Count bare singulats in Uruguayan Spanish

Spanish is a Romance language that has a determiner system, but also allows for the presence of nominals without determiners. Recent literature [1,2] claims that singular count nouns only occur in object position and that they are only selected by so-called have predicates (rent, buy). Uruguayan Spanish seems to have a wider range of predicates that combine with singular count nouns, such as: write, publish, start, finish.

(1) María termina monografía esta semana.
Mary finishes paper this week.

Constructions containing Bare Nouns (BN) in Uruguayan Spanish have not yet been experimentally attested to confirm these judgements. The current study examined this by testing whether the processing of these constructions is similar to their counterparts, regular indefinites.

The experiment compared sentences containing Uruguayan Spanish BNs, regular indefinites and ungrammatical sentences as controls for the BNs grammaticality. All conditions were identical except for the region of the verb and the object: the object was in (a) a bare noun, in (b) an indefinite noun phrase and in (c) the verb was in infinitive form. Only (a) and (b) are grammatical.

Each sentence was preceded by a context to introduce discourse information.

(a) En invierno escribo tesis y termino un trabajo.
   In Winter I write thesis and finish a paper.
(b) En invierno escribo una tesis y termino un trabajo.
   In Winter I write a thesis and finish a paper
(c) *En invierno escribir tesis y termino un trabajo.
   In Winter to write thesis and finish a paper

We conducted a self-paced reading study, where each participant (n=24) read 96 sentences (72 fillers and 24 targets) randomized in a Latin Square design. We predicted that BNs would have closer reaction times (RT) to regular indefinites, since they are produced frequently. Both were expected to be read faster than (c) if BNs are taken as grammatical sentences.

Results showed a slight difference of RT between the BNs (M=374.80ms;SD=104.8ms) and the regular indefinites (M=344.63ms;SD=86.46ms) that did not reach statistical significance (t(23)=1.871;p=0.075), which indicates that they are processed similarly. The ungrammatical condition (c) as expected shows a significantly larger RT (M=452.64ms;SD=158.91ms) when compared to both (a) (t(23)=2.662;p=0.014) and (b) (t(23)=3.887;p=0.001).

On the one hand, results seem to confirm that a wider range of predicates than currently postulated by the literature can select singular count nouns in Uruguayan Spanish. On the other hand, we will explore some of their syntactic properties in order to see how differently they behave from prototypical BNs that occur with have predicates constructions.