Making Suggestions in the Workplace: 
Insights from Learner and Native Speaker Discourses

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Abstract: Portuguese native-speaker production of suggestions in the workplace is examined and used as a background for the exploration of how heritage and non-heritage learners of Portuguese produce and perceive this speech act. Central to our analysis is how these different groups of Portuguese users attend to the demands of power and politeness in suggestion making in the workplace, with a focus on their choices of verb tense, personal pronouns and additional mitigators. Findings suggest that although there are similarities in the ways these individuals produce suggestions, native speakers and heritage learners tend to respond to hierarchical issues more systematically than non-heritage learners, especially in relation to mitigating devices and expression of agency. Also, native speakers deploy a wider repertoire of linguistic strategies than learners when making suggestions. We close this paper by discussing the implications of these findings for research and pedagogy in applied language studies in Portuguese.

Key Words: heritage learners, politeness, Portuguese language learning, power, suggestions, workplace

1. Introduction

Although it has been pointed out that work is an important motivation for many Portuguese learners (Abreu 1982, Kelm 2002a), much remains to explore about discourse in the workplace in applied Portuguese language studies. The present article examines how different groups of Portuguese speakers produce and/or perceive suggestions in the workplace. Specifically, we describe and analyze native speaker production of suggestions in business meetings and use these findings as the background for discussion on how heritage and non-heritage learners of Portuguese produce and perceive this speech act. Our main argument is that despite many similarities among the choices made by native speakers, heritage learners, and non-heritage learners regarding suggestions in the workplace, important differences exist in the preferential forms deployed by these three groups of Portuguese users in order to make suggestions. These differences may express these groups’ different concerns with the demands of power and politeness involved in suggestion making in the workplace.

2. The Background

Links between L2 education and norms of language use in the workplace have concerned applied linguists for many years, especially in contexts of L2 English. In the past few years, economic and political factors involving the Lusophone world (such as the increasing importance of the Brazilian economic market, the Portuguese participation in the EU, or the emergence of the developing economies in Lusophone Africa) have triggered interest in teaching and learning Portuguese for work-related purposes. Materials have been developed having the international professional as potential audience (e.g.: Collin 1998, Kelm 2002b, Kelm and Risner
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2007, Krieck de Biaggi and de Biaggi Stavale 2005) and programs in International Business involving relationships with Brazil and/or Portugal, such as those described in Suárez (1990) and Lokensgard (2004), reflect learners’ interest in this area.

Notwithstanding these developments, two particular areas call for further investigation in L2 Portuguese—namely, the extent to which heritage and non-heritage learners display different perceptions about discourse in the workplace and the extent to which L2 Portuguese pedagogy can be informed by analyses of naturally-occurring interactions among native speakers of Portuguese. We will discuss these two topics in turn.

In this study, heritage learners are those students who were exposed to Portuguese during childhood (and, presumably, also later). As these learners were growing up, Portuguese was one of the languages spoken either by the students themselves or by their relatives. Heritage language learners, as shown by research on L2 teaching and learning, have needs that may differ substantially from those of non-heritage learners. According to Valdés (2005), when Spanish instructors in the U.S. started working with Spanish heritage speakers, they were faced with learners “who could not talk about the language” with the terminology that comes from traditional grammar and is familiar to foreign-language learners (Valdés 2005: 412). Rather, heritage learners found it difficult to understand grammatical explanations, since linguistic issues explained to foreign-language learners (e.g. the difference between *ser* and *estar*) were already part of heritage speakers’ competence. Kondo-Brown (2005) also identified substantial differences between learners of Japanese as a foreign language and Japanese heritage learners with at least one Japanese-speaking parent; learners in the latter group demonstrated higher listening and reading proficiency, as well as more accurate linguistic production than the foreign-language learners, while heritage learners had difficulty (in higher or lesser degree) sustaining prolonged conversations in formal style and performing explanatory speeches on abstract topics.

Although approximately 600,000 people speak Portuguese at home in the USA (U.S. Census Bureau 2000), Portuguese heritage learners have not received systematic attention from research. Also under-researched are the ways Portuguese native speakers do things with and through language at work. More generally, studies about discourse in the workplace (e.g. Holmes and Stubbe 2003, Koester 2006, Sarangi and Roberts 1999) have shown how co-workers make use of a wide range of strategies to balance the demands of the workplace and the preservation of social relations. In order to achieve transactional and relational goals in the workplace, individuals have to engage in an ongoing display-and-negotiation of power and politeness. This tension becomes more evident in business meetings, as these occasions “function as one of the most important and visible sites of organisational power, and of the reification or organisational hierarchy” (Mumby 1988: 68, cited in Holmes and Stubbe 2003: 56).

Structural issues involving discourse in the workplace impose important constraints on the ways co-workers do things with and through language. These issues become even more complex when workplace interaction involves directives such as suggestions.

3. Suggestions

Despite prolific literature on speech acts in different languages, suggestions remain relatively underexplored (Jiang 2006). One possible reason for this lack of research attention may be the difficulty in defining suggestions. Most studies on suggestions draw on Searle’s (1979: 13) view that this speech act occurs when the speaker believes the action will benefit the hearer, but others have challenged this condition. Suggestions may also be made in the interest of the speaker (Koike 1996: 260) and, as this article suggests, in the interest of both transactional and relational goals of the interaction.

Regarding categorization, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford’s (1993) study on native and non-native speaker suggestions offers a useful model. They categorize speech acts in four ways: frequency, use of mitigators and aggravators, success rate and type (responses to questions, responses to prompts, initiated suggestions). They find that non-native speakers do not use the
same mitigating devices used by native speakers; moreover, the former use aggravators, which does not occur in native-speaker production in their data. They also indicate that the more mitigators are used, the higher the success rate of suggestions.

Banerjee and Carrell (1988) have found similar differences between native and non-native use of suggestions. Their study found that native speakers make suggestions more often than non-native speakers, though the preferred strategy is the same in the two groups: both favor offering suggestions through statements of fact. The major difference between the groups concerns negative and positive politeness strategies, and one important finding is that learners sometimes use strategies associated with requests (using “would” and “please”) leading to what they describe as “impolite strategies” (Banerjee and Carrell 1988: 336).

Differences in uses of suggestions may be related to differences in perception as well, which is what Koike (1996) set out to investigate. Koike focused on learners of Spanish, concluding that more proficient learners identified suggestions more efficiently than elementary learners. Also concerning perceptions, others have examined the extent to which learners perceive mitigation. Cook (2001) considered Japanese as a foreign language learners’ perception of more and less polite speech, concluding that L2 learners may underestimate the importance of mitigating devices in L2.

Regarding Portuguese, we have few examples of studies examining suggestions. Generally, in studying politeness strategies in Brazilian Portuguese, Koike (1992) found more use of the present indicative than any other verb tense in directives. Earlier, Koike (1985) explored another directive (requests) in Portuguese, and the assumption guiding this work—namely, that the deictic center of particular personal pronouns and verb tenses is strongly linked with illocutionary force and politeness—is relevant to exploration of suggestions.

Other studies concerning suggestions have examined instructional issues related to formal teaching and learning of this speech act (Koike and Pearson 2005, Martinez-Flor and Fukuya 2005, Santos and Silva 2008), or socialization practices in school (Poole 1992) or at work (Li 2000). What these and the other studies reviewed here indicate is that making suggestions involves knowledge of and ability to use complex linguistic resources. Applied to workplace scenarios, these studies suggest that particular choices have important consequences for both the “job being done” and the preservation of workplace relationships. Specifically, how co-workers make use of direct expressions (conveyed through more or less direct verb tenses, mitigators, pronouns, etc.) is key for the achievement of both transactional and interpersonal goals.

4. This Study

Remembering the foregoing, this work explores the following questions:

(1) In business meetings involving native speakers of Portuguese with different hierarchical levels, to what extent does the choice of verb tenses and personal pronouns relate to the ways the more and less powerful participants balance power and politeness in their suggestions?

(2) In an educational setting involving learners of Portuguese,
   (a) What linguistic strategies do heritage and non-heritage learners deploy for the production of suggestions in the workplace?
   (b) What do the linguistic strategies above suggest about understandings these two groups of learners regarding interplay between power and politeness in the use of Portuguese in the workplace?

5. Methods

We divided our work in two parts, the first involving collection of naturally-occurring data in
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business meetings at a language school in a large city in Brazil, where participants were planning an event being organized for the first time. Suggestions were extremely productive as all details (speakers, furniture arrangement, schedule, food and drinks, etc.) had to be defined during these meetings. Six people participated in the four audio-recorded meetings: two occupied a higher position in the school hierarchy (the two directors of the school) and were responsible for making the final decisions; the other four were less powerful in decision-making (two administrative assistants, a teacher and the coordinator). One administrative assistant was male and the other participants were female. The meetings took place in the office of one of the directors, lasting 3.5 hours in total and generating a corpus of transcribed data comprising over 45,000 words.

We identified the suggestions in the data and analyzed linguistic forms used by participants to produce their suggestions. We observed particularly how participants with different power levels constructed their suggestions in terms of preferential verb tenses, uses of personal pronouns and mitigating devices such as impersonalization, diminutives, or negative questions, among others. We also considered preferential formulaic expressions, and how these related to verb tenses and notions of agency.

The results of this analysis (discussed in further depth in the next section) provided a basis for developing the instrument used in the second part. This tripartite instrument included three discourse completion tasks (DCT) (See Appendix 1 for details), six multiple-choice questions (see Appendix 2) and questions involving learners’ background information. For the first two parts, learners were instructed to consider ways of making suggestions in Portuguese in business meetings during which co-workers were planning a future event. They were also reminded, while completing these tasks, that all the interactions involved a more and a less powerful participant and that the situations were supposed to involve face-to-face (hence spoken) interaction. The third part of the instrument included questions about the languages spoken by the learners and by their relatives during the respondents’ childhood and also questions about learners’ proficiency level and their reasons for learning Portuguese. Learners were asked to identify contextual features (such as interactants’ gender, age, hierarchical level, inter alia) that they thought affected production of suggestions in the workplace.

Thirty-eight students enrolled in Portuguese classes at an American university participated in the study, 71% of whom matched our definition of heritage learners. These participants were enrolled in classes at three different levels: low intermediate (21%), intermediate (55%), and low advanced (24%). First, students were given the DCT; upon completion, that part was collected and multiple-choice questions were distributed. The background questionnaire was distributed and completed last. The three parts were distributed separately; consequently, learners could not go back to answers given in the DCT after seeing possible responses in the multiple-choice section.

Before moving on, we must highlight our awareness of the numerous methodological difficulties involving DCTs (Beebe and Cummings 1996; Hinkel 1997). Like Kasper and Rose (2002: 96), we believe that the major objective of using DCTs is to gain insight into learners’ pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge. These insights should enable us to make more informed decisions in our pedagogic practice.

6. Analysis of the Naturally-Occurring Data

Analysis of the transcribed data revealed that all the participants involved in these meetings employed varied and often sophisticated linguistic resources while making suggestions. All participants showed a concern in using negative politeness strategies; also as expected, important differences appeared in the ways more and less powerful participants deployed linguistic resources to produce their suggestions. Table 1 summarizes the main findings of our analysis in terms of choice of verb tense as well as the uses of these tenses in relation to both preferential collocations and expression of agency.
In addition to the results above, the analysis of the naturally-occurring data also showed important trends regarding the use of performatives, negatives and formulaic expressions, as discussed below.

6.1. Performatives

The performative verb sugerir occurs only three times in our data, all in utterances that lack the illocutionary force of a suggestion. This verb appears once in the imperative form used by a more powerful participant to give an order (“Mas po-, você sugere, pode ser ...”); another time, in the imperfect to ask for clarification (“Mas você sugeriria o que, amostra de comidas típicas?”); and another, in the perfect to report something that was said before (“Então eu sugeriria isso na classe ...”). One of the more powerful participants employs the performative verb propor in one of the meetings to make a suggestion: “Mas olha aqui, eu proponho o seguinte [...] Vamos fazer outra reunião no dia 15 no mesmo horário?”
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6.2. Negatives

Negatives were not frequent in our data. When used, they were mostly associated with the present indicative (“Não tem aquelas cadeiras de armar?”; “A gente não tem nenhum pai de aluno que trabalha com cinema, não?”) and both more and less powerful participants used this strategy. In addition to the present, other tenses found in the negative form include the imperfect indicative and the conditional, predominantly used by less powerful participants.

Negatives also occurred with the phrases “não é melhor,” “não seria melhor,” “será que não era melhor,” used by all the participants. Interestingly, all but one of these uses were marked by impersonalization of the action. When co-workers needed to specify the agent of the action they tended to use negatives with poder: “Ela não pode fazer uma pintura, num, num material mais simples?”; “Será que o Hugo não poderia dar duas palestras?”

A final comment on the use of negatives in our data: the phrase Por que que a gente não occurred only once, used by a less powerful participant, coming after an enormous preamble of 117 words and followed by further justification.

6.3. Formulaic Expressions

Ser + melhor was widely used by all participants, with an important difference between the more and less powerful participants: whereas the former may or may not use the expression without a mitigating device (e.g., “Não é melhor dar esse nome em espanhol”), the latter always use these phrases together with negative politeness strategies such as an indication of pessimism (“Será que não era melhor”), tag questions (“nê”), negatives (“Não era melhor ir lá, não?”), justifications (“por exemplo”).

Concerning formulaic expressions, notably absent in our data is the expression que tal for making suggestions. Vamos + infinitive was likewise seldom used by our participants, although introduced very early in Portuguese textbooks (e.g. Florissi, Ponce and Burim 1999). An important difference occurs between the ways more and less powerful participants in our data use vamos to make suggestions. Whereas the latter use the formula with mitigating devices such as pauses and diminutives, the former tend to use it with no mitigating devices, as shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More powerful participants</th>
<th>Less powerful participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* “Vamos desenvolver essa idéia”</td>
<td>* Então vamos pensar só uma coisa/nha?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* “Vamos fazer outra reunião no dia quinze no mesmo horário?”</td>
<td>Só, vamos... Só, só, deixa eu acabar esse meu pensamento, que eu continue esse, eh, ah, eh, sabe?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* “Então vamos organizar aqui.”</td>
<td>* “Vamos falar rapidinho pra eu, pra eu subir né, assim.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In sum, responding to our first research question, our data indicate that participants’ choices of verb tenses, combined with their choices of pronouns, reflect the ways these individuals balance power and politeness in their suggestions. In other words, verb tenses alone (even the ones considered more indirect such as the conditional or the forms of the subjunctive) do not seem to be the only mechanism through which these individuals manage the often conflicting demands of referential and interpersonal goals. Both mitigation through impersonalization of the action (with the omission of the subject) and vagueness in agency (e.g. with a gente) are recurrent strategies deployed by these individuals in parallel with their choices of verb tenses. The data suggest that more and less powerful participants may feel that they have different conversational rights in expressing agency (in particular with the uses of eu acho que and of the future subjunctive).
Another important finding concerns preference for the Present Indicative by participants with different hierarchical levels and their extensive use of mitigating devices with this tense (including impersonalization, tag questions, hesitations, non-factive verbs like *achar*, use of the verb *poder*, *inter alia*).

In the next section we examine the learners’ choices in relation to these issues.

7. Analysis of the Elicited Data

Mirroring the analysis of the naturally-occurring data, this section is organized around mitigators and uses of *achar que*, the future subjunctive, performatives, negatives and formulaic expressions. We will not comment on the uses of conditionals or the present and imperfect forms of the subjunctive given the somewhat limited use of these forms both in the naturally-occurring data and in the responses in the learner questionnaire. But before outlining the results of the second part of the study, we give an account of learners’ responses in relation to their reasons for learning Portuguese and the contextual factors they perceived as important when making suggestions.

Most learners rated work as a very important factor (66%). Likewise, family and travel were rated very important by the majority of the learners (66% and 58%, respectively) but friends were not a decisive criterion (45% of the learners said it was not important while 37% found it very important). These ratings gain special overtones if we sub-categorize learners as heritage or non-heritage: work is perceived as very important or important for almost all non-heritage learners. The majority of non-heritage learners also perceive travel as a very important factor for learning Portuguese, but family and friends do not seem to be a determining factor. Heritage learners, however, prioritize family reasons, and more than half of this group also rate work as very important. Graphs illustrating these and other results of this study can be found on <www.denisesantos.com> and <http://www.umassd.edu/cas/portuguese/gsilva.cfm>.

Differences between the two groups are also found regarding the predominant factors which, in their views, affect how individuals make suggestions in the workplace. Heritage learners prioritize interactants’ age; hierarchy is the second most important factor for this group, followed by the setting of the interaction, participants’ gender and the mode (spoken or written) of the interaction. Non-heritage learners also prioritize age, but perceive the mode of interaction and the setting for the interaction as more important than the hierarchical relationship between participants.

7.1. Mitigators

In the DCTs, learners used mitigators such as impersonalization (“*A gente pode perguntar ao Sr. Carlos*”), the verb *poder* in the imperfect indicative (“Então o senhor podia telefonar…”), negatives (“Então por que não chamar o Sr. Carlos?”), but in general their repertoire of mitigators was not very wide. Also, mitigators were proportionately less prevalent in the learner corpus than in the naturally-occurring data.

Situations 1 and 2 did not include mitigators in the prompt but the prompt in Situation 3 included a mitigator in the form of an explanation. In Situations 1 and 3, learners were asked to provide a suggestion by a less powerful participant; Situation 2 involved a suggestion by a more powerful participant. In Situation 1 most learners (60.5%) did not utilize mitigating devices in their suggestions. When they did, the preferential strategies were impersonalization and inclusion of explanation or purpose. Likewise, most responses for Situation 2 (63%) did not include mitigating devices. Preferential mitigators for Situation 2 were the verb *poder* used in an interrogative (e.g., “Podemos fazer outro encontro na quinta-feira?”) and tag questions (e.g., “Vamos reunir no dia 10 de Outubro, tá?”). In Situation 3, most answers (76%) included mitigating devices. Breaking down the type of mitigator used, we find that most learners who used mitigation employed the explanation provided in the prompt, while only 11% of the answers included another
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type of device, such as desculpa or por favor—the latter leading to “impolite suggestions”
(Banerjee and Carrell 1988: 336) such as “Vamos com pressa, por favor, tenho coisa que fazer.”
This information is summarized in Tables 3 and 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Occurrence</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3
Occurrence of Mitigators in Learners’ Corpus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Use of Mitigators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only</td>
<td>Explanation only 66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other mitigators 11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No mitigators 23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4
Use of Mitigators in Situation 3

In the multiple-choice section, Question 6 explored respondents’ concern with the use of
mitigating devices. Alternative (a) proposed a suggestion with no mitigating device other than
impersonalization; alternative (b), with mitigation through the use of the diminutive, but a po-
tentially problematic explicit mention of você; alternative (c), with a combination of mitigating
devices including avoidance of explicit use of pronoun. Learners avoided option (c), which had
the most mitigators: both heritage and non-heritage learners preferred the more tangential use of
mitigation (impersonalization only) to the choice including hesitation, impersonalization and the
diminutive. Option (a) was more attractive to non-heritage learners (64% of whom chose this
option, as opposed to 48% of heritage learners). The choice with several mitigators was rarely
chosen (8% of all learners). Interestingly, the potentially face-threatening option (b) was chosen
by some non-heritage learners (27%) and many heritage learners (44%).

7.2. “Eu acho que”

The multiple-choice section contained two questions involving eu acho que (question 5
focused on a more powerful participant; question 2 on a participant with less power). For the
suggestion by a less powerful participant, non-heritage learners preferred a strategy that does
not appear in the naturally-occurring data (option [b], eu acho que + specific pronoun). Heritage
learners, on the other hand, preferred the answer that better corresponds to the data in the
meetings, expressing pessimism (option [c], será que + specific pronoun). Significantly, non-
heritage learners did not find this option attractive: only 18% chose this alternative. In the ques-
tion involving a suggestion by a more powerful participant, most learners preferred the option
with a specific agent, which in fact occurred in the meetings. The contrast between the results for
these two questions indicate that heritage learners may be more aware of the implications of
power relations in the production of suggestions, alternating their uses of specific/non-specific
agency depending on the hierarchical level of the speaker. This fluctuation is not evident in non-
heritage learners’ responses.

7.3. Future Subjunctive

The multiple-choice question 4 explored the use of the future subjunctive from the perspec-
tive of a more powerful participant. The options reflected the range of results in the analysis of
the naturally occurring data, as they offered (a) an option in which a specific agent followed the
use of the future subjunctive; (b) an option where agency was blurred through the use of a gente,
and only later the more explicit você was used; and (c) an agentless option followed by the use of você. Indeed, heritage learners’ preferences mirrored native speaker production: 33% of them chose (a), 33% elected (b), and 33% chose (c). These results indicate a very balanced reaction to these three realizations. The majority (54%) of non-heritage learners, however, tended to elect (c), privileging the option with more emphatic impersonalization. These results match those discussed in the previous section, reinforcing the claim that non-heritage learners in our sample did not display flexible adjustments to their production of suggestions depending on the hierarchical level of the speaker; rather, they tended to be consistent in their specific uses of pronouns irrespective of the power relations involving addressers and addressees in suggestion making in the workplace.

7.4. Performatives

Performative verbs were rarely chosen in the data. For the DCTs, one non-heritage learner used recomendar and one heritage learner used sugerir. Both were intermediate students who rated work as a very important factor in their Portuguese learning, and both identified hierarchical issues as an important feature affecting suggestion-making, but neither selected performative verbs in the multiple-choice task (question 1). Regarding the latter, heritage and non-heritage learner choices revealed similar patterns, with students from both groups opting for a non-performative verb. Table 5 shows the results for this question, demonstrating that, despite preference for the option which did not contain a performative verb (c), the other two options (i.e. propor in [a] and sugerir in [b]) were likewise chosen by learners from both groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(a)</th>
<th>(b)</th>
<th>(c)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heritage learners</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-heritage learners</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
Answers to Question 1 (MCQ)

7.5. Negatives

Like performative verbs, negatives appeared only twice in the DCT data, chosen once by a heritage intermediate learner (“Então por que não chamar o Sr. Carlos?”) and once by a heritage low-advanced learner (“Você não acha que deve contactar o representante do consulado para refirmar [sic] o que você pretende?”). For question 2 in the multiple-choice task, heritage learners responded favorably to the option “Será que o Pedro não poderia dar duas palestras?” (option [c] in Table 6 below), whereas non-heritage learner did not find this alternative attractive. The other option involving a negative suggestion in this question (option [a], “O Pedro não poderia dar duas palestras?”) appeared more attractive to non-heritage than to heritage learners, although the former group preferred a suggestion without a negative (option [b], “Eu acho que o Pedro pode dar duas palestras”).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(a)</th>
<th>(b)</th>
<th>(c)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heritage learners</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-heritage learners</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6
Answers to Question 2 (MCQ)

7.6. Formulaic Expressions

In terms of uses (or lack thereof) of formulaic expressions, que tal is not produced in the DCTs. For Question 3 in the multiple-choice task, only 11% of the heritage and 9% of the non-heritage learners elected the alternative containing que tal (option [a]), displaying instead clear
preference for the imperfect subjunctive. 

Ser+ melhor only appears once in the DCT data, used by a low-intermediate heritage learner who suggests “Talvez é (sic) melhor falar com o representativo.” As to vamos + infinitive, no respondents used this expression in the non-guided DCT; for those DCTs which elicited its use, students tended to employ explanation as the predominant mitigating device, as discussed above.

In sum, analysis of the elicited data revealed some similarities between heritage and non-heritage learners in the ways they produce and perceive suggestions in the workplace. In terms of production, both groups avoided formulaic expressions such as que tal, por que não, vamos (unless prompted to) and tended to produce suggestions using the present indicative. In terms of perception, both groups avoided options with performative verbs. Given choices of mitigation, both groups preferred impersonalization as opposed to options with more mitigators, even for a less powerful participant.

However, our data revealed important differences between heritage and non-heritage learners in their frequency and range of mitigators. For Situation 1 in the DCT, for example, only 18% of non-heritage speakers used mitigators, while 48% of heritage speakers included some type of mitigation in their suggestions, the most common of which was impersonalization. When the situation involved action by one of the participants, heritage learners seemed to perceive a need for different patterns of verb tense + personal pronouns depending on the hierarchical level of the speaker. Non-heritage learners appeared to perceive the need for mitigators (e.g., indirectness conveyed by the imperfect subjunctive or uncertainty conveyed by “eu acho”) but they rarely combined these mitigators with impersonalizations as heritage learners did, indicating that non-heritage learners may be less fully aware of the importance of the constraints imposed by hierarchical issues on discourse in the workplace.

8. Concluding Remarks

This section discusses our findings and their implications for both research and pedagogy. First, let us reiterate what we believe this work does—and what it does not. This work offers, as its title suggests, insights into how different users of Portuguese articulate suggestions at work. We used native-speaker data to gain better understanding of how Portuguese speakers in business meetings deal with the often-conflicting demands of transactional and relational goals while making suggestions, and how they use language to manage this tension. We applied our initial conclusions to design and carry out a study with learners of Portuguese to obtain insight into the linguistic forms privileged by two types of learners in similar situations and into the extent to which these learners attended to the demands of power and politeness. We do not argue that the learners in our corpus should produce the same type of language as the native speakers in the recorded meetings; after all, discourse in the workplace is contextually bound by definition (Drew and Heritage 1992: 22). Rather, we are interested in sketching a map of the preferential linguistic forms elected by these three groups of Portuguese users and, most importantly, to discuss what these preferences suggest about ways of dealing with the demands of power and politeness in discourse in the workplace.

This study indicates that the three different groups of Portuguese speakers we examined—native speakers, heritage learners and non-heritage learners—use many and varied strategies when making suggestions, which display some similarities. No group produces (or prefers) que tal; likewise, no group favors production of performative verbs, although learners may perceive these verbs as appropriate. Vamos + infinitive appears sparsely in the native speaker corpus, and does not occur in the learner corpus unless included in a prompt.

While all three groups display some features in common, native speakers and heritage learners appear to differ from non-heritage learners in that the first two groups make use of more flexible choices attending to contextual features: they oscillate between directness and indirectness depending on the hierarchical level of the participants involved. When a more powerful
participant addresses a less powerful one, the two groups may or may not use many mitigating
devices. Non-heritage learners, on the other hand, tend to resort to the same strategies irrespec-
tive of the hierarchical relationships involved, which suggests that these learners may be less
sensitive to the need for (or appropriateness of) more or less mitigation of power when making
suggestions.

An important difference between suggestions in the transcribed data and in the learner
corpus is the wider repertoire of strategies utilized by native speakers. Again, such variation
might indicate these individuals’ awareness of the contextual constraints involved in the pro-
duction of a directive to more or less powerful co-workers. From a pedagogical perspective, this
result does not constitute a problem given the preference for the present indicative to make
suggestions—and not for any of the subjunctives. Consequently, our findings suggest that
students would need only add to their inventory of mitigators, and not necessarily master the
subjunctive in order to produce sociopragmatically appropriate suggestions in the workplace.

Other pedagogical implications of our study include the recommendation for practitioners to
exercise caution in using textbook language as the only model for the production of suggestions
in L2 Portuguese. Uses of corpora like the one we developed in the first part of this study can be
beneficial for learners, not only in terms of language input but also, and perhaps most impor-
tantly, as a means of providing topics for reflection and discussion regarding L2 use (Santos and
Silva 2008). These conversations might be less challenging to heritage learners than the con-
ventional decontextualised lectures about grammar in the L2 class.

From a research perspective, our study suggests that analyses of naturally-occurring data
may inform investigation into L2 Portuguese learner discourses in important ways. In this work,
non-elicited data helped us to make crucial decisions about the design and analysis of the em-
pirical study. Also from a research standpoint, cross-sectional studies like this one may provide
the basis for longitudinal studies in the future (as pointed out by Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford
1993). Finally, this investigation has shown potential problems in the categorization of “the
Portuguese learner” as a monolithic group. This point has been raised in other studies looking at
differences between Spanish-speaking and non-Spanish-speaking Portuguese learners (e.g.
Johnson 2004), but our study has highlighted important differences between heritage and non-
heritage learners of Portuguese. Obviously our claims need to be re-examined in future studies
involving different groups of learners and possibly exploring variations involving speakers’
gender and age. Further investigations could also develop a more exhaustive taxonomy of the
strategies deployed by learners and non-learners while making suggestions. Case studies could
be very illuminating and could also shed light into contextual features affecting uses of verbal
and non-verbal language for suggestion-making.

These are all timely explorations in applied linguistic research in Portuguese. By examining
how different groups of people produced and/or perceived suggestions in the workplace, this
work provides a descriptive and theoretical account of an important real-world issue. We hope
that the insights offered may help orient pedagogic practice and lead to further explorations.

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Making Suggestions in the Workplace


Situation 1
Participants discuss arrangements about a talk to be given by a consulate representative:

P+: ((laughs)) Não. Então eu vou pedir pra você escrever o fax ...
P-: Não, eu tava até pensando nisso. Eu escrevo o fax mas, claro, isso dependendo do que nós definirmos aqui ...
P+: Mas isso já está definido, dizer que vai ter um Dia da Hispanidade, uma noite da hispanidade e que nós gostaríamos de saber se alguém no dia 5, se alguém poderia vir aqui fazer uma divulgação sobre a cultura hispânica. O que é que eles têm para oferecer.
P-: Hmm, hmm. (P- suggests that P+ follow up on the contact with the consulate representative)
P+: Hmm, hmm, tá. Falar com esse mesmo Sr. Carlos.
P-: É.

Situation 2
Participants are discussing letters to be sent to students, but the meeting is running late.

P+: Depois que souber a agenda, né? Eu só posso fazer a carta...
P-: Ah, sim...
P+: Depois que tiver uma agenda. Mas olha aqui...
P-: Não podemos mandar duas cartas, não? Uma dizendo que vai ter esse dia e tal, e depois manda uma com a agenda específica, quando chegar mais perto....
P+: Pode. (A P+ participant wants to propose another meeting, on a different day, at the same time. What does she say? Use “VAMOS” in your answer)
P-: É feriado

Situation 3
A P- participant wants to suggest that the discussion should be wrapped up, as she has to teach soon. What does she say? Use “VAMOS” in your answer.

P-: Olha, ____________________________________________________.
P+: Ah é, você tá super atrasada.

Appendix 2
Following the description of each situation you will be given three options for a possible statement. Choose the one you think is closest to what you might say in the situation.

1. Participants are discussing possible sponsors for the event. A P- participant suggests that a local restaurant might like to sponsor.
   a. Eu proponho o seguinte: vamos entrar em contato com o restaurante Pancho?
   b. Eu sugiro que a gente entre em contato com o restaurante Pancho.
   c. Tem um restaurante aqui perto que pode se interessar.

2. An art history professor, Pedro, will take part in the event. A P- participant suggests that he give two talks ("palestras").
   a. O Pedro não poderia dar duas palestras?
   b. Eu acho que o Pedro pode dar duas palestras.
   c. Será que o Pedro não poderia dar duas palestras?

3. During the event, there will be a video about Spanish art. A P+ participant suggests that the video be shown in a room different than the one originally planned.
   a. Que tal passar o video em outra sala?
   b. E se o vídeo fosse passado em outra sala?
   c. O ideal era que o vídeo fosse passado em outra sala.
4. P+ suggests that P- give an introductory talk based on a map that is in the textbook.
   a. Se não tiver, você dá a palestra introdutória baseada naquele mapa.
   b. Se não tiver, a gente dá a palestra introdutória baseada naquele mapa. Será que você podia ficar encarregada disso?
   c. Se não tiver, dá a palestra introdutória baseada naquele mapa. Será que você podia ficar encarregada disso?

5. P+ suggests that P- (who is responsible for organizing a bulletin board about the event) should add more postcards to the display.
   a. Eu acho que pode botar mais cartão postal.
   b. Eu acho que pode ter mais cartão postal.
   c. Eu acho que você pode botar mais cartão postal.

6. A P- participant suggests that they use a spoon (instead of a knife) for the spreads that will be served.
   a. É melhor colher do que faca.
   b. É melhor você comprar colherinha descartável do que faquinha.
   c. É melhor esse tipo de colherinha dessas descartáveis, é melhor do que, do que faquinha.