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Endangered Language Varieties:

Vernacular Speech and Linguistic Standardization in Brazilian Portuguese

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The central motivations for the attention paid to endangered languages by linguists and social scientists are two-fold: above all, there is concern for language as the embodiment or manifestation of the culture and history of the speakers, and the risk to that social and cultural heritage of a people that language loss entails. Additionally, there is the professional concern of linguists at loss of typological evidence about human linguistic capacity and specific evidence about the nature of the endangered language. And the preferred resolution for both of these concerns is to promote the preservation, or failing that the documentation, of languages at risk.

Implicit in both of these motivations is some concept of just what are the social and linguistic characteristics that define a language variety as endangered. The most common conception is of some distinct language (typically bearing a language name) associated with a particular group of speakers--a people or ethnic group--which is threatened by absorption or replacement by some hegemonic language with which the endangered speakers are in contact. But the same issues--of vernacular response to contact with a hegemonic variety--also arise in connection with less distinctive, unnamed language varieties that are defined mainly by the social status of their speakers, i.e., nonstandard, popular, or vernacular varieties. This includes low-status regional and local dialects, nonstandard varieties defined by social class or exclusion,

and varieties associated with ethnic minorities. Indeed, any language variety that constitutes the verbal heritage of some speech community and experiences assimilatory contact with a dominant or standard language is potentially at risk; we will call such cases ‘endangered dialects’. Of course, it is a truism to linguists that the difference between ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ is one of degree. These categories are really regions on a continuum of linguistic difference that has no natural dividing points. Hence there is no natural distinction between endangered language and endangered dialect. We use the term simply to focus attention on one end of this continuum.

What we wish to emphasize is that for many endangered dialects all the issues of endangerment are especially acute. These varieties may be especially valuable to linguistic science, for their lack of prescriptive editing, and for their potential to shed light on historical processes such as prior language contact, creolization, and popular linguistic developments that go unrecorded or devalued in the standard tradition. And they may be especially at risk, because they lack names and popular recognition, and may have no association with an identifiable ‘people’. Such ‘dialects’ lack social power, and in the modern world, many are faced with standardizing, assimilatory pressures under the impact of accelerating globalization, mass education, and mass communication. Varieties that are labeled according to the prevailing social wisdom as substandard, incorrect, uneducated, bad, sloppy, or whatever pejorative is attached, are often the deliberate targets of efforts at assimilation or eradication. And if their speakers believe these negative evaluations, they will often be willing participants, even advocates, for assimilation.

### Popular Brazilian Portuguese

As a case in point we focus on the nonstandard or Popular varieties of Brazilian Portuguese (PBP), which have been the subject of intensive sociolinguistic research for the past 30 years.

As has been amply documented, a majority of Brazilians speak popular varieties that differ from the prescriptive standard, and from the usage of the social elite, with respect to numerous features of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. Brazil is, in short, sociolinguistically highly diverse, and Brazilian Portuguese is a veritable tropical rainforest of linguistic variety. This variety has been of great interest to linguists and has provided evidence for numerous theoretical and historical claims, such as the parametric nature of syntactic change (Duarte 1995 and 2000, Kato 2000, Tarallo 1995, working within Chomsky's Principles and Parameters model of grammar), the effect of saliency on syntactic change (Naro and Lemle 1976; Naro 1981), and notably the historical question of the source (Castilho 1992) and significance of this diversity. This is the issue we will focus on here.

The origins of PBP have been the subject of considerable debate. One common scholarly tradition attributes popular characteristics to the internal history of Portuguese, either seeking European sources, or inferring spontaneous innovation within Brazil. But other approaches appeal to language contact. There is a current of scholarly opinion that has attributed PBP characteristics to contact with the indigenous languages of Brazil (cf. Schmidt-Riese 2000) including the *língua geral*, a Tupi-based lingua franca widely spoken in colonial times (Rodrigues 1993, 1996). For reasons of space, we will not explore this issue here. The other contact-based account of the origins of PBP appeals to the presence of the Africans who were brought to Brazil in great numbers during the period of the slave trade. Since Brazil has a huge population of African descent, and since the economies of colonial and Imperial Brazil were largely founded on a system of slave-based agriculture, one logically possible source of sociolinguistic diversity is prior language contact and creolization. This position has been advanced by a number of linguists from Mendonça 1935 and Mattoso Camara 1972 to Guy 1981,

Holm 1992, and Lucchesi 2001. Crucially, it is the linguistic characteristics of the popular varieties that form the evidence for this reconstruction of historical events. As Mattoso rightly notes, there's no good basis for claiming that *standard* BP was much influenced by contact with African languages or creolization. But popular varieties across Brazil, often spoken by people of African descent, show substantial evidence of such a history, a fact of considerable interest to Afro-Brazilians and other speakers of PBP, and also to linguists.

Importantly, the evidence of three decades of sociolinguistic research shows that the distinctive characteristics of PBP are receding on a broad front under standardizing pressures. Features of the contemporary social world, including urbanization, industrialization, mass advances in literacy and education, internal migration within Brazil, and improved transportation and communication, are all facilitating the rapid assimilation of nonstandard speakers to the socially dominant standard and the concomitant reduction in the use of popular features, the very features that provide evidence of the social heritage of the language. In this paper we focus on one of the most distinctive characteristics of PBP, the high level of variability in agreement processes, and present evidence of how it is assimilating towards the standard language.

This evidence is drawn from both real time and apparent time data. We will cite data from three different points in real time in Rio de Janeiro, covering the 24 year span from 1976 to 2000, and apparent time data collected in 2000 in a socially very different location, the small community of São Miguel dos Pretos, founded by ex-slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. The corpora from which these data are drawn are the following: the 1976 corpus collected for the *Competências Básicas* project (Lemle and Naro 1977), which comprised interviews with 20 illiterate speakers in Rio de Janeiro; two sets of interviews (the first set recorded in the 1980s and the second in 2000) with a group of 16 speakers from Rio of

varying educational levels (Naro and Scherre 2003); and data from a stratified sample of 24 speakers from São Miguel dos Pretos, a small southern Afro-Brazilian community founded by ex-slaves in the nineteenth century (Ameida 2005).

The evidence of all of these data-sets is consistent, showing a rise in the rate of use of standard features across real time, and across age cohorts. Additionally, panel data in Rio show a direct effect of education as a standardizing factor, in that speakers who increased their level of education between the initial and follow-up studies showed the highest increase in the use of standard forms. The São Miguel data also confirm the effect of increased education--the youngest speakers, who have a higher level of education than the older age groups, use the most agreement; São Miguel also illustrates the effect of other social pressures promoting the spread of standard features.

#### Variable Agreement

A very distinctive characteristic of PBP is variability in agreement marking. Standard Portuguese, dating from the time of Latin (and probably even from Proto-Indo-European!), has always had obligatory, categorical agreement--in number and person between subject and verb, and agreement in number and gender within a noun phrase. But PBP, apparently from its earliest days, has had variable agreement marking in all of these processes. This variability can be seen in the text in (1) from George, an illiterate 48 year old male speaker from Rio interviewed in 1976 for the Competências Básicas project (cf. Lemle and Naro 1977; Guy 1981).

(1) *Os pai dela FORU escravo, que eles ERAM os negros.*

The(pl) parent(Ø) of her were(pl) slave(Ø), for they(pl) were(pl) the(pl) blacks(pl).

***Os preto*** *na época de cativo* ***ERA*** *escravo*. ***Os branco*** *que* ***ERA*** *senhor*.

The(pl) black(Ø) in time of slavery was(sg) slave(Ø). The(pl) white(Ø) who was(sg) master(Ø).

‘Her parents were slaves, because they were the blacks. The blacks in slavery-days were slaves, it was the whites who were masters.’ (George, tape 17-7A:130f)

In this short text, George utters four two-word NPs (shown as bold in 1 above), of which one shows full standard agreement (*os negros*), while three (*os pai*, *os preto*, *os branco*) have one plural marker omitted (always the second one), but are all still clearly and overtly plural because of the plural morpheme –s appearing in the accompanying definite article *os*. There are also four tensed verbs with overt plural subjects (indicated by small caps above), of which the first two are plural marked (*foru*, *eram*), while the last two are produced in third singular form. There are also four NP complements of copular sentences which in the standard language would arguably require plural markers (underlined above); of these only *os negros* is plural marked; none of the other three complement NPs show any plural marking (*escravo*, *escravo*, and *senhor*). This is variability of a high order, and the rapid alternation between presence and absence of number agreement marking is typical not only of this speaker, but of popular Brazilian speech in general.

The sociohistorical question that arises in connection with data like this is, how does variability replace a categorical process, or, in other words, where does the *absence* of plural marking come from? Naro, Lemle, Scherre, and others have argued that this is a spontaneous, internal development in BP (Naro & Lemle 1976, Naro 1981, Naro & Scherre 2003). But other scholars, such as Guy 1981, Holm 1992, and Lucchesi 2001, argue that absent or variable agreement arose from a creolized or creole-influenced history. They note that absence of

agreement is typical of virtually all creole languages, and that in Brazil, this phenomenon appears at the same historical period as the arrival there of massive numbers of enslaved Africans. Elsewhere in the Portuguese-speaking world, similar phenomena are found in varieties involving contact with African languages (cf. Gärtner 2002); even in the classical (16<sup>th</sup> century) Portuguese drama of Gil Vicente, the speech of black Africans is represented as lacking agreement.

The scholarly debate on this point has hinged crucially on the investigation of a number of well-documented morphosyntactic constraints on variable agreement, which provide vital evidence bearing on the origins and social history of Popular Brazilian Portuguese. We will cite three of the constraints on number agreement by way of illustration. First, are two constraints on subject-verb agreement: subject position, and morphological saliency of the plural marking. For subject position, preposed subjects (e.g. *As meninas chegaram* ‘the(pl) girls(pl) arrived(pl)’) immediately adjacent to the verb trigger the highest rate of plural marking, while postposed (e.g. *chegaram as meninas* ‘arrived(pl) the(pl) girls(pl)’) or distant (e.g. *as meninas que te contei finalmente chegaram* ‘the(pl) girls(pl) that I told you about finally arrived(pl)’) subjects evoke much less verbal marking. The morphological saliency constraint works as follows: verb forms with highly distinctive number desinences (e.g. *ele cantou* ‘he sang’ vs. *eles cantaram*, ‘they sang’) are much more likely to show plural marking than those forms where the singular and plural are only slightly or subtly different (e.g. *ele canta* ‘he sings’ vs. *eles cantam*, ‘they sing’).

The creolist position on these constraints argues that they reflect natural constraints on acquisition of plural marking by speakers of a creole-influenced variety; the plural marking rule is acquired more readily in contexts where its operation is most evident or salient. Positionally, this means when the morphosyntactic relationship between subject and verb is most evident,

i.e., when they are adjacent in the canonical order SV; morphologically, acquisition of agreement is facilitated when the markers of plurality are especially distinctive.

The third constraint considered here affects nominal agreement. This involves another unusual positional constraint. Words at the beginning of a noun phrase, including both pre-nominal modifiers and head nouns that occur in first position, are extremely likely to bear a plural marker (at rates above 90%), while later positions, especially postnominal modifiers, are marked at much lower rates. Guy's creolist explanation of these facts is that they reflect a substratum effect, in that most of the West African languages that contributed speakers to the founding African population of Brazil had NP-initial number marking patterns (Guy 1981).

However, the crucial point that we wish to emphasize here is not the question of prior creolization, but the erosion of the evidence. For all of these constraints on both of the agreement processes, the popular patterns are succumbing to standard language influence, the rate of plural marking is climbing rapidly, and the distribution of plural markers across contexts is evening out. The spread of standardization is happening so fast that, in another few generations, it seems unlikely that there will be any evidence to discuss, and the sociolinguistic history that the popular varieties embody will be lost, both to their speakers and to science.

### The Advance of Plural Marking

First let us consider the overall rate of plural marking across all contexts. Table 1 summarizes the gross rates for the four samples of PBP speech cited above.

<Table 1 about here>



The Rio de Janeiro data show a fairly dramatic rise in the rate of plural marking in the 24 years from 1976 to 2000. In the earliest studies, the popular variety of working class speakers showed a high level of absence of plural marking in both NPs and verbs; in Guy's (1981) analysis of Naro and Lemle's 1976 sample of illiterate speakers, nominal plurals were marked less than two thirds of the time (64%) and verbal plurals were marked less than half the time (44%). Naro and Scherre's early 1980s data show higher rates of plural marking in both nouns and verbs, but this is probably more a consequence of the social makeup of the corpus rather than of the passage of 5 or 6 years of time: this sample included literate speakers of varying educational levels. Naro and Scherre's data collected in 2000 was a follow-up recontact of the same 16 speakers interviewed in the 1980s, showing that their rates of plural marking jumped dramatically in less than 20 years, to over 80% marking in both nouns and verbs. Finally, Almeida's study (2005) of verbal agreement in an Afro-Brazilian community in southern Brazil in 2000 shows high rates of plural marking comparable to the Naro and Scherre 2000 data. Interestingly, Almeida's community is quite different in this respect from other Afro-Brazilian communities that have been studied (cf. Baxter 1992, 1995), in having a very high rate of plural marking. Almeida's discussion of the social characteristics of São Miguel make it clear that this high rate of marking is associated with a high degree of integration with the wider society. São Miguel has a long history of people working outside the community and having frequent verbal interaction with outsiders. Other ex-slave communities studied in Brazil show both greater linguistic isolation and much lower rates of plural marking, as illustrated in Figure 1 from Almeida's study.

<Figure 1 about here>

This across the board increase in plural marking by itself represents a significant alteration in the behavior of the speakers in this community, taking them a long step in the direction of the standard. However, these figures are based on pooled data from a number of speakers. We might well ask: what are individual speakers doing, and what factors are causing them to change? The Naro and Scherre panel study permits some answers to these questions. First, virtually all of the individuals in the study increased their rate of plural marking in the later sample, save only two speakers who declined by 1% in verbal marking. This clearly shows that standardization is affecting the behavior of the community as a whole. But the role of education as a driving force in standardization is also clear: the individuals in the study who spent at least some years in school in the interval between the two studies were the ones who increased plural marking the most, as can be seen in Table 2, drawn from Naro and Scherre (2003:50-52). The average increase in plural marking for those who got more schooling was about double the increase for those who did not receive any more schooling.

<Table 2 about here>

Now let us consider the contextual constraints on plural marking. A striking result of recent research is that the increase in plural marking is concentrated in the most nonstandard contexts, having the effect of obscuring or minimizing the constraints on this process that have provided evidence for the debate on the origins of the dialect.

Consider in Figure 2 the positional constraint on NP plural marking. Systematically, all studies of PBP have shown a powerful positional effect: plural markers are concentrated in pre-

head positions, especially the first word in an NP, while marking of head and post-head positions is much less frequent. The dashed line in Figure 2 shows how strong this effect was in 1980, with rates of marking above 90% for pre-head and head-first positions, versus rates under 50% for other positions. But in 2000, while pre-head plural marking is unchanged at a nearly categorical rate, there is an increase in all other positions, and the size of this increase keeps getting bigger moving from left to right across the figure; in other words, the more nonstandard a category was in 1980, the more it has been corrected towards the norm in 2000. This has the effect of minimizing the positional constraint on plural marking, of flattening out the lines on the graph.

<Figure 2 about here>

The same kind of leveling of constraint effects is evident in the Rio data on verbal plural marking. In Figure 3 we see the effect of subject position on verbal marking. There is a substantial overall rise in plural marking for all subject positions, but the rise is most marked in those contexts that had the lowest levels of marking in the earlier period. Once again, the constraint effect is being minimized in the course of the change. Plural marking in the disfavoring context of distant preverbal subjects (i.e. those that are separated from the verb by other words or phrases (such as adverbial phrases, relative clauses, etc.) has risen to more than 70%, a figure as high as what was found for the most favorable position in the earlier data – that of adjacent preverbal subjects. And postverbal subjects, which triggered agreement less than a third of the time in the 1980 corpus, are now getting 60% agreement. The line for 2000 is flattening out compared to the earlier data, again obscuring the effect of the context.

<Figure 3 about here>

Finally, let us turn to the morphological saliency constraint. For this we will use apparent time data from São Miguel. This gives us a different perspective on the problem, but one that illustrates the same tendency towards assimilation and minimization of vernacular constraint effects. Figure 4 shows Almeida's data, for four saliency levels, broken down by age groups. At the left edge of the graph we have the minimally salient morphological category, in which the opposition between singular and plural forms is unstressed and consists of simply an oral versus nasal vowel: e.g. *come* 'he eats' vs. *comem* 'they eat' (a vowel followed by the letter <m> represents a nasal vowel in Portuguese orthography). The second level (Almeida's morphological categories 2 and 3) also involves unstressed desinences, but with greater phonological contrast (e.g., *faz* 'he does' vs. *fazem* 'they do'). The third and fourth levels involve stressed desinences with progressively greater inflectional contrasts: the third level (Almeida's categories 4 and 5) have partial similarity between singular and plural desinences (e.g., *dá/dão* 'gives/give'), while the fourth level (categories 6+7) have completely dissimilar inflections in singular and plural (e.g., *é/são* 'is/are'). As we proceed from left to right, the more salient oppositions are always associated with higher levels of marking. However, note the differences among the age groups. Overall, the younger a speaker is, the more plural marking they do, but once again the greatest shift is in the most nonstandard environment. The oldest speakers showed zero plural marking in the first category, while the youngest speakers are already above the 50% rate here. Again the lines are flattening out, and younger speakers are moving in the direction of marking plurality without respect to morphological saliency. If the trend shown here

continues into the next generation, we can expect an essentially straight line across the saliency categories, implying a plural marking rule that is no longer constrained by saliency.

<Figure 4 about here>

In all of these cases, the diachronic tendency is towards the elimination of the constraint. As these constraints fade in local vernacular speech, the likelihood is that eventually they will not be acquired by a new generation of speakers. This will constitute a substantive change in the grammar of the community, a restructuring of the grammatical processes of agreement. Crucially, the constraints being eroded are precisely the ones of greatest proven interest to linguists, which have provided important evidence about the social history of the language.

The data that we have presented here thus show a general tendency towards increased use of agreement by speakers of very different social groups, stimulated by normative pressures. However, it should be noted that there is another change going on in the verbal system that indirectly affects the distribution of inflectional markers of agreement. This is the generalized use of a new first person plural pronoun, resulting from the grammaticalization of what was historically a full NP *a gente* 'the people' replacing the historical pronoun *nós* (Zilles 2005a). This change matters here for two reasons. First it reduces the use of the traditional first person plural desinence *-mos*, because verbs that take *a gente* as their subject appear in the unmarked form. This is the verb form that occurs with third person subject pronouns *ele/ela*, as well as with second person *você*, and even with the traditional second person subject pronoun *tu* for several Brazilian dialects. Second, many Brazilians spontaneously say they prefer using *a gente*, because it avoids the worries about agreement that arise with using *nós*. This clearly demonstrates the linguistic insecurity that speakers feel about agreement. By adopting the

innovative *a gente*, they are effectively reducing their use of agreement marking by means of a parallel pathway that avoids the inconvenience of making “mistakes in agreement”-- a highly undesirable 'error' in view of the pronounced social stigma associated with lack of agreement that we document in the next section.

### The Social Evaluation of Grammatical Agreement

We have implicitly asserted in this paper that vernacular PBP speakers are responding to the higher social status and power of the dominant standard language when they increase their rates of agreement. We will now present explicit evidence of the social evaluation of this variable. Grammatical agreement is the subject of overt social attention in Brazil, and Brazilian speakers often refer to the absence of agreement as a stereotypical marker of ‘bad’ speech. Here are some examples from the data reported by Zilles in a recent paper on real-time change in PBP (Zilles 2005b).

The first example is from a woman recorded in 1990 in Porto Alegre, a city of about 1.4 million inhabitants in the southern-most Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. She was interviewed for the Varsul (‘Variation in the South’) corpus, a data base containing more than 300 hours of interviews from 12 different cities and towns in the three southern states of Brazil. She is a widow, age 68, with an elementary education. The interviewer asks what she thinks it means to speak correctly. Without hesitation, she replies ‘agreement’. But strikingly, when pressed to elaborate, she tries to give an explanation of why agreement is so important, but fails! This is very suggestive of a myth that she believes in but cannot explain--in other words, she

recognizes the social norm for which superiority is asserted by the linguistically powerful, but which in fact is simply arbitrary.

*Entrevistador: O que que pra senhora assim é falar português corretamente?*

*Falante: A concordância.*

*E: A concordância?*

*F: A concordância, né? É muito importante, né? Porque- E escrever corretamente também, ler, saber ler... (VARSUL corpus, RSPOA16, l. 1127-33)*

*Interviewer: What is it for you to speak Portuguese correctly?*

*Speaker: Agreement.*

*I: Agreement?*

*S: Agreement, right? It's very important, isn't it? Because – And write correctly too, read, to know how to read...*

Our second example comes from an interview conducted in 1970 in Porto Alegre, with a 30 year old professor of dentistry, himself no doubt an elite speaker. (This interview is drawn from the NURC project (Norma Lingüística Urbana Culta -- ‘urban cultivated linguistic norms’ project, which recorded the speech of samples of educated speakers from a number of major cities in Brazil.) The interviewer asks about ‘defects’ in the way people speak, probably aiming at mannerisms like stuttering and speech defects. The subject immediately and spontaneously talks about lack of agreement!

*Entrevistador: Quais os defeitos mais comuns que você conhece no modo de falar?*

*Falante: Quais os defeitos mais comuns no modo de falar? ... éh... não há concordância... do verbo com a pessoa... às vezes a pes/ são várias pessoas e usa-se o verbo numa pessoa só... ou para uma pessoa... eu posso estar aqui... perfeitamente devido ao nervosismo estar falando erradamente... (NURC – Porto Alegre inquérito 09 linhas 413-421)*

After repeating the question presented to him, as if looking for a proper answer, the speaker says:

*there is no agreement... of the verb with the person... sometimes the per- there are several people and one uses the verb for only one person (...) I may be here – just because of nervousness – speaking incorrectly..*

Strikingly, this is a highly educated person displaying linguistic insecurity, fearing that he may be speaking ‘incorrectly’ because he is nervous (although he is, in fact, using standard person/number agreement throughout). This bespeaks a powerful social stigma attached to lack of agreement. It is this stigma that is no doubt driving the assimilation evident in the data presented above.

### Conclusions

Popular Brazilian Portuguese is among the most well-studied vernacular varieties in the world. Thirty years of sociolinguistic research have demonstrated a rich profusion of popular features, many of them strikingly at odds with the standard variety, and some of them typologically quite



revealing or unusual. Numerous research projects--many of them completed, even more still underway, have investigated the sociolinguistic and dialectological landscape of Brazil. The data have revealed massive evidence bearing on the history and development of the Portuguese language in Brazil, and some of this evidence speaks directly to the social and cultural heritage of the great majority of Brazilians. Brazil manifestly possesses a culture and a population with a rich diversity of inputs from African, European, indigenous American, and even Asian roots, and the linguistic tapestry of Brazil has offered a colorful portrait of this diversity. But this tapestry is now being bleached of its color. Features of the standard language are spreading rapidly and the grammars of Brazil are being homogenized. One consequence of this homogenization is that the linguistic contributions of some of the founding peoples of Brazil are being suppressed. The tapestry is turning monochromatic, and the color that is emerging is a lot paler than the population. The loss to linguistics and other social sciences from these processes of standardization will be substantial, but the loss to Brazilian society may be even greater.

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Table 1. Overall rates of plural marking

Study/Place-Date	Nominal plural marking	Verbal plural marking (3p)
G/Rio-1976 (illiterates)	64%	44%
N&S/Rio-1980's	68%	65%
N&S/Rio-2000	81%	81%
A/São Miguel-2000	n.d.	80%

Studies: G: Guy 1981, 20 illiterate speakers in Rio, recorded in 1976; N&S: Naro & Scherre 2003, panel study of 16 speakers of varying educational levels, recorded in early 1980s and again in 2000; A: Almeida 2005, stratified sample of 24 speakers from São Miguel dos Pretos, RS, a community founded by ex-slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> C.

Figure 1. Verbal plural marking in four ex-slave communities – São Miguel dos Pretos, Rio de Contas, Helvécia, and Cinzento (from Almeida 2005).

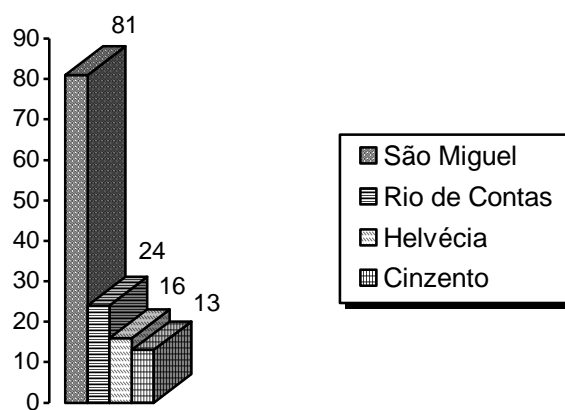


Figure 4. Advance of standard verbal plural marking in apparent time, in São Miguel, by morphological saliency ( data from Almeida 2005)

