

The Formation of Plural in Nominal Items in Speech of Natives of Maranhão and Sergipe Based on Geolinguistics Data

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Abstract:

The variation in the formation of the plural in nominal items in Brazilian Portuguese (BP) is an example of what the grammatical tradition understands as a *deviation* from the standard norm, because its use is focused as being of a mandatory nature and, in general, it tends to be associated with the speech of more educated people and in a more monitored formal or colloquial register. From this viewpoint – that this phenomenon is much more a social than a linguistic requirement – this article seeks, based on the assumptions of Pluridimensional Dialectology and Sociolinguistics, to investigate the phenomenon of nominal agreement in the speech of natives of Maranhão and Sergipe, considering the localities that compose the network of points of the Linguistic Atlas of Maranhão (ALiMA), for the study of this State, and of the Linguistic Atlas of Brazil (ALiB), for Sergipe. With this representative sample, it was possible to make a comparative analysis of the obtained data and to observe the nominal agreement as a phenomenon with a visible tendency to vary in the formation of the plural of items ending in oral diphthongs, such as *chapéu* and *degrau*, largely conditioned by diastatic factors.

Keywords:

Nominal agreement. Portuguese spoken in the Northeast of Brazil. Linguistic atlas.

Signum: Estudos da Linguagem, Londrina, v. 25, i. 1, p. 42-51, Apr. 2022

Received on: 01/30/2022

Accepted on: 04/13/2022

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INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that nominal number agreement in Portuguese is a redundant mechanism, given that it manifests itself in all specifiers or modifiers of the noun that can be inflected, as, for example, in “os nossos chapéus amarelos”. However, as several dialectal researches in Brazil have attested, the application of the agreement rule is not verified in the effective use, in certain varieties of Brazilian Portuguese (BP), in which, normally, only one of the component elements of the nominal syntagma (NS), in general the anchor of the reference, that is, the determinant, presents the mark of plurality.

We cannot, however, lose sight of the fact that, although the non-application of the agreement rule is more recurrent among speakers of the popular variety, with a lower level of schooling, it is already present among speakers with university level, as evidenced by the Map M01E of the Linguistic Atlas of Brazil (CARDOSO *et al.*, 2014, p. 347). So, is the BP moving towards a less redundant system, in which it will be up to a pre-nuclear element to present the only mark of plurality of the NS?

In view of this situation, we propose, with this work, to analyze the application of the agreement rule in nominal items, more particularly in items ending in oral diphthong, in the speech of speakers from Maranhão and Sergipe, based on the data collected for the elaboration of the Linguistic Atlas of Maranhão (ALiMA) and the Linguistic Atlas of Brazil (ALiB), in 19 localities distributed between these two Northeastern states. We aim to investigate the application of the agreement rule considering the performance of social variables.

1. THE AGREEMENT IN NUMBER IN THE NS: A BRIEF SUMMARY

It is a consensus among BP scholars that one of the main differences between BP and European Portuguese (EP), in the domain of morphosyntax, is the simplification, in BP, of the nominal morphology, with the loss of [-s] plural marker, in the popular variety, except in the Specifier.

Castilho (2010), for example, when dealing with the social history and grammatical change of (BP), ratifies this idea and, by expanding its lens and focusing on diversity within BP, even recognizing that there is still no consolidation of the findings of Brazilian regional atlases and that many phenomena are more correlated with the diastratic factor than with the diatopy, brings up again the question of the simplification of nominal agreement, expressed only by the determinant, as one of the characteristics that differentiates BP spoken in the North from BP spoken in the South. According to the author, Southern speech is characterized by having redundant marks of agreement in cultivated speech, with fewer marks in popular speech. On the same line, he highlights the strong performance of the principle of phonic salience.

In summarizing the main characteristics of popular BP and cultivated BP, it is again, according to Castilho (2010), the simplification of nominal agreement, expressed only by the determinant, which points out differences and marks the popular variety, although the author recognizes that there is not a categorical opposition between these varieties.

The way back, that is, from the most recent studies to the first studies of BP from a dialectal point of view, just to name a few examples, also leads us to the same result. Amaral (1920), when examining the *caipira* (country) dialect, states that the *s* as a sign of plurality disappears in this dialect, with the plurality of nouns being indicated by the *determinatives*. Nascentes (1953, p. 81), in *O linguajar carioca*, points out that “The numerical inflection by means of *s* disappears altogether in the uneducated class: *livro* (singular and plural)”. Marroquim (1996, p. 80), in turn, when documenting the language of the Northeast, more precisely of Alagoas and Pernambuco, highlights that “The number, in the northeastern dialect, is indicated only by the determinative”.

In a more recent work, Veado (1982, p. 57), in his study on the micro-region Sanfranciscana de Januária, in the state of Minas Gerais, points out that in the rural dialect of this micro-region, with regard to nominal agreement, “[...] The only existing system is the equivalent form of the ‘non-standard’”, as in *as menina*.

The evidences, considering the cited studies, by way of example, point out that the marking of nominal agreement in BP seems to be a question, in fact, diastatic, with diatopy being of little relevance. In this sense, this phenomenon is located in the domain of differences between BP and EP which, according to Mattos e Silva (2013, p. 151), are “[...] more accentuated when considering the popular variety of BP and more attenuated when it comes to highly educated speakers who, in highly formal contexts, seek to follow the standard Lusitanian norm.”. It will therefore be up to the atlases (the national one and the state ones) to shed more light on this issue.

2. METHODOLOGY

As already indicated, it is stigmatized the fact that the plurality mark does not extend to the nominal nucleus of the NS and its adjuncts. Furthermore, as seen above, studies have shown that the phenomenon of variation in nominal agreement is not restricted to certain regions of the country, being, therefore, conditioned by similar linguistic and social factors.

In this sense, we carried out this study on the variation registered in the plural formation process in nominal items, in the speech of 84 informants, represented here by the localities of Alto Parnaíba, Araisos, Bacabal, Balsas, Brejo, Carolina, Carutapera, Caxias, Codó, Imperatriz, Pinheiro, Raposa, São João dos Patos, São Luís (capital), Turiaçu and Tuntum, in the state of Maranhão, and Aracaju (capital), Estância and Propriá, in the state of Sergipe. These places are located in the network of points that make up the Linguistic Atlas of Maranhão (ALiMA) and the Linguistic Atlas of Brazil (ALiB), respectively.

The selection of informants follows the criteria of ALiMA and ALiB: equally distributed in two age groups - group I, from 18 to 30 years old, and group II, from 50 to 65 years old - all informants are originally from the researched locality, with a elementary education level. Added to these are informants with university level in the capitals, justified by the need to assess the influence of the diastatic variable and verify whether there is a relationship between the increase in years of schooling and the index of explicit plural marks in the NSs, as evidenced in research such as that of Scherre (1998b, p. 445). As for the *corpus*, we considered the answers given to questions 10 to 20 of the Morphosyntactic Questionnaire of ALiB, which was also applied by ALiMA. These questions allow us to investigate, more specifically, the variation regarding the plural of nouns.

To obtain the answers, pictures were presented to the informants and they were asked to describe what they saw in the images, which include 11 nominal items: *lápiz*, *anéis*, *aventais*, *pães*, *mãos*, *leões*, *degraus*, *flores*, *chapéus*, *anzóis* and *olhos*. Of these, we opted to analyze *degrau* and *chapéu*, items ending in an oral diphthong, given the possibility of comparing them with the Linguistic Maps – M01 and M01E – from the Linguistic Atlas of Brazil, in its volume 2 (CARDOSO *et al.*, 2014, p. 344-347), which describe and analyze the variation of *degrau* in BP, in the capitals, under a multidimensional approach.

It should be noted that, during the description process, the informants, in general, did not use the isolated nominal item (*degrau*, *chapéu*), but inserted it in NSs formed mainly by two elements - the nominal item in question, in the nuclear position, and a prenuclear element as an adjunct. In the case of elements in front of the NS nucleus, the occurrence of numerals was significant, a fact motivated by the very formulation of the question, since the inquirer, seeking to encourage the use of the plural, asked how many items were in the pictures.

For this article, we consider the plural formation process as variable, divided as follows: i) *standard*, for occurrences such as *degraus*, *chapéus*; ii) *non-standard*, for occurrences such as *degrais*, *chapéis* and iii) *non-marking*, for occurrences with morphological zero, such as *degrau* [Ø], *chapéu* [Ø]. However, it should be noted that, although we understand that non-marking is also a non-standard variant, we have decided to tripartite the variable, which allowed us to make a comparison with the Linguistic Maps of ALiB. The analyzed sample considered, for registration purposes only, the number of 16 occurrences of *non-valid answers*, obtained in the following situations: i) cases in which the speakers declare that they do not remember, when describing the picture, the name of the target object of the question; situation coded as *Não Lembra* (N.L), and (ii) cases in which the speaker names the object generically as to walk, in reference to the step of the stair, a situation coded as *Não Obtida* (N.O). Once these occurrences were excluded, we used GoldVarbX program to perform the general round of the variable rule, which also includes the statistical results of the factors - locality, age group, sex and level of schooling -, in order to verify the effect of social variables on the use of the nominal agreement.

3. THE ORAL DIPHTHONG IN THE SPEECH OF SPEAKERS FROM MARANHÃO AND SERGIPE: *DEGRAUS/DEGRAIS/DEGRAU[Ø]*, *CHAPÉUS/CHAPÉIS/CHAPÉU[Ø]*

As already explained in the introduction, we propose to present the analysis of the general results recorded on the phenomenon of nominal agreement and to correlate them with social characteristics, mainly in the diatopic axis, considering the capitals and localities in countryside of the States of Maranhão and Sergipe, and in the diastratic axis, investigated here by the schooling bias. We begin with the general distribution of occurrences recorded in the surveyed sample, as shown in Table 1, below.

Table 1 - General frequency of the items *degrau* and *chapéu*.

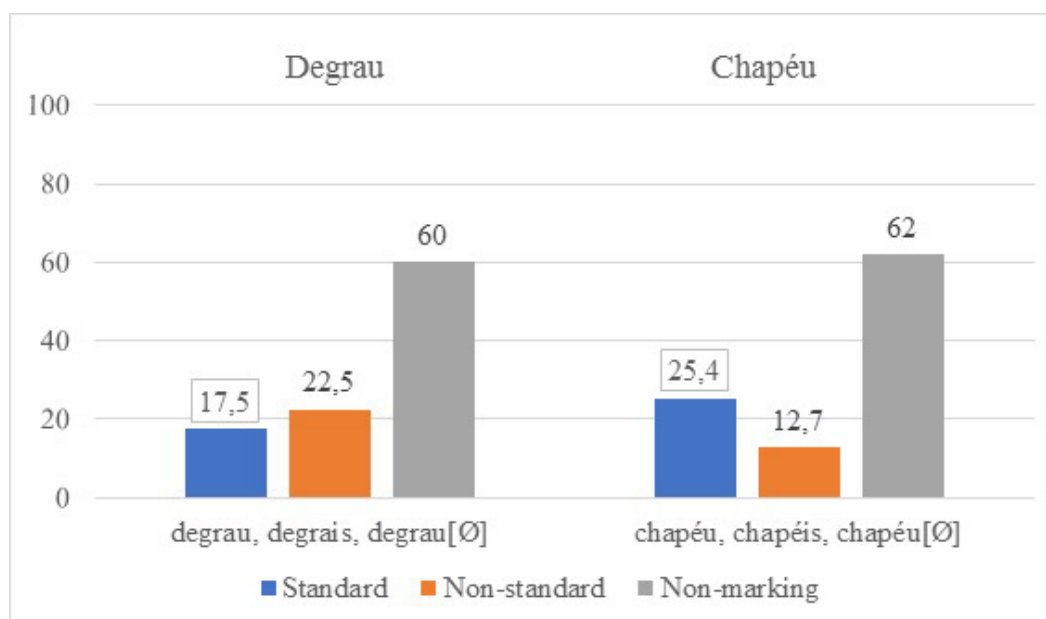
Standard	Non-standard	Non-marking	Total
32 21,2 %	27 17,9%	92 60,9%	151 100%

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Observing the percentages, we found that the items ending in an oral diphthong, such as *degrau* and *chapéu*, favor the application of the agreement rule in 21,2%, with 32 occurrences, and present themselves as inhibitors of this application with 17,9%, in 27 *non-standard* occurrences, and with 60,9%, in 92 *non-marking* occurrences. The high frequency of morphological zero data evidences a trend already observed in Brazilian Portuguese: the plural mark tends to occur only in the first element of the NS, this is because the informants, for the most part, use the nominal item formed by two elements and, in turn, they mark the plural in the first position of the syntagma, as in *seis degrau[Ø]*, *dois chapéu[Ø]*. In this regard, Scherre (1998a, p. 92) states that “the first position of the NS is the factor that most favors the insertion of a plural mark, with a sudden drop in relation to the other positions, which tend to disfavor in a decreasing way the presence of the formal plural mark in the NS”. The example “*seis degrau de cada lado*”, extracted from our *corpus*, shows this tendency.

The result of our sample, which includes data of speakers from the Northeast region, confirms the observation by Marroquim (1996), in the work *A língua do Nordeste: Alagoas e Pernambuco* which records, as we have seen, that “the number, in the northeastern dialect, is indicated only by the determinative. The noun and the qualifying adjective, whether in the singular or in the plural, keep the invariable form that is that of the singular, with the transformations of dialectal phonetics.” (MARROQUIM, 1996, p. 80). In Graph 1, below, it is possible to see the record of 22,5% for *degrais* and 12.7% for *chapéis*, non-standard forms, and 60% for *degrau[Ø]* and 62% for *chapéu[Ø]*, unmarked forms.

Graph 1 - Distribution of the items *degrau* and *chapéu*, in percentage.



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Let us now move on to the presentation of Table 2, which shows the distribution of nominal agreement in our sample, for each investigated locality.

Table 2 - Frequency of the items *degrau* and *chapéu*, according to locality.

Localities	Standard		Non-standard		Non-marking		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Maranhão								
Alto Parnaíba	0	0	0	0	5	100	5	3,3
Araioses	1	14,3	1	14,3	5	71,4	7	4,6
Bacabal	0	0	1	12,5	7	87,5	8	5,3
Balsas	0	0	0	0	5	100	5	3,3
Brejo	0	0	4	66,7	2	33,3	6	4,0
Carolina	2	28,6	0	0	5	71,4	7	4,6
Carutapera	0	0	1	14,3	6	85,7	7	4,6
Caxias	2	25	0	0	6	75	8	5,3
Codó	1	12,5	3	37,5	4	50	8	5,3
Imperatriz	3	37,5	1	12,5	4	50	8	5,3
Pinheiro	0	0	0	0	8	100	8	5,3
Raposa	0	0	1	14,3	6	85,7	7	4,6
São João dos Patos	1	14,3	2	28,6	4	57,1	7	4,6
São Luís	8	50	6	37,5	2	12,5	16	10,6
Turiaçu	1	25	1	25	2	50	4	2,6
Tuntum	2	25	0	0	6	75	8	5,3
Sergipe								
Aracaju	8	50	2	12,5	6	37,5	16	10,6
Estância (080)	1	12,5	4	50	3	37,5	8	5,3
Propriá (078)	2	25	0	0	6	75	8	5,3
Total	32	21,2	27	17,9	92	60,9	151	100

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 2 presents the distribution of diatopic variation, considering the 19 analyzed localities and, as we can see, there is a prevalence of the *unmarked* form in most of the countryside localities and a predominance of the *standard* form, in the capitals of Maranhão and Sergipe. The analysis of this diatopic distribution allows us to observe that:

- i) In Maranhão, there is a predominance of the *unmarked* form in 11 localities, being Alto Parnaíba and Balsas with categorical use. Brejo, Codó, Imperatriz and Turiaçu present percentages varying between 33,3% and 50%. Only the capital, São Luís, disfavored the use, indicating a percentage of 12,5%. The *non-standard* form stands out in Brejo, with 66%, followed by São Luís and Codó, with 37,5% each.
- ii) In Sergipe, there is a predominance of the *unmarked* form only in Propriá, with 75%. Estância stood out with the use of 50% for the *non-standard* form, while the capital, Aracaju, stood out for the *standard* form, also with 50% of the data.
- iii) The capitals register the same linguistic behavior regarding the selection of the *standard* form, both with 50%. However, they have different behaviors in relation to the other variants: São Luís has the *non-standard* form as a second option, while Aracaju opts for *non-marking*. A separate round, with only the sample of the capitals, better evidenced these uses, as it allowed us to draw a parallel with informants that have a higher level of schooling.

Let us now look at the phenomenon of nominal agreement, in the diagenational, diasexual and diastratic dimensions, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 - Frequency of the items *degrau* and *chapéu*, according to social variables.

Variables	Standard		Non-standard		Non-marking		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age group								
Young people	16	20	20	25	44	55	80	53
Elderly people	16	22,5	7	9,9	48	67,6	71	47
Sex								
Women	21	27,6	13	17,1	42	55,3	76	50,3
Men	11	14,7	14	18,7	50	66,7	75	49,7
Level of Schooling								
Elementary	19	14,1	24	17,8	92	68,1	135	89,4
University	13	81,2	3	18,8	0	0	16	10,6
Total	32	21,2	27	17,9	92	60,9	151	100

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

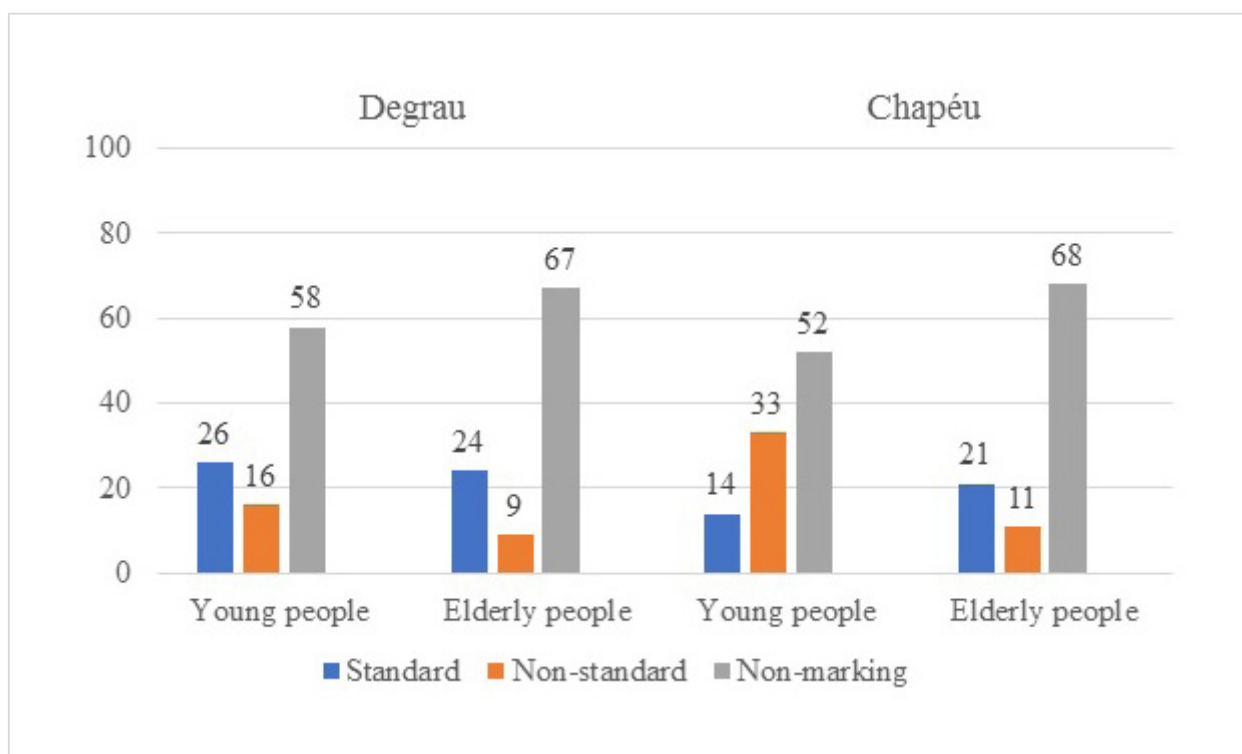
According to Table 3, the general calculation of the data did not show a great difference between the two age groups regarding the *standard* form, with 20% and 22,5%. *Non-standard* forms, with 25% and 9,9%, and *non-marking*, with 55% and 67,6%, show a percentage difference between young and elderly people. Despite the difference of twelve percentage points, indicating a slight preference for *non-marking* among the elderly, it seems to us that the younger ones also follow the trend observed in BP.

Regarding the diasexual variation, the forms analyzed here do not show great differences in the overall result. The preference remains for the *unmarked* form, both for women and men, with 55,3% and 66,7%, respectively. However, it is possible to perceive some nuances: the *standard* form stands out in the speech of women, with a percentage of 27,6%, while the *non-standard* and *unmarked* forms are, in percentage, more favored in the speech of men, with 18,7% and 66,7%, respectively.

Diastratic variation, in turn, already indicates that it is one of the factors that possibly explains the uses recorded in the sample. Among speakers with a lower level of schooling, the highest percentage recorded is computed in *unmarked* forms, with 68,1%. Among the speakers with a higher level of schooling, we recorded a percentage of 81,2% for the *standard* form. In percentage terms, in which the difference reaches around 67,1%, we see a possible linguistic polarization of the agreement phenomenon within the NS: the higher the level of schooling, the greater the use of the agreement rule and the lower the level of schooling, the lower its application.

Next, we present the graphs generated for each of the analyzed nominal items, according to the social variables already mentioned here. Let's see Graph 2, which shows the distribution by age group.

Graph 2 - Distribution of items *degrau* and *chapéu*, according to age group.



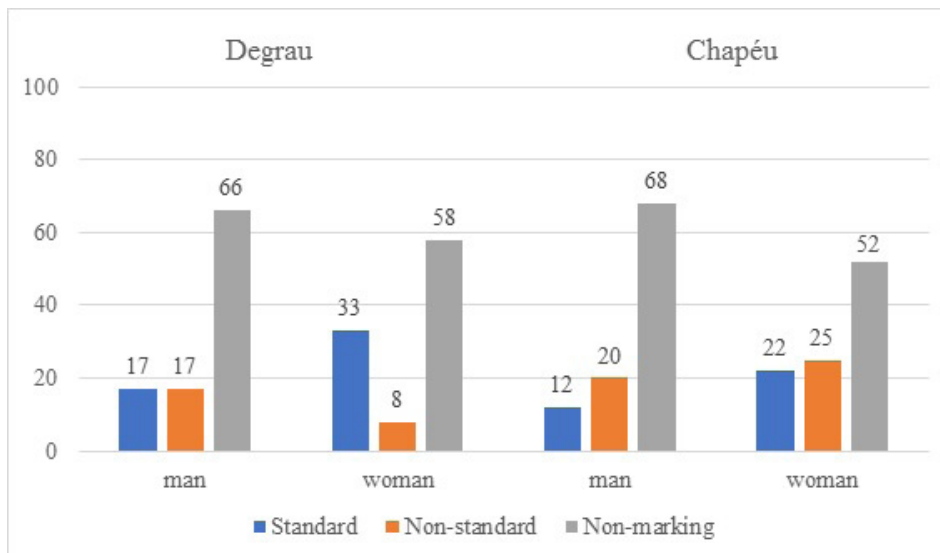
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

We can see, from the results of Graph 2, that the item *degrau* is more recurrent in the speech of the young people, with 26%, if compared with the item *chapéu*, which presents itself with a percentage of 14%. Among the elderly people, the *standard* form remained with similar uses, 24% and 21%.

Regarding the *non-standard* form, with a percentage of 16% for *degrais* and 33% for *chapéis*, the variation is even clearer in the speech of the young people, when compared to the speech of the elderly ones, with percentages of 9% and 11%.

The *unmarked* forms kept the percentages close to those found in the general calculation, as seen in Table 3, confirming a more frequent index of *degrau*[Ø] and *chapéu*[Ø] in the speech of the elderly people, with percentages of 67% and 68%. Comparatively, the percentage data in Graph 2 indicate that the younger ones have higher rates for the *non-standard* form, while the older ones opt for *non-marking*. The *standard* form does not reveal major diagenational differences.

Graph 3 - Distribution of the items *degrau* and *chapéu*, according to sex.

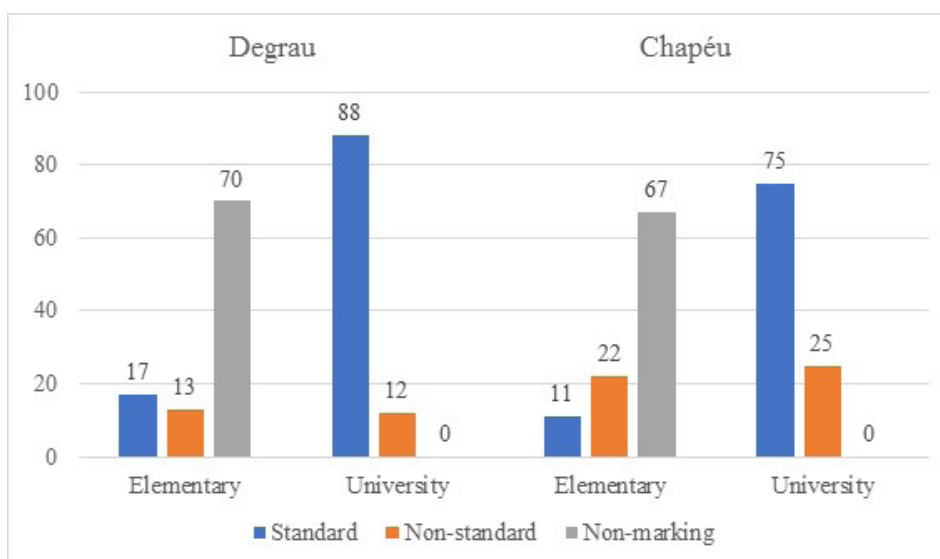


Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The results of Graph 3 and those presented in Table 3 match, showing no differences in the diasexual profile of the informants. We still observed a high rate of *unmarked* forms, although it is possible to note a slight tendency of this use by men, with percentages of 66% and 68%. The preference of men for *non-standard* forms was also ratified, with percentages between 17% and 20%, however, the percentage of 25% of *chapéis* in the women’s speech draws attention. Going back to the sample, we observe ten occurrences of *chapéis*; eight of them are registered in the speech of women with a lower level of schooling, a fact that would justify the use of the *non-standard* form. As for the *standard* form, it is recurrent in women’s speech, with percentages of 33% and 22%, a relatively high rate compared to men, who have the lowest percentage for using this form.

Based on the percentages shown in Table 3 and Graph 3, there is no doubt that our results are in line with several studies on linguistic variation that have shown that women are more likely to employ the *standard* or more socially prestigious form. This is the case of the research carried out by Scherre (1998b), which points to sex as the second variable that best explains the application of the variable rule, by indicating that women make more nominal agreement than men. The first variable is the level of schooling, and Graph 4 shows the results of this variable in our sample.

Graph 4 - Distribution of the items *degrau* and *chapéu*, according to the level of schooling.



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The parallel between informants with university level and informants with elementary education showed the trend pointed towards the variation of nominal agreement: the more years of schooling, the greater the probability of using the *standard* form, which evidences the Linguistic Map M01E of the ALiB, about the plural of *degrau* in capitals. We registered percentages of 88% and 75% for *degrau* and *chapéu* among speakers with university level, who, in turn, presented themselves as inhibitors of the *unmarked* form, having not presented any occurrence for this variant. Still in this group, we have the percentage of 12% and 25% for the *non-standard* form, being *degrais* a single occurrence and *chapéis* with two records in the sample.

Among informants with elementary education, we obtained a greater variety of uses, with emphasis on the *unmarked* form, which maintained a high rate, with percentages of 88% and 75%, followed by the *non-standard* form, with percentages of 13% and 22% and, finally, the *standard* form with 17% and 11%.

To confirm the trends above, we carried out a separate round, in the capitals, using, as an application rule, the occurrences of *standard* forms as opposed to *non-standard* forms: we found that the level of schooling is, in fact, the most relevant variable to explain the phenomenon, since it was the first and only group selected by the GoldVarbX program, with a relative weight of 0,65 for those with a university level and 0,21 for those with a elementary education level.

CONCLUSION

With this research, we seek to expand knowledge about the phenomenon of nominal agreement, in Portuguese spoken in the localities that make up the network of points of ALiMA, where the data from Maranhão are located; and ALiB, where the data from Sergipe are located. We have found that, among the analyzed social factors, the one that stands out the most is the speaker's *level of schooling*. More specifically, we can summarize the effects of this and other groups of factors as follows:

- i) In geographic terms, we have observed a trend towards the unmarked form, which had its use registered around 60,9%, with a clear preference among speakers from Maranhão. Bearing in mind that the research *corpus* is mostly formed by NS consisting of two elements – *dois degrau[Ø]*, *três chapéu[Ø]*, it is possible to affirm that the principle of linguistic economy is prevailing, that is, there is a tendency to eliminate the characteristic redundancy of Portuguese nominal inflection. In turn, the capitals São Luís and Aracaju stand out for maintaining agreement, both with 50%, a behavior explained by the correlation of the level of schooling factor.
- ii) Regarding the age group, it was evident, on the one hand, that this variable is not so significant for the understanding of the phenomenon and, on the other hand, that the preference for the *unmarked* form is manifested in both age groups. It is interesting to point out that we verified a use varying between 16% and 33% of the *non-standard* form among the young people, while the elderly people have a use varying between 9% and 11% (cf. Graph 2). Despite the little influence, the results related to the age group can point out future trends of variations and changes in the language, which instigates the analysis of the influence of the variable age, since the younger ones have the *unmarked* and *non-standard* forms as the most recurrent options.
- iii) The variable sex also did not prove to be a conditioning factor for the variation. The *unmarked* form is registered in the speech of women and men, with percentages of 55,3% and 66,7%. On the other hand, data in the *standard* form, in the order of 27,6%, show that women are more likely to apply the rule of agreement. This result, when compared to the high rates of *standard* form in the capitals, which include informants with university level, gives us indications that the schooling process is acting more strongly on women, who are more receptive to normative action from school.

- iv) The diastatic variable, analyzed through the bias of level of schooling, reveals itself to have a significant role. Among the speakers with university level, the percentages of 88% and 75% confirm that the application of the rule is higher, while speakers with elementary schooling disfavor this use. This configuration is also confirmed, in terms of relative weights, with a separate round with data from the capitals São Luís and Aracaju, which pointed out the most educated, with a relative weight of 0,65 (range 44), that is, the more years of schooling, more agreement.

Finally, it should be noted that the results of this study complement and, to a certain extent, ratify the results of other works on nominal number agreement, constituting, in this way, one more contribution to the mapping of BP, especially with regard to the reality of speaking in Maranhão and Sergipe.

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