

## Variation and usage preferences: The case of first-person plural in Brazilian Portuguese

Standard Brazilian Portuguese (BP) makes use of two forms to express the semantics of first-person plural (1.PL): the personal pronoun *nós*, with its clitic counterpart *nos*, and the newer form *a gente*, which is diachronically derived from the combination of the feminine definite determiner *a* ('the') with the collective singular noun *gente* ('people') (cf. Menuzzi 2000; Taylor 2009; Costa & Pereira 2013; Marcotulio et al. 2013). The two forms can be used interchangeably; the major difference between them is that *a gente* typically triggers 3.SG agreement, while *nós* is predominantly associated with 1.PL exponents (Lopes 2004). This can be seen in instances of subject-verb agreement (SVA):

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>(1) <b>A gente</b> {<b>toca</b> / ?<b>tocamos</b>} jazz.<br/>         A GENTE play.3.SG play.1.PL jazz<br/>         'We play jazz.'</p> | <p>(2) <b>Nós</b> {?<b>toca</b> / <b>tocamos</b>} jazz.<br/>         we play.3.SG play.1.PL jazz<br/>         'We play jazz.'</p> |
|--|---|

With respect to local anaphoric agreement (LAA), *a gente* is typically used with the proclitic *se* as a target, as opposed to the dedicated 1.PL clitic *nos*. In this case, agreement between *a gente* and the overtly 1.PL form is sometimes even claimed to be **ungrammatical** (Menuzzi 2000; Reuland 2011).

- (3) **A gente<sub>i</sub>** {**se<sub>i</sub>** / ??**nos<sub>i</sub>**} viu na TV.  
 A GENTE REFL REFL.1.PL saw.3.SG on-the TV  
 'We<sub>i</sub> saw ourselves<sub>i</sub> on TV.'

Though occurrences of *a gente* with 1.PL exponents are rare, examples are found in corpora and reported in sociolinguistic studies. In the case of SVA, 1.PL exponents can correspond to up to 18% of the attested variants, depending on the survey (Rubio & Gonçalves 2012; Marcotulio et al. 2013). For LAA, 1.PL variants are less frequent – also because the overall frequency of clitics other than *se* is generally quite low in BP (Cyrino 2003; Carvalho & Calindro 2018), but examples are nonetheless consistently attested in corpora and judged as acceptable by speakers (Taylor 2009; Brito & Sedrins 2017; Varaschin 2021b). The following example from Corpus do Português (Davies 2016) illustrates:

- (4) O amigo é um presente que **a gente<sub>i</sub> nos<sub>i</sub>** dá.  
 the friend is a present that a gente REFL.1.PL give.3.SG  
 'Friends are a gift that we<sub>i</sub> give to ourselves<sub>i</sub>.'

The upshot is that *a gente* seems to be capable of triggering two distinct forms of agreement – 1.PL or 3.SG – with one of them being dispreferred to varying degrees. All of these patterns co-exist within individual dialects, rendering an account in terms of grammar competition implausible. The purpose of our paper is to account for this hybrid behavior of *a gente* (i.e. its agreement variation), as well as for its usage preferences reflected in gradient acceptability judgments (Miller 2013).

We frame our account in terms of HPSG (Pollard & Sag 1994). One of the advantages of HPSG is that it incorporates an architecture of features which is richer and more formally grounded than

the ones assumed in previous proposals regarding *a gente* (Taylor 2009, i.a.). The hybrid behavior of *a gente* with respect to agreement is explained by invoking two distinct (but often overlapping) sets of  $\phi$ -features: one responsible for encoding the mode of individuation of discourse referents (roughly, **semantic agreement** features) and another more directly related to the expression of morphophonological exponents (roughly, **syntactic agreement** features). This is the INDEX/CONCORD distinction introduced by Kathol (1999) and Wechsler & Zlatic (2003), variants of which are also assumed in derivational approaches (Sauerland & Elbourne 2002; Smith 2017; Wurmbrand 2017, i.a.). We argue that *a gente* is a pronoun which is specified as [INDEX 1pl, CONCORD 3sg].

There is independent evidence showing that both INDEX and CONCORD values function as possible triggers for SVA agreement in BP, thus explaining the variation in (1) (de Alencar 2013). With respect to LAA, however, the HPSG Binding Theory predicts that only INDEX  $\phi$ -features should be relevant, given that INDEX  $\phi$ -features play a role analogous to that of individual variables (Varaschin 2021a). That this is in fact true can be seen in the case of complex reflexives, where LAA between *a gente* and dedicated 3.SG forms are categorically rejected and only 1.PL anaphors are acceptable:

- (5) **A gente<sub>i</sub>** viu {\*ela mesma<sub>i</sub> / \*ele mesmo<sub>i</sub> / **nós mesmas<sub>i</sub>**} na TV.  
 A GENTE saw her same.FEM he same.MASC we same.FEM on-the TV.  
 ‘We<sub>i</sub> saw ourselves<sub>i</sub> on TV.’

The fact that both *nos* and *se* are possible in (3) follows from the fact that *se* is not 3.SG, but actually underspecified with respect to its INDEX value (Pereira 2007; Brito 2008). So the variation in (3) is an instance of allomorphy, and not a threat to the view that local binding requires INDEX identity.

The usage preferences signaled in (1) and (4) are explained in terms external to the core grammatical mechanisms sketched above. We argue that lower frequency and reduced acceptability of *a gente*+V[1.PL] and *a gente*+*nos* follows from a theory of social meanings and register coherence (Wilcock 1999; Paolillo 2000; McCready 2019; Beltrama 2020; Asadpour et al. 2022). Sociolinguistic work indicates that *a gente* (as opposed to *nós*) is mostly prevalent among less educated and younger speakers and in colloquial situations (Seara 2000; Zilles 2005; Rubio & Gonçalves 2012). Attitude studies also indicate that speakers perceive *a gente* as an index of informal contexts and less educated speakers (Brustolin 2009; Aguiar 2015). This contrasts with the social embedding of 1.PL inflection and 1.PL clitics like *nos*, which are associated with older speakers (Naro et al. 1999; Mattos 2013) and formal situations (Brustolin 2009; Aguiar 2015; Freitag 2016; Schwenter et al. 2022).

The basic idea we propose to account for the usage preferences in (1) and (4) is that structures where *a gente* is associated with overt 1.PL exponents (be they verbal or anaphoric) convey conflicting social meanings, making it difficult for speakers to infer what register they belong to. Following Bender (2007) and Asadpour et al. (2022), we model social meanings as mutually shared beliefs about the context expressions can be used in. On this view, besides regular licensing statements, grammars should contain: (i) a set of implicational statements associating (the description of) a licensed form F (which can be a phonological string, a word, or a phrase) with a requirement that the context for F must include a particular shared belief – typically one that attributes an evaluative property (e.g. *educated*, *formal*) to the speaker, the addressee or the context itself – and (ii) a principle for projecting these shared assumptions from lexical items to phrases (Pollard & Sag 1994: 334–337).

# References

- Aguiar, Elyne Giselle de Santana Lima. 2015. Variação nós ea gente na posição de sujeito na escrita escolar. *Letras & Letras* 31(2). 128–143.
- de Alencar, Leonel Figueiredo. 2013. Modelação computacional de padrões variáveis de concordância em português. *Revista de Estudos da Linguagem* 21(1). 43–110.
- Asadpour, Hiwa, Shene Hassan & Manfred Sailer. 2022. Non-wh relatives in English and Kurdish: Constraints on grammar and use. In Stefan Müller & Elodie Winckel (eds.), *Proceedings of the 29th International Conference on Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar, Nagoya University & Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics*, 6–26. Frankfurt/Main: University Library. doi:10.21248/hpsg.2022.1.
- Beltrama, Andrea. 2020. Social meaning in semantics and pragmatics. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 14(9). e12398.
- Bender, Emily M. 2007. Socially meaningful syntactic variation in sign-based grammar. *English Language & Linguistics* 11(2). 347–381.
- Brito, Dorothy Bezerra Silva de. 2008. Concordância e a relação antecedente/reflexivo no português brasileiro. *Revista do GELNE* 10(2). 42–45.
- Brito, Dorothy Bezerra Silva de & Adeilson Pinheiro Sedrins. 2017. Sistemas de concordância e de correferência no paradigma pronominal de primeira pessoa do plural no português brasileiro. *Atas do V Simpósio Mundial de Estudos em Língua Portuguesa* 13–28.
- Brustolin, Ana Kelly Borba da Silva. 2009. *Itinerário do uso e variação de nós e a gente em textos escritos e orais de alunos do ensino fundamental da rede pública de Florianópolis*. Florianópolis Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina MA thesis.
- Carvalho, Janayna & Ana Regina Calindro. 2018. A unified account for the loss of third person clitics in Brazilian Portuguese. In Danniell Carvalho & Dorothy Brito (eds.), *Pronomes: Morfossintaxe e semântica*, 91–110. Salvador: EdUFBA.
- Costa, João & Sandra Pereira. 2013. A gente: Pronominal status and agreement revisited. *The Linguistic Review* 30(2). 161–184.
- Cyrino, Sonia Maria Lazzarini. 2003. Para a história do Português Brasileiro: A presença do objeto nulo e a ausência dos clíticos. *Letras de Hoje* 38(1).
- Davies, Mark. 2016. Corpus do Português: Web/dialects. Available online at <http://www.corpusdoportugues.org/web-dial/>.
- Freitag, Raquel Meister Ko. 2016. Uso, crença e atitudes na variação na primeira pessoa do plural no português brasileiro. *DELTA: Documentação de Estudos em Linguística Teórica e Aplicada* 32(4). 889–917.
- Kathol, Andreas. 1999. Agreement and the syntax-morphology interface in HPSG. In Robert Levine & Georgia M. Green (eds.), *Studies in contemporary phrase structure grammar*, 223–274. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lopes, Célia Regina dos Santos. 2004. A gramaticalização de a gente em português em tempo real de longa e de curta duração: Retenção e mudança na especificação dos traços intrínsecos. *Fórum linguístico* 4(1). 47–80.
- Marcotulio, Leonardo, Juliana Vianna & Célia Lopes. 2013. Agreement patterns with a gente in Portuguese. *Journal of Portuguese Linguistics* 12(2).
- Mattos, Shirley Eliany Rocha. 2013. *Goiás na primeira pessoa do plural*. Brasília: Universidade de Brasília dissertation.
- McCready, Elin. 2019. *The semantics and pragmatics of honorification: Register and social meaning*, vol. 11. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Menuzzi, Sérgio. 2000. First person plural anaphora in Brazilian Portuguese: Chains and constraint interaction in binding. In João Costa (ed.), *Portuguese syntax*, 191–240. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, Philip. 2013. Usage preferences: The case of the English verbal anaphor do so. In Stefan Müller (ed.), *Proceedings of the 20th International Conference on Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar, Freie Universität Berlin*, 121–139. <https://proceedings.hpsg.xyz/article/view/801>.
- Naro, Anthony J, Edair Görski & Eulália Fernandes. 1999. Change without change. *Language variation and change* 11(2). 197–211.
- Paolillo, John C. 2000. Formalizing formality: an analysis of register variation in sinhala. *Journal of Linguistics* 36(2). 215–259.
- Pereira, Deize Crespim. 2007. *Variação e mudança no uso dos pronomes reflexivos no português popular da capital paulista*. Sao Paulo, Brazil: Universidade de Sao Paulo dissertation.
- Pollard, Carl & Ivan A. Sag. 1994. *Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press and CSLI Publications.
- Reuland, Eric. 2011. *Anaphora and language design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Rubio, Cássio Florêncio & Sebastião Carlos Leite Gonçalves. 2012. A fala do interior paulista no cenário da sociolinguística brasileira: panorama da concordância verbal e da alternância pronominal. *Alfa: Revista de Linguística* 56(1). 1003–1034.
- Sauerland, Uli & Paul Elbourne. 2002. Total reconstruction, PF movement, and derivational order. *Linguistic Inquiry* 33(2). 283–319.
- Schwenter, Scott, Paige Barton, Kendra Dickinson & Marcia Macedo. 2022. Speakers' subjective evaluations of direct object pronouns in Brazilian Portuguese. *Toronto Working Papers in Linguistics* 44(1).
- Seara, Izabel Christine. 2000. A variação do sujeito nós e a gente na fala florianopolitana. *Organon* 14(28-29). 179–194.
- Smith, Peter W. 2017. The syntax of semantic agreement in English. *Journal of Linguistics* 53(4). 823–863.
- Taylor, Michael. 2009. On the pronominal status of Brazilian Portuguese a gente. *NYU Working Papers in Linguistics* 2. 1–36.
- Varaschin, Giuseppe. 2021a. The disunity of Principle B effects. In Stefan Müller & Nurit Melnik (eds.), *Proceedings of the 28th International Conference on Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar, Frankfurt am Main*, 220–240. Frankfurt/Main: University Library. doi:10.21248/hpsg.2021.12.
- Varaschin, Giuseppe. 2021b. *A simpler syntax of anaphora*. Florianópolis: Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina dissertation.
- Wechsler, Stephen & Larisa Zlatić. 2003. *The many faces of agreement*. Stanford Monographs in Linguistics. Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information.
- Wilcock, Graham. 1999. Lexicalization of context. In Gert Webelhuth, Jean-Pierre Koenig & Andreas Kathol (eds.), *Lexical and constructional aspects of linguistic explanation*, 373–387. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
- Wurmbrand, Susi. 2017. Formal and semantic agreement in syntax: A dual feature approach. In Joseph Emonds & Markéta Janebová (eds.), *Language use and linguistic structure: Proceedings of the Olomouc Linguistics Colloquium*, 19–36. Olomouc: Palacký University.
- Zilles, Ana M S. 2005. The development of a new pronoun: The linguistic and social embedding of a gente in Brazilian Portuguese. *Language Variation and Change* 17(1). 19–53.