

Zilles, Ana M. S. 2005. The Development of a New Pronoun: The Linguistic and Social Embedding of “gente” in Brazilian Portuguese. *Language Variation and change*, 17, 1:19-53

Abstract

“A gente” is replacing “nos” as 1st person plural pronoun.

“A gente” is becoming grammaticalized.

“Grammaticalization” was used for the first time in 1912, “The attribution of grammatical character to a previously autonomous word” (Meillet, 1912:131).

Grammaticalization is a distinctive type of change:

- 1) It involves a set of interrelated changes.
- 2) It is unidirectional

Labov’s Model of Changes

Change from above:

- 1) Imported from somewhere
- 2) Prestige
- 3) Speakers are conscious of the new form
- 4) Socially driven
- 5) Educated young adults are at the forefront of the change

Change from below:

- 1) Local
- 2) Little conscious awareness
- 3) Lower middle class adolescents are at the forefront of the change

Background on the Variable

- Words like man, people, and person, probably for semantic reasons, are good candidates for grammaticalization as indefinite pronouns.

Parallels With Você

Vossa Mercê -> Você, and kicked out “tu” [2 sing] (and “vos” [2 pl])

A gente -> A’ente, and kicking out “nos” [1 pl] (and “eu” [1 sing])

Portuguese is moving from 6 verb forms:

- Eu canto
- Tu cantas
- Ele canta
- Nos cantamos
- Vos cantais
- Eles cantam

to one:

- A gente canta
- Você canta
- Ele canta
- A gente canta
- Vocês canta
- Eles canta

(Zilles says to three)

Phonological reduction of Gente and Você

-A gente -> a’ente

-Você -> cê

-Reduction only occurs in subject position.

“Apparently, therefore, the grammaticalization of você is still underway, with new stages evolving that may be supplying the language with a clear distinction between subject and object pronouns...”(Zilles, 2005:29).

Long-Term Diachronic Studies

The use of “gente” as a subject referential pronoun increased in the ‘60’s and ‘70’s, coinciding with industrialization, urban migration, improvements in communication, development of an urban working class, and increase in enrolment in public schools.

Popular Origins

- Consistent with change from below.
- Assis (1988) studied a rural community in Minas; the informants were all illiterate, both genders and several age groups, who were born and lived in the area.
- Speakers favoured “a gente” even in contexts where 1st person singular forms would be expected.

National Distribution

- All studies show Brazilians are using “a gente” at increasing rates, all over the country, and increasingly over time.

What is “A gente”?

- Started in the 19th century.
- Received a negative evaluation because it was associated with people of lower social status.

Apparent time, Data from 1990's

<u>Sample</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Education</u>
(39)	m (19)	25-49 (17)	Elementary (10)
Sociolinguistic Interviews	f (20)	50< (22)	Intermediate (8)
Porto Alegre			Secondary (9)
1990's			Post-secondary (12)

- “A gente” was used 69% of the time.
- Shows change from below (or at least zero evidence of change from above – the most highly educated speakers do not use it more than poorly educated ones.)
- Evidence of grammaticalization is that “gente” is governed by the sex of the referent, not the sex of gente (f).

“a gente está zangado”

Brazilian Portuguese is moving away from being a pro-drop language:

With nos	with a gente
Pro 32%	68%
Null 62%	38%

Real time panel study

- Compared the speech of the same 13 speakers in 1970's and 1990's.
- Found no change in their rate of "gente" use.
- Remained lower than the younger people.

"It seems likely that the age differences observed in apparent time are a reflection of generational change, not an age-grading pattern that each individual will retrace in the course of their lifetime" (Zilles, 2005).

Real time trend study

36 speakers – 18 male, 18 female

20 recorded in 1970's, 16 in 1990's

- Older people used "nos" more, younger people used "gente" more.
- Generational change, not age graded.

Conclusions

- 1) Education-level distribution – Peak at middle educational levels, suggesting a change from below.
- 2) Age groups – Younger speakers use "a gente" more than older speakers, suggesting a generational change. (Impressionistic observation suggests that adolescents use "a gente" and also its reduced form even more than adults, suggesting change from below)
- 3) Sex – Women lead the change, except for the most highly educated women. This shows "a gente" is stigmatized, suggesting change from below.
- 4) Stylistic variation – "A gente" provides a safe way of avoiding the heavy stigma associated with omitted agreement, that is, given the choice between making a mistake in agreement and using a non-standard but generalized new pronoun, people prefer the second option.

"So, to sum up, there is no linguistic evidence that this is a change from above. Indeed, what external prestige dialect would it be coming from? This is difficult to say because Brazilians defer to no one, and Porto Alegrenses defer to no one in Brazil. "