Nós and A Gente ‘we’ in Brazilian Portuguese: Effect of Age in Urban and Rural Areas of Espírito Santo

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Abstract
In Brazilian Portuguese there are three common ways to express first person plural: Traditional standard ‘nós’ with concord (‘nós falamos’ ‘we speak’); Nonstandard ‘nós’ without concord (‘nós fala’ ‘we speak’); Emerging standard ‘a gente’ with concord (‘a gente fala’ ‘we speak’). In this paper, variation involving these forms is analyzed as two binary variables, concord with ‘nós’ and alternation between ‘nós’ and ‘a gente.’ This variation is vigorous and ongoing: concord is a stereotype; alternation is a marker. We analyze 1517 tokens from 40 speakers in Vitória, the capital of the State of Espírito Santo, and 1757 tokens from 32 speakers in the rural area of Santa Leopoldina, a small town of the same State. In terms over overall ternary distribution, the samples differ in only 4.6 percentage points with respect to nós with concord; 20.4 percentage points with respect to ‘nós’ without concord; and 15.7 percentage points with respect to ‘a gente’ with concord. The relative weights of age group in separate binary analyses show different directions in the cases of ‘nós’ with concord vs. ‘nós’ without concord, and ‘a gente’ with concord vs. ‘nós’ with or without concord in the two communities. In Vitória, the youngest age group favors ‘nós’ with concord and ‘a gente’ with concord, suggesting change in the urban community toward increased frequency of concord in line with other urban centers in Brazil. In Santa Leopoldina, we find decreasing use of ‘nós’ with concord in three age groups with an uptick in concord by the 7-14 year group. Furthermore, in Santa Leopoldina, the intermediate group of 26-49 favors of ‘a gente’ with concord, suggesting age grading. This use is more frequently by speakers who have greater contact with Vitória, such as in agricultural trade. It is reinforced by the effect of the interviewer in Santa Leopoldina: a gente with concord is favored if the interviewer is an outsider. Thus, rural and urban communities are on the same plane as far as overall distribution of ‘nós’ with concord is concerned, but exhibit different trajectories of ongoing progress, with distinct reflexes in the community: urban progress is community-wide change, while rural progress show age grading for a gente with concord, and change in progress is slower for ‘nós’ with concord. In both cases, direction is toward the dominant urban norm of agreeing forms. Nonetheless, even though ‘a gente’ with concord, an urban feature preferred in cities, penetrates the rural community, speakers still exhibit more ‘nós’ without concord, a local loyalty feature.

Authors
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1 Introduction

We investigate the effect of age in first-person-plural expression with subject pronouns nós (1st-plural morphology) ‘we’ and a gente (3rd-singular morphology) ‘we’ in urban and rural areas of the State of Espírito Santo, Brazil. The form nós comes directly from the Latin pronominal nos; a gente is derived from the Latin nominal gens, gentis ‘tribe’.

In this paper we focus on three constructions:

(I) nós with concord (with –mos) ‘we’ - traditional standard or prestige variant (Nós moramos ‘we live’; Nós vamos ‘we go’; Nós fomos ‘we went’; Nós morávamos ‘we used to live’)

(II) nós without concord (without –mos) ‘we’ - non-standard variant, heavily stigmatized in urban areas (Nós mora ‘we live’; Nós morou ‘we lived’; Nós vai ‘we go’; Nós foi ‘we went’; Nós morava ‘we used to live’)

(III) a gente with concord (without –mos) ‘we’ - emerging standard variant (A gente mora ‘we live’; A gente morou ‘we lived’; A gente vai ‘we go’; A gente foi ‘we went’; A gente morava ‘we used to live’)

This variation is very common and exhibits several constraints and ongoing trends (Naro et al. 2017, Scherre and Naro 2014, Scherre, Yacovenco, and Naro 2018, Zilles 2005). In terms of Labov (1994), variable concord with nós is a stereotype; and alternation between nós and a gente is a marker (Scherre and Naro 2014, Zilles 2005). “Some variables are the overt topics of social comment and show both correction and hypercorrection (stereotypes)” (Labov 1994:78): this is exactly the case of variable concord with nós, especially with respect to overt correction (Scherre and Naro 2014). “…others are not at the same high level of social awareness, but show consistent stylistic and social stratification (markers)” (Labov 1994:78): this is exactly the case of alternation between nós and a gente (Zilles 2005).

Variation involving these forms is analyzed here as two binary variables, concord with nós and alternation between nós and a gente, using GoldVarb X (Sankoff, Tagliamonte, and Smith 2005). Our principal aim is to show once again the existence of flows and counterflows in the vast Brazilian speech community, especially in cases involving stigma such as in variable concord (Naro and Scherre 2013).

2 The Samples, with Examples

Here we analyze data from two samples, the Vitória 2000 sample and the Santa Leopoldina 2013 sample. Vitória 2000 contains 40 speakers from the capital of the state of Espírito Santo (Figure 1), a city of about 320,000 inhabitants, with a variety that in the view of many speakers may be termed unmarked urban speech (Scherre, Yacovenco, and Naro 2018:16). Speakers are stratified in four age groups: 7-14, 15-25, 26-49, >49; two sex/gender: male/female; and three levels of schooling: 1-8, 9-11; >11. Santa Leopoldina 2013 contains the speech of 32 speakers from the rural area of Santa Leopoldina (Figure 2), a small city in a mountainous part of the state of Espírito Santo, with about

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12,000 inhabitants. *Santa Leopoldina* speech is typically rural, showing specific usages such as low frequency of use of -mos with the pronouns nós in the present and imperfect tenses. This results in the relatively frequent use of forms without agreement such as nós mora ‘we live’ and nós morava ‘we used to live’ (Foeger, Yacovenco and Scherre 2017, Naro, Scherre, Foeger and Benfica 2017, Scherre, Yacovenco and Naro 2018). The 32 speakers in the *Santa Leopoldina* sample are stratified in four age groups: 7-14, 15-25, 26-49, >49; two sex/gender: male/female; and two schooling levels: 1-4, 5-8 years of schooling.

Examples drawn from our two samples, *Vitória* (1a. 1b. 1c. and 1d.) and *Santa Leopoldina* (2a. 2b. 2c. and 2d.), are shown below. Examples in (1) and (2) constitute supertokens, as defined in Tagliamonte (2012:111): “variants forms from the same speaker in the same stretch of discourse, [...] in parallel constructions”. Traditional standard variants with nós with concord are given in
[green square brackets]: non-standard variants with nós without concord are given in (pink parentheses); the emerging standard variant a gente with concord is noted in <red angle brackets>.

Speaker from Vitória 2000 sample, 26-49 years old, male, 1-8 years of schooling

(1) a. (Nós toma) bastante cuidado
   ‘We take great care…’

   b. Às vezes, [nós tamo] limpando o terreiro
   Sometimes, [nós tamo] cleaning the yard
   ‘Sometimes, we are cleaning the yard’

   c. que <a gente não pode> só depender também dos outros
   Because we(SG) not can(3SG) only depend on also the people
   ‘because we can’t just depend on other people’

   d. <A gente tem que> tomar providência
   ‘We have to do something’

Speaker from Santa Leopoldina 2013 sample, 07-14 years old, female, 5-8 years of schooling

(2) a. Aí (nós faz carinho) nele
   ‘Then we(1PL) pet(3SG) him’

   b. [Nós pegamo] o periquito
   ‘We caught the parakeet’

   c. (Nós tirava) elas lá de dentro.
   ‘We chased them out of there.’

   d. <A gente sai>, sabe?
   ‘We go out, right?’

3 Results and Discussion

We reanalyzed 1517 tokens from the 40 speakers in Vitória, the capital (Benfica 2016, Mendonça 2010), and 1757 tokens from the 32 speakers in the rural area of Santa Leopoldina, a small town (Foeger 2014, Foeger, Yacovenco and Scherre 2017).

In terms over overall ternary distribution (Table 1), the Vitória and Santa Leopoldina samples differ in only 4.6 percentage points with respect to nós with concord (26.6%/22.0%); 20.4 percentage points with respect to nós without concord (3.8%/24.2%); and 15.7 percentage points with respect to a gente with concord (69.6%/53.8%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Samples</th>
<th>Variants</th>
<th>Nós with concord: old standard</th>
<th>Nós without concord: non-standard</th>
<th>A gente with concord: new standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vitória sample 2000</td>
<td></td>
<td>26.6% (403/1517)</td>
<td>3.8% (57/1517)</td>
<td>69.6% (1057/1517)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Leopoldina sample</td>
<td></td>
<td>22.0% (386/1757)</td>
<td>24.2% (425/1757)</td>
<td>53.8% (946/1757)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Frequencies of nós with concord, nós without concord and a gente with concord ‘we’ in two samples of Brazilian Portuguese: trinomial distribution.

However, the relative weights of age group in separate binary analyses show flows in different directions in the cases of nós with concord vs. nós without concord, and a gente with concord vs. nós with or without concord in the two communities.
In Vitória, the urban area (Table 2 and Figure 3), the two youngest age groups favor nós with concord (0.814) and a gente with concord (0.775), suggesting change in the urban community toward increased frequency of concord, in line with other urban centers in Brazil as, for example, in Rio de Janeiro (Naro and Scherre 2013).

Nonetheless, there is a slight hint of two separate flows in the case of nós with concord, one in the direction of loss of concord (0.409; 0.318) and another in the direction of acquisition of concord (0.814), in terms of relative weights.

In Santa Leopoldina (Table 3 and Figure 4), the rural area, we find decreasing use of nós with concord in the three older age groups (0.675; 0.506; 0.315, respectively) with a slight increase in concord (0.489) by the youngest group (7-14 year old). Here there is a clear evidence of two flows: loss of concord up to the 15-25 year group; and acquisition, still in its beginning stages, in the 7-14 year group (Naro and Scherre 2013 also). Furthermore, in Santa Leopoldina, the intermediate group of 26-49 favors of a gente with concord (0.745), suggesting age grading. It is used more frequently by speakers who have greater contact with Vitória, an urban area, such as in agricultural trade, predominantly in the 26-49 year old group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variants</th>
<th>Nós with concord     vs. nós without concord</th>
<th>A gente with concord vs. nós with and without concord</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age, Years</td>
<td>Relative weights</td>
<td>Percentages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-25</td>
<td>0.814</td>
<td>97.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-49</td>
<td>0.318</td>
<td>90.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;49</td>
<td>0.409</td>
<td>80.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>87.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Effect of age in Vitória sample 2000 (urban area): two separate binary analysis.

Figure 3: Effect of age in Vitória sample 2000 (urban area): two binary analysis.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age, Years</th>
<th>Relative weights</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
<th>n/N</th>
<th>Relative weights</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
<th>n/N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7-14</td>
<td>0.489</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
<td>84/190</td>
<td>0.210</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>81/272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-25</td>
<td>0.315</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td>117/239</td>
<td>0.428</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>143/382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-49</td>
<td>0.506</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
<td>65/121</td>
<td>0.745</td>
<td>74.9%</td>
<td>362/483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;49</td>
<td>0.675</td>
<td>46.0%</td>
<td>120/261</td>
<td>0.482</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
<td>359/620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>0.476</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
<td>386/811</td>
<td>0.538</td>
<td>53.8%</td>
<td>946/1757</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Effect of age in *Santa Leopoldina* sample 2013 (rural area): two separate binary analysis.

![Figure 4](image_url)

Figure 4: Effect of age in *Santa Leopoldina* sample 2013 (rural area): two binary analysis.

The age grading on variable *a gente* with concord vs. all cases of *nós* in *Santa Leopoldina* is reinforced by the effect of the interviewer: *a gente* with concord is favored if the interviewer is an outsider (0.700). This variable is not statistically significant for *nós* with concord.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variants</th>
<th><em>Nós</em> with concord vs. <em>nós</em> without concord</th>
<th><em>A gente</em> with concord vs. <em>nós</em> with and without concord</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The interviewer</td>
<td>Relative weights</td>
<td>Percentages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside the community</td>
<td>[0.466]</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside the community</td>
<td>[0.649]</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
<td>386/811</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Effect of the interviewer on *Santa Leopoldina* sample 2013 (rural area): two separate binary analysis.
4 Final Remarks

In sum, rural and urban communities in Espírito Santo are similar concerning overall distribution of nós with concord, but exhibit different trends. Urban progress is community-wide change for nós with concord and for a gente with concord, while rural progress is change undergone by speakers in the middle-age subgroup of the community for a gente with concord (Figure 5), and change in progress is slower for nós with concord (Figure 6).

![Figure 5](image1)

Figure 5: Effect of age on Vitória-Urban and Santa Leopoldina-Rural samples: Nós with concord vs. nós without concord (two binary analyses).

![Figure 6](image2)

Figure 6: Effect of age on Vitória-Urban and Santa Leopoldina-Rural samples: A gente with concord vs. nós with and without concord (two binary analyses).

In both cases, direction is toward the dominant urban norm of agreeing forms in the country as a whole. Nonetheless, even though a gente with concord - an urban feature preferred in cities - penetrates the rural community, speakers in Santa Leopoldina still exhibit more nós without concord, a local loyalty feature (Milroy 1989:168, Mattos and Scherre 2015, Mattos 2017). The fact of the matter is that the nós form, with or without concord, is still very common in Santa Leopoldina (22.0% and 24.2%, respectively). Indeed, nós without concord is naturally used in some varieties of Brazilian Portuguese in predictable linguistic contexts, in accord with cognitive, functional, and structural principles (Foeger, Yacovenco and Scherre 2017, Naro et al 2017, Naro, Görski and Fernandes 1999, Naro, Scherre, Foeger and Benfica 2017, Scherre, Yacovenco and Naro 2018).
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