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The African Contribution to Brazilian Portuguese:

To what extent did the speech of slaves influence the mother tongue?

by Fernanda Ferreira



Photograph by Greg Thomas

As any English speaker who has visited Jamaica, South Africa or Ireland knows, a language can take very different forms in different places. As soon as people migrate to a new land, their language begins to change. Thus, American English assimilated words such as *chipmunk* and *raccoon*, derived from Native American languages, just as Australian English assimilated *kangaroo* and *boomerang*. The same process occurred in my first language, Portuguese: the variety of Portuguese spoken in Brazil, where I grew up, differs in many ways from the “mother” tongue spoken in Portugal. Just as many different factors contributed to the development of the American English we speak today, the same is true with modern Brazilian Portuguese.

As a linguist, I am fascinated by the causes of linguistic change and by the relationships between languages. When I began to study Caribbean Spanish, in graduate school, I was struck by its parallels to Brazilian Portuguese. For example, I heard Dominicans and Puerto Ricans sometimes pronouncing plural words with no /s/ at the end, as in the phrases *doh niño* ‘two children’ and *tus hijo* ‘your sons.’ I remembered that my own relatives in Brazil would often say these same phrases in similar fashion: *dois menino* ‘two children’ and *seus filho* ‘your sons.’ I began to wonder if the linguistic parallels between these two languages could be a function of a common ethnic ancestry. Further research led me to be more open to the possibility that African languages, introduced to Latin America by slaves, contributed to both Brazilian Portuguese and Caribbean Spanish. Eventually, my dissertation topic centered on the possible contribution of African speakers to the evolution of these two Romance languages.

The question of whether or not the Spanish of the Caribbean and the Portuguese spoken in Brazil share a common African imprint is a controversial one. To be sure, both of these geographical regions imported massive numbers of slaves. Scholars generally accept the idea that Africans, forcibly brought to the former American colonies, contributed non-Latin words to Spanish and Portuguese, such as *birimbau*, a musical instrument, and the word *çaçula* meaning the youngest child. In addition, the cultural contribution of Africans to the musical, religious (*Candomblé*, *Santería*) and culinary traditions of both Brazil and Cuba, for example, is indisputable.

The controversy focuses on the issue of how extensive the *linguistic* contribution of Africans to Spanish and Portuguese was. Scholars point to examples reported in early fifteenth century texts, where Portuguese-speaking Blacks, often depicted in negative light, produce “mistakes” or reveal a particular way of speaking typical of a second-language learner. In the following examples from the sixteenth century, the “mistakes” are in bold-face.

1) *Boso seria muito bó;*
vaca ne Francico paia;
*tenha **seis filho** e mi so* ‘six sons’
nam temo comere ni migaia...
 —(O Clérigo da Beyra, Gil Vicente)

2) *¿Eso me le si señor, delante*
***de la honras** de [...]* ‘of the honors’
Anagoras, señor, y dícame señora Clavela:
callan, fija Guiomám aprender ben a colar
***la flores** [...]* ‘the flow-
 ers’
 —(Comedia de los Engañados, Lope de Rueda)

In standard Portuguese the above phrase “seis filho” would be pronounced “seis filhos” and in standard Spanish “de la honras” would be “de las honras” while “la flores” would be “las flores.” In sum, number agreement would be present in the standard dialects of these languages, while the lack of plural /s/ would be an aspect of the non-standard speech.

Many scholars believe that Africans must have spoken a *pidginized* Portuguese or a Portuguese with a distinctive non-native sound as they arrived in the American colonies. Much as English today is an international language of computers and technology, in the sixteenth century Portuguese was the “foreign” language that sub-Saharan Africans must have heard most often: it was the virtual *lingua franca* in an age of scientific discoveries and maritime travel.

It should be said, however, that slavery did not begin with the European colonial powers; it was practiced centuries earlier by African tribes. However, slaves in Africa (before the arrival of the Portuguese) were pris-

oners of war, defeated warriors who later were incorporated into the victorious tribal group and were nonetheless considered human beings. The new type of slavery started by the Portuguese was essentially dehumanizing: Africans were considered objects rather than fellow human beings. In fact, slaves were counted and negotiated in terms of *piezas*, literally “pieces” of merchandise. Thus the difficulty in determining from historical data the exact number of slaves brought to the American colonies, since one *pieza* meant one healthy young male, or any number of women and children. But more importantly, the astronomical numbers of the transatlantic commerce in human lives made it inherently different from the slave conditions previously present in Africa. In total, it is believed that more than nine million Africans were sold into slavery to the American colonies over the approximately three hundred years from 1500 to 1800. The greatest numbers were transported to the Americas from the 17th century (roughly more than one million) to the 18th century (approximately six million). That period coincides with the pre-industrial mercantilism in the American colonies, the cotton *plantation* system in North America and sugar mills in Northeast Brazil, as well as the gold rush in the south-central region of Brazil.

As ethnographer Katia Queiroz Mattoso has explained, slave laborers in Brazil fell into five different socio-economic categories: they could be workers on sugar and coffee plantations; miners of gold and diamonds; Black *gauchos* or cattle ranchers; urban slaves, known as slaves “for rent”; street sellers who performed a wide variety of activities and finally domestic slaves, found mostly in the large plantation houses.

The possibility of attaining freedom was very different in each category. The slave who worked in the sugar fields had very little possibility of getting his “letter of manumission,” which was the document given to an ex-slave that certified his freedom. A similar situation applied to the domestic slave, who was constantly observed and did not have the economic means of becoming free. On the other hand, the *gaucho* had some possibility of escaping slavery if he saved enough money. For the slaves who were able to win their freedom, life was by no means safe, since they could at any time be arrested for “suspicion of being a slave.” The different types of slaves and the situation of ex-slaves are important in the discussion of linguistic evolution because the participation of ex-slaves in a slave society considerably shaped the relationships between them and the slave owners. For example, news of the slave

revolution in Haiti in 1791 reached the American colonies and gave hope to Brazilian slaves, possibly creating escape initiatives. The *quilombos*, or societies of slaves who had escaped captivity, were constantly being built and organized, as well as being persecuted and destroyed. The speech that thrived in these isolated societies is studied to this day. One example is the dialect of *Helvécia*, spoken by a group of Brazilians living in the state of Bahia, a largely Black community. It could be argued that the *Helvécia* dialect is a window into what “Black Portuguese” would have sounded like had this particular variety been spoken by more main-



Portuguese-speaking Brazil.

stream Brazilians.

In general, it is assumed that the ratio of native to non-native speakers is a good indicator of the resulting language variety in a largely multiracial society. In the case of Brazil, the numbers of Black Africans in comparison to the white population during the three centuries of slavery could give an indication of the language Brazilians spoke at that time. By most accounts, close to 3.6 million Africans were kidnapped and transported to Brazil between the second half of the 16th and the middle of the 19th century. Thus, the demographic dis-

tribution of people of diverse linguistic backgrounds gave Brazil not only a multiracial but also multilinguistic makeup. The information presented in the table below summarizes the different racial backgrounds of inhabitants of Brazil, which in turn may indicate the possible linguistic background of the non-native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese.

HISTORICAL DEMOGRAPHICS OF BRAZIL	1538-1600	1601-1700	1701-1800	1801-1850	1851-1890
	%	%	%	%	%
African	20	30	20	12	02
Black Brazilian	00	20	21	19	13
Mixed ancestry	00	10	19	34	42
Indigenous	50	10	08	04	02
Total of Color	70	70	68	69	59
White Brazilian	00	05	10	17	24
European	30	25	22	14	17
Total White	30	30	32	31	41

The numbers in the table show that the population of color has always been more numerous than the white population in Brazil. It is also clear that in the very beginning of colonization (1518-1600) the indigenous population (whose first language was not Portuguese) were more numerous than the Africans or the white population. However, this native population, which comprised half of the inhabitants in the first century of colonization, was reduced to 4% and 2% in the 19th century (that is, in the periods of 1801-1850 and 1851-1890, respectively). What was the linguistic background of indigenous Brazilians? One author, Aryon Rodrigues, calculates that there were around 1,175 different indigenous languages in Brazil, of which 85% were lost after the colonial period. Nowadays, although this number has been reduced considerably, Brazil is still one of the most multilingual countries in the world, with approximately 180 languages spoken by some 260,000 indigenous people.

During the next historical period (from 1601 to 1700), there were more Africans than any other ethnic group, diminishing the linguistic impact of the indigenous languages. Later, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the number of those born in Africa steadily dwindled, while at the same time, the number of Black Brazilians and those of mixed ancestry increased. These numbers reflect the high degree of racial mixing that existed in Brazil and might clarify the complex racial and linguis-

tic situation particular to that country.

What are the ethnolinguistic origins of the Africans who arrived in Brazil? Apparently speakers from several different linguistic groups (including Mande, Kru, Gru, Kwa and Bantu) arrived in Brazil during three centuries of slave trade. Of these, the Bantu group came in the greatest numbers, comprising between 35% to 65% of all African slaves. It is approximated that of the African languages that contributed to Brazilian Portuguese, the Bantu languages (*Kikongo*, *Kibumdu* and, to a lesser extent, *Umbundu*) were the biggest suppliers of African-based conversational words. In other Caribbean countries, such as Haiti, the ratio of people of color to the white population is much higher: people of African descent comprised around 90% of the Haitian population. It is not surprising, then, that Haitian Creole is one of the languages now spoken on that Caribbean island.

Because of this multilingual tapestry in Brazil, the Portuguese language became the essential unifying mode of communication in a developing nation. Thus, a 60% to 40% ratio of Black and white population that was present in Brazil might not warrant overreaching conclusions about the development of Brazilian Portuguese, but it gives any linguist food for thought. In addition, some scholars believe that the presence of so many popular as well as cultured varieties of the language almost guarantees that no overreaching explanation about the origin of the more non-standard variety of Brazilian Portuguese can be attained. Heliana Mello argues that “the likeliest scenario [of language contact in Brazil] was a process of imperfect language shift to Portuguese by the African and Amerindian populations and their descendants.” By “imperfect language shift” it is understood that not all accepted grammatical norms of European Portuguese were maintained by later generations.

The possible scenarios regarding the development of Brazilian Portuguese (i.e. natural linguistic drift or the contribution of African languages) should run parallel in discussing particular linguistic patterns. Judging from the large presence of people of African descent in Brazil, it is probable that non-native speakers of Portuguese were at least potentially able to make a significant linguistic contribution to this Romance language. More comparisons of non-standard varieties of European Portuguese as well as Portuguese-based Creoles (such as Cape Verdean) could give scholars other important pieces of the puzzle.

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