

FROM *URBIS* TO THE COUNTRYSIDE: THE SPREADING OF THE NEW PRONOMINAL  
FORM *A GENTE* IN A BRAZILIAN RURAL COMMUNITY

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This paper is on the usage of the noun phrase *a gente* (“the people”) to express first person plural among speakers of a rural community of Brazil. Studies in urban settings demonstrate that *a gente* is undergoing grammaticalization and is acquiring characteristics of a personal pronoun; gradually it is replacing *nós* (“we”). In this process, *a gente* has lost the requirement of feminine gender agreeing modifiers. Also, the pronominalization of *a gente* contributes to the reduction of the verbal inflectional paradigm: being derived from a nominal expression, *a gente* takes third person singular agreement.

Data from 15 speakers living in the rural area of Jaraguá (State of Goiás) was used in this study. At the time of data collection (1997), the population of this rural community was beginning to have more contact with urban life. In the first analysis, with the pronoun in various syntactic positions, the following groups were selected as being statistically significant:

Significant factor groups in the use of <i>a gente</i> ( $p < 0.05$ )	%	Weight
Generic Reference	91	.96
Reference to defined group, interlocutor excluded	29	.25
Reference to defined group, interlocutor included	11	.19
Reference to two defined people, interlocutor excluded	14	.13
Speaker w/ lower level of interaction with city	25	.13
Speaker w/ medium level of interaction with city	43	.48
Speaker w/ higher level of interaction with city	49	.66
Informal situation	42	.61
Formal situation	48	.14
Total	43	Input: .44

In a second analysis, considering the pronoun only in subject position, the following factor group was also selected:

	%	Weight
<i>a gente</i> in the subject of previous clause	88	.89
<i>nós</i> in the subject of previous clause	20	.24
other in the subject of previous clause	48	.54
initial clause	35	.39

Women used *a gente* slightly more than men as well as the oldest population. Nevertheless, age and sex of speakers did not play a significant role in the usage of the new pronominal form.

Generic reference being the most significant factor in the occurrence of *a gente* conforms to the fact that the new pronominal form was introduced into the language as an indeterminate expression with a generic meaning. Comparison of percentages and factor weights of this data with the results found in Zilles (2005) for the 1990 VARSUL database demonstrates that the ongoing change is at a much earlier stage in the rural community.

Although this change is generally seen to be from below for the Brazilian community as a whole, in this rural community the pronominalization of *a gente* and the set of interrelated changes are occurring in a somewhat different manner, reflecting different motivations. The insertion of *a gente* in the pronominal system is likely coming from above, with urban speech being the prestige dialect.