

# Spatial reference in children's narrative: a study in Brazilian Portuguese

ANA MARIA DE MATTOS GUIMARÃES

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

The aim of the project we are currently engaged in (*The development of children's language in the literacy period: the case of spatial reference*) is to provide a description of some aspects of Brazilian Portuguese concerning spatial reference so that they can be grouped together and used in contrastive studies. The project examines spatial reference and spatial expression in narratives written by forty-five Brazilian children, aged 5 (forming what we called G1, or group 1), 7 (G2), and 10 (G3). There were fifteen subjects for each age group, five of which were tested in the blindfolded addressee situation (G1v; G2v; G3v). Children were tested at school or at home. The control group was composed of 10 adults (G4), all college students, aged between 18 and 30 years old. The results reported here concern the first stage of the project, developed on the basis of the Story of the Horse. (The integral version of this study can be find at <http://www.ufrgs.br/delicri>).

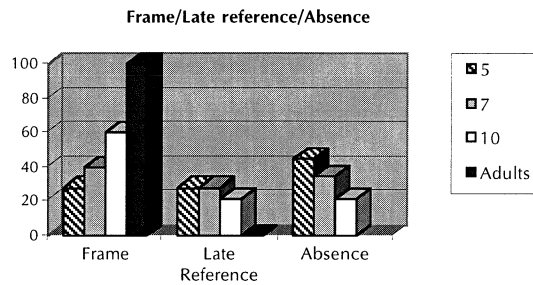
As we know, building spatial reference in a story is a complex task. In order to do so, two concepts have to be distinguished: spatial frame and spatial anchorage. Any spatial information given throughout a narrative provides what we call spatial anchorage in such a narrative. Spatial anchorage can be distinguished from spatial frame in that the latter refers to the most important spatial information, generally given at the beginning of a narrative, which will provide spatial background to the story as a whole. Generally, the introduction of a main character occurs simultaneously with the setting of spatial frame at the beginning of a narrative.

As proposed by Hickmann (1994), the development of spatial frame in the different age groups was analyzed considering: a) spatial frame properly speaking, in the way it has been defined before, e.g., \*ALE: era uma vez um cavalinho que estava caminhando **no campo** (G2), (once upon a time there was a little horse walking **on the field**; b) a first late reference, that is, the background information is given late in the narrative, or far from its introduction (up to the third scene), like in: \*BRU: uma vez um cavalinho e ele corria que é de montão... ele chegou **perto da casa** (G1) (one time a little horse and he ran that is a lot ...he arrived **close to the fence** , meaning: once a little horse, which ran a lot, got close to the fence); c) its absence, in cases in which background is not mentioned in any moment throughout the narrative. The chart below shows the observed distribution:

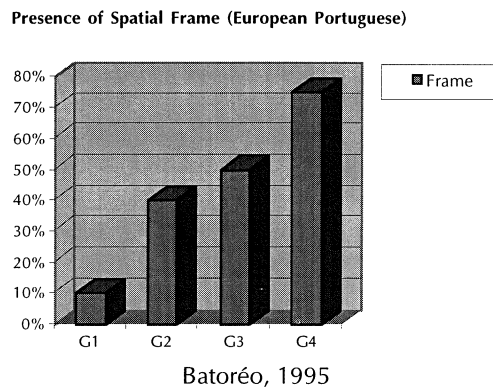
## DISTRIBUTION OF SPATIAL BACKGROUND

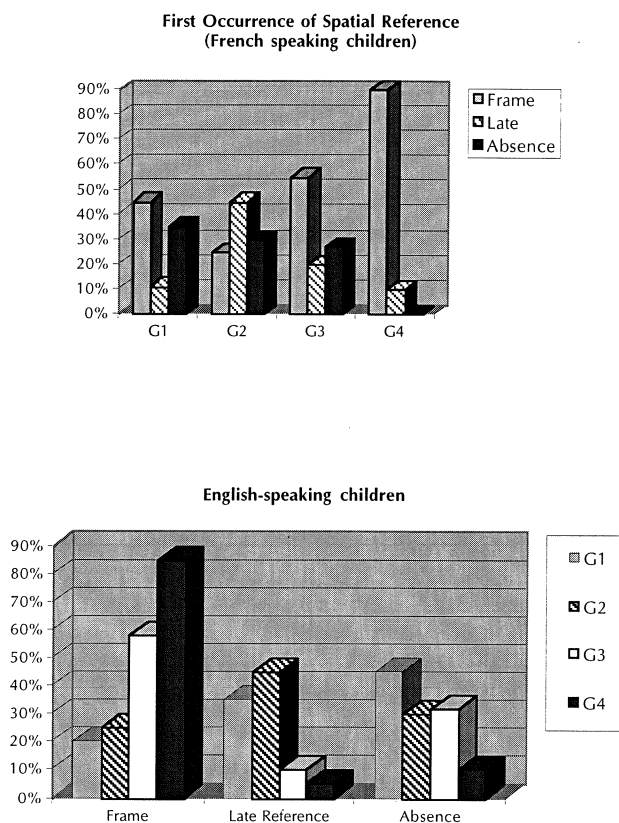
GROUP	FRAME	LATE REFERENCE	ABSENCE
G1	30%	40%	30%
G1V	20%	0	80%
G2	40%	30%	30%
G2V	40%	20%	40%
G3	60%	20%	20%
G3V	60%	20%	20%
G4	100%	0	0

This first set of results led us to question the experiment in which the addressee was blindfolded. In the case in question, the comparative results between groups G and GV seem to indicate that shared information do not affect the indication of spatial reference. On the other hand, when the addressee was not blindfolded there was a higher number of occurrences of spatial reference. Therefore, we suppose that the artificiality of the situation in which the addressee was blindfolded ended up causing the subject-narrator to feel inhibited. The overall data about Brazilian children can be seen in the following chart:



Abstracting from the methodological differences between Hickmann's work and others', let us now compare the data about Brazilian children to the analyses carried out by Batoréo (1994) about Portuguese children and by Hickmann (1994) about French and English children. We initially reproduce the charts presented by the authors and emphasize that the first chart concerns only spatial frame properly speaking.





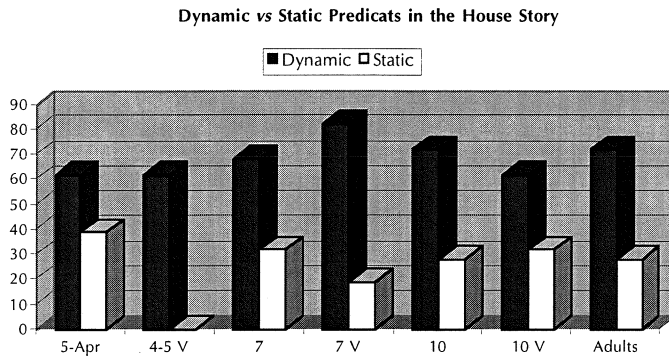
Hickmann, 1994

In all languages, one can observe a correlation between age and the use of spatial frame at the beginning of narratives: the older the children, the more frequent their use of spatial frame at the beginning of narratives. Differences, however, can be observed too. The most intriguing ones concern Portuguese-speaking children. Brazilian Portuguese speakers show a significant early use of spatial frame (in G1, 26,7% of Brazilian children already used such a mechanism against 10% of Portuguese ones) and their use is always more marked, even among adults.

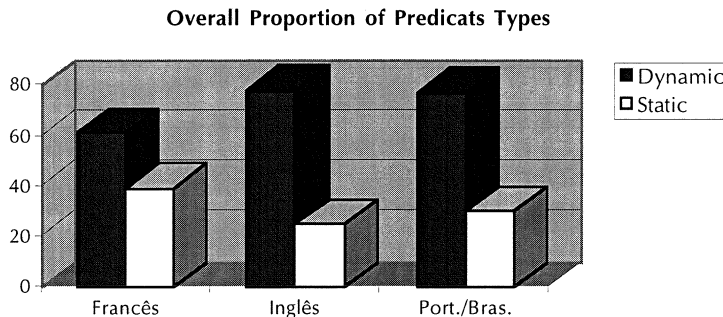
As regards the comparison between French and English, data show that younger French children use spatial reference more frequently. Hickmann hypothesizes that such a result reflects the more frequent use of presentative constructions, which contain a higher number of static predicates. In such constructions, the background is introduced initially before the development of the narrative.

We now move on to the analysis of the performance of Brazilian children. In order to do so, we base ourselves on studies by Talmy (1975, 1985), which, by means of interlinguistic research, show that typological differences divide languages into 'manner type, satellite-framed', like English, or 'path type, verb-framed', like Romanic languages. According to Talmy, such typological differences condition the focus of spatial information presented in a narrative. This way, English speakers, on the one hand, specify their protagonists' development in terms of spatial movement. Spanish speakers, on the other hand, specify movement in less elaborate

paths and provide more static information in order to place protagonists and set scenes. We observed the total number of predicates in the Brazilian narratives and identified the use of dynamic and static predicates by the different groups. As it can be observed, there is an increase in the use of dynamic predicates and a correlation between their use and age progression:



The data available for comparison comes from Hickmann (1994)'s work with speakers of French and English. The data of all informants are globally presented below:



Contrary to our initial hypothesis, performance results of speakers of Brazilian Portuguese get closer to those of speakers of English ('satellite-framed language') than to those of speakers of French ('verb framed language', just like Portuguese). Similarly to what is reported by Hickmann concerning both languages, the youngest group of subjects (4-5 years old) use static predicates more often (Brazilian Portuguese 37%; French 48%; English 35%), again in a proportion similar to that of speakers of English. Taken isolatedly, the adult group of Brazilian Portuguese uses dynamic predicates more frequently than speakers of English (Brazilian Portuguese: 74,7%; English: 73%; French 68%).

In comparative terms, therefore, static predicates are less frequently found in Brazilian Portuguese than in other languages of the 'verb-framed' type. This finding goes against those by Berman & Slobin (1994) and Hickmann (1994).

In search of an explanation to the less frequent use of static predicates in a 'verb-framed' language, like ours, we point to the fact that Talmy proposed a conceptual analogy between space and time (1991:13) based on evidence that: «the organization of conceptualization for linguistic expression sets temporal contouring [i.e.aspect] into analogy with Motion as part of a broader cognitive analogy by which temporal structuring is conceptualized as paralleling spatial structuring. This conceptual analogy motivates a syntactic and lexical analogy: ...». With that in mind, we have attempted to find differences between Brazilian Portuguese and other Romanic languages as far as aspect is concerned. Portuguese, like Spanish, marks progressive aspect. However, differently from other Romanic languages, Brazilian Portuguese accepts progressive forms with static predicates, like, for instance, «I am knowing that...» or «I am having difficulties». As Lyons (1977: 706-7) states, «stative verbs (e.g. know, have, belong, live, contain) constitute the most important subclass of verbs that do not normally occur in the progressive aspect in English. Stativity, then, is lexicalized, rather than grammaticalized, in English: it is part of the aspectual character of particular verbs. It is grammatically relevant, however, in that it is incompatible with progressivity, which is grammaticalized in English, as it is in Spanish, etc.»

Differently from other languages that also allow the use of the progressive marking with stative verbs, like Turkish, the Portuguese progressive belongs to a set of aspectual distinctions, which includes the perfective and the imperfective aspects. This difference needs further investigation and might eventually explain the low frequency of stative predicates in Brazilian Portuguese, despite its being a 'verb-framed' language. In any event, Berman and Slobin (1994:118) remind us that «As a general caveat, it should be remembered that typological characterizations often reflect tendencies rather than absolute differences between languages.» In our understanding, the case of Brazilian Portuguese analyzed here confirms this statement.

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