

Language and the Many Histories of Brazilian Inequality

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On *História social da língua nacional*. Edited by Ivana Stolze Lima and Laura Carmo. Rio de Janeiro: Edições Casa de Rui Barbosa, 2008.

It is no secret that language is a fundamental marker of social difference in modern Brazil. “Correct” Portuguese usage is often considered difficult, and is certainly uncommon. Even highly educated people habitually “speak wrong,” and even seasoned authors require extensive “technical revision” of their published texts. Up and down the social scale, Brazilians lambast popular speech as “incorrect,” a symbol of ignorance and educational incompetence. Even in circles where open “pre-conceito” is considered gauche, disparaging remarks about poor people’s linguistic abilities are sometimes regarded as above the belt, objective assessments of intelligence and competence rather than unfounded dismissals of the underprivileged. Fernando Henrique Cardoso is only the most famous of the observers who have for decades routinely savaged Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva for massacring the Portuguese language.¹ As recently as March 2011, a columnist in *Veja* ridiculed the decision by Portugal’s Coimbra University to award President Lula an honorary degree, claiming that when Lula speaks off script, “Plurals flee, grammar takes refuge in the Portuguese embassy, verbal concordance hides in the basement of an abandoned house, logical analysis asks for a cup of strychnine straight up, and reason asks for UN protection in order to free itself from another torture session” (Nunes).

Over more than thirty years of public life, Lula has snuffed the spark from these kinds of denigrations by repeatedly defending the intelligence of the unschooled and carefully courting the university class. But his critics’ remarks

are instructive insofar as they pull the veil from practices of distinction and discrimination that are at once ubiquitous and invisible in Brazilian public life. Ubiquitous, because patterns of speech and literacy—along with more formal proof of educational attainment—routinely shape snap judgments about social status, intelligence, and competence. Invisible, because unlike discrimination based on race, class, gender, or sexuality, prejudice against the unlettered is not widely politicized. Despite some grumblings, there is no mass “movement of the unlettered,” or law against discrimination based on educational attainment. Education and proper speech are considered both attainable and universally desirable, and discrimination against the uneducated is often considered objectively justified. Like any number of other scantily politicized status markers—physical conditioning and grooming, style of dress, patterns of body language and manners, taste in food and humor—speech and language are thought of as mutable traits, things that anyone who aims for social ascension can and ought to change. It is quite rare for any public figure in Brazil to question the value of formal education, and when they do—as Lula sometimes has—they are roundly criticized for undermining Brazil’s drive toward progress. When linguistic prejudice is denounced, it is often portrayed as a mask for supposedly deeper prejudices of color or class rather than an inherently fallacious form of distinction.

Somewhat surprisingly, social historians have until recently left such dynamics largely unexamined. There are numerous historical critiques of elitist educational policies, as well as studies of the racial and gender dynamics of education, and scholars have routinely lamented the historical lack of access to schooling among the Brazilian poor. But surprisingly few historians have taken on language and education as durable categories of inequality—created, recognized, legitimized, and acted upon over many generations, constitutive elements in Brazil’s constellation of social difference. This is especially remarkable given the rich and repeated emphasis on language, literacy, and education that characterized debates about Brazilian inequality in the century after independence.

In that context, Ivana Stolze Lima and Laura do Carmo’s *História social da língua nacional* is an important and thought-provoking contribution. Stolze Lima’s first book, *Cores, marcas e falas: sentidos da mestiçagem no Império do*

Brasil (Rio de Janeiro: Arquivo Nacional, 2003), established her as a pioneering and sensitive historian of language and its interactions with social prejudice and distinction in Brazil. In *História social*, she and co-editor Carmo amplify this earlier work, bringing together a multidisciplinary group of historians, linguists, anthropologists, and literary scholars to examine the question of Brazil's *língua nacional* from a dazzling array of perspectives. In essays that range from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, but focus most intensely on the 1800s, the collection's authors convincingly analyze language and education as the fulcrums of critical debates about cultural identity, independence, national unity, and socio-racial inequality. While the essays are somewhat uneven in depth and quality, all suggest that the definition and diffusion of a *língua nacional* were central to Brazil's construction as a highly unequal nation-state.

História social is divided into four thematic sections. The first, "As letras e o Império," comprises three essays focused on the colonial period. Cláudio Costa Pinheiro's "Língua e conquista" considers the entire Portuguese empire over multiple centuries. The essay usefully explores the nurturing of relatively privileged multiracial and multicultural interpreters, or "línguas," who performed both the grunt work of translation and the subtler tasks of evangelization, acculturation, and the promotion of Portuguese as an early lingua franca in the African and Asiatic colonial worlds. Anita Correia Lima de Almeida's insightful "Aulas régias no império colonial português" examines the impact of a series of colonial educational reforms that began with the Jesuit expulsions of 1759-1760. While distance and local resistance limited the reforms' concrete impact, the "aulas régias" that they mandated imbued a generation of Brazilian elites with a sense of cultural unity, as well as with the notion that "civilization" and "opulence" were defined by linguistic and rhetorical erudition, diffused through a classical education in both Latin and Portuguese. Luiz Carlos Villalta's "Livro, língua e leitura" brings together "sparse notes" on the interconnections between language, education, and power in the Pombaline era. The most interesting element involves the colonial government's increasing eighteenth-century emphasis on Portuguese competency as part of a state-building process. Villalta shows how this aimed to create a sense of cultural unity, but also to reinforce social hierarchies and political order: monolingualism in

Portuguese—or at least lack of French and Latin—excluded even lettered Brazilians from the highest ranks of the elite, while also complicating their access to potentially subversive ideas. All in all, this section suggests the early emergence of language as both a political tool and a category of social distinction in the Portuguese colonial world.

The book's second section, "Colonização linguística," brings to the fore questions of domination, resistance, and linguistic intermixing. José Ribamar Bessa-Freire's masterful "Nheengatu: a outra língua brasileira" demonstrates how attention to language can call into question two dominant assumptions about Brazilian national development: first, that Brazil possessed territorial unity from the moment of contact, and second, that all of Brazil is and has been defined by Portuguese. By exploring the particular case of Amazônia—where most of the population spoke the indigenous *língua geral* Nheengatu until the rubber-induced mass migration of northeasterners to the region in the late nineteenth century—Bessa-Freire questions both assumptions, and also demonstrates succinctly the ways in which mono- or multilingualism located Amazonian indigenous peoples on a spectrum that ran from "índios selvagens" to "caboclos." Linguist Dante Lucchesi's "Africanos, crioulos e a língua portuguesa" provides both an abbreviated summary of African contributions to Brazilian Portuguese (much vocabulary and a few subtle grammatical shifts that often mark popular speech as "incorrect") and a strong condemnation of linguistic discrimination as a form of social exclusion. Afranio Gonçalves Barbosa's "Fontes escritas e história," somewhat of an outlier in this section, explicates methodologies through which colonial documents can illuminate patterns of speech and accent that marked social and geographical origin, thus providing important instruction for scholars of the colonial period intent on uncovering the "silent" but ubiquitous linguistic markers of status.

The book's third section, "A formação da língua nacional: modelos, experiências, conflitos," broaches the role of language in nineteenth-century Brazil. Ivana Stolze Lima's "Língua nacional, histórias de um velho surrão" imaginatively integrates two of this volume's overarching themes. The first concerns the role of language in projects of political domination and nation building; here, Stolze Lima ingenuously detects a shift among national deputies from policies designed to

consolidate Brazilian independence from Portugal toward initiatives meant to colonize the vast, unlettered, multilingual Brazilian interior. The second theme involves language as a marker of social difference; in this regard, Stolze Lima uses nineteenth-century classified advertisements to demonstrate how command of national Portuguese served to differentiate Afro-Brazilians from one another, a process that both stigmatized slaves and offered them opportunities for advancement and subterfuge. Tania Alkmim's "Falas e cores" employs mainly literary sources to argue that, while Afro-Brazilians were often ridiculed and stigmatized for their distinctive Portuguese grammar and syntax, such prejudice also applied to rural and unlettered whites. In this sense, she suggests that, rather than describing a division between a "português de brancos" and a "português de negros," scholars might more fruitfully explore the gulf between a "português dos letrados" and a "português dos não letrados." Adriana Maria Paulo da Silva's "Espaços de normatização do português brasileiro" also re-evaluates critically dominant paradigms related to race, language, and education, brilliantly showing how—contrary to most received wisdom—both enslaved and free Afro-descendants were frequently successful in their struggle to teach and learn "primeiras letras" in nineteenth-century Recife. While educational equality was still far from accessible, Silva's arguments reinforce a growing body of scholarship that, by identifying non-traditional arenas of social struggle, has negated long-standing stereotypes about Afro-Brazilian passivity in the absence of explicit racial politics. Finally, Heliana Mello's essay, "Modelos de formação da língua nacional sob a perspectiva do contato de populações," takes a macro perspective, summarizing demographic data on Portuguese, African, and Indigenous populations to explain the varying patterns of linguistic exchange and intermixture that have produced Brazil's popular vernacular.

The book's final section, "Projetos intelectuais e construções de nacionalidade," brings together four essays focused on the formal, lettered construction of the *língua nacional* in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Brazil. Janaína Senna's "O ponto precário" explores Januário da Cunha Barbosa's pioneering anthology of Brazilian writings. Cunha argues that—despite the work's lack of explicitly nativist or romantic nationalism—it was an important step in intellectual nation building because it forcefully asserted Brazil's membership in the

community of lettered civilizations. João Paulo Rodrigues's "Tupifilia internacional" traces the emergence of the Tupi as Brazil's (supposedly extinct) Indian *par excellence*, showing how scholars used pseudo-scientific analyses of Tupi racial and linguistic features to further nationalist claims. José Horta Nunes's "Dicionário, sociedade e língua nacional" investigates the emergence of dictionaries of Brazilian Portuguese from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century, showing how such dictionaries demonstrate both accelerated independence from linguistic models exported from Portugal and a greater sensitivity to the practical linguistic requirements of a growing lettered population. Lauro do Carmo's closes the section with the fascinating "A voz do caipira em Amadeu Amaral," which illuminates the first comprehensive study of a Brazilian dialect. Carmo shows how such works could at once bring dialects into the fold of the "national language" and expose deeply held prejudices about rural speakers of non-standard Portuguese.

História social closes with Manoel Luiz Salgado Guimarães's essay on the construction of national historical method in nineteenth-century Brazil. Guimarães argues that Brazilian historiography was defined at birth by a project to canonize select written sources and write of them in patterned ways, an enterprise that in its very conception excluded the unlettered. In that way, the study of the past incorporated the distinctions of language and literacy that defined Brazilian social life. It is a fitting closing for a collection of texts about the social history of language.

História social treats Brazil's *língua nacional* as the living product of anarchic intermixture. But the volume's authors also unveil the *língua nacional* as an idealized emblem of nationality, a marker of social status, and a tool of political domination. Historians of inequality and its social workings will be wise to build upon these insights in order to better understand the subtle and mutable forms of prejudice that have silently shaped social exclusion in contemporary Brazil.

Note

¹ This has continued well after the end of formal political competition between the two. See, for example, Cardoso (137).

Works Cited

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