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Object mass nouns in Brazilian Portuguese in comparison with other Romance languages

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Abstract: In languages like English which have a clear distinction between mass and count nouns, so-called object mass nouns (OMN) like *clothing* syntactically behave like typical mass nouns, but semantically they don't refer to a homogeneous mass, but a plurality of heterogeneous entities. Given the fact that Brazilian Portuguese allows a systematically flexible use of nouns established as count (e.g. in bare noun phrases), we assume that this variety is getting more similar to the Romance-based creole languages, which mostly have optional plural marking and where a noun can refer either to a single entity or a plurality of things. Consequently, the question arises, how OMNs, which *per definitionem* need a clear mass-count-distinction, behave in Brazilian Portuguese. We present a comparative study which analyses morphosyntactic as well as semantic properties of OMNs in Brazilian and European Portuguese, French, Italian and Spanish via acceptability judgements. The results show clear differences between the big Romance languages, but also between the two diatopic varieties of Portuguese. This indicates that there indeed is a correlation between the degree of grammaticalization of countability in each language (e.g. through the presence of a mass-marking partitive article) and the linguistic flexibility of a potential OMN. Future studies should also take into consideration Romance-based creole language in order to be able to deduce more fine-grained implications and tendencies.

Keywords: object mass nouns; nominal aspectuality; plural marking; mass-count-distinction; cross-linguistic variation

Introduction[1]

The present contribution examines so-called object mass nouns (OMN). This type of noun syntactically behaves like common mass nouns, but semantically it does not refer to a homogeneous mass but to a plurality of heterogeneous entities. Consequently, they cannot be pluralized (like mass nouns), but they can be combined with distributives adjectives like *round* (like plural count nouns):

(1)
    a. *three furnitures (ROTHSTEIN, 2010, p. 376)
    b. The furniture in that nightclub is round. (SCHWARZSCHILD, 2011, p. 670)

Research on OMNs done so far especially concentrates on the English language were examples like *furniture* but also *cutlery*, *mail* or *jewellery* are very common. The Romance languages were so far not in the centre of interest. Nevertheless, particularly Brazilian Portuguese (BrP) represents a Romance variety which is of special interest in this respect. It is characterised by not having a sharp grammatical boundary between count and mass nouns (there is e.g. no overt mass marker, unlike in French (FR) where the partitive article clearly marks mass nouns). Consequently, the question arises how OMNs, which *per definitionem* need a clear mass-count-distinction, behave in BrP, or rather, if there are OMNs in BrP at all.

The paper is structured as follows: We will first present the state of the art with respect to OMNs focussing mainly on the existing research on English. Second, we will describe the nominal systems of the Romance languages treated in this paper. The main part of the paper will present an acceptability judgement study which examines our main question: How do OMNs in BrP behave syntactically and semantically in comparison to other Romance languages with a sharper boundary between mass and count?

1. *Object mass nouns* – State of the art

As mentioned above, the great majority of research done to far on OMNs focuses the English language; with respect to Romance, there are only some single papers mentioning OMNs as a subtype of collective nouns (cf. i.a. FLAUX, 1999) or as exemplars of adjacent topics (cf. i.a. PIRES DE OLIVEIRA, ROTHSTEIN, 2011; 2011). Consequently, the following description of the state of the art is mainly based on the existing work on English which additionally mostly adapts a formal-semantic perspective.

OMNs in general are described with the type mismatch already mentioned in the introduction: On the one hand, they syntactically behave like ordinary mass nouns, but on the other hand, they semantically behave like plural count nouns (cf. ROTHSTEIN, 2010, p. 352–354). The mass noun properties entail an incompatibility with the indefinite article and the impossibility to be pluralised or to be combined with numerals (cf. (1a)). The plural count noun properties entail the compatibility with so-called *stubbornly distributive predicates* (cf. (1b)) and a comparison on the basis of cardinality: *more silverware* implicates *more pieces of silverware* (cf. BARNER, SNEDEKER, 2005).

2. The nominal system of BrP in comparison with the other Romance languages

The different Romance languages under study differ in how far they overtly mark mass and count syntax. All Romance languages under study dispose of an indefinite article which unambiguously marks singular count NPs, but only FR and Italian (IT) have an unambiguous determiner to overtly mark mass NPs, the so-called partitive article *du/ del*.

Bare plurals can be used freely in subject and in argument position in BrP, Eurpean Portuguese (EP), Spanish (SP) and IT only allow their use in argument position where it additionally is restricted mostly to postverbal positions in SP and IT. Bare singulars occur freely in BrP, in EP, SP and IT they are restricted to the

argument position and mass and abstract nouns. FR does not allow bare nouns at all:

	BrP	EP	SP	IT	FR
Unambiguous determiner for count NPs?	YES *um*	YES *um*	YES *uno*	YES *un(o)*	YES *un*
Unambiguous determiner for mass NPs?	NO	NO	NO	YES *del*	YES *du*
Bare plurals	YES	YES (only arg. pos.)	YES (restricted use)	YES (restricted use)	NO
Bare singulars	YES	ONLY in arg. pos., only mass/abstract nouns	ONLY in arg. pos., only mass/abstract nouns	ONLY in arg. pos., only mass/abstract nouns	NO

Tab. 1: Mass-count-distinction markers in the Romance languages[2]

This short overview shows a continuum of the degree of grammaticalization of the mass-count distinction in the Romance languages: In FR, the degree is rather high, count as well as mass nouns have to be overtly marked as such. The other pole is represented by BrP where neither mass nor count syntax has to be overtly marked. In between there are EP, SP and IT which mark mass nouns in argument position by zero determination. IT additionally marks mass syntax by having – like FR – the partitive article.

3. *Object mass nouns* – An acceptability judgement study

In what follows we will present an acceptability judgement study which examines the linguistics behaviour of OMNs in BrP in comparison to EP, SP, IT and FR. We will focus mainly on the two constituting characteristics of external unboundedness and internal plurality. The object of study will be the respective translation equivalent for Port. *roupa* for which we find a (plural) OMN in every

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[2] This overview is based on: Chierchia (1998); Meisterfeld (1998); Müller e Oliveira (2004); Stark (2008).

language under study and quasi-synonyms to serve as control conditions.[3] These are: FR *fringues*[4], SP *ropa* and IT *abbigliamento*.

3.1. Unboundedness

As mentioned in section 1, it is generally claimed that OMNs cannot be combined with the indefinite article and cannot be pluralised or even combined with numerals. To examine these characteristics of Romance OMNs we tested the level of acceptability of the combination <indef. art. + OMN> as well as the level of acceptability of the morphological plural of these nouns. For the first test domain the following sentence was constructed:

(2) Estive ocupada com tarefas domésticas o dia inteiro, mas agora só falta passar <u>uma roupa</u>OMN/ <u>uma peça de roupa</u>control.
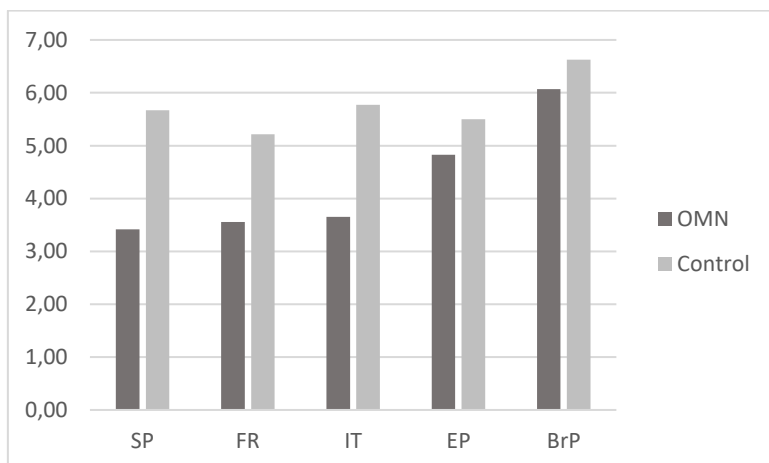

Fig. 1: Mean acceptability of <indef. Art. + OMN>

Figure 1 already shows that there are clear differences in the mean acceptability between the languages and between the respective OMN and its

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[3] The original study also treats Port. *gado*, *gente* and their respective quasi-equivalents as well as other examples like *mobília* or *louça* to examine aspects of animacy or salience of the constituting entities. For this broader analysis see Kleineberg (in prep.).

[4] There is another word in French with the meaning of 'clothing', namely *habillement*. This would be more equivalent to the other Romance OMNs because it also is morphologically singular. We did not choose this word for the study, but the plural tantum *fringues*, because the former is not in common use. Differences between the singularia tantum and this plurale tantum will be discussed in the respective sections. FR *vêtement* was only partly analysed because it can also be used as a count noun: *un vêtement* 'a piece of clothing'.

control item. A one-way ANOVA revealed that this difference between the languages is significant ($F(4, 166) = 15{,}076$, $p < .001$); a Games-Howell post-hoc analysis further indicated that the BrP sentence is significantly more acceptable than the EP, IT, FR and SP version; the EP sentence furthermore is significantly more acceptable than the IT, FR and SP version. These results indicate that the equivalent for *clothing* actually behaves like a count noun in Portuguese, but like a (nearly) mass noun in the other three languages under study. BrP further varies from its European counterpart in accepting even more the count noun interpretation of *roupa*.

The second test domain with respect to the possible mass properties of OMNs concerns pluralisation. For this second test domain the following sentence was constructed:

(3) É absolutamente necessário que eu organize o meu armário. Tenho <u>muitas roupas</u>$_{OMN}$/ <u>peças de roupa</u>$_{control}$ que não uso.
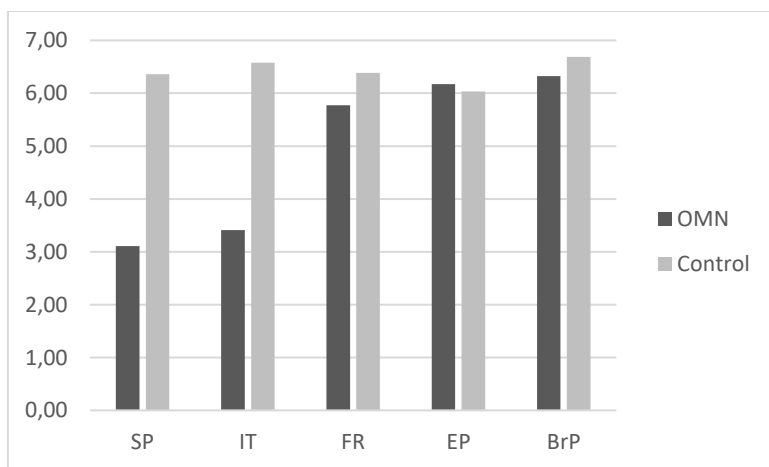

Fig. 2: Mean acceptability of <OMN_PL>

Again, we can detect a rather clear distribution of acceptability preferences: BrP, as well as EP and FR nearly show perfect acceptability for sentence (3) whereas the SP and IT version of the test sentence were only rated mediocre. This difference between the languages is significant ($F(4, 167) = 32{,}741$, $p < .001$), a Games-Howell post-hoc analysis confirmed the two language groups.

The test results for the unboundedness partly confirm our hypothesis formulated above: We indeed find increasing acceptability of OMNs in count-noun contexts with BrP having the highest degree of acceptability. We did not find the expected differences between Fr, IT and SP.

3.2. Internal plurality

The second test domain concerns the internal plurality of OMNs. As described in section 1 this generally is tested with the combination of an OMN with a stubbornly distributive predicate (SDP) like *round*, *long* or *short*. Additionally, we will examine the acceptability of OMNs in combination with distributive predicates like *um a/por um*. For English, reciprocal or distributive constructions are claimed ungrammatical with OMNs (cf. ROTHSTEIN, 2010, p. 379).

To test the acceptability of an OMN with a stubbornly distributive predicate the following sentence was constructed:

(4) Quando cheguei a Berlim estava tanto frio que fui logo por roupaOMN comprida/ peças de roupacontrol compridas.
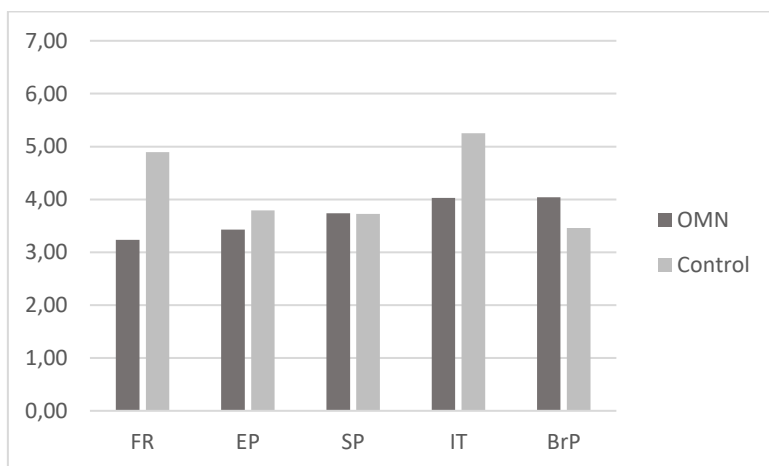

Fig. 3: Mean acceptability of <OMN + SDP>

For this test domain, we cannot find any significant differences between the test sentences ($F(4, 161) = .942$, $p > .05$). All in all, both test and control sentences were only rated mediocre. The results nevertheless indicate that the

degree of grammaticalization of the mass-count-distinction in a language does not seem to influence the degree of acceptability of the combination <OMN + SDP>. This goes in line with what already has been assumed for English.

The last test domain examines the acceptability of OMNs in combination with distributive constructions like *um por um*. For this test domain the following sentence was constructed:

(5) A lavanderia Dos Santos garante que a roupa_{OMN} será controlada/ as peças de roupa_{control} serão controladas uma a uma antes da entrega.
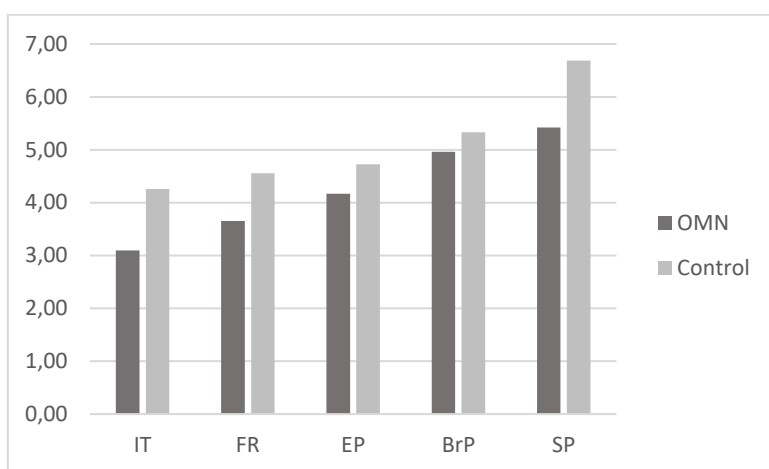

Fig. 4: Mean acceptability of <OMN + 'one after the other'>

Interestingly, it is not BrP, but SP which has the highest degree of acceptability for this test sentence. A one-way ANOVA and a Bonferroni post-hoc analysis revealed that the SP test sentence is significantly more acceptable than the IT, FR[5] and EP version, there is no significant difference between the latter. Additionally, BrP is rated significantly higher than IT ($F(4, 166) = 9,999$, $p < .001$).

The results for the internal plurality test domain prove that OMNs indeed do refer to a plurality of entities, but their linguistic accessibility only seems to depend indirectly from the degree of grammaticalization of the mass-count-distinction of a language.

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[5] For this test domain, we also tested FR *vêtement*, represented in fig. 4. There is no significant difference between the acceptability of *vêtement* and *fringues* in this sentence ($t(26) = .330$, p > .05).

Conclusion

The present contribution examined the linguistic characteristics of OMNs in BrP in comparison to other Romance languages. It has been proved that in the domain of *clothing*, BrP has no OMN, but a flexible count noun. Cross-linguistic variability has been proved to be clearer in the syntactic domain of external unboundedness than in the semantic domain of internal plurality.

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