

Gender and politeness rules in Brazilian Portuguese: 1st person plural pronouns

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Gender relations and topic control can be related to the politeness expressed by linguistic variables. However, the relation between politeness rules and gender relations is a relatively unexplored research field. To control politeness in the sociolinguistic interview is a difficult task because more details about the gender relation between interviewee and interviewer are necessary, which is not always possible. Most samples don't cover male/female relations – for instance, by controlling interviewees' and interviewers' gender (Holmes, 1995). Based on Meyerhoff's (2006) proposal of interface between Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness studies and the sociolinguistic approach, we analyze the variable use of Brazilian Portuguese 1st person plural pronouns ("nós" vs. "a gente") in two samples of high school students' speech: one sample was extracted from 20 sociolinguistics interviews and the other one from 32 group interactions between 8 participants which were controlled according to proximity/distance, gender relations, and topic. Both data samples are from Itabaiana, a country town in Sergipe, the smallest Brazilian state, located in the Northeastern region.

Similarly to Zilles' (2005), results show that in the sample of Itabaiana, collected in 2013, multivariate analyses of 1,915 tokens with Goldvarb X show that "a gente" is also predominant (83%). "A gente" is favored in group interactions (0.60) rather than in sociolinguistic interviews (0.38) and by women (0.63) rather than men (0.23). But in considering sample type, the gender difference is greater in group interactions: men use "a gente" less (0.17) than women (0.69). Gender relations were analyzed in terms of relations between participants, if symmetric (M=M, F=F) or asymmetric (F=M, M=F), or male or female as topic introducers, also shows gender effects. In situations in which a male introduces the topic in interactions, "a gente" form is disfavored (M=M 0.35; M=F 0.39). A female introducing the topic is a neutral condition to occur "a gente" form in an asymmetric relation (F=M 0.47) and favorable in a symmetric one (F=F 0.67).

Zilles' (2005) studies show that "nós" is replacing "a gente" in Southern Brazil, in a female-led change. She analyzes a sample of 36 speakers (18 males and 18 females), collected in real time (20 recorded in 1970's, 16 in 1990's) and results point that "a gente" is used in 69% of times. Younger speakers use "a gente" more (0.66) than older speakers (0.42); crosstabs between sex and level of education show that men and women differ only among speakers of lower levels of education.

Considering the design of Itabaiana's sample (young high school students) and Zilles' (2005) results we can suggest that "a gente", possibly, is not a stigmatized form in Brazilian Portuguese. Results of an embedding change in the 1st person of plural, the verb inflection *-mos* with "nós" and "a gente", can corroborate such a suggestion (Naro, Görski and Fernandes, 1999).

However, the results of Itabaiana's sample show that there are non-explicit gender rules for "nós" and "a gente": women use "a gente" and men use "nós" among themselves in group interactions and this can be correlated with a politeness strategy to face preservation in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms. This result reinforces the importance of strategies to control gender relations in data collecting.

References

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