Chapter 6
Talking About Women

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ABSTRACT

The reference to males and females in Portuguese is related to grammatical gender, but the relationship is not straightforward. The grammatical gender system is quite complex and semantically fragile, allowing a very low degree of predictability of the gender value, especially regarding inanimate nouns. Gender contrasts are also problematic. They only apply to some animate nouns and when they occur, they can be diversely fulfilled. Furthermore, this state of affairs is being threatened by social changes that are the output of increasing access of women to social and political rights, and especially to jobs and positions traditionally held only by men. On the other hand, words referring to men and women have a denotative meaning and different connotations. The definitions provided by some early and contemporary dictionaries will be compared. This comparison will demonstrate that these nouns are unevenly tackled. If dictionaries reflect canonical concepts, then the global understanding of male and female concepts are not that different from what they were three hundred years ago.

INTRODUCTION

Words, parts of words and phrases that refer to men and women are just words, parts of words and phrases that cannot be blamed for any particular social behavior. World views exist independently of language properties, although specific social groups may take advantage of the properties of language to express their own prejudices, fears, and intents of domination. Women's entitlement
to civil rights that were unavailable to them until quite recently, or their entrance into politics, on job markets and their access to institutional positions, which used to be exclusively reserved to men, have raised issues about linguistic gender bias. In fact, strict linguistic requirements are often unfit to verbalize new needs, which brings portions of the social fabric to implement egalitarian solutions that are not always generally appreciated nor linguistically elegant, and often fail to solve the problem. All these issues deserve further discussion, based on the evaluation of plausible solutions, and considering the available linguistic resources.

This chapter will focus on Portuguese data, namely on the relationship between grammatical gender and referential values, on access to grammatical gender contrasts, and on the lexicographic history of words that refer to female entities. Although the emphasis is on the expression of female references, discussing grammatical gender also involves addressing issues related to the gender system in general. Consequently, female concepts will be discussed by comparison with the portrait of male entities.

Portuguese has an apparently straightforward grammatical gender system that relies on three values (masculine, feminine and underspecified), associated to a specific thematic index[1] (graphically *<o>*, *<a>*, *<e>*) that define three out of the five thematic classes (the other two include no thematic index in the singular and *<e>* in the plural, and a strictly athematic class). Nouns ending in *<o>*, like *livro* 'book', are typically masculine, and nouns ending in *<a>*, like *cara* 'face', are usually feminine. On the other hand, nouns denoting males are usually masculine and nouns denoting females are generally feminine. The Portuguese gender system is, however, much more complex, with regard to its semantics, as well as its formal properties. The first section of this chapter will be devoted to the presentation of this gender system, and the following section will discuss the possibility of generating gender contrasts.

From a contemporary standpoint, reading 18th century lexicographic definitions of words like *menina* 'little girl', *rapariga* 'girl', or *mulher* 'woman' may be surprising or even amusing, but those pieces of conceptual discourse were received by their contemporaries as acceptable common places. The entertainment reaches an odd threshold when the definitions of nouns referring to females are compared with those of their male counterparts. This will be discussed in the third section of this chapter.

The fourth section will deal with the subsequent Portuguese lexicographic registers of the same set of nouns, to assess if dictionaries have changed since the early 18th century. Three landmark dictionaries (Bluteau, 1712-1728; Figueiredo, 1913; Silva, 1813), and three contemporary dictionaries, two of which were compiled in Portugal and the third in Brazil) will be considered.

The last section will tie up the loose ends. On the one hand, there is the fragility of the grammatical gender system and of grammatical gender contrasts; on the other hand, the gap between concepts and words referring to males and females of different ages and kinds, and its reshaping along the past three hundred years in lexicographic registers. Ultimately, it will become evident that the grammatical and lexical image of women in Portuguese echoes their social status in Portugal, even if this is not immediately recognized.

Background

The distinction between grammatical gender and biological sex is well established in linguistics (Corbett, 1991, 2014; Greenberg, 1978; Ibrahim, 1973). However, for laypeople, such a distinction is hardly ever acknowledged, which sometimes gives rise to protests against language sexism and requests for gender-fairness (Menegatti & Rubini, 2017).

Solving linguistic gender issues requires a technical language-specific approach. In Portuguese, the complexity of the grammatical gender system is discussed in Villalva (1994), and some particular issues have been tackled, among others, by Gouveia (2005) or Carvalho and Brito (2020).

The semantics of nouns that refer to female entities is not very often discussed. Villalva, Carmo and Cardeira (2019) initiated a research trend that will hopefully lead to further developments in the near future.

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