

Agreement between words

Agreement between words is an important feature of both written and spoken language. It is one of the two principles that assist us in the interpretation of statements because it shows the relationship between the words.

This is how it works:

Alguns **insetos** provocam **doenças**, às vezes, fatais à **população** ribeirinha.

Some-PL insect-PL cause-PRES.3PL illness-PL, at times, fatal-F.PL to population riverside-F.

insetos (masculine, plural)	←	alguns (masculine, plural)
doenças (feminine, plural)	←	fatais (feminine, plural)
população (feminine, singular)	←	ribeirinha (feminine, singular)

The key words (insetos, doenças, população) appear here with other words that say something about them. Those other words have the same gender (masculine/feminine) and the same number (singular/plural) as the key words.

This is how things work in standard Portuguese. In the vernacular, however, agreement is often handled differently, such as in the following example:

Os **livro** ilustrado mais interessante estão emprestado.

DEF-PL book illustrated most interesting be.PRES.3PL borrow-PAST.PART.M.SG.

livro (masculine, singular)	→	os (masculine, plural)
		ilustrado (masculine, singular)
		interessante (masculine, singular)
		emprestado (masculine, singular)

What do you think – does the author of the sentence refer to a single book or to a number of books? Let's see:

The word 'os' (plural) indicates that we are dealing with more than one book. In the vernacular, it's enough to put this first word in the plural to indicate more than one referent. If we were to rewrite the sentence in standard Portuguese, we would get this:

Os **livros** ilustrados mais interessantes estão emprestados.

DEF-PL book-PL illustrated-PL most interesting-PL be.PRES.3PL borrow-PAST.PART.M-PL.

You may be asking: "But can I say 'os livro?'"

Of course you can. But be careful, because – depending on the situation – you may be running the risk of falling victim to linguistic prejudice. Many people will tell you about what should and what should not be said or written, believing the rules of standard Portuguese apply to all varieties of Portuguese. A speaker must therefore be able to use the adequate variety for every occasion.

There is also another type of agreement, one that involves verbs. This is how it works:

In standard Portuguese, the verb agrees in both the number (singular/plural) and the person (1st/2nd/3rd) who is performing the action expressed by the verb.

O menino pegou o peixe. DEF boy catch-PRET.3SG DEF fish	Os meninos pegaram o peixe. DEF.PL boy-PL catch-PRET.3PL DEF fish
menino → singular	meninos → plural
pegou → singular	pegaram → plural
O menino pegou o peixe. DEF boy catch-PRET.3SG DEF fish	Eu peguei o peixe. I catch-PRET.1SG DEF fish
menino → 3rd person	eu → 1st person
pegou → 3rd person	peguei → 1st person

In the vernacular, however, verbal agreement often works a little differently, like in the following example:

Nós pega o peixe.
We catch-PRES.3SG DEF fish

nós → 1st person, plural
pega → 3rd person, singular

Os menino pega o peixe.
DEF.PL boy catch-3SG DEF fish

menino → 3rd person, plural in meaning (because of "os")
pega → 3rd person, singular

Note: When referring to agreement, the word *person* does not denote a human being. In this context, *person* refers to those involved in the speech act who don't necessarily have to be individuals. So there is someone who speaks (1st person), someone who is spoken to (2nd person) and someone who is spoken of (3rd person). For example:

Não vi sua revista, mãe.
NEG see-PRET.1SG your-F magazine, mother
(1st person: son; 2nd person: mother; 3rd person: magazine)

Mas eu a dexei aqui!
But I it leave-PRET.1SG here
(1st person: mother; 2nd person: son; 3rd person: magazine)