which was in his nest in a tree)

We shall draw some conclusions concerning the relation between *é* and *uma vez*. The problem lies in being able to see that *uma vez* operates a break in relation to the here-and-now situation, whereas *é* does not. This is a problem of tense and aspect. *Once* is autonomous but undetermined (Campos, 1997), that is, it establishes a reference time that is independent of the time of speech. *É* is the verb *ser* in the present tense, which means it is located in relation to Sit_0. Thus there is no compatibility between the reference time of *é* and *uma vez*. Hearing *uma vez* the addressee cannot process it in the same sequence as *é*, because the latter is connected directly to Sit_0, while the former suggests the construction of another discursive plane.

When the subject replaces the present tense by the imperfect tense (marking a temporal translation), he makes compatible tense, aspect and modality values. Thus the break operation underlying *uma vez* (the origin temporal locator) needs the translation operation underlying *era*.

(5) o cavalo <está & cá> // estava a correr sempre sempre sempre sempre (ARI 5;3.15)
the horse is here // it was always always running

In this example, the subject does not construct the entity as a new one (as we have seen, the definite article operates an identification with an entity already known). The subject has no problem about the status of the information. The existence of *a horse* is shared with the addressee, once they are sharing the stimulus pictures, and there is no need for an existential structure[9]. If we share the same information, which means we are seeing a horse, we must conclude that there is a horse, and if there is a horse we can predicate something about it.

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[8] Culioli (1990) distinguishes between metalinguistic and epilinguistic activity. The former is the activity of the linguistic researcher: it is a conscious activity whose goal is to make a calculus of the activity of language, the latter is an unconscious activity and is common to all speakers.

[9] Lakoff (1987, p. 518) observes that "something exists if it is in our presence".

The problem is with the temporal status of the text. If this is a story, it should be located on another plane detached from the plane of enunciation: an operation of temporal translation must be marked to signal that this is a story. Thus, present is replaced by imperfect.

(6)   Era uma vez <o pássaro> //um pássaro. (FRA 5;10.09)
      (once upon a time there was the bird//a bird)
      Era uma vez um pássaro
      (Once upon a time there was a bird)

Here the reformulation concerns the status of the information. The definite article supposes that the entity is known by the speaker and the listener. In the text, the entity *bird* is a new element, but we must stress that the context (that is, the picture stimulus) is shared by both speaker and listener. However, there is a contradiction between the nominal and verbal determination. As shown above, *era* is a marker of translation; if we are dealing with a new plane, the entities are original ones that must be constructed. The indefinite article signals, precisely, that we are constructing a new entity.

Once upon a time marks that we are creating another universe. The otherness of this universe is in contradiction to the operation underlying the definite article: re-identification, and so the subject reformulates and operates extraction.

(7)   <era> // uh estava um cavalo a correr (TIA 7;3.4)
      (there was// uh there was a horse, this horse was running)

Here the problem of existence and location arises. The subject starts with *era,* which indicates that the existence of the entity is being constructed. Shifting to *estava,* the subject signals that he is introducing into the enunciative space the existence of *horse* and at the same time locating it.

When the subject states that *a horse was running* he presupposes that *there is a horse* (see Donnellan, 1966; Lyons, 1968).

(8)   uh <um cavalo que andava a brincar> // era um cavalo que andava a brincar
      (TER 10;3.01)
      (a horse that was playing // there was a horse that was playing)

Again, the problem concerns the construction of existence. *Um cavalo que andava a brincar* is a good opening to a story, even though in another context it may be ill-formed. Given the context, one can introduce the entity and predicate about it (the localization would be made by discursive context); the subject here highlights the discursive goal: to construct a narrative . Hence, the subject reformulates and constructs a canonical opening, that is, auxiliary of existence in the "imperfeito" *era* and an indefinite noun group *um cavalo*, back-referenced by the relative pronoun *que*.

Discussion

Language is the activity of construction of representations (Culioli), and inherent to this activity is a cognitive teleonomy, which means that there is a subject constructing

shapes to be reconstructed by another subject. Here we have discussed utterances in construction, subjects searching for a "good" shape. Since we have no access to the processes that originate these shapes, we must observe textual markers as traces of these inaccessible processes. The different ways to present the same linguistic object allows us to understand the conceptualization the subjects choose to present to their interlocutors.

Reformulation shows us that the subjects' problem is about the localization of the text and the status of information regarding the story entities. Subjects search how to locate the text: in relation to Sit_0 or located on another plane constructed *ad hoc* and with no relationship to Sit_0. Subjects also search how to present entities as new information or as information already known to the interlocutor.

These problems a) can be related to textual competence; but we should point out that b) it can derive from an essential conflict between the task (to tell a story) and the situation of communication experienced during the task achievement. Sharing with the investigator the knowledge about the characters, sharing the spatio-temporal coordinates, it is not relevant to construct another plane and to construct the entities (as the results from adult data confirm). By pointing, one can see that we are dealing with the present and presence (of things and events).

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