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Grammaticalization of *a gente* in Brazilian Portuguese

Ana M. S. Zilles

1 Introduction

This study is part of a project about several morphosyntactic changes affecting the system of pronouns and subject-verb agreement in Brazilian Portuguese. These changes include the introduction of new pronouns and an overall reduction in the use of verbal agreement. One aspect of this grammatical reorganization is the pronominal usage of *a gente*, originally a full NP meaning 'the people', which is increasingly being used as a personal pronoun, as shown in (1) where this new form alternates with the old pronoun *nós*:

- (1) POA28¹ 1.33-7: (hes) *nós* não tínhamos muito contato com outras crianças, a *vó* nunca deixou *a gente* sair assim [do]- do portão pra fora pra brincar com outras crianças, então o nosso mundo éramos *nós* mesmos²

2 Historical and Theoretical Background

This shift probably began in the 16th century with the decline in the use of *homem/ome* ('man' in English) and the rise in the use of *gente* as an indeterminate expression with generic meaning. According to Lopes (2001:140-1), this process was slow and gradual, involving an intermediate stage in which the noun *gente* lost the syntactic feature [+plural] and crystallized as a singular word with plural or collective semantic interpretation. According to Menon (1996:626) and Lopes (2001:137), another aspect of this change has to do with gender agreement. As a noun, *gente* is feminine, and requires feminine modifiers (*muita gente*, *só gente bonita*)³ but now, as a pronoun, the form *a gente* can appear with masculine or feminine adjectives or nouns,

¹ POA refers to Porto Alegre, the city where data in this analysis have been collected (Section 3). The number 28 identifies the informant and is followed by an indication of the line(s) in which the token occurred.

² (hesitation) *we* didn't have much contact with other children, grandma never let us (literally: *the people*, referring to the speaker and her cousins) go beyond the gate to play with other children, so *we* ourselves were our own world'

³ The examples mean: 'a lot of people' and 'only beautiful people'. The quantifier *muita* and the adjective *bonita* are marked feminine forms in Portuguese.

according to the gender of the speaker, like the pronouns for first and second person both singular and plural. Let us consider an example from the VARSUL corpus. A male speaker was talking about his childhood and how children would offer their seats to adults in buses or streetcars. He said:

- (2) POA07 1.468-70 - *a gente*, por exemplo, era *guri*, a gente vinha do colégio e coisa, entrava uma pessoa idosa...⁴

In (2), *guri* is a regional word for 'boy'; it is masculine, in opposition to feminine *guria*, to be chosen by a female speaker if all the referents she would have in mind were females. So it is clear that this change in agreement is a very important attestation of the ongoing pronominalization of *a gente*.

In the second half of the 19th century, the NP *a gente* already included reference to the speaker, thus showing features of a personal pronoun. This can be seen in (3), extracted from a comic play by Martins Pena, an important playwright of that time in Brazil.

- (3) "Rosinha: A prima Maricota disse-me que era uma coisa de pôr *a gente* de queixo caído⁵." (Martins Pena, *apud* Lopes, 2001:141)

Now, as a personal pronoun, *a gente* is used to refer to 1st person plural, with the following meanings: a) the speaker and the interlocutor or audience (the inclusive usage); b) the speaker and a clearly defined group of persons (e.g. the family), excluding the interlocutor; c) the speaker and a non-specific group of persons (e.g. the Brazilians); d) the speaker and everybody else (the generic meaning, be it understood as anyone or everyone in a group). Besides these semantically plural references, *a gente* is sometimes used with first person singular reference, although these cases still seem ambiguous.

These observations show that *a gente* has acquired the semantic properties of a personal pronoun and support the view that it is undergoing a particular kind of change called grammaticalization. In this respect, the introduction of *a gente* in the pronominal system of Brazilian Portuguese seems to be parallel to the introduction of the pronoun *on* in French, from the Latin noun *homo* ('man'). Most important for the purpose here, it is also

⁴ 'We, for example, were children, we were coming back from school and so on, an old person would come into (the bus)...

⁵ 'Cousin Maricota told me it was something to make *one's* jaw drop' (literally: to put *the people* [including the speaker] with dropped jaw).

parallel to the development of the second person singular pronoun *você* in Portuguese. *Você* results from the grammaticalization of the address form *Vossa Mercê* ('Your Mercy', 'Your Grace'), whose first record dates from 1331 (Faraco 1996:58). Presumably it was coined during the Middle Ages and was first used exclusively for the king, but in the XIV century it was already being used among nobles and in the XV century among the bourgeoisie, as can be seen in Gil Vicente's plays. In the meantime, new address forms were being coined to distinguish the king, in a very interesting process that reveals the symbolic role of address terms.⁶

The pronoun *você* developed a corresponding plural form *vocês*, imposing another change in the system. The distinction between singular and plural is not provided anymore by different lexical items (*tu* - *vós*), but by morphology (-s ending).

These changes concerning the second person pronouns and the corresponding agreement with 3p verb forms were labeled as the "revolution of the third person" by Marilina dos Santos Luz (Faraco 1996:54-5). This expression thus refers to a sociolinguistic process leading to a chain of morphological and syntactic changes which are still in progress in the language, particularly in Brazil (European Portuguese is beyond the scope of this paper).

The introduction of both *você* and *a gente* in the language has several consequences, not only in the pronoun paradigm, but also in the verbal agreement system. Deriving from nominal expressions, which took 3rd person agreement on the verb, the new pronouns have a great impact in reducing verbal morphology from six different forms to only three: a) the marked first singular ending *canto*; b) the marked 2nd and 3rd plural endings: *vocês/eles cantam*; c) the unmarked, generalizing form for 2nd and 3rd singular as well as for 1st plural forms: *você/ele/a gente canta*. In this case, we have only the verb stem *cant-* ('sing') followed by the thematic vowel *-a*. This is the thematic vowel for the verbs in the 1st conjugation, while in the 2nd and 3rd conjugations the thematic vowel would be *-e* as in *vende* ('sell') and *parte* ('leave'). In Table 1, the 'old' and 'new' systems are contrasted.

Note, however, that there are other, phonological changes in the verbal system as well: there is a lot of variability in 3p pl agreement, with denasalization (e.g. Guy, 1982). The result seems to be the loss of person marking in the verbal system, with the correlate decline of null subject and

⁶ Faraco (1996) explains the interrelated development of a new social order in Portugal, the consequent communicative needs, and corresponding new linguistic forms.

rise in the use of full pronouns in subject position, as shown, for example, in Duarte (2000).

	'old' pronominal system	agreement	'new' pronominal system	agreement
P1	Eu	cantO	Eu	CantO
P2	Tu	cantaS	Você / Tu ⁷	CantaØ
P3	Ele / ela	cantaØ ⁸	Ele / ela	CantaØ
P4	Nós	cantaMOS	A gente ⁹	CantaØ
P5	Vós	cantaIS	Vocês	CantaM
P6	Eles / elas	cantaM	Eles / elas	CantaM

Table 1: The pronominal paradigms for subject position and corresponding verb forms in Portuguese ('old') and in Brazilian Portuguese ('new' system)

In this paper I concentrate on the grammaticalization of *a gente*, assuming that there are two different stages¹⁰ going on at the moment. The first stage considered here is the recategorization of *a gente* as a personal pronoun, which can be described, in terms of a variable rule, as the alternation between *nós* and *a gente*. The second stage involves phonological reduction and can be described in terms of a variable rule as the alternation between *a gente* and *a'ente*, with deletion of the fricative segment.

As for the reduction, it is important to notice that there is no evidence, as far as I know, of a general phonological process of deleting this fricative segment going on in the language, although it was observed in remote times—e.g., Latin *legere* ('to read') > *leer* > *ler* in Portuguese. Now the reduction seems to be restricted to this word, leading to the conclusion that it happens because of the grammaticalization process.

⁷ *Você* is the widespread second person pronoun, but *tu* is still used in several areas (in the South, in the Northeast, etc.) with variable agreement in the verb.

⁸ In Latin the ending for 3rd sg. was *-t*, already lost in early Portuguese texts.

⁹ When *nós* is used there is great variability in agreement. Besides the standard inflection *-mos*, there are two non-standard forms: *-mo* and \emptyset ending, the latter mainly restricted to contexts in which the target form would be a word with antepenultimate stress: *nós cantávamos* ~ *nós cantava* (Zilles, 2000).

¹⁰ The process of grammaticalization involves correlated unidirectional changes. This enables us to conceive the process as a set of successive changes here referred to as 'stages' because of their implicational relation: stage B necessarily presupposes stage A, but not the reverse.

In this respect, it is interesting again to look at the parallel development of *você*. According to Vitral (1996) and Ramos (1997), this form is also undergoing phonological reduction, presenting two variants: *ocê* or simply *cê* in the singular, and *ocês* or *cês* in the plural. Interestingly enough, there is no general loss of this initial fricative segment /v/ in the language as well. Besides this reduction, there is an important syntactic constraint that must be mentioned: the reduced forms *ocê/cê* occur almost only in subject position, though *ocê* may be combined with a preceding preposition, as, for example, in a sentence like *isso é pr'ocê* (with contraction between the preposition and the pronoun) instead of *isso é para você*, meaning 'this is for you'.

Apparently, then, the grammaticalization of *você* is still underway, with new stages going on that may be supplying the language with a clear distinction between subject and object pronouns, a distinction greatly affected by other changes that have been happening which I barely mention here: the use of 3rd person nominative pronouns in accusative position and the parallel almost total loss of the 3rd person accusative clitics (*o/a, os/as*).

If this is true, we might guess both *você* and *a gente* are undergoing phonological reduction to 'reorganize' the grammar. And if it is true that the reduction of *a gente* to *a'ente* is also constrained to subject position, one might even think that another change is on its way, in the same direction of the French language, cliticizing subject pronouns as the verbal morphology is being lost (Vitral 1996; Duarte 2000). Presence or absence of stress on the reduced forms is an important question in this respect, but lie beyond the scope of this study.

3 Methodology

I have two main objectives in this paper: a) to characterize briefly the use of *a gente* in contrast with *nós*, considering only tokens in subject position and the social distribution of these variants; and b) to investigate in more detail the use of the reduced form *a'ente*, considering both linguistic and social variables. To do so I am using materials from the VARSUL database (a corpus of sociolinguistic interviews focusing on urban language variation in southern Brazil). This paper considers data from Porto Alegre,¹¹ a large metropolitan center and capital of Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost state.

¹¹ In 2001, the sample of Porto Alegre included 52 informants, all adults aged 25 or more. There are three different age groups. Adolescents will be included next.

For the first variable rule (the alternation between *nós* and *a gente*), the sample included 33 informants stratified according to gender, age group (under 50 and above 50), and level of education (elementary, intermediate, high school, and post-secondary education). These are, in fact, the criteria established in the VARSUL data base.

For the second variable rule, the alternation between *a gente* and *a'ente*, the sample included 32 informants,¹² also stratified according to gender, age group, and level of education. In this analysis I added a tentative formulation for social class which had not been considered when the data were collected.

4 Results Concerning the Use of *a gente* versus *nós*

The general distribution of the two pronouns is as follows: out of 1483 tokens of 1st person plural reference, 1041 (70%) of them were of *a gente* and only 441 (30%) of them were of *nós*. This result is not only a robust one, but it is consistent with the results of other investigations as in Omena (1996), Seara (to appear), and Lopes (1995, 2001).

First, it is important to mention that in our data, the majority of tokens of *a gente* are associated with verbs in the 3sg form. There is only one token of *a gente* followed by a verb with 1pl ending, from a male who has been to high school and belongs to the younger age group. He uttered it¹³ jokingly. This clearly shows that in fact *a gente* is dramatically reducing verbal morphology.

In all VARBRUL runs, age group, level of education, and gender were selected as statistically significant. Results are presented in Table 1. The results support the idea that this is a change in progress led by female speakers and by younger speakers, but the results for level of education are puzzling, because the less educated speakers in our sample disfavor the new form while the others not only favor it, but seem to be very uniform in this respect.

Observing both weights and percentages for intermediate, high school, and post-secondary education in Table 2, there is much similarity. The chi-square tests showed no significant difference among them. Therefore, instead of simply amalgamating them, I investigated the possibility of interaction between gender and level of education. Results show there is interaction,

¹² 90% of the informants are the same in both analyses.

¹³ He said: 'e pra se entrá numa faculdade também não é fácil, né? então *a gente 'stamos aí, né?*' The meaning of this is 'it's not easy for someone to get into a faculty, so there I am (lit.: there the people are (using the verb *estar*+1st p.p. inflection)'. This expression means 'I'm ready/open for what may come'.

although both male and female speakers in these three levels of education are not significantly different in the use of *a gente*. As shown in Table 3, while females are uniform in their use of the new form, regardless of their level of education, males with the lower level of education seem to resist the use of *a gente* (37%), clearly differing from all other groups. I have no explanation for this difference, but I can speculate this might be an issue of identity: if the use of *a gente* is perceived as a female feature, males in this lower social level may wish to avoid it in order to present themselves as different from females. Further investigation is needed, and a study of attitudes may be of great help.

Factor groups		N/Total	%	Weight
Age group	< 50 years	468/591	79	.65
	> 50 years	573/892	64	.40
Level of education	Elementary	130/239	54	.31
	Intermediate	335/454	74	.55
	High School	292/372	78	.54
	Post-secondary	284/418	68	.53
Gender	Female	670/895	75	.56
	Male	371/588	63	.41

Table 2. Groups of social factors statistically significant for *a gente* in Porto Alegre, Brazil (VARSUL data base)

Gender	Education	N/Total	%
Females	Elementary	84/116	72
	Intermediate	223/304	73
	High School	233/279	84
	Post-Secondary	130/196	66
Males	Elementary	46/123	37
	Intermediate	112/150	75
	High School	59/93	63
	Post-secondary	154/222	69

Table 3. Percentages of *a gente* showing interaction between gender and level of education in Porto Alegre, Brazil (VARSUL data base)

In any case, the role of gender and social status is unclear in the literature. Omena (1996:313-320), studying data from a sample of working and lower middle class speakers in Rio de Janeiro, shows males favor slightly the use of *a gente* (72%), in comparison to females (67%). It is important to

noted that more than 50% of these women did not have a job and spent the day at home. In opposition to this, other studies by Lemos Monteiro (1991) and Lopes (1995), considering the speech of people who have post-secondary education and belong to the cultural elite in Brazil, show women favor the new form. If further research shows this to be the general tendency, it may indicate that this stage of the process is led not just by women, but by women from higher social levels. Omena suggested that this change accelerated rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, a period of political conflicts and great social change in Brazil. Interestingly, this was a period in which more women got university degrees, entered massively in the job market and were empowered by feminist movements. So perhaps the new form was taken up by women as a signal of their new identity. At the present, this is an open question.

Lastly, there is one further important observation to be made here, concerning the social level of the leaders in this change. One can also conjecture that speakers may use it in order to avoid the strong social stigma associated with absence of agreement. So given an apparently general drift to 3rd sg or unmarked forms, regardless of the subject, higher-status speakers achieve agreement by using a pronoun for the meaning 'we' which happens to be morphologically 3rd sg. With this in mind, let us now turn to the reduction of the new form.

5 Preliminary Considerations about Reduction to *a'ente*

The idea to study this reduction came from two sources: empirical observation of the speech of adolescents and the work of a colleague in the VARSUL team, Odete Menon. Based on her article about the grammaticalization of *a gente* (Menon, 1996) and on her study of standard spoken language in São Paulo (Menon, 1994), I postulate here the following simplified sequence of reductions, *a gente* > *a'ente* > *'ente* > *'te*, which conform to the expectations in a grammaticalization process. Testing them by quantitative analysis is important. Furthermore, the identification of any systematicity in these reductions may be crucial to a discussion of these changes, especially their social configuration.

Zilles and Mazzoca (2000) found many different realizations of *a gente* (Figure 1). Noticing that the deletion of the fricative segment seemed to be the most systematic tendency in the data, and considering that some of the reductions were clearly motivated by articulatory reasons, as in (7), I decided to collapse the variants into two categories (Figure 2): one with the fricative

segment (to which I added the only token of an aspirated segment ((8) in Figure 1)) and the other, with all the tokens in which the fricative segment was missing. This is the new form in the present analysis. Results are presented for the selection of the reduced form.

Original form:

- (1) Então *a gente* tem bastante opção (de filmes na TV). (RS POA 04)
So we have many options (of films on TV)

Reductions involving deletion of the fricative segment:

- (2) Lá na nascente dele *a 'ente* fica com água por aqui, ó. (RS POA 27)
'there in the source of it (the river) we get water up to here, see'
(3) *'ente* quase não sai agora, né? (RS POA 11)
'we almost never go out now, right?'
(4) De ônibus, né? *'te* viajava. (RS.POA07)
'By bus, right? we used to travel.'
(5) Mas foi bom, *'en* aproveitou bastante. (RS POA 25)
'But it was good, we got a lot done.'

Reductions maintaining the fricative segment:

- (6) *gente* tem que comer comida sem sal, bebida não pode. (RS POA 19)
'we have to eat saltless food, liquor is forbidden'
(7) então é uma coisa assim que *a gen'* não pode parar. (RS POA 25)
'so it is something that we can't stop'

Aspiration of the fricative segment (reduction?)

- (8) quando eu descobri que ele estava doente, foi o dia que nós, *a hente*, ele me convidou pra ir passear ... (RS POA 14)
'when I discovered that he was sick, it was the day that we, we, he invited me to go out'

Figure 1. Realizations of *a gente* in Porto Alegre, Brazil (VARSQL database)

variant 1 = *a gente*: all the realizations containing a fricative or aspirated segment

a gente gente a gen gen a hente

variant 2 = *a 'ente*: all the realizations without the fricative segment

a 'ente 'ente 'en 'te

Figure 2: Dependent variable and variants used in the VARBRUL analyses

The linguistic factor groups considered at this point of the study were: a) syntactic function (subject, object, prepositional object); b) subject position in relation to the verb (adjacent, non-adjacent with clitics, non-adjacent with other words); c) reference (generic, specific (group), specific (1st p.s.)); d) type

of discourse (non-reported, direct reported speech, indirect reported speech); e) speed (fast, slow, natural speech).

Besides the social factor groups previously described, social class was added here, including four levels: D=lower working class, C=upper working class, B=lower middle class, A=upper middle class. Social classes were defined on the basis of the following social traits of the subjects interviewed:

- a) level of education: elementary, intermediate, high school, post-secondary;
- b) level of education of family members: children, spouse, parents, siblings;
- c) occupation: manual occupations: level 1, unskilled (e.g. farm laborer, gardener, watchman), level 2, skilled (e.g. electrician, seamstress, mechanic); intellectual occupations: level 1 (e.g. salesman, small businessman) level 2 (e.g. doctors, lawyers, teachers, managers);
- d) income: up to 5 times the minimum salary; more than 5 times the minimum salary.

One observation must be mentioned: as social class was defined partially according to level of education, I was careful to not include both social class and level of education in the same analysis. One important step may be to investigate the role of level of education with *nós* and *a gente*.

6 Results Concerning the Use of *a'ente*

The general distribution was as follows: a total of 1289 tokens were studied. 198 (15%) of them showed deletion of the fricative segment, 1090 (85%) of the tokens showed the fricative segment, and only 1 token showed an aspirated segment instead of the fricative one.

6.1 Results for Linguistic Factors

The results for syntactic function (Table 4) are impressive. Of 198 tokens of the reduced *a'ente*, 190¹⁴ are in subject position, consistent with the constraint already observed for the reduced forms of *você*. Most important, there are only two tokens preceded by a preposition and none in object position. Of course object pronouns, being a knockout, were not included in

¹⁴ Six tokens were excluded from this analysis of syntactic function.

the VARBRUL analysis, but they are cited in Table 4 because of the importance of this constraint.

The results for reference (Table 4) seem to support the idea that this reduction is a new stage in the grammaticalization process. The old, generic meaning is disfavored, while the actual referential pronominal meanings are favored.¹⁵ The reduced form is most favored when reference is 1p sg, but the number of tokens is too small to warrant a firm conclusion at this point.

In this analysis, other linguistic factor groups were not statistically significant, but I should mention that in previous, partial analyses, the reduced form was strongly associated with fast speech, which is a predictable result.

Factor groups		N/Total	%	Weight
Syntactic Fun.	Subject	190/1117	17	.54
	Prép. obj.	2/87	2	.13
	Object	0/10	0	-
Reference	Generic	108/775	14	.48
	Refer. group	79/477	17	.51
	1 st . p.s.	11/31	35	.74

Table 4. Use of *a gente* according to syntactic function and reference; Porto Alegre, Brazil (VARSL database)

6.2 Results for Social Factors

As for the social variables shown in Table 5, results are somewhat intriguing: the reduced forms are strongly favored by males, suggesting that they are the ones to have the lead in this new stage of the grammaticalization process. Although the data we have analyzed here are not sufficient as yet to allow an assertion to this effect, I think this result, which contrasts with the previous result for the overall use of *a gente*, leads to interesting questions about the roles of different groups within a community in the implementation of interrelated changes in a grammaticalization process.

Also intriguing are the results for level of education: highly educated speakers favor the reduced form, which goes against expectations. Note also that the class distribution (Tables 6 and 7) indicates that higher-status

¹⁵ When contrasting *nós* and *a gente*, results for reference are the opposite: *a gente* is favored with generic meaning (529/676, 78%, weight of .66) and disfavored with specific, referential meanings (512/807, 63%, weight of .37).

speakers are leading this stage of the grammaticalization of *a gente*. Table 7 reinforces the interpretation that males are leading this reduction.

Factor groups		N/Total	%	Weight
Gender	Males	111/430	26	.66
	Females	87/859	10	.42
Level of Education	Elementary	25/299	8	.35
	Intermediate	49/266	18	.57
	High School	45/358	11	.45
	Post- secondary	79/321	25	.64
Age group	< 50 years	103/605	17	.54
	> 50 years	95/684	14	.46

Table 5. Significant social factors for *a'ente*; Porto Alegre, (VARSUL)

Social class	N/Total	%	Weight
A (upper middle class)	109/414	26	.66
B (lower middle class)	51/590	9	.39
C (upper/lower working class)	38/285	13	.47

Table 6. Use of *a'ente* by social class; Porto Alegre (VARSUL database)

		Gender	
		Males	Females
Class	A	39%	15%
	B	9%	8%
	C/D	20%	8%

Table 7. Percentage of *a'ente* in the crosstabulation of gender and social class; Porto Alegre, Brazil (VARSUL database)

Table 7 shows interaction between gender and social class. While females show an increase in the use of *a gente* only in the higher social level, males present a curvilinear pattern, but against expectations, the leaders of the process are in the higher social class. An important observation must be made here. Data for this higher social group were collected several (6-8) years later than that of the other social groups. So it is not possible to separate the effect of social class or gender from a possible effect related to when data had been collected. This could be especially relevant in the initial phase of a change, as seems to be the case here.

So far I do not have explanations for these results. Are men reducing to *a'ente* to be different from women? Before trying to answer questions like this, I think it is necessary to enlarge the sample to include more interviews. It is important to include data from adolescents, because I suspect that male adolescents may really be the leaders of this process, and this will be our next step. In addition, it may also be important to investigate stylistic differences, because reduction may be systematically associated with informal speech.

7 Conclusion

The results for both variable rules investigated in this paper support the hypothesis that *a gente* is undergoing grammaticalization in Brazilian Portuguese. The preference to use *a gente* in place of *nós* is led by women and younger speakers. There is clear evidence that *a gente* displays features of a personal pronoun. Furthermore it overwhelmingly takes 3rd sg agreement on the verb, which is consistent with a general drift to unmarked forms. By adopting the new pronoun, speakers are able to avoid the strong social stigma associated with lack of agreement between subject and verb. This is suggested by the high rates of *a gente* by the higher social status groups in the present sample.

The linguistic variables investigated in the reduction of *a gente* to *a'ente* favor the idea that this pronoun, in parallel with *você*, is undergoing cliticization. Further detailed analysis of the syntactic contexts and a prosodic analysis of the presence or absence of stress on the reduced form may decide this question.

The fact that in our sample the reduction is mostly favored by highly educated (male) speakers requires further investigation because it may be an effect of a difference in when their data had been collected.

The differences observed in the social factor groups in the two variable rules studied here support the idea that these changes are independent but correlated processes led by different speakers in the community. Finally the results support the unidirectionality of the grammaticalization process as a whole, because it is clear that the reduction stage (cliticization) is incipient and presupposes the advanced stage (pronominalization) of the use of *a gente* instead of *nós*.

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