

Sex and the NP: Plural Marking as an Index of Masculinity

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In spoken Brazilian Portuguese (BP), plural agreement within the NP varies between (standard) redundant marking on all elements (*aqueles caras* ‘those guys’) (SRP) and (nonstandard) non-redundant plural marking (*aqueles cara*) (NRP). While ubiquitous in Brazil, NRP is evaluated negatively (Naro & Scherre, 2003) and tends to be used by less educated and lower-class speakers. Oushiro (forthcoming) also notes its association with ‘Paulistanos’ (residents of São Paulo), especially those of Italian descent.

In this paper, we add a further dimension to the study of NRP by focusing on its link to *perceived* masculinity among men. Although issues of gender or sexuality are not normally raised in metalinguistic commentary on NRP, Oushiro (forthcoming) shows that, unlike in other cities in Brazil (e.g. Brandão & Oliveira 2012), sex/gender is strongly correlated with NP plural agreement in São Paulo, with men favoring the nonstandard form. To explore the association of perceived sex/gender and NRP, this paper analyzes responses of 100 listeners to a matched guise test (Lambert et al. 1960, Campbell-Kibler 2006) based on the following questions:

- Are effeminate/gay-sounding male voices perceived as masculine in an NRP guise?
- Are masculine/straight-sounding male voices perceived as effeminate when in an SRP guise?

Data are drawn from two excerpts of interviews with two gay-sounding and two straight-sounding men, which were digitally manipulated in Praat so that the plural NPs in each were all either SRP or NRP. A perception questionnaire asked listeners to rate the guises on six 6-point Likert scales (perceived class, education, intelligence, friendliness, formality and effeminacy), as well as on certain traits (shy, articulate, lazy, gay, etc).

T-test analyses in R (R Core Team 2014) show significant differences between listeners’ responses to NRP- and SRP-guises for all scales but friendliness. Both gay- and straight-sounding male voices in NRP-guise are perceived as belonging to a lower social class, and as less educated, less intelligent, less formal and less effeminate than in SRP-guise. However, when responses by male and female listeners are analyzed separately, we find that men perceive other men as effeminate in their SRP-guise more than women, for whom class and intelligence come first. In addition, male listeners checked the “gay box” significantly more often than female listeners for all four voices in their SRP-guise. Conversely, for voices in their NRP-guise, male listeners checked the “gay box” for the straight-sounding voices significantly less often than female listeners.

These results suggest an indirect link (Ochs 1992) between variable NP plural agreement and the perception of gender and sexuality. The relationship between a grammatical variable and perceptions of masculinity/effeminacy is derived from associations with “correctness”, since men are perceived (especially by other men) as effeminate when they employ the prescribed, standard form. These results also show that, although production studies indicate that education and class (but not always sex/gender) are strongly correlated to variability in NP plural agreement in BP, NRP may also convey meanings of masculinity/effeminacy, though indirectly.

References

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