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Discourse motivations for the gender-inclusive coordinated plural forms in Czech

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Abstract

This paper examines coordinated masculine plural and feminine plural noun phrases (MFPL constructions) (e.g., *studenti a studentky*$^{\text{MFPL}}$ 'students'), alternative to the "generic" masculine plural form (*studenti*). Rather than simply stating that MFPL constructions are marked with explicit reference to both male and female members, this study explores whether MFPL forms have the potential to spread, and if so, how such spread might be motivated. The data suggest that MFPL constructions are emergent and compete with MPL forms. The study further discusses the types of lemmas that are most prone to MFPL use and the contexts in which the construction appears.

1. Introduction

Czech has nouns in masculine grammatical gender that are said to be unmarked with respect to biological gender (Valdrová 2017). These "generic masculine" nouns can have either a male or female referent. Thus, e.g., the generic masculine noun psycholog in the singular below can be used as a predicate nominal for the female subject Eva:

(1) Eva je dobrý psycholog (Valdrová 2017)
'Eva is a good psychologist$^{\text{GMSG}}$.'

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A generic masculine noun in the plural (GMPL) is said to be capable of referring to a mixed-gender group. In (2) the mountain climbers and Czechs are supposed to be inclusive of male and female members.

(2) Mezi horolezci nebyli žádní Češi (Valdrová 2017)
'Among the mountain climbers^{GMPL} there were no Czechs^{GMPL}.'

Recent experimental research, however, questions such a "generic" function in various languages. For example, Gygax et al (2008) test gender-bias in generically intended masculine nouns in French and German, using a sentence evaluation paradigm. They conclude that use of the masculine plural leads to a specifically male representation. Glim et al (2024) show that generic masculine forms in German affected neural processing of references to gender, including difficulty in accessing female referents after generic masculine nouns are used. Vela-Plo et al. find that masculine generic nouns in Spanish are interpreted as mostly referring to a group of male members, showing that they do not function as truly mixed-gender forms (2025:19).

Alternative referential expressions are proposed. Their effectiveness, however, seems to be mixed. Glim et al (2025) compare neutral processing of generic masculine plural forms vs. star forms in German.[1] They observed that neither form evoked a gender-balanced mental representation of male and female referents. In contrast, the study by Lindqvist et al (2019) finds that paired forms (he/she) and actively created gender-neutral pronouns are reported to eliminate gender-bias in Swedish compared to the generic masculine forms.

This paper is an attempt to consider the property of masculine plural and feminine plural coordinated noun phrases (MFPL constructions)[2]: e.g., studenti a studentky^{MFPL} 'students' in the cognitive grammar perspective. Rather than simply stating that the MFPL construction is marked with explicit reference to both male and female members, my aim is to explore whether it shows a potential to spread, and if so, how it might be motivated.

My claim is two-fold: first, while plural nouns are said to be similar to mass nouns that are characterized by homogeneity (Langacker 1987: 203-205), MFPL constructions are likely when the plural reference is construed as a set where individual members are profiled, foregrounding heterogeneity; second, the use of this construction clusters in solidarity-focused in-groups, but the construction is extending from socially grounded differentiation to a more schematic marker of internal diversity.

The paper consists of 3 parts. Section 2 describes the method and quantitative results. It tests whether the MFPL constructions are emergent and whether they are competing with

[1] Star forms are meant to be gender-inclusive forms with an asterisk to represent non-male gender identities in the plural (e.g., *Leser*innen 'readers'*)

[2] There are two other possible alternatives for gender neutrality: FMPL constructions (e.g., *studentky a studenti*) and neuter singular forms (e.g., *studentstvo*), which occur less frequently than MFPL. This study focuses on MFPL constructions, which could be seen as an extention of MPL (MPL forms followed by FPL forms).

MPL forms. Section 3 discusses the type of lemmas that are most prone to MFPL use and the contexts in which the construction appears. It is followed by Section 4 with conclusions.

2. Data, Method, and Results

The present study used two genre-matched subcorpora (traditional journalism) extracted from SYN2020 (Křen et al. 2020) and SYN2025 (Křen et al. 2025) (Table 1). The former contains texts from 2017-18 and the latter 2023-24.

Period covered	Size (tokens)
2017-18 traditional journalism (from SYN2020)	9,544,955
2023-24 traditional journalism (from SYN2025)	9,513,324

Table 1. Data used.

Table 2 shows absolute frequencies of MFPL forms from the two periods. I included lemmas that showed the relative frequencies above .3. MFPL constructions increased significantly from 2017-18 to 2023-24 (Fisher's exact test $p << 0.001$), rising from 6.6 to 25.1 tokens per million (≈ 3.8-fold increase)

Period	MFPL constructions (raw freq) (ipm>.3)	Total number of tokens in the corpus
2017–18	63	9,544,892
2023–24	239	9,513,085

Table 2. Aggregated MFPL forms over time.

The numbers of tokens are small, but they suggest an early stage of diffusion, showing that a new construction is perceived as new by the speech community and spreads through media over time. It is possible that this increase is in line with the innovation diffusion pattern discussed by Rogers (1995)[3].

Table 3 shows how the MP forms and MFPL constructions compete. The numbers of MPL forms reflect those lemmas appearing at least in one period.

[3] Rogers's idea broadly covers social innovations. This notion is applied to language, e.g. by Maybaum (2013).

In 2017-18, MFPL constructions accounted for .21% of all MP and MFPL realizations (63/29,639), compared to .95% in 2023-24 (239/25,162). The odds of selecting an MFPL construction rather than an MPL form are about 4.5 times higher in 2023-24 than in 2017-18 (OR = 4.50). The 95% Confidence Interval [3.41, 5.95] does not include 1, indicating that the increase is statistically robust and is unlikely to be due to chance. These results point to a substantial shift in constructional preference over time.

Period	MFPL forms (raw freq) (ipm >.3)	MPL forms (raw freq) (ipm >.3)	TOTAL MP + MFPL
2017-18	63	29576	29639
2023-24	239	24923	25162

Table 3. Frequencies of MP forms vs. MFPL constructions (Fisher's exact test p < .001).

The relationship between MP forms and MFPL constructions shows a change in progress. The shift shows that MP forms are far from being replaced by MFPL constructions, but the relationship between the two is gradually changing, with the latter on the increase.

3. Lemmas appearing in MFPL constructions

Lemmas that allowed MFPL constructions are listed in Tables 4 and 5. Table 4 lists lexical items that appear above ipm>.3 in both periods.

	2023-24 Raw freq	2023-24 ipm (>.3)	2023-24 Raw freq	2023-24 ipm (>.3)
autoři a autorky 'authors'	3	0.31	15	1.58
Češi a Češky 'Czechs'	10	1.05	19	2
herci a herečky 'actors'	7	0.73	4	0.42
hráči a hráčky 'players'	5	0.52	5	0.53
hrdinové a hrdinky 'heroes'	5	0.52	7	0.74
kolegové a kolegyně 'colleagues'	5	0.52	7	0.74
ministři a ministryně 'ministers'	4	0.42	0	(0)[4]

[4] The brackets mark the values below 0.3.

poslanci a poslankyně ‘MPs’	3	0.31	5	0.53
senioři a seniorky ‘seniors’	8	0.84	1	(0.11)
studenti a studentky ‘students’	5	0.52	15	1.58
voliči a voličky ‘voters’	3	0.31	4	0.42
žáci a žákyně ‘pupils’	5	0.52	4	0.42

Table 4. Comparison: Lemmas showing MFPL in 2017-18 and in 2023-24 (ipm > .3).

Out of the 12 types that appear in both periods, the majority of lemmas (2/3) show a rise in the frequency of MFPL constructions.

The lemmas showing the rise display a certain consistency in terms of semantics and the type of context. The most prototypical category is likely to be the “in-groups”: Czechs and colleagues (Češi a Češky, kolegové a kolegyně). These groups consist of members who are most familiar. The discourse contexts foreground the speaker’s alignment with members of the set; consequently, the set is likely to be viewed as internally heterogeneous.

In (3a) the MFPL construction appears in a context where the speaker advocates improvement in the quality of life for each member of the set. In (4a) the construction appears in a context where each colleague had a special relationship with the trade union leader. The context in each example suggest that the speaker supports the members of the set: the speaker agrees with the view that “Czechs deserve a higher pension;” the speaker presents the trade union leader as a respected individual, thereby agreeing with the colleagues, each of whom thought highly of and cared about their leader. Such an alignment-emphasized view of a set entails acknowledging each set member as worthy/unique rather than as faceless/homogeneous.

In contrast, the MPL forms in (3b) and (4b) appear in a context where the group is presented in relation to other sets: Czechs and Slovaks; and the STAN party (Starostové a nezávislí) and the other parties. The examples do not focus on the internal heterogeneity of the groups.

(3a) Pokud chce vláda zvyšovat věk odchodu do důchodu, musí mnohem více dbát na kvalitu života Čechů a Češek^{MFPL}, nejen apelem na prevenci, ale většími investicemi do oblasti veřejného zdraví. (2024)
‘If the government wants to raise the retirement age, it must pay much more attention to the quality of life of Czechs^{MFPL}, not only by appealing to prevention, but by investing more in public health.’

(3b) Po převratu v roce 1948 se řada Čechů^{MPL} a Slováků^{MPL} aktivně zapojila do boje proti komunismu. (2023)

'After the 1948 coup, many Czechs[MPL] and Slovaks[MPL] became actively involved in the fight against communism.'

(4a) Celý život se aktivně zapojoval do odborové činnosti, dlouhá léta stál v čele odborové organizace pracovníků aparátu strany. Svými kolegy a kolegyněmi[MFPL] byl velice vážen za svou moudrost a rozhled. Každému rád ochotně pomohl řešit jeho nesnáze. (2024)
'Throughout his life he was actively involved in trade union activity, and for many years he headed the trade union of the workers of the party apparatus. He was highly respected by his colleagues[MFPL] for his wisdom and insight. He was happy to help everyone solve their difficulties.'

(4b) Podle mého soudu by takový krok musel být vyvážen opatřeními v rozpočtovém určení daní. Co na to říkájí vaši straničtí kolegové[MPL]starostové? (2023)
'In my opinion, such a move would have to be balanced by measures in the budgetary determination of taxes. What do your colleagues[MPL] from the STAN party have to say about this?'

The MFPL constructions for the other groups (heroes, students, authors, players, and MPs) are often set in contexts where a group is viewed as consisting of distinct individuals, i.e. where each member is individuated.

Story characters are often created to be different from one another; such differences could be underscored further by context. The MFPL construction in (5a) is set in a text where the episode titles (of a series) cause people to wonder how each character might end up. In contrast, the MPL form in (5b) represents a type: the speaker characterizes the referents uniformly as murderers.

(5a) V listopadu oznámil názvy všech dílů a nastartoval tak vlnu spekulací, kam by se vyprávění zasazené do osmdesátých let mohlo vyvíjet a jak jeho hrdinové a hrdinky[MFPL] skončí. (2024)
'In November, he announced the titles of all the episodes, thereby kicking off a wave of speculation as to where the story set in the 1980s might evolve and how its heroes[MFPL] would end up.'

(5b) Z lidí, kteří byli masoví vrazi, dělat dneska hrdiny[MPL], to je pro mě absolutně nepochopitelné. (2024)
'To make heroes[MPL] out of people who were mass murderers today is absolutely incomprehensible to me.'

The lemma student in the plural most often refers to gymnasium and university students5 who are expected to have their own (often liberal) opinions and/or vary in their specializations. In (6a) the MFPL construction occurs in a context where students must produce unique robots for a competition; they are creative individuals who would produce different results. In contrast, the MPL form in (6b) occurs in a context where a teacher applies the traditional teaching style to any student.

[5] The lemma is strongly collocated with *univerzita, fakulta, obor*, and *gymnazium.*

(6a) Studenti a studentky[MFPL] budou ze stavebnice LEGO MINDSTORMS programovat robota – popeláře! Úkolem je postavit a naprogramovat robota tak, aby během 90 sekund, bez jakékoliv další pomoci, vyčistil hrací hřiště. (2024)
'Students[MFPL] will program a robot from the LEGO MINDSTORMS kit – a garbage collector! The task is to build and program a robot to clean the playing field in 90 seconds, without any further help.'

(6b) Prý se tam spíš učí podle tradičního modelu, kdy pedagog přednáší většinu hodiny a studenti[MPL] jen poslouchají a nemají moc možnosti nějak reagovat na to, co se právě řeší. (2024)
'What [I] hear is that teaching is done according to the traditional model, where the teacher lectures most of the hour and the students[MPL] just listen and do not have much possibility to react to what is being talked about.'

Authors are often considered unique and creative individuals. Varying approaches, interests, and performances by individual members of the set might be emphasized by context. In example (7a) authors were assigned various themes and were expected to produce original results. Furthermore, they differ with respect to the genres in which they specialize (drawings, graphics, sculptures, and paintings). Unlike in (7a), the MPL in (7b) occurs in a context where all authors are viewed as identical -- they are not as unique as their counterpart (Alena Wagnerová). Examples (8a) and (8b) are similar to the preceding pair. The MFPL construction in (8a) appears in a context where the speaker mentions some of the individual players by name (those mentioned are female), while the MPL form in (8b) is in a context where the players as a set are compared to another set, i.e. ordinary people, regarding their behavior.

(7a) Originálním způsobem tak rozvíjí témata, jimž se ve své práci věnovali vystavující autoři a autorky[MFPL]. (2024)
'They [the curators] therefore develop in an original way the themes that the exhibiting authors have addressed in their work.'

(7b) Reportáže Aleny Wagnerová lze pro jejich specifičnost jen těžko srovnávat s prací jiných českých autorů[MPL] stejného žánru. (2023)
'The reportage by Alena Wagnerová can hardly be compared to the work of other Czech authors[MPL] of the same genre because of their specificity.'

(8a) Veronika Malá, Markéta Jeřábková a Jana Knedlíková jsou mezi nominovanými na jednotlivých postech v anketě Evropské házenkářské federace o nejlepší hráče a hráčky[MFPL] sezony. (2024)
'Veronika Malá, Markéta Jeřábková and Jana Knedlíková are among the nominees for individual posts in the European Handball Federation poll for the best players[MFPL] of the season.'

(8b) Mocní hráči[MPL], jako je stát nebo soukromí developeři, určují způsob života ve městě, zatímco běžní lidé tomuto tlaku vzdorují. (2023)
'Powerful players[MPL], such as the state or private developers, determine the way of life in the city, while ordinary people resist the pressure.'

Finally, MPs (in the Czech Chamber of Deputies) are expected to propagate different political views and are known for their confrontational debates in Czech politics. The MFPL construction in (9a) appears in a context where the future majority group might result from a coalition, i.e. a heterogeneous and complex group, while the MPL in (9b) refers to one of the two sets of politicians who elected the president in Czechoslovakia.

(9a) Hypotetická koalice ANO + ODS by měla ústavní většinu 123 poslanců a poslankyň^{MFPL}. (2023)
'The hypothetical ANO + ODS coalition would have a constitutional majority of 123 MPs^{MPFL}.
(9b) Prezidenta na společné schůzi volili českoslovenští poslanci^{MPL} a senátoři. (2023)
'The president was elected by Czechoslovak MPs^{MPL} and senators at a joint meeting.'

There are two groups of lemmas that show a decline in the use of MFPL constructions from 2017-18 to 2024. Admittedly, MFPL constructions are not impossible. In (10a) voice or dubbing actors vary in terms of types of awards given to them, and (11a) suggests that each minister within the group is expected to make different decisions. However, actors and ministers are more likely to be seen as individuals in the singular, accompanied by names (e.g., herec Miroslav Krobot 'actor Miroslav Krobot', herečka Jiřina Bohdalová 'actress Jiřina Bohdalová', ministr finance Andrej Babiš 'Finance Minister Andrej Babiš, ministryně práce Michaela Marksová 'Labor Minister Michaela Marksová'). In the plural they tend to appear as a category (10b, 11b).[6] Example (10b) emphasizes the unusual ending of the play, with the entire mass of actors leaving the stage without greeting the audience; the focus is not on the diversity of actors. Example (11b) is about the joint statement by the EU foreign ministers, highlighting the uniformness of their views.

(10a) V sobotu se v Přelouči udělovaly Ceny Františka Filipovského pro nejlepší dabingové herce a herečky^{MPFL}. Cenu za celožitovní mistroství si odnesli Maria Drahokoupilová, Jan Přeučil a režisér Jiří Kubík. Hlavní herecké ceny získali Martina Hudečková a Jiří Plachý. (2017)
'On Saturday the František Filipovský Awards for the best dubbing actors^{MPFL} were awarded in Přelouč. Maria Drahokoupilová, Jan Přeučil and director Jiří Kubík won the Lifetime Championship. Martina Hudečková and Jiří Plachý won the main acting awards.'
(10b) Když na konci herci^{MPL} opustili jeviště, aniž by se uklonili, měl jsem radost, že přes to přese všechno po dvou minutách zazněl zasloužený polesk. (2018)
'When, at the end, the actors^{MPL} left the stage without bowing, I was pleased that, despite everything, two minutes later a well-deserved applause sounded.'
(11a) Ale i v případě, že dosavadní vláda zůstane, musíme počítat se změnami, protože nově vejde v platnost zákon proti kumulaci funkcí a celá řada ministrů a

[6]Singular forms make up more than 80% of all the word forms of *ministr* in both 2017-18 and 2023-24 (cf. 40% for *poslanec* in both periods). Singular forms are also more predominant for *herec* (56% of all the word forms in both 2017-18 and 2023-24) (cf. 27% and 28% for *hráč* in the two periods).

ministryň[MPFL] se bude muset rozhodnout, jestli dále ministrovat, nebo působit v lokální politice. (2017)
'But even if the current government remains, we have to reckon on changes, because the law against the accumulation of functions will come into force, and a whole range of ministers[MPFL] will have to decide whether to continue to serve as ministers, or to work in local politics.'

(11b) Borrell to uvedl včera v Lucemburku na okraj jednání ministrů[MPL] zahraničí zemí Evropské unie. […] Společné odsuzující prohlášení sedmadvacítky ohledně útoků na UNIFL, které je označuje za „vážné porušení mezinárodního práva", […] (2024)
'Borrell said it yesterday in Luxembourg in the margins of the meeting of the EU state foreign ministers[MPL] […] Joint statement of condemnation by the 27 [EU states] of the attacks on UNIFL, calling a "serious violation of international law", […]'

Seniors and pupils could be part of the speaker's in-group community but they are more likely to be viewed as part of the population that needs protection or education rather than individuals who act independently. The lemma senior is often set in a context that addresses social and economic problems. In (12) seniors constitute an age category; the focus is what must be done. Compare this example with (3a) above where the speaker is invested in the well-being of each citizen. In (13) elementary school students are listed as one of the three categories along with teachers and parents.

(12) Podle predikcí Ústavu zdravotnických informací a statistiky ČR se totiž Zlínský kraj do tří až čtyř let stane nejstarším v zemi a bude potřebovat dvojnásobek lůžek pro seniory[MPL]. (2024)
'According to the predictions by the Czech Institute of Health Information and Statistics, the Zlín Region will in fact become the oldest in the country within three to four years and will need twice as many beds for seniors[MPL].'

(13) V rámci jejich balíčku se tak budou konat workshopy, semináře a interaktivní programy zaměřené jak na žáky[MPL], tak na učitele a rodiče. (2023)
'Under the auspices of their package, there will be workshops, seminars, and an interactive program aimed at pupils[MPL] as well as teachers and parents.'

Table 4, in short, does not consist of a random collection of lemmas. It suggests that MFPL constructions are motivated by the speaker's solidarity with the referents. Lemmas that can be identified as in-groups most likely allow solidarity expressions (Czechs and colleagues). Additionally, MFPL constructions are also possible for groups that could suggest set-internal heterogeneity, especially with contextual support.

Table 5 below shows new lemmas for which MFPL constructions occur above ipm >.3 in 2023-24. Here, we also see lemmas that could be considered types of in-groups. Fire fighters, who are often volunteers in the Czech scene, can be couched in discourse that focuses on speaker alignment with the members of the set. Readers, visitors, users, viewers (audience) are clients or subscribers to media and cultural organizations; discourse could indicate that each and individual member is valued. Workers can be colleagues and

potentially refer to an in-group. These newly joining lemmas can be characterized as extensions of the more prototypical in-groups.

Table 5, however, shows more lemmas that could signal individuated members within a set. Journalists, artists, creators, poets, writers, confectioners, architects, and scientists are specific types of authors. Similarly, graduates, just like students, constitute an intellectually diverse group. Tennis players, runners, athletes, scouts are specific groups of players; they are "groups whose members contribute individually in competitions" Politicians, mayors, Israelites, Palestinians, and directors (typically school principals) could suggest diversity in political views. Both politicians and mayors have different political affiliations. Israelites and Palestinians can be interpreted as a politically heterogeneous groups (in the coverage of the conflict in Gaza at this time). Directors who lead basic education are powerful negotiators to influence the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in different directions. The appearance of renters and pensioners indicate that MFPL constructions might be spreading to groups varying in economic conditions. Table 5 thus shows expansion of MFPL use in lemmas that can be set in contexts that accentuate individuality of set members. This tendency suggests on-going small steps (Traugott and Trousdale 2013: 74-75): while the concept of in-groups is extended to cover more sets, MFPL forms are further spreading to lemmas that signal individuated set members when such interpretation is contextually supported. In other words, MFPL appears to be motivated not only by socially pre-determined distinctness, but increasingly by more schematically conceptualized distinctness.

MFPL constructions in 2023-24	raw freq	ipm
novináři a novinářky 'journalists'	19	2
umělci a umělkyně 'artists'	15	1.58
členové a členky 'members'	12	1.26
tvůrci a tvůrkyně 'creators'	8	0.84
návštěvníci a návštěvnice 'visitors'	7	0.74
básníci a básnířky 'poets'	6	0.63
čtenáři a čtenářky 'readers'	6	0.63
politici a političky 'politicians	5	0.53
pracovníci a pracovnice 'workers'	5	0.53
spisovatelé a spisovatelky 'writers'	5	0.53
tenisté a tenistky 'tennis players'	5	0.53
uživatelé a uživatelky 'users'	5	0.53
absolventi a absolventky 'graduates'	4	0.42
cukráři a cukrářky 'confectioners'	4	0.42
diváci a divačky 'viewers'	4	0.42

hasiči a hasičky ‘fire fighters’	4	0.42
Izraelci a Izraelky ‘Israelites’	4	0.42
nájemníci a nájemnice ‘renters’	4	0.42
ředitelé a ředitelky ‘directors, school principals’	4	0.42
vědci a vědkyně ‘scientists’	4	0.42
architekti a architektky ‘architects’	3	0.32
atleti a atletky ‘athletes’	3	0.32
běžci a běžkyně ‘runners’	3	0.32
důchodci a důchodkyně ‘pensioners’	3	0.32
občané a občanky ‘citizens’	3	0.32
Palestinci a Palestinky ‘Palestinians’	3	0.32
skauti a skautky ‘scouts’	3	0.32
starosté a starostky ‘mayors’	3	0.32

Table 5. MFPL constructions appearing exclusively in 2023-24 above ipm>.3.

4. Conclusions

This study explored discourse motivations for the emergence of MFPL forms in 2017-18 and 2023-24. The study is limited in scope in that it does not include FMPL forms (e.g. *kolegyně a kolegové*) and the neuter singular forms of the *studentstvo* type. The quantitative as well as qualitative data nevertheless show that MFPL constructions are emergent and that they are in the early stages of competition with MPL forms. The lemmas that increasingly appear in MFPL constructions during this period suggest that that motivations for MFPL use might be becoming more schematic: they appear in-groups (Czechs, colleagues) that allow social alignment earlier, but are spreading to other lemmas that signal the distinctness of members within the set. While plural nominals allow a homogeneous, summary construal of the profiled region (Langacker 1987), MFPL constructions encode a partitioned construal of plural reference; they facilitate the interpretation of a set as internally differentiated.

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