

# GENDER AND POSSESSIVES IN PORTUGUESE AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE

GÊNERO E POSSESSIVOS EM PORTUGUÊS COMO LÍNGUA ESTRANGEIRA  
GÉNERO Y POSESIVOS EN EL PORTUGUÉS LENGUA EXTRANJERA

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**ABSTRACT:** This study described the gender nominal agreement between possessives and nouns in Portuguese as foreign language. We analyzed noun phrases in which there is anomalous agreement between possessives and nouns. These noun phrases were written by learners of Portuguese at the University of Zimbabwe. This group of students presents previous linguistic knowledge of Shona and English, two linguistic systems different from Portuguese, what allows the occurrence of deviations. The language change and foreign language acquisition theories enlighten this study. Both are considered because they offer explanations for the deviations when individuals learn and use non-mother tongue. The results of this research reveal that learners, differently from Brazilian Portuguese, use definite articles before possessives. In regard to nominal agreement between possessive and nouns, the students replace the use of masculine by the use of feminine. This aspect, however, dues to the fact that they establish grammatical agreement based on biological gender.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender. Possessives. Nominal agreement in Portuguese Foreign Language. Use of feminine.

**RESUMO:** O objetivo deste artigo é descrever a concordância nominal de gênero entre os possessivos e os nomes em Português como Língua Estrangeira. Analisam-se SNs, em que os possessivos apresentam anomalias de concordância, escritos por estudantes de português na Universidade do Zimbabwe. Este grupo de estudantes apresenta um conhecimento linguístico prévio de shona e de inglês, sistemas diferentes do português, o que propicia a ocorrência de desvios. O estudo baseia-se nas teorias de variação linguística e de ensino-aprendizagem de línguas, por oferecerem explicações para a ocorrência de desvios na aquisição de línguas não maternas. O estudo, basicamente qualitativo, indica que os estudantes, distanciando-se do PB, usam os possessivos anteceditos por artigos definidos. Ademais, a tendência geral de uso do masculino na concordância nominal, com o possessivo, é substituída pelo uso do feminino, aspecto resultante do estabelecimento da concordância em função do gênero biológico.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Gênero. Possessivos. Concordância nominal em PLE. Uso do feminino.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo describe la concordancia nominal en género entre los posesivos con los nombres en portugués lengua extranjera. Se analizan las estructuras sintagmáticas, donde los posesivos presentan anomalías de concordancia, escritos por los alumnos de portugués de la Universidad de Zimbabwe. Este grupo tiene un conocimiento lingüístico previo de shona y inglés, sistemas diferentes del portugués, facilitando la aparición de los desviados. El estudio se basa en las teorías de la variación lingüística y del enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas, ya que ofrecen explicaciones para la ocurrencia de fenómenos de desviaciones en la adquisición de lenguas no nativas. El estudio, principalmente cualitativo, indica que los alumnos, distanciándose del PB, utilizan el

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posesivo precedido de artículos definidos. La tendencia general del uso de masculino en la concordancia nominal, con el posesivo, se sustituye por el uso del femenino, lo que resulta de creación de la concordancia basada en el género biológico.

PALABRAS-CLAVE: Género. Posesivo. Concordancia nominal en PLE. Uso del femenino.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Nominal agreement in general is one of the major challenges to the Portuguese as Foreign Language (PFL) teaching and learning process. The difficulties in this area are accentuated where the grammatical category of gender whose morphological marking mechanisms are not based on regular and systematic processes is concerned. There are studies that, actually, report the difficulties in establishing gender in noun phrases (NP) of PFL learners, such as Martins (2015), Pinto (2012) and Mariotto and Lourenço-Gomes (2013). In this context, these authors detect in different groups the widespread tendency of the use of the masculine in the accessory elements of the noun-nucleus. Such difficulties of marking the gender are often explained on the basis of two great phenomena that are imposed in the learning of Foreign Languages (FL). It is firstly the phenomenon of interlanguage, which mediates the non-speaker phase of learning a FL and that of a competent speaker; and secondly the phenomenon of linguistic influence and transfer that requires the use of aspects of native languages in the learning and use of FL. There are also studies that show the occurrence of certain linguistic phenomena whose explanation is based on the relationship between language and biological gender.

The objective of this study is to investigate the phenomenon of nominal agreement in gender between the possessives – words that determine the noun and the pragmatic level indicate ownership – and the noun in NPs written by PFL learners whose linguistic profile reveals the coexistence of Shona and English, two language systems relatively distant from Portuguese in terms of concordance. Thus, we intend to identify the trends that are registered in the use of the possessive and to relate them to the different influential aspects in the use of PFL. We also intend to verify to what extent the use of the possessives by the PFL learners is carried out in accordance with the tendencies that are transversal.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that it can bring to the surface specific linguistic aspects of a particular group of learners who, due to several factors, presents particularities that escape the monitoring of the different agents involved in the teaching and learning of PFL, because they do not incorporate the generalized trends presented in the literature. In addition, the work is justified by the need to produce and disseminate specific knowledge about PFL in such a way that the same knowledge serves the interests of the great project of expansion of the Portuguese language as an instrument of communication and vehicle of scholarship in the world. In fact, just by knowing the different salient aspects in the teaching and learning process is that one can make efforts directed to each case, either by students or by teachers, researchers and education systems.

It is hoped, therefore, with this study, to present tendencies that particularize the nominal agreement in gender of the possessives in PFL learners with a previous linguistic knowledge of Shona and English. In parallel, we seek to present a sociolinguistic explanation of the tendency to establish nominal agreement in gender according to the biological gender of the speaking subject. Thus, with this study, more aspects and attributes to consider in the design of strategies that minimize the difficulties of developing the competence of nominal agreement in gender in Portuguese, within the target group and beyond, will be made available to the teacher of PFL.

Based on a qualitative methodology, the deviant structures of NPs are analyzed, having as one of the determinants the possessive. The choice of this approach is justified by the fact that its essence meets the general objective of this study, by allowing the description and explanation of the agreement phenomenon, so as to bring to the surface the trends in the use of PFL as well as the sociolinguistic explanations. Thus, examples and schemes are used as a resource to demonstrate the tendencies in the use of possessives. The *corpus* to be analyzed consists of syntactic structures produced by first, second and third year students of PFL learning at the University of Zimbabwe. The use of data from three groups is based on the need to verify whether the extent to which the establishment of the agreement of the possessive with the noun according to the biological gender is resolved or not, with the advancement in learning.

## 2 PRELIMINARY DATA

The target group of this study consists of PFL learners who are native-speakers of Shona and English. These students, aged between 19 and 35 years, have Portuguese as part of the different programs they are studying. In terms of prior linguistic knowledge on the basis of Portuguese learning, the absence of flexion and concordance in feminine and masculine gender in both languages should be emphasized within the scope of nominal agreement. Incidentally, although the phenomenon of nominal concordance in gender occurs through the placement of nominal class morphemes in Shona, such gender does not refer to the grammatical categories of feminine and masculine.

The mother tongue of the target group is part of the languages of zone S10, being native to the people of Mashonaland, Zimbabwe. However, it is also spoken by small social groups in neighboring countries such as Botswana, Mozambique and Zambia (cf. MUKARO, 2012, p. 221; MHUTE, 2016, p. 340). In Zimbabwe, there are about 16 official languages – Shona, Ndebele, Tonga, Tswana, Kalanga, Koisan, Shangani, Ndau, Chibarwe, Nambya, Xhosa, Chewa, Sign language, Sotho, and English. The latter, the language of the former colonizer – England – is the second language of most Zimbabweans. This situation favors the existence of multilingual individuals.

The language system of the Shona (mother tongue) is based on nominal classes that fit into two large groups of names, namely, countable names and countless names (MPOFU, 2009, p. 100-108). 21 classes based on purely semantic aspects, which correspond to the gender are considered; the elements directly related to the name (verbs and adjectives) must agree in the categories of nominal class (gender), person and number with the prefix of the core name (FORTUNE, 1980 p. 29-84; MUKARO, 2012). Therefore, agreement in Shona occurs through the prefixing of agglutinating morphemes of person, number and class, as can be seen in the following examples.

### Examples I:

- a. [F [NP-suj.[Pref.class/num/pess**Dzi**] mba[Dem**idzi**]] [VP[Pref.class/num/pess**dz**] akanaka]] (dzimbaidzidzakanaka) (SH) = Estas casas são bonitas (PT).
- b. [F [NP-suj.[Pref.class/num/pess**Mu**]nhu] [VP[Pref.class/num/pess**a**]nozivazvaanoda]] (munhuanozivazvaanoda) (SH) = A pessoa sabe o que quer (PT).
- c. [F [NP-suj.[Pref.class/num/pess**Va**]nhu] [VP[Pref.class/num/pess**va**]nozivazvavanoda]] (vanhuvanozivazvavanoda.) = As pessoas sabem o que querem (PT).
- d. [F [NP-suj.[Pref.class/num/pess**Zv**]ino] [Pref.class/num/pess**zv**]ose] [VP[Pref.class/num/pess**zv**]inebasa]]. (zvinozvosezvinebasa) (SH) = Todas as coisas são úteis (PT).

These characteristics are very distinct from Portuguese characteristics. Even though the value of the contribution of the socio-familial *input* to the development of skills in foreign languages is proven, the group members under study do not have opportunities to develop their competence of the Portuguese language in a social/family setup to complement the use of Portuguese, which only happens in the classroom, in the context of learning (cf. ORTEGA, 2013, p. 27; ELLIS, 2013, p. 365-378). Moreover, on the value of socio-family *input*, relying on Krashen's theory (1985), Ortega considers

[...] learners obtain comprehensible input mostly through listening to oral messages that interlocutors direct to them and via reading written texts that surround them, such as street signs, personal letters, books and so on. When L2 learners process these messages for meaning (which they will most likely do if the content is personally relevant, and provided they can reasonably understand them), grammar learning will naturally occur. (KRASHEN, 1985 apud ORTEGA, 2013, p. 59).

However, the input of Portuguese is not available to the students, which, considering Krashen's perspective, makes it possible to foresee major difficulties in the development of competences in linguistic processes such as nominal agreement in gender, motivated firstly by the complexity and the non-systemic nature of morphological marking of gender in Portuguese, secondly, by the distance

between the languages known by the student and the language in learning, specifically Portuguese, and thirdly by the lack of input that favors learning.

The lack of a linguistic and cognitive basis (e.g. ORTEGA, 2013, p. 83-107) that accommodates the acquisition of gender-concordant competence in PFL within the target group makes critical the achievement of the gender agreement phenomenon. In general, studies of nominal agreement in this group and in others carried out by other researchers such as Martins (2015) and Pinto (2012) demonstrate the difficulty that PFL learners have in the establishing gender and number traits, the category of gender being the one with the most deviations.

There is still a tendency to use the unmarked gender, the masculine, regardless of the characteristics of the nucleus. The explanation given for this phenomenon is in most cases the fact that in the native languages of these groups of learners there is no morphological distinction between masculine and feminine, that is, in English, Shona, Cantonese, etc. Thus, the deviation is favored by the phenomenon of cross-linguistic influence, in which aspects of the languages developed by the students are mobilized to fill certain difficulties in the use of the new language (ELLIS, 2013, p. 365-378). Now, if the Shona and English languages do not offer any linguistic backings in the area of nominal agreement in female and male gender, if the surrounding environment does not offer any meaningful input in Portuguese, how do PFL learners solve the question of agreement of the possessives with the noun in the grammatical category of gender?

In fact, although in the Shona language the possessive agrees (in morphosyntactic terms) in nominal class with the noun, it always operates an anaphoric reference, that is, it is always postponed to the nucleus as in examples I. In English, as stated, there is no gender agreement of the possessive. Actually, considering the question presented in the previous paragraph on the agreement of the possessive and the name in gender, several hypotheses can be put among which can be indicated:

1. The PFL learners with the linguistic profile presented, considering the different aspects that characterize the nominal agreement, present, as a general tendency in the establishment of the agreement between the possessive and the noun, the use of the masculine, since in their languages there are no morphosyntactic mechanisms of distinction of the two categories of gender (feminine and masculine).
2. If their prior linguistic knowledge does not provide them with features related to gender agreement, if the possessive behaves in a particular way – determines the noun, indicates the semantic value of possession and at the same time establishes a pragmatic relation between the speaking subject and the entity possessed ... – and if there is no possibility of putting the possessive in the neutral form (without reference to any entity), without, therefore, the possibility of resorting to their linguistic knowledge for learning and use, the student looks for his/her own strategies to make use of possessives.

Thus, the attempt to find answers to the question posed about the nominal gender agreement in PFL of learners with a linguistic profile presented implies the consideration of two main theories, namely, the theory of linguistic variation (LABOV, 2007, 1994) and the theory of acquisition of foreign languages (ELLIS, 2013 and ELLIS, 1994). The two theories are summoned by the fact that they predict, in the acquisition of FLs, occurrences of phenomena of deviations, and the first one finds different variables on which such deviations (variation) depend. One variable that is invoked as a determinant of certain linguistic achievements, deviant or not, is gender (cf. ECKERT, 2013, ROMAINE, 2013, and MCELHINNY, 2013). The theory of acquisition of FLs, in turn, predicts that, at a certain stage of learning (interlanguage), the realization of morphosyntactic achievements fits neither in the languages already known (in this case English and Shona), nor in the target language (Portuguese) (cf. CORDER, 1981, p. 16-17; SCHUMANN, 1974, p. 145-146), a characteristic that can be attributed to the use of the possessive by the target group.

### 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

The word *gênero* comes from the Latin *genus* carrying with it the significance of 'type'. However, the types of entities denoted by nouns cannot be limited to the masculine and the feminine resulting from the notion of male and female. There are languages with

more than two genders; they can go up to fifteen (cf. BEIT-ALLAHMI et al. 1974, p.426), a consequence of the existence, in different languages, of several aspects considered for the definition of gender. There are, however, systems that consider the sex of living beings for the definition of the genus of the nouns that designate them; others, the life (being / not being), hierarchies of beings (humans, animals, trees, superiors, inferiors), etc. (cf. CORBERT, 2006).

Gender consists, in effect, in the notional subcategorization that the speakers make of the reality around them, based on processes of cognition of reality. It is not necessarily sex, though sex can be considered as one of the criteria for defining it. While sex is natural – particularly concerning animate beings (male and female) – gender is not a natural thing, it is the conventional, social, cultural, and psychological categorization of reality (MCELHINNY, 2003, p. 22-23). However, the grammatical gender consists in the placing of morphemes to the nouns and their accessories, without such morphemes establishing a natural or consistent relation with the referents. Moreover, in Portuguese, the morphological marking of the gender does not obey systematic criteria, in such a way that many linguists criticize and deny the indication of gender based on morphological processes.

In fact, languages have gender-differentiation systems, and they have different gender-based systems; “noun phrases headed by nouns of different types control different agreements [...] [so], the evidence that nouns have gender in a given language lies in the agreement targets that show gender” (CORBERT, 2006, p. 749-750). According to this author, there are two great criteria / rules used in the definition of gender; semantic (for certain languages) and formal (for others). However, the formal never dissociate from the former, in reality, there are languages that combine the meaning and form of units. Considering that in Portuguese the speakers differentiate, albeit less systematically, the masculine nouns from the feminine by giving them certain terminations, it can be considered that Portuguese obeys the second criterion (the combination of meaning and form).

In Portuguese, there is a tendency to associate thematic vowels ‘-a’ with the feminine and ‘-o’ with the masculine. However, there is enough evidence to demonstrate the non-functionality of this criterion for the identification and marking of gender, for example, the impossibility of changing feminine nouns such as *mesa* (table) for the masculine \**meso* by switching the vowels. Gender is unequivocally “determined by the determinant that lies to the left of the name” (RIO-TORTO, 2001, p. 263), through the process of nominal agreement in gender (LUCCHESI, 2009, p. 2996).

In this nominal agreement, possessives, one of the classes that must present the form corresponding to the genus of the nominal nucleus, have the particularity of varying according to the semantic traits of gender of the entity possessed. Generally, they are postponed to the determinant article or demonstrative (see Examples 2) and precede the numerical quantifiers (Examples 2 c, d), with which they operate a multiple specification, without ever being able to occur in the initial position of the NP, in canonical Portuguese (European Portuguese) (Examples 2 d, e) (RAPOSO; MIGUEL, 2013, p. 729-730), one of the attributes that distinguish this variety from the Brazilian.

### Examples II

- a. O meu livro está encapado.
- b. Este meu livrocustou 20\$.
- c. Osmeus quatro filhos são jornalistas.
- d. As suas cinco canetas estão guardadas.
- e. \*Meu amigo chegou (EuropeanPortuguese (EP)). vs. Meu amigo chegou (BrazilianPortuguese (BP))
- f. O meu amigo chegou.

In contemporary Portuguese, the data analyzed by Miguel reveal, as far as the strictly syntagmatic level of NP is concerned, the disappearance of the “clitic forms” of the possessives, that is, the pre-nominal placement not combined with articles of the possessives (MIGUEL, 2002, p. 290). This implies the consideration of two positions in the use of Portuguese, namely, the pre-nominal placement of the possessives combined with an article or a demonstrative – weak forms of the possessives – and the post-nominal placement – strong forms of possessives – in the European variant of Portuguese (cf. CASTRO; COSTA, 2002, p. 101-107). These positions (pre-nominal and post-nominal) are sensitive to NPs “definiteness” or “indefiniteness” (BRITO, 2003, p. 509).

While the possessive determinants are preceded by the definite articles and demonstratives in defined NPs (Examples 3 a, b.), they are postponed to the noun determined by the indefinites, by numerals, by interrogatives, and by exclamations (Examples 3 c, d.), in undefined NPs (BRITO, 2003, p. 509).

### Examples III

- a. *O meu* irmão chegou.
- b. *Este meu* irmão é muito inteligente.
- c. *Um* *tias* *nossas* chegaram ontem.
- d. *Quatro* amigos *seus* chegaram.

As regards the use of the Portuguese as a non-mother tongue (PNMT), according to Gonçalves (1997, p. 62-63), the tendency towards preference for the masculine stands out. Pinto (2012, p. 27), in turn, in a study involving Moroccan students, highlights among their main difficulties, the selection of the gender when the noun in Portuguese does not belong to the thematic classes ‘-o’ or ‘-a’ with partial correlation with the male gender values or the feminine. As in the case of Mozambican Portuguese (MP) and in the other PALOP<sup>1</sup>s, the trend towards the widespread use of the masculine is also found in European PFL learners (cf. MARIOTTO; LOURENÇO-GOMES, 2013, p. 181-183).

The use of possessives is not exempt from the phenomena of sociolinguistic variation. While in EP, pre-nominals (weak possessives) occur with definite determination, in BP, they occur without articles – functioning as possessive determinants (cf. CASTRO, 2007). This leads to the consideration of a strategy of avoiding the multiple determinations advocated in the Portuguese grammar. In BP, the use of the possessive resulting from the association of the preposition *de* (with the value of belonging / origin) with 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns (*ele* e *ela*) is frequent. Rather than disambiguating the semantics of the pronouns *his* and *her* (*seu/ sua*), which are of preferential use in the EP, *dele/dela* are used in BP because of the distance between the possessive and the referent in the contexts (cf. CERQUEIRA, 1996, p. 86-121).

In the African context, although the EP norm is officially assumed, the use of possessives registers a significant linguistic variation. Such a variation implies, in a general sense, the occurrence of the so-called variable concordance within the NP (JOHN-AND, 2011). In addition to the aspects related to non-flexing in gender and number of accessory elements of the nominal nucleus, revealed by authors of diverse origin such as Miguel and Mendes (2013), Inverno (2009) and Gonçalves (2010), in a recent study, Adriano (2014, p. 168-170) confirms the erasure of the marked number (plural), marks not necessarily of the specifiers, but of the nouns and adjectives, in effect avoiding the patterns of correspondence of syntactic and semantic traits with the specifiers (including the possessives) in the Angolan Portuguese (AP). In the Mozambican Portuguese (MP), the case is similar to that which stands out in the BP that consists in the use of the pre-nominal (weak) possessives without the definite determination (cf. ATANASIO, 2002, p. 118-119). Therefore, in relation to the use of the possessives in the African variants, two tendencies appear in the pre-nominal position: the erasure of the marked number (plural) in the nucleus, sometimes in the possessive, and the omission of the determinants.

From the sociolinguistic point of view, there are studies that demonstrate linguistic variation phenomena conditioned by the gender (sex) of the speaking subject. Romaine (2003) and Eckert (2003) present studies that relate the phenomenon of linguistic hypercorrection to women: “one of these sociolinguistic patterns is that women, regardless of other social characteristics such as class, age, etc., tended to use more standard forms than men” (ROMAINE, 2003, p. 101-102). Romaine gives as an example the realisation of / r / post-vowel by New York women (cf. ECKERT, 2003, p.392). With regard to the Portuguese, in a doctoral dissertation, Ernesto (2015) presents as one of the problems of PFL learners, the establishment of nominal agreement in gender dependent on the biological gender. In turn, Brito (2015, p. 13) analysing PFL structures of learners with prior linguistic knowledge of English, reveals the occurrence of deviations in nominal gender agreement without, however, relating grammatical gender deviance to the gender of individuals.

<sup>1</sup> African countries that have Portuguese as official language.

#### 4 DATA PRESENTATION

The possessives indicate morphological traits of gender and number of the nucleus and, at the same time, indicate the semantic value of possession. With regard to gender, a determinant like 'meu' varies according to the marks of the entity possessed. Being able to be placed in the post-nucleus position (strong possessive), its canonical position is the pre-nuclear (weak possessive) conforming to the sequence *Art. + Poss. + Noun*. The data analyzed, which reveal that the PFL learners at the University of Zimbabwe use the possessives in their canonical position i.e. as weak possessives (cf. CASTRO, 2007), involve two contexts of occurrence, namely, in the sequence *Art. + Poss. + Noun* (in an autonomous NP or complement of Verbal Phrases (VP)) and in the sequence *Prep + Art. + Poss. + Noun* (in a structure in which the NP is a complement of PREPOSITION). In these contexts, PFL learners use the possessives as nominal determinants.

With regard to the sequence: *Art. + Poss. + Noun*, although in some cases with problems of agreement, the target group places articles before the possessives and, together, determine the noun, as can be seen in the examples below:

##### Examples IV (first year)

1. \***O meu irmã** chama-se Morgan Marwiro (Female student (FS));
2. \***A minha amigo** tem namorado (Male student (MS));
3. \***A minha pai** e mãe têm cinco filhos (FS);
4. \*Limpo **as minhas dentes** (FS);

##### Examples V (second year)

1. \*Depois do jantar eu **fazia a minha trabalho de casa** (FS);
2. \*Ela mora em Chipinge com o meu avô **e o seu família** (FS);
3. \*Também **eu vou cassar a minha namorado** (FS);
4. \***A minha professor** foi chama-se senhora Makurumidze (FS);

##### Examples VI (third year)

1. \*Quando ela **terminar a sua programa** (FS);
2. \***A minha amiga é trabalhador** em **a sua livros** (FS);
3. \*A Tanya gosta de brincar com **as suas irmãos** (FS);
4. \*A Treasher vai ao cinema com **a sua namorado** (FS);

The above examples indicate, with respect to gender agreement, peculiar aspects if one considers the results of other studies on non-native variants of Portuguese. At the three levels, it is clear that the deviations with masculine tendencies are quite reduced, on the one hand, contrary to the generalized tendency of the masculine use, and, on the other hand, giving way to the tendency of the feminine use. That is, in the group under study, with regards the possessives, the tendency to use the feminine in the establishment of concordance is emphasized, as shown in figure I below.

In the *Prep + Art. + Poss. + Noun* structure (where the NP is part of the Prepositional phrase (PP)), the deviations of agreement take place either in the relation between the article and the noun or between the possessive and the noun or between the two and the noun. In the second and third years (the levels in which the structures in question were registered), the data indicate that there are greater difficulties in harmonizing grammatical traits of gender between the possessive and the nominal nucleus. Although the use of the masculine is the dominant tendency in the second year (only in the syntactic context in question), in the 3rd year, the use of the feminine stands out with greater significance. It seems, therefore, that in the early years PFL learners tend to use the masculine gender – hence the high number of occurrences – however, with the development of learning, this tendency gives rise to the

establishment of the morphological gender according to the biological gender of the speaking subject. In fact, even in the first structure of analysis, the use of the masculine is vivid in the second year. Examples (7 and 8) below illustrate the aspects presented in this paragraph.

#### Examples VII (second year)

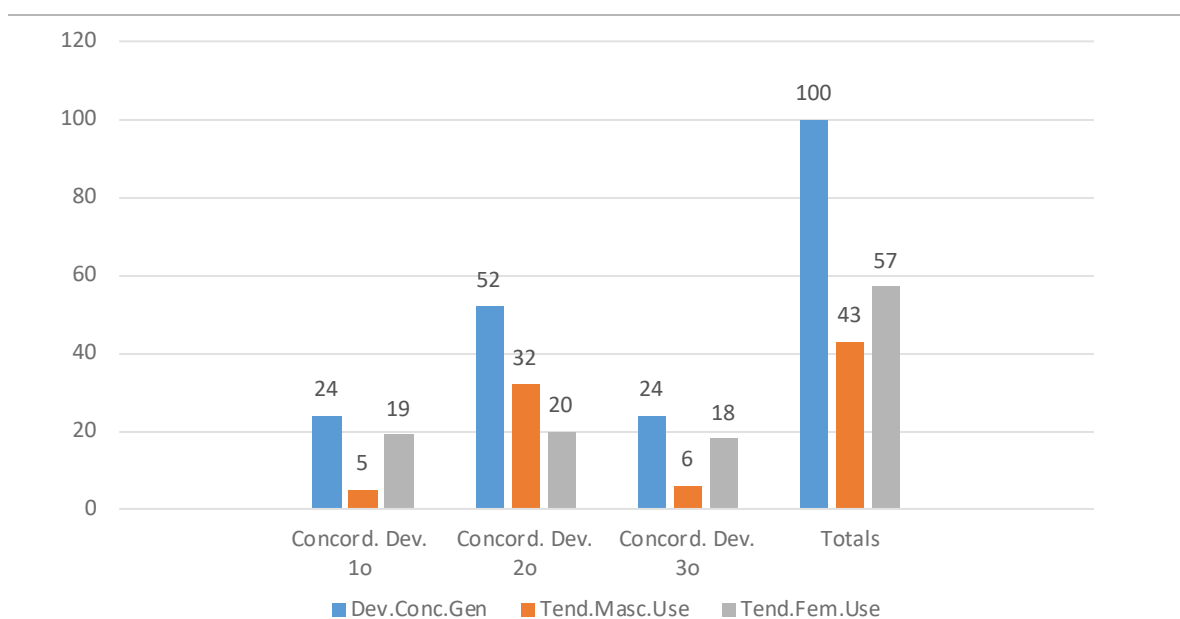
1. \*Normalmente Leah vai na escola a pé **com seus amigas**; (MS)
2. \*Convidarei os meus amigos **para o meu festa**; (FS)
3. \*e toma pequeno almoço **com os seus famílias**; (FS)
4. \*No ano passado eu fui da ideia **com a minha pai e mãe**; (MS)

#### Examples VIII (third year)

1. \*A Tanya gosta de brincar com **as suas irmãos**; (FS)
2. \*A Treasher vai ao cinema com **a sua namorado**; (FS)
3. \*ou brincar **com as suas irmãos**; (FS)
4. \*sobre **os seus amigos**, namorada e a sua vida; (FS)

In statements like \*depois das **nossas estudos**; \*depois do jantar **eu fazia a minha trabalho de casa**; \*a **minha amigo** tem namorado; \*no ano passado eu fui da ideia **com a minha pai e mãe** and \*A Tanya gosta de brincar com **as suas irmãos**, as with most NPs with deviations of gender agreement, the nominal nucleus *estudos*, *trabalho*, *amigo*, *pai* and *irmão* display marks of the masculine, however, the possessives specifier is particularly presented in its feminine form. Regarding the nominal agreement on gender (male and female), English and Shona do not present any aspect that directly influences this tendency. Therefore, the deviations and the trend that occur seem to have to do with the complex and unclear character of the gender marking in Portuguese (MARTINS, 2015, p. 40-41). Graph I below shows trends in establishing gender agreement at all three levels. In general, the use of the feminine exceeds half of the deviant occurrences.

**Graph I:** Tendency of deviations of nominal agreement in gender between the possessive and the noun



Source: from author.



## 5 DISCUSSION

The fact that gender is a difficult category to learn actually seems to be generalized. In this context, the results of this research converge with other studies on the PFL carried out by authors such as Martins (2015) and Pinto (2012). However, they no longer converge with studies of Mariotto and Lourenço-Gomes (2013) and Gonçalves (1997; 2010) among others on the trend of the use of the masculine. In general terms (although in the second year the use of the masculine slightly exceeds the use of the feminine with the possessive), the analyzed structures indicate that in syntactic structures of the type *Art. + Poss. + Noun* or *Prep. + Art. + Poss. + Noun*, the tendency is to place the possessive to the left preceded by an article, according to the EP prescription. Thus, this canonical realization distances itself from the generalized occurrence of the possessives in the BP and from the deviant tendency in the MP to omit the preposition of the articles of the possessives (cf. CASTRO, 2007; ATANÁSIO, 2002).

In the African variants, with emphasis on the Portuguese of São Tomé where Portuguese-based creoles are spoken (HAGEMEIJER, 2009) and on the AP where Bantu languages are spoken as mother tongues (INVERNO, 2009), tendency to flex the antecedent elements is registered (MIGUEL; MENDES, 2013), which also converges with the results of this study on the use of possessives in which, in fact, their morphosyntactic variation is noted. However, unlike what happens in the above variants and in the PFL in which the preference of the masculine is emphasized (cf. MIGUEL; MENDES, 2013; WINTER, 2009; GONÇALVES, 2010; MARTINS, 2015; LOURENÇO-GOMES, 2013; PINTO, 2012), this study indicates that, with the possessive determinants, the tendency is to put them in the feminine, regardless of the gender of the nominal nucleus.

Considering the complex nature that involves the indication of gender in Portuguese, first because it does not have systematic and regular mechanisms, and second, because it depends on the gender of the possessed element and not the possessor; also considering the fact that English and Shona languages do not have aspects that can influence this tendency – because there are no mechanisms of flexion and agreement in masculine or feminine gender – and considering in parallel that a larger number of students, whose PFL syntactic structures constitute the corpus analyzed, is female, the recorded behavior reveals the tendency of marking the morphological gender according to the biological gender (sex) of the speaker. This conclusion agrees with and confirms one of the findings of ERNESTO (2015).

Effectively, within the target group, the tendency to use the feminine in the agreement of the weak possessors with the noun, even if it can be explained in the interlingua theory, such explanation cannot be related to the phenomenon of cross-linguistic influence, an aspect that can be considered in the explanation of the tendency of the use of the masculine by the same group of students. However, the biological gender has an influence on language use as demonstrated by Romaine (2003) and Eckert (2003). However the results on the agreement of the weak possessive with the noun, although they illustrate the influence of the biological gender on the accomplishment in PFL, distanced themselves from the features indicated by those two, merely by the fact that the influence consists in a deviant realization.

Therefore, the study on the agreement of the possessive with the noun, with respect to the grammatical category of the gender, reveals that students do not obey that general tendency to put noun expanders in their unmarked form in gender and, in this way, invalidate the first hypothesis presented in relation to the question that guides this study. In reality, it is demonstrated that the learners find their own independent strategies for the establishment of agreement involving the possessive, in this case, the recourse to the strategy of establishing agreement in gender according to the biological gender of the speaking subject.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Denoting gender in Portuguese is a controversial subject due to the lack of systematic and regular criteria. This situation slows down the process of developing competences of nominal agreement of gender in PFL. On the other hand, the possessives, one of the classes of the determinants, turn out to be complex to use since, despite simply anticipating the morphological traits of gender of the nominal nucleus, they serve to convey the idea of possession. Although in general terms the tendency is to use the masculine in the

establishment of the relations of agreement in PFL, with the possessive, the study reveals a contrary propensity, the use of the feminine.

This situation, considering the constitution of the target group – constituted mainly by female individuals – leads to consider the adoption of the criterion of establishment of nominal agreement of gender according to the biological gender of the speaking subject. In fact, similar tendencies – in which linguistic aspects are related and explained on the basis of biological gender differences – involving different linguistic aspects are reported in a significant number of sociolinguistic studies of Portuguese. Therefore, from the point of view of teaching and learning of foreign languages and PFL in particular, this implies the need for an increased investment in teaching, learning and practice of possessives, considering that this class of words is frequently used and discursively marked.

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