

Gender in society and the grammar: the cycle of representativeness and frequency in Brazilian Portuguese

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The relationship between language and gender is shaped by surface phenomena that reveal underlying prejudices, such as sexism. This raises a fundamental question: Are languages inherently sexist, or do they merely codify sexism embedded in society? Given that language and society are mutually constitutive, any examination of sexism in language must consider both dimensions.

This study revisits the issue of linguistic sexism by adopting a novel perspective: the processing of linguistic variation (Freitag & Soto, 2023). Although this field of the interface remains relatively underexplored, it offers significant potential for understanding how individuals engage with linguistic rules in context, particularly in relation to representativeness and frequency.

Drawing on societal evidence and recent descriptive and experimental research in Brazilian Portuguese (Schwindt, 2020; Pinheiro & Freitag, 2020), this study investigates how gendered grammatical rules are perceived and codified, hypothesizing a cyclical relationship between gender representativeness in society and grammatical structures, where the frequency of gendered linguistic forms reflects broader social dynamics.

This paper begins by outlining the framework for processing linguistic variation before examining the rules governing grammatical gender in Brazilian Portuguese, particularly in contexts where one gender dominates, such as in agreement structures (Freitag, 2024). A key case study is the variation between *presidente* and *presidenta*, a choice shaped by the social forces of representativeness and frequency. The preference for the two-gender common noun over the biform noun rule is analyzed in light of empirical data on noun frequency and the correlation between gendered language and occupational roles in the relevant fields. These findings reinforce the argument that the cycle of representativeness and frequency plays a crucial role in shaping gender-related grammatical norms.

This study underscores that linguistic variation processing provides a compelling framework for explaining why certain gendered grammatical rules do not gain widespread acceptance because of the under-representation of specific social groups in positions of power and visibility. In conclusion, language does not simply reflect societal sexism; rather, from a sociolinguistic perspective, language itself is not inherently sexist. Instead, the selection of specific linguistic forms reveals the reactive stance of certain societal groups that resist acknowledging women's political leadership. The lack of frequent examples results in the absence of gender prototypes or generalizations, strengthening the cycle of gender representativeness and frequency (Freitag, 2025).

Breaking this cycle by increasing the visibility of women in positions of authority is essential to disrupt the linguistic normalization of the masculine as the default and hegemonic form in grammar.

References

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