

The Bare Truth: Bare Nominals Acquisition Challenges for Brazilian Learners of English, French, and Spanish

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1. Introduction

This paper investigates the acquisition of bare nominals in the second language (L2) grammars of Brazilian Portuguese (BrP) speakers learning English, French, or Spanish. Our study addresses the question of article omission in these learners, especially regarding bare singular count nouns, which are licensed in BrP. The acquisition of articles and determiners has been widely recognized as a persistent locus of difficulty in L2 acquisition, even for advanced learners and even when the first and target languages both possess article systems. This difficulty raises questions about how learners map semantic notions such as definiteness, genericity, and reference onto the formal feature configurations that regulate determiner systems in different languages. As stated by Garcia Mayo & Hawkins (p. 1, 2009): “Where L1 and L2 both have articles, but the range of their interpretations and distribution differs, what kinds of interlanguage grammars will emerge? Will L2 learners, with proficiency, converge on the kinds of knowledge of articles that native speakers have?”

Brazilian Portuguese offers a particularly revealing interesting testing ground for these issues since, unlike English, French, and Spanish, it productively licenses bare singular count nouns in preverbal subject position. This property has been extensively discussed in the theoretical literature (Schmitt & Munn, 1999; Müller, 2004; Lopes, 2006; Ferreira, 2010; Pires de Oliveira & Rothstein, 2011; Menuzzi et al., 2015; among others) and is considered a defining characteristic of BrP. Thus, for L2 learners whose grammars license null determiners in a broad range of contexts, acquiring a target language that imposes stricter determiner requirements poses a nontrivial challenge.

The present study adopts a generative perspective grounded in the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995) and the DP Hypothesis (Abney, 1987), treating articles as the spell-out of functional heads whose formal features vary crosslinguistically. Within this approach, differences in the availability of bare

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nominals reflect systematic differences in feature configurations and parametric options in the nominal domain. These differences can be organized hierarchically, allowing principled predictions about relative acquisition difficulty across languages.

Building on recent work on parametric hierarchies, particularly the proposal advanced by Roberts (2019), this paper argues that one of the difficulties Brazilian learners face in acquiring the article system in English, French, or Spanish is modulated by parametric distance. While English and BrP both allow null determiners in restricted contexts—suggesting a microparametric difference—French and Spanish categorically require overt determiners in argument positions, reflecting a deeper, mesoparametric divergence. If parametric distance constrains the space of possible interlanguage grammars, learners should show more target-like behavior in English than in the Romance languages.

In addition to parametric distance, the study engages in the issue of L1 transfer and proficiency effects in L2 acquisition. Ionin et al. (2013) predict that L1 influence should gradually diminish as proficiency increases. Thus, by comparing intermediate and advanced learners across three target languages, our present study provides an empirical test of whether increased instructional exposure leads to convergence in the acquisition of the article system.

In this study we addressed the following research questions:

1. In which semantic contexts do Brazilian learners accept article omission in their interlanguages?
2. Does increased instructional exposure (intermediate vs. advanced level) lead to more target-like article use?
3. Do learners perform more target-like in English than in French or Spanish, reflecting differences in parametric distance?

Based on previous research, three hypotheses were formulated:

- L1 Transfer Hypothesis: Learners will accept article omission in contexts where BrP licenses bare nouns.
- Proficiency Hypothesis: Advanced learners will show greater convergence with native speakers than intermediate learners.
- Parametric Distance Hypothesis: Learners of English will outperform learners of French and Spanish.

Methodologically, the study used an Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT) to probe learners' grammatical intuitions regarding bare nominals. This choice allows direct comparison between learner grammars and native BrP speakers.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical background, reviewing analyses of bare singulars in BrP, the relation of bare singulars in BrP and article acquisition in L2, formal features in null DPs and L2 article acquisition, as well as transfer effects. Section 3 details the experimental

design and methodology. Section 4 reports the results. Section 5 discusses the results and their implications, and section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Bare singulars in Brazilian Portuguese

This section reviews the main theoretical debates concerning bare singular nouns in Brazilian Portuguese (BRP), a phenomenon that has been extensively discussed in the literature but for which no unified analysis has yet been established. While bare singulars are widely accepted in generic contexts (1), their acceptability in kind-level predicates (2) and episodic sentences (3) remains controversial. Recent experimental evidence, however, suggests that bare singulars are more acceptable in BrP than traditionally assumed, even in restricted contexts.

- (1) Gato adoece facilmente.
Cat gets sick easily.
'Cats get easily sick.'
- (2) Dinossauro está extinto.
Dinosaur is extinct.
'The dinosaurs are extinct.'
- (3) Beija-flor entrou pela janela enquanto eu cozinhava.
Hummingbird came in through the window while I was cooking.
'A hummingbird flew in through the window while I was cooking.'

Early work by Schmitt and Munn (1999) argues that bare singulars in BrP are DPs headed by a null determiner lacking number specification, rather than being NPs or mass nouns. Although bare singulars pattern similarly to bare plurals in generic contexts, they show important distributional restrictions in episodic sentences, particularly in subject position. On the basis of coordination and predicate compatibility, Schmitt and Munn reject both a mass-noun analysis and an NP analysis for bare singulars.

Subsequent proposals challenge parts of this account. Lopes (2006) distinguishes between generic and existential bare singulars, arguing that existential bare singulars behave like indefinites and are neutral with respect to number, as shown by their anaphoric behavior. Ferreira (2010) further proposes that bare singulars may be either specified or underspecified for number, depending on the functional structure involved in the derivation.

Müller (2004) offers a discourse-based analysis, claiming that bare singulars in preverbal position are necessarily generic and function as topicalized NPs rather than argumental DPs. This view is partially contested by Menuzzi et al. (2015), who show that bare singular subjects in generic sentences are

informationally unconstrained and may receive not only indefinite readings but also kind-level interpretations, undermining a purely topical analysis.

Another proposal is Pires de Oliveira and Rothstein's (2011), that argues that bare singulars in BrP behave like mass nouns, particularly those that are naturally atomic, and that BrP nouns are fundamentally mass by default. According to this view, bare singulars correspond to the mass counterparts of count nouns.

2.2. Bare Singulars in Brazilian Portuguese and Article Acquisition in L2

This section situates the debate on bare singular nouns in BrP within a cross-linguistic and second language acquisition (L2) perspective, contrasting BrP to English, French, and Spanish. The comparison highlights a central asymmetry: while BrP productively licenses bare singulars—especially in generic contexts—the target L2s under investigation impose systematic restrictions on bare singulars.

As mentioned above, in BrP, bare singulars are widely accepted in generic sentences and, according to our study, show higher acceptability than traditionally assumed even in contexts often described as restricted, such as episodic environments. Theoretical accounts diverge as to their status—DPs with null determiners, underspecified indefinites, mass-like nouns, or discourse-dependent structures—but converge on the idea that bare singulars are a grammatical and productive option in the language.

In contrast, English generally prohibits bare singulars in argument positions. Generic reference is expressed either through bare plurals (*Dogs are loyal*) or definite singulars (*The dog is a loyal animal*), while bare singulars (*Dog is loyal*) are ungrammatical. French and Spanish, similarly, require overt determiners in generic and episodic contexts alike. Generic interpretations typically involve definite articles (*Le chien est fidèle* / *El perro es fiel*), and bare singulars are systematically excluded from argumental positions.

This typological contrast has direct consequences for L2 acquisition. Learners whose L1 is BrP must acquire not only the morphological realization of articles in the L2, but also the restructuring of the form–meaning mapping between definiteness, number, and genericity. In BrP, genericity can be expressed without an overt determiner, whereas in English, French, and Spanish it is tightly constrained by article choice and number marking. As a result, BrP learners of these languages are predicted to overuse bare forms, that is, omit articles when necessary in the target language they are acquiring.

From a theoretical perspective, if BrP bare singulars involve a DP with a phonologically null determiner, as assumed in this paper, L2 learners must learn that the target grammars do not allow such null realizations in equivalent contexts. Persistent optionality and variability in article use can thus be understood as reflecting competition between L1-based representations and L2-specific constraints.

2.3. Formal Features in Null DPs and L2 Article Acquisition

Following Oosterhof (2008), null determiners are analyzed as carrying formal features related to countability ($[\pm\text{count}]$), number ($[\pm\text{plural}]$), and reference ($[\pm R]$), which jointly determine the interpretive possibilities of DPs.

Oosterhof proposes three types of null determiners: those selecting singular mass nouns, singular count nouns, and plural count nouns. These are defined by the feature combinations $[-\text{count}, -\text{plural}]$, $[\text{count}, -\text{plural}]$, and $[\text{count}, \text{plural}]$, respectively. In addition to number-related features, null determiners may carry referential features that distinguish between kind-reference ($[+R]$), generic quantification ($[-R]$), and definite/specific readings ($[-R, \iota]$)¹.

The $[\pm R]$ feature is uninterpretable on nouns and must be licensed by the determiner during the syntactic derivation. If feature checking fails, the derivation crashes. This mechanism explains why certain null-D configurations are permitted in some languages but disallowed in others.

Assuming a universal hierarchy of functional projections and combining Longobardi's proposal with the formal features identified by Oosterhof, the first step in nominal mapping concerns the Person feature. Following Longobardi (2008), Person is universally present in all languages. The relevant parametric variation lies in (i) whether Person is syntactically active (interpretable) and, if so, (ii) whether it must be overtly realized in D.

If Person is not syntactically active, as in languages such as Japanese, it does not trigger syntactic operations in the nominal domain. If Person is active, a further bifurcation arises. In Romance languages, Person must be overtly realized, yielding systems in which D is obligatorily expressed. In languages where overt realization is not required, lower-level feature combinations—specifically $[\pm\text{count}]$ and $[\pm\text{plural}]$, as proposed by Oosterhof—become relevant in determining the distribution of null D.

This yields a principled parametric split between Romance languages and languages such as English and BrP. Spanish and French require an overt N–D chain across mass, singular, and plural contexts, while English allows null D with mass nouns and plural count nouns. BrP extends this system further by also licensing bare singulars in mass and generic contexts.

Within the hierarchical model of parameters proposed by Roberts (2019), these contrasts correspond to different levels of variation. The distinction between French and Spanish and BrP/English reflects mesoparametric variation, involving the strength of the Person feature. By contrast, the differences between BrP and English are microparametric, concerning the interaction of Person with $[\pm\text{count}]$ and $[\pm\text{plural}]$.

¹ The iota operator acts on the denotation of a noun to obtain a specific/definite reading, as with the definite article in 'The dog entered the room'.

2.4. Transfer effects

In Ionin, Montrul, and Crivos' (2013) bidirectional experimental study on the L2 acquisition of plural noun phrases, they examine how learners of English and Spanish interpret and evaluate definite and bare plurals in generic and specific contexts, with particular attention to L1 transfer effects. The study is grounded in a cross-linguistic asymmetry whereby English licenses generic readings through bare plurals while restricting definite plurals to specific interpretations, whereas Spanish allows definite plurals to receive both generic and specific readings and largely disallows bare plurals in argument positions. Using a Truth Value Judgment Task and an Acceptability Judgment Task, the results indicate that L1 transfer strongly shapes learners' judgments at lower proficiency levels: Spanish learners of English over-accept generic interpretations of definite plurals, while English learners of Spanish tend to restrict definite plurals to specific readings, mirroring their L1. Transfer effects are minimal in specific plural contexts, where the two languages converge, but robust in generic contexts, where they diverge, with learners displaying systematic over- or under-acceptance patterns consistent with their L1. Significantly, more advanced learners in both directions show increased target-like behavior, indicating that transfer effects are developmentally constrained and gradually weakened as learners restructure their grammatical representations, a pattern that supports models of L2 acquisition in which learners initially rely on L1-based parameter settings but progressively acquire target-language distinctions.

The study provides a particularly relevant parallel for the present study on bare singular licensing in BrP, as it shows that L2 learners are highly sensitive to cross-linguistic differences in the mapping between nominal form and semantic interpretation, and that such differences trigger systematic L1 transfer effects in acceptability and interpretation, as transfer effects arise precisely in contexts where the two languages diverge in how generic, kind, and specific readings are encoded morphosyntactically, while convergence contexts show little or no transfer. This pattern directly informs the current experimental design, which tests BrP learners of English, Spanish, and French in precisely those domains where BrP differs from the target languages, namely the licensing of bare singulars in argument position with generic, episodic, and kind-level predicates. Just as Spanish learners of English over-accept non-target-like definite plurals due to the availability of generic definites in Spanish, BrP learners are predicted to over-accept bare singular DPs in L2 contexts where determiners are obligatorily realized, reflecting transfer from a grammar that licenses bare singulars via a null D. Consistent with Ionin et al.'s developmental findings, the inclusion of intermediate and advanced learners in the present study allows us to test the hypothesis that such transfer effects are strongest at earlier stages and are progressively attenuated as learners acquire the target-language determiner system. The use of an acceptability judgment task with controlled manipulations of DP type and denotation thus follows Ionin et al.'s methodological logic,

extending it from plural nominals to bare singulars, and from a bilingual English–Spanish comparison to a trilingual design anchored in the typologically distinct system of BrP.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The experimental group comprised 131 Brazilian undergraduate students with majors in English (N=44), French (N=42), or Spanish (=45) at public universities in Brazil. Participants were distributed across the three target languages and further divided into intermediate and advanced groups based on semester of study. While semester-based classification does not map perfectly onto proficiency, it provides a reliable and institutionally grounded proxy for instructional exposure in the Brazilian higher education context.

In addition to the learner groups, four control groups were recruited: native speakers of English, French, and Spanish, as well as a monolingual BrP control group. Each control group consisted of 40 participants. The inclusion of a BrP control group was particularly important for establishing baseline acceptability patterns for bare nominals in the L1, thereby enabling a principled assessment of transfer effects in the L2 learner data.

All learners had received formal instruction exclusively in classroom settings and had not lived in countries where the target language is spoken, minimizing potential confounds related to immersion.

3.2. Experimental task

Data were collected using an Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT) administered online via Google Forms. Participants were asked to rate sentences on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *completely unacceptable* (1) to *completely acceptable* (4). The choice of a 4-point scale, rather than a scale with a midpoint, was motivated by the desire to reduce neutral responses and encourage participants to make categorical judgments about grammatical acceptability.

3.3. Experimental design and materials

The experimental stimuli systematically manipulated three variables: denotation type (generic, kind-level, episodic), noun type (singular count nouns, plural count nouns, mass nouns), and time of formal training at university (intermediate, advanced). Stimuli sentences were constructed across the four languages, ensuring comparability while respecting language-specific grammatical constraints. The questionnaire consisted of 12 sentences of each denotation type, with 4 sentences of each noun type, totaling 36 sentences. In addition there were 36 filler sentences.

3.4. Procedure

Participants completed the task individually and remotely. Instructions were provided in the participants' native language (Portuguese for learners and BrP controls; the target language for native speaker controls). Participants were instructed to rely on their first intuition and to avoid overthinking their responses. The task was preceded by a short practice session designed to familiarize participants with the rating scale.

3.5. Statistical analysis

Judgment data were analyzed using mixed-effects logistic regression models, implemented in R. Mixed-effects models are particularly appropriate for acceptability judgment data, as they allow simultaneous modeling of participant- and item-level variability. Random intercepts were included for participants and items, ensuring that the results generalize beyond the specific sample and stimulus set. Fixed effects included group (learner vs. native speaker), language (English, French, Spanish), proficiency level (intermediate vs. advanced), noun type, and denotation type, as well as their interactions.

4. Results

4.1. Brazilian Portuguese baseline results

This section reports acceptability judgments from 40 monolingual native speakers of BrP, who served as the control group. Because only one group was analyzed, statistical evaluation relied on chi-square tests with binary responses (acceptable vs. unacceptable). The results reveal systematic patterns of null D licensing in BrP, providing an empirical baseline for comparison with the L2 data of our research.

Table 1. Acceptability rates for BrP native speakers (N=40)

	SINGULAR	PLURAL	MASSIVE
GENERIC	93%	94%	82%
KIND	76%	89%	89%
EPISODIC	63%	94%	49%

Across generic contexts, all bare DP types were rated highly acceptable (Table 1), in line with previous descriptions of BrP. In kind-level contexts, bare plurals and mass nouns were strongly accepted (both 89%), while bare singular count nouns also showed high acceptability (76%), exceeding what is often assumed in the literature. In episodic contexts, bare plurals remained highly acceptable (94%), but two unexpected results emerged: bare singulars were accepted at a substantial rate (63%), and bare mass nouns showed comparatively

low acceptability (49%). These findings indicate that bare singular count nouns in BrP are more widely licensed than traditionally assumed, even beyond generic contexts, supporting analyses that treat null D in BrP as a robust option within the nominal system.

4.2. English

Overall, the results comparing native English speakers with advanced and intermediate Brazilian learners of this language align closely with the grammatical constraints of English, particularly with respect to the restricted distribution of bare singular count nouns (Figure 1).

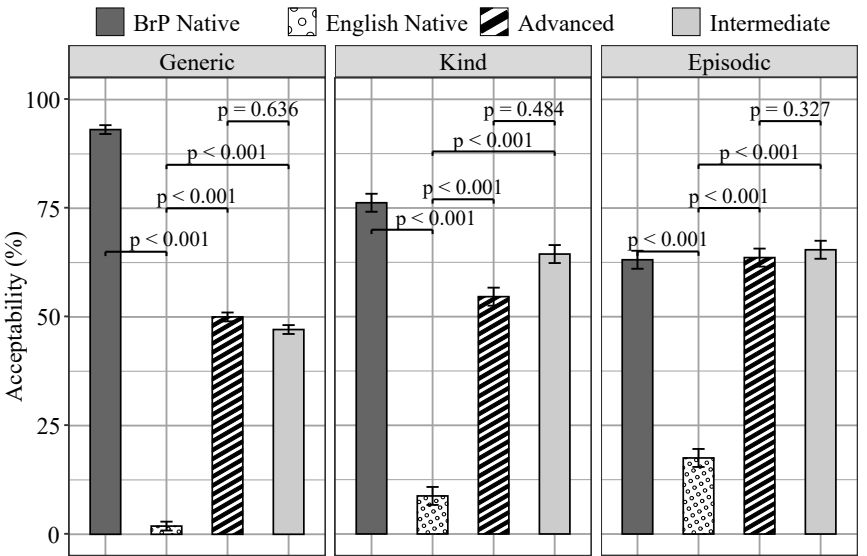


Figure 1. English: Acceptability of bare singular count nouns² (N=124)

Across all sentence types, bare plurals and bare mass nouns were highly acceptable for native speakers and learners alike. In contrast, bare singular count nouns were systematically rejected by native speakers (2% in generics, 9% in kind-level, 18% in episodic contexts), confirming that English does not license bare singulars in argument position. Brazilian learners, however, showed substantially higher acceptance rates for bare singulars across all contexts (47–65%), indicating persistent L1 transfer from BrP. While learners patterned target-like with respect to bare plurals and mass nouns, their non-target acceptance of bare singulars remained high even at advanced proficiency, with no distinction between intermediate and advanced groups. These findings

² Due to the lack of space, we will only present the results of bare singulars in the Figures. The complete results and discussion can be found in Codina Bobia (2025).

support the study's predictions regarding transfer effects in article choice and highlight the particular difficulty learners face in acquiring the English restriction against bare singular count nouns.

4.3. French

The results for French are notably more categorical than those observed for the other languages investigated, reflecting the strict requirement for overt determiners in the French nominal system.

Native speakers consistently showed very low acceptability rates for bare nominals across all sentence types and DP classes, including singular (Figure 2), plural, and mass nouns (below 15%). This pattern confirms that French categorically disallows null D in argument position, regardless of denotation. In contrast, Brazilian learners of French accepted bare nominals at substantially higher rates, ranging from 39% to 64%, across all conditions. Unlike the native group, learners showed no sharp differentiation among DP types or denotational contexts, suggesting broad overacceptance of null D structures.

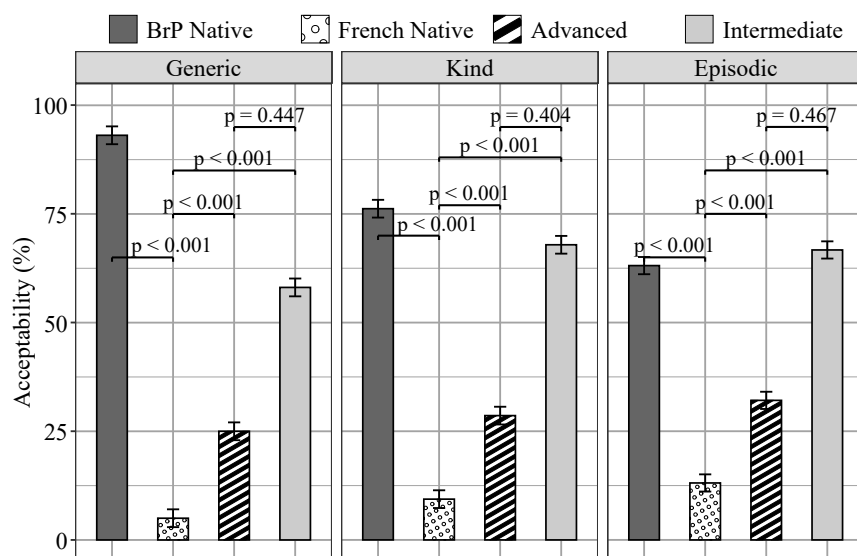


Figure 2. French: Acceptability of bare singular count nouns (N=122)

Although learners' acceptability rates were lower than those observed for English and closer to chance levels, statistical analysis nonetheless revealed significant differences between native speakers and Brazilian learners. These findings indicate persistent L1 transfer effects from BrP and highlight the particular difficulty learners face in acquiring the mesoparametric requirement of French that determiners be obligatorily overt. This contrasts sharply with

English, where only a subset of DP types disallows null D, and underscores the role of parameter strength in shaping L2 article acquisition.

4.4. Spanish

Overall, the results for Spanish also reveal an asymmetry between native speakers and the Brazilian learners (see Figure 3 for the results of bare singulars), with native speakers showing systematic rejection of bare nominals, while the Brazilian learners exhibit broad overacceptance across DP types and sentence contexts.

In generic and kind-denoting sentences, native speakers showed relatively low acceptability rates for bare singular, plural, and mass nouns (17–29%), although these rates were somewhat higher than initially predicted. In contrast, both groups of Brazilian learners accepted bare nominals at substantially higher rates (47–78%), with similar patterns across DP types.

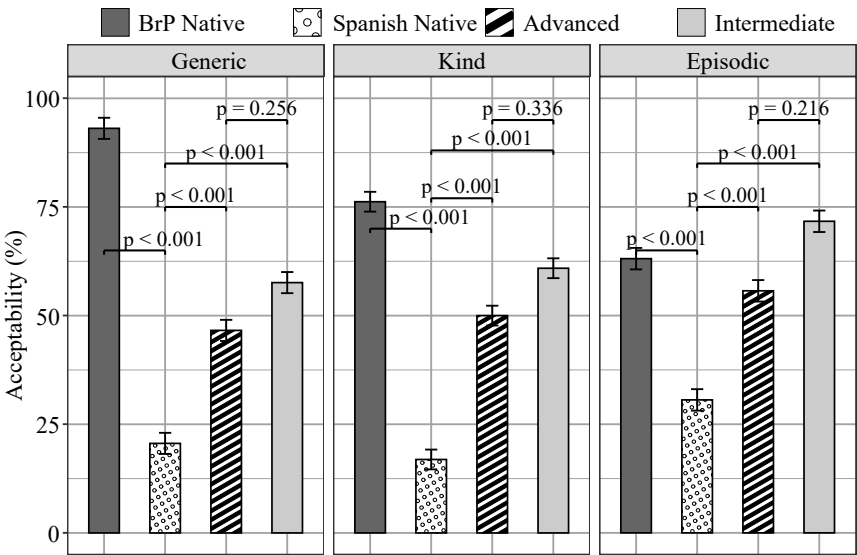


Figure 3. Spanish: Acceptability of bare singular count nouns (N=125)

Statistical analyses confirmed significant differences between native speakers and Brazilian learners in these contexts, indicating strong L1 transfer effects from BrP. For episodic sentences, native speakers showed comparatively higher acceptability rates for bare plural DPs than for bare singulars or mass nouns, reflecting the more nuanced behavior of Spanish plural nominals. Brazilian learners again accepted all DP types at higher rates than natives. Notably, bare plural episodic sentences were the only condition in which no significant difference emerged between native speakers and advanced learners, suggesting partial convergence on the Spanish system at higher proficiency.

Nonetheless, the overall pattern confirms that Spanish, like French, poses substantial difficulty for Brazilian learners due to its requirement for overt determiners, though the availability of bare plurals in certain contexts may facilitate limited target-like behavior.

5. Discussion

This study investigated article omission in the interlanguage grammars of BrP speakers acquiring English, French, and Spanish, focusing on generic, kind-denoting, and episodic contexts. Our analysis was guided by a transfer-based approach to L2 acquisition (Ionin et al. 2013) and by parametric theories of determiner systems (Longobardi 2008; Roberts 2019).

Across all sentence types, the results converge on a robust generalization: Brazilian learners systematically transfer the permissive determiner system of BrP into the L2, yielding persistent overacceptance of null determiners whenever the target language requires an overt article. This pattern holds in generic, kind-denoting, and episodic contexts, despite substantial differences in the grammatical status of bare nominals across the target languages.

The findings support Prediction 1: transfer effects are attested precisely in those contexts in which BrP licenses article omission. Learners of English diverge primarily with bare singular count nouns, while converging on native-like judgments for plurals and mass nouns—contexts in which English and BrP partially overlap. Learners of French and Spanish, by contrast, overaccept null determiners across all DP types and sentence classes, reflecting wholesale transfer of BrP-like licensing into grammars that categorically require overt determiners.

On the other hand, Prediction 2 was not supported: no significant differences were found between intermediate and advanced learners in any language or context. This absence of proficiency effects challenges accounts in which L1 influence gradually weakens with increased exposure and instead suggests that transferred feature configurations remain stable. Article systems thus appear to involve deep grammatical properties that are resistant to restructuring in adult L2 acquisition.

The cross-linguistic comparison directly confirms Prediction 3. Learners of English show the highest degree of alignment with native speakers, whereas learners of French and Spanish show consistently poorer performance. This asymmetry follows naturally from a parametric perspective. The BrP–English contrast involves microparametric differences, allowing partial overlap in determiner licensing (notably with plural and mass nouns). In contrast, the BrP–French/Spanish contrast operates at a mesoparametric level, imposing a global requirement for overt determiners that is largely opaque to learners and difficult to reset.

Taken together, these results motivate a hierarchy of parametric distance in L2 article acquisition: BrP → English → French/Spanish. Convergence is facilitated when the L2 shares structural properties with the L1 and

systematically blocked when the L2 requires categorical restrictions absent from the source grammar. This hierarchy provides a principled explanation for why English seems to be comparatively easier for Brazilian learners than French or Spanish and underscores the central role of parametric distance—rather than proficiency alone—in shaping interlanguage grammars.

In sum, this study offers empirical support for a feature-based, parametric model of L2 acquisition, in which transfer is pervasive, restructuring is selective, and cross-linguistic differences in learnability follow from the architecture of determiner systems themselves. Beyond contributing to the literature on article acquisition, the findings highlight the need for greater attention to syntax–semantics interfaces in both theoretical models and pedagogical practice.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigated the acquisition of bare nominals in the interlanguages of Brazilian Portuguese speakers learning English, French, and Spanish. Using acceptability judgment data and a feature-based, parametric framework, the results bring robust L1 transfer effects, limited proficiency-related change, and clear crosslinguistic asymmetries tied to parametric distance.

The findings of our study have several implications for theories of second language acquisition. First, they provide empirical support for feature-based and parametric approaches that emphasize the role of abstract grammatical representations. Second, they highlight the importance of considering hierarchical parametric structures, rather than treating parameters as isolated binary choices.

Perhaps the most theoretically informative result of the study concerns precisely this asymmetry between English, on the one hand, and French and Spanish, on the other. Brazilian learners perform significantly closer to native speakers in English than in the Romance languages, despite the superficial similarity between BrP and French/Spanish.

We believe the results contribute to ongoing debates on L2 grammars and underscore the value of Roberts' parametric hierarchies for understanding differential acquisition outcomes. We also suggest that future research should explore longitudinal designs and complementary methodologies to further elucidate the mechanisms underlying stability and change in adult interlanguage grammars.

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Proceedings of the 50th annual Boston University Conference on Language Development

edited by Romi Hill, Xinhan Jiang,
Danutham Worapipat, and Aditya Yedetore

Cascadilla Press Somerville, MA 2026

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Proceedings of the 50th annual Boston University Conference on Language Development
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ISSN 1080-692X
ISBN 978-1-57473-047-0 (2 volume set, paperback)

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