

BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE PLURALS: How language usage reshapes grammar

This paper addresses the theoretical concept of emergent grammar. Exploring this topic practically, a morphological phenomenon in Brazilian Portuguese pluralization is discussed.

One particularly interesting group of Portuguese words is composed of items that end with the nasal diphthong *-ão*, such as *capitão* (“captain”), *cidadão* (“citizen”) and *leão* (“lion”). Due to etymological reasons, for one singular form (*-ão*), there are three different plural morphemes: *-ães*, *-ãos* and *-ões* (“capitão” – “capitães”, “cidadão” – “cidadãos”, “leão” – “leães”). Since each word of this group comes from a different Latin root, the three plural forms may not be applied indiscriminately. In fact, according to the etymological origin, each of these words should have only one plural form. However, it is noticeable that, in some cases, native Brazilian Portuguese speakers adopt one morpheme for cases in which another one would be correct (considering the etymological origin). In the aforementioned examples, some speakers use the forms “capitães” or “cidadães”. Looking for explanations for this phenomenon, we notice that the three plural morphemes (*-ões*, *-ãos* and *-ães*) have different frequency rates in Brazilian Portuguese corpora. In terms of historical origin, the morpheme *-ões* pluralizes more than 90% of the Portuguese *-ão* words. The other two morphemes (*-ãos* and *-ães*) are applied to a mere 10% of the words. In this paper, we argue that, because of this high type frequency, the morpheme *-ões* is used to pluralize words that etymologically should have *-ãos* or *-ães* plural forms.

Analyzing this plural group, we provide more arguments for the debate about the existence of morphological rules (Pinker 1991 and 1999, Pinker & Prince 1994, Pinker & Ullman 2002a and 2002b) or lexical storage (Bybee 1985, 1994, 1995 and 2001) in the mental lexicon. It is argued that plural regularizations are based on type frequency and have a strong correlation to the storage of the words in the speakers’ mental lexicon. Diachronic and synchronic evidence for these plurals are presented to support the assumption that the units of lexical storage are whole words. Because of that, token frequency plays an important role in categorizing linguistic information. It is proposed that speakers, instead of just applying rules to pluralize items, make generalizations about patterns in the lexicon and evaluate information such as type and token frequency. Finally, it is argued that the grammar of a language, instead of being consistent and predetermined, is *reshaped* by its daily usage.

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