Rethinking the Gender Paradox: The Notion of Markedness

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Our aim in this paper is to discuss the gender paradox in phenomena of linguistic change and variation in terms of Labov’s formulation of the Conformity Paradox and the Nonconformity Principle with social mobility (Labov, 1990; 2011: 366-367; 516). Our proposal is that gender does indeed have a role in language and that this role can be better understood as a function of the notion of markedness in terms of: (1) frequency distribution (Givón, 1995); (2) geographic or social orientation; and (3) the dependency of interactional relations.

We compare the effect of gender, codified by means of the variable ‘sex’, in four large areas of research on Brazilian Portuguese using diverse data bases from varied geographical areas, carried out in accord with the principles of the Theory of Language Variation and Change (Weireich, Labov & Herzog, 1968; Sankoff, Tagliamonte & Smith, 2005):

[1] alternation between the second person pronouns tu/VOCÊ (‘you’) in the following regions: South (Loregian-Penkal, 2004; Ramos, 1989); Northeast (Oliveira 2005, 2007); North (Martins, 2010); Southeast (Paredes Silva, 2004; Lopes et alii, 2009); the Federal District and the Center-West (Lucca, 2005; Dias, 2007; Andrade, 2010);

[2] alternation between the first person pronouns nós/a gente (‘we’) in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Vitória, in the Southeast (Omena, 1996; Mendonça, 2010);

[3] expression of the grammatical imperative fala/fale (‘speak’) in Brasília, in the Center-West, and Fortaleza, in the Northeast (Cardoso, 2009);


This research reveals that women tend to favor either (1) the most frequent variant, less marked in terms of frequency distribution, (2) the variant of geographical identity or the most prestigious variant, less marked in geographical or social terms, (3) the variant with the widest interpersonal relationships, less marked in interactional terms. Men, on the other hand, tend to favor either the least frequent variant, the least prestigious variant, or the variant that express more interpersonal solidarity, i.e., the most marked variant.

Thus, the notion of markedness -- be it linguistic, geographical, social, or interactional -- is the basis of the generalization that frames our reanalysis of the Gender Paradox in the following terms: in less marked configurations – not necessarily more prestigious – women tend to be at the forefront in variation and change; in more marked configurations – not necessarily less prestigious – men tend to be at the forefront in variation and change.

Our central hypothesis is that prestige is only one aspect of the notion of markedness. Therefore, we can reach broader and more integrated understanding of the role of gender in stable variation, change from below, and change from above by interrelating cognitive, sociocultural, and interactional aspects through the notion of markedness (Scherre & Yacovenco, 2011; Haspelmath, 2006).