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Publication Date

2005-05-21

Lusofonia - Some thoughts on language

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Lusofonia is a concept coined fairly recently, and in reference to the existing eight Lusophone countries, along with other Portuguese-speaking groups, such as the Portuguese communities abroad, otherwise known as the *Portuguese Diaspora*. The term has been controversial given its symbolic power, related to the Portuguese language as the vernacular of the colonizer. Lusofonia, however, nowadays serves as a buzz-word for the generalities and platitudes repeated by political figures in the postcolonial Portuguese-speaking world, a usage that frequently reflects a confused understanding of language and its role in identity formation. Unfortunately, political expediency often appears to be reason enough to allow for muddy thinking.

What I propose here is an attempt to “unmuddy” some of the misconceptions held by these prominent figures in referencing Lusofonia, misconceptions that are often echoed by the media in a rather uncritical fashion. This paper will critically scrutinize some often-repeated claims concerning the nature and impact of language, through an analysis inserted into the particular context of the on-going *Lusofonia* debate.

My analysis forms a part of a much larger, on-going series of reflections in which I draw upon the experiences of major writers from the Lusophone world, whose battles over language occur almost daily. The experiences of these writers, recorded in such places as the marvelous collection of interviews carried out by Michel Laban with writers from African Portuguese-speaking countries¹, are a gold mine of information. I will use these along with information I have gathered from my own exchanges with some of these

¹ It is a seven-volume packet, with interviews with writers from Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and S. Tomé and Príncipe - *Encontros com Escritores* (Porto: Fundação Eng. António de Almeida, 1991-2002).

authors. These interactions have allowed me to expand my views on the subject of language and identity, which has been one of my main research interests over the years. My reflections in this area have come mainly from the intersection of theoretical readings on the philosophy of language and culture. Yet they are also a product of my day-to-day involvement with the Portuguese immigrant communities in the United States and throughout the world.

I imagine there is not a single educated Portuguese person who hasn't heard this quote from the Portuguese writer Vergílio Ferreira, taken from his address to a Central European audience in the Europália exhibit in Belgium in the early 90's:

“From my language”, declared Ferreira, “one can see the ocean.”² And who has never heard the oft-revisited theme found decanted in the phrase of Bernardo Soares, a semi-heteronym of Fernando Pessoa, “my homeland is the Portuguese language?” A tiresome recital of laudatory praise has been generated over the years concerning the language of Camões and Pessoa, of Eça and Saramago, a chorus sung throughout the seven parts of the seven nations in the Lusophone sphere (alas, almost all of the praises are sung from Portugal). Without critical reflection, people call it the *Lusíada* language³, such that not too long ago the Portuguese went wild over Timor as the eighth *Lusíada* nation, failing to pay much attention to the fact that, perhaps because it is so far removed from the Portuguese world, the country barely speaks Portuguese, especially after 25 years of Indonesian domination.

² Actually what Vergílio Ferreira says is much more than this: Uma língua é o lugar donde se vê o Mundo e em que se traçam os limites do nosso pensar e sentir. Da minha língua vê-se o mar. Da minha língua ouve-se o seu rumor, como da de outros se ouvirá o da floresta ou o silêncio do deserto. Por isso a voz do mar foi a da nossa inquietação. (*Conta-Corrente*) He echoes a famous and rather problematic statement from Wittgenstein, “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” But Vergílio, by adding "feeling" to what language permits or encompasses, makes a serious *faux pas*. Feelings are not always expressed in language. It appears that indeed one can feel outside language.

³ In reference to Luís de Camões's *Os Lusíadas*, the Portuguese national epic poem.

Portuguese, a language of various countries, said to be fraternal and malleable, well-suited for convivial communication, is taken as an adequate means of expression in other areas, precisely for being also a language of science of technology, and of art⁴. It is the language of poetry and poets, as Teixeira de Pascoaes explained in *A Arte de Ser Português, while offering no reasons for his supposed 'explanation'*. Actually, his reasoning is a good example of his thesis.

A clear delineation between rational, empirical, and logical discourse on the one hand, and the literary, poetic and utopian, on the other, is often non-existent, leading to the well-turned phrase of Vergílio Ferreira (who ironically never actually saw the ocean from his home in the Beira province, nor even from the window of his Lisbon apartment). It is also for this lack of linguistic boundaries that Ferreira's phrase about seeing the ocean from his language is usually recalled literally, stripped of its metaphoric value, as it is inserted in speeches that oscillate constantly between rational and literary discourses without ever displaying any awareness of the difference. The phrase is more often than not used in a kind of post-modern delirium where all barriers are dissolved; and where all text is real and all that is real is text.

A variety of reflections relevant to the theme of lusofonia have been published of late. Particularly rich are those of Eduardo Lourenço, recently collected in the work *A Nau de Ícaro, seguido de Imagem e Miragem da Lusofonia*⁵. Also, in his *A Lusofonia e os Lusófonos: Novos Mitos Portugueses*⁶, Alfredo Margarido writes a forceful and bitter

⁴ One reads or hears frequently references to the unique character of the Portuguese language from scholars as well as from high officials or both, such as in this case, by a well-known historian: "It is extraordinary the plasticity of our language which enables the creation of new words. It is awesome." Joaquim Romero de Magalhães in an interview to *Público*, ("A História não é um tribunal"), February 7, 1999, conducted by Carlos Câmara Leme and Isabel Salema. Another example could be this statement from Guilherme d'Oliveira Martins: "Portuguese language, a language of cordiality and affection". ("A pátria é a língua", *Jornal de Letras, Artes e Ideias*, March 17, 2004.

⁵ Lisboa: Gradiva, 1999.

⁶ Lisboa: Edições Universitárias Lusófonas, 2000. Alfredo Margarido's very interesting book serves primarily as a critique of the Portuguese attempt to reconstitute its empire in the present

tirade, in which he recalls Portugal's historical relationship with the countries that now compose the PALOPS nations. An furthermore, one of the more recent issues of the magazine *Discursos* featured a round table discussion related to the theme, "Lusofonia: a History, A Project, A Question,"⁷ in which a number of pertinent questions were raised. This brief essay, will, in the meantime, examine one aspect of the theme implicit in some of those texts, although not explicitly treated there.

The tendency to see language as possessing a character and even a sort of spirit has Germanic roots. Wilhelm Humboldt and Johann Gottfried von Herder, precursors, by the way, of much of contemporary ethno-linguistics, provided the springboard for such views. In 19th century Germany, language was treated as if it were a living thing, a being with its own soul. Language captured the spirit, the Geist of those who spoke it, but it was treated as if it also had its own particular life. In the United States at the beginning of the 20th century, Edward Sapir, and later his disciple Benjamin Whorf, conceived what would come to be known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which enjoyed widespread popularity for many years among anthropologists and linguists. According to this hypothesis, each language contains an immutable understanding of the world that cannot be translated into any other language. Incidentally, this theory occasionally reappears today, here and there, usually combined with ill-placed quotes from Wittgenstein, Willard Quine, Donald Davidson and Jacques Derrida, to mention only the luminaries.

The inclusion of these names is, as far as I am concerned, more the responsibility of commentators than of the authors themselves, at least in the case of Wittgenstein,

day and through linguistic control. He writes: 'Our modernity, brought about through African independence, obligated the country to cut to a substantial degree its ties with the Atlantic (...). The truth is that as of the 1960s, due on the one hand to the colonial war, and on the other to emigration, the country cut the ties that had maintained its place in the Atlantic, and in particular in the south Atlantic. The colonial war must be seen as a great national tragedy that the dictatorial regime, in its racist nationalism, naturally managed to render arcaic. The invention of *Lusofonia* has sought with some desperation to return to this /Atlantic/ space.' (p. 6).

Quine and Davidson. And I refer expressly to the conception of language as a conditioning of thought, of a worldview; which is a different concept from the idea that all languages are structured within certain parameters that render translation from one language to another more difficult. Translation becomes particularly difficult the more abstract the concept. The farther from the empirical and measurable a concept is, the harder it is to translate. No one will deny, for example, that in poetry and in humor there exist linguistic nuances that are truly untranslatable, or at least this is certainly the case in a significant number of instances.

It is not the goal of this essay to provide a rigorous philosophical analysis of the topic. I will thus limit myself to those practical points that may lead to arguments which counter the enthusiasm with language so frequently shown off in oft-misguided Portuguese social and political discourse.

Even Benjamin Whorf has passages that reflect disparate positions on the relationship to thought. This allows us to differentiate two versions of Whorf's formulation, the Hard and the Soft versions. According to the hard version, each language constitutes the basis on which stands the specific worldview of a culture, since it is through language that we think and interact. According to the soft version, there exists a greater latitude in how a language preconditions a worldview; a speaker of a particular language is less conditioned by and less subjected to the structure of that language. It can be said that language *conditions, affects, and molds in some form or another*, a speaker's *Weltanschauung*. Let us say that this latter formulation offers much higher probabilities of empirical verification.

It is not terribly fruitful to continue in this vein. It is enough to mention some of the most outrageous misconceptions of this view: the Germans are hard and bellicose because their language is hard and rough; the British are empirical because the English

language detests abstract words; the Italian's sing-song speech cadence exists because the language is full of vowels. I even remember reading an explanation that argued that the popular force of Maoism among the Chinese was a consequence of their language being ideographic.⁸

In Portugal, too, there were fruits of this animistic conception of language. Teixeira de Pascoais set the tone and António Quadros, in various books, but notably in *O Espírito da Cultura Portuguesa*, commented abundantly on the untranslatable nature of certain words as being derived from the unique character of certain linguistic experiences. The word *saudade* was, and still is for many, the prime example of this kind of thinking. António Quadros gives a list of words that include words perfectly translatable into other languages, but which, according to him, have a unique resonance, experience, and life that can only exist in Portuguese. The “sea” (*mar*) was one such word. Others included “travel” (*viagem*), quest (*demanda*), ship (*nau*), the East (*Oriente*), love (*amor*) and empire (*império*).⁹

It is not uncommon for us to encounter statements like this one by Sousa Dias:

Heidegger would be unthinkable in Japanese...; Hegel in Chinese. Empiricism would be difficult in Germany, because the German language has the memory of the Root, and the nostalgia of Grund. Conversely, it would be difficult to imagine metaphysics in English, as English is a language that proceeds relationally, with lateral connections, immanent surface, is agrammatical, has no interior, is without thickness. English is as Empirical a language as German is a metaphysical language.¹⁰

It was not only in Portugal that this version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis circulated in intellectual circles as if it were a verified, or confirmed thesis. Totalitarian regimes attribute to words the power to determine thought. George Orwell in his *1984*, of

⁸ (Bernd Oelgart, *Idéologues et Idéologies de la Nouvelle Gauche*, Paris, 1971).

⁹ There is a point here, but it is universal. Many of these words are easily translatable, even though when spoken in each language they may connote realities that are distinct from the ones of the Portuguese experience.

¹⁰ Sousa Dias, *Razão e Império* (Porto: Livraria Civilização – Editora, 1981, p. 7.

course, demonstrated how weary and ridiculous such pretensions are. Political correctness is not only the other side of the same coin, but results in being, at the same time, its opposite. On the one hand, language determines one's worldview, so one has to abolish racist and chauvinist terms and the like, from one's vocabulary. On the other hand, however, cleansing the language means that one is also cleansing the reality. Correcting the evils of language would imply correcting, or rectifying, reality.

Let us move to a less abstract level. I will relate two stories that reflect upon some generalized misconceptions of language. (Although I will comment on them briefly, I will reserve for later a set of overall considerations.)

The first is a story told to me personally by José Saramago, that he later retold in an interview (I believe it may have appeared in one of the volumes of his journal *Cadernos de Lanzarote*, but I am not certain). In Brazil, after one of Saramago's talks, someone from the audience asked him to repeat what he had just said, explaining, "I am sorry, sir, but I could not understand what you said because of your accent." Saramago then proceeded to lecture his questioner. "My accent? Excuse me. The language is MINE. The accent is YOURS!"¹¹

The other true story occurred over dinner at the Portuguese Embassy in Washington, at the conclusion of a day of work on matters related to the future of the Portuguese language in the United States, which was attended by official representatives from the CPLP countries. The participants were exchanging platitudes, as is customary at the beginning of these dinners, when a highly placed Brazilian dignitary, trying to be polite to our host the Portuguese Ambassador, said that the unity of Brazil was only

¹¹ This is not an idiosyncratic view on the part of the Portuguese Noble Prize winner. It simply reflects a widespread point of view still prevalent among Portuguese speakers. As recently as on March 26, 2005, I was watching on TV a soccer match between the national teams of Portugal and Canada played in Barcelos, Portugal. At one point, Deco, a native Brazilian with Portuguese citizenship, and who plays for the Portuguese national team, exchanged a few words with his coach, who also happens to be Brazilian. The TV Portuguese commentator referred to the event in the following terms: "There was over there a 30-second conversation in Portuguese with an accent between Felipe Scolari and Deco."

possible thanks to the Portuguese language¹². I begged to differ. I had heard that particular cliché repeated so many times that I thought it was high time that someone approached it critically, especially since I was surrounded by ambassadors from the Portuguese-speaking world.

I proceeded to remind the dignitary (as politely as I could — after all, I was among diplomats who pride themselves on polishing whatever they say to the point of making it completely uninteresting) that one had only to think of the Spanish language in Latin America in order to realize that other factors had to be involved in the case of Brazilian unity. Spanish is spoken all over Central America and the western half of South America and, despite that, there exist eighteen separate countries among those speakers. Language, therefore, cannot be the determining factor of Brazilian territorial unity. A key factor seems to me to have been geography. The Spanish portion of the Americas is a tremendously harsh territory, full of *sierras* (just think of the Andes running from North to South down the Western side of South America) when compared to the relatively even Brazilian landscape. Besides, in the Brazilian case it must be said that the bulk of its history was relegated mostly to the shores between the Northeast and a few port cities on the Eastern seaboard (with the notable exception of Minas Gerais). Ships connected these dots for centuries with very little movement into the vast interior of the country.

A unifying language can be (and has been) used as a political tool in order to maintain national unity. We see it repeated often to explain the reasons for Portuguese-speaking countries maintaining, against all odds, Portuguese as their official language. But that was never the case of Brazil, where language did not seem to have played the role in national unity so often ascribed to it. The fact that Brazilian history centered on the close geographic triangle of Bahia/Rio/São Paulo — the rest scattered periphery — is, from my point of view, a much more plausible explanation for Brazilian national unity.

¹² I have heard the same statement made by a former President of Brazil.

If one remembers the historical facts, or reads the interviews in Michel Laban's aforementioned seven volumes, one will confirm, I hope, the plausibility of this interpretation. Guiné-Bissau and Cape Verde did not remain politically unified, despite their common language (at least the language spoken in common by their leaders). It was cultural and political differences that determined the separation of the two countries.

Language is indeed — I do not intend to deny it — a political tool. Just read the views expressed by the Lusophone African writers in Laban's seven volumes. Most of them recall how they were forbidden from speaking their native African languages during colonial times, when they attended elementary and secondary schools¹³.

More relevant to my concerns here, however, is the story I recounted above from Saramago. In his novel *The Stone Raft*, the Iberian Peninsula actually drifts away to the South Atlantic and finds its "naturalized" place between Portuguese-speaking Africa and Brazil, together with Spanish-speaking South America. Running contrary to this conception is the novelist's vehement response to the audience member's request for him to repeat what he said, which shows how pervasive and strong the Portuguese hold on "language" is. I generalize here, because I have never heard anybody comment on this story. There is, among the Portuguese, a widespread feeling that language (together with the leftover lands of the Azores and Madeira) is the last territory of the Portuguese empire; and, thus, is off limits to anyone else. One often hears references to the Fifth Empire in a misguided allusion to Fernando Pessoa's *Mensagem*¹⁴. Even Brazilian

13 See, for instance, Calane da Silva, *Moçambique*, vol. II, pp. 595 and 793; José Craveirinha, *Moçambique*, vol. I, p. 60; Angola, vol. I, p. 34; Henrique Teixeira de Sousa, *Cabo Verde*. Vol. I, pp. 210, 217, 226; Gabriel Mariano, *Cabo Verde*, vol. I, pp. 339-340. Actually, almost all these writers report of being taught during their formative years to despise and reject their native languages, particularly by their teachers.

14 I have attempted to show how Pessoa's book has been systematically misread by both the left and right wings. See *Mensagem- Uma Tentativa de Reinterpretação* (Angra do Heroísmo: Secretaria Regional da Educação e Cultura, 1987). For a shorter English rendition, see "the ideological background of Pessoa's *Mensagem*," *Indiana Journal of Hispanic Literatures*, Special

Portuguese (as Saramago's comment reflects) is often considered somewhat of a child, a product of its mother tongue, and for that reason still owing Portugal its filial respect.

The belief in the power of language to make nations is tied up in the idea that there is a standard Portuguese spoken in the Coimbra-Lisbon axis and that the rest of the Lusophone world should follow that standard. The deep-seated and erroneous belief in the existence of a correct, standard accent is just the most obvious manifestation of the problem. Hence the struggle of Lusophone-African writers to affirm themselves and their right to float freely in their linguistic worlds, including their own native languages, whether these may be considered "compromise languages" as some like to call them, or as others prefer, "hybrid Portuguese," or even a reincarnation of the mother language dressed up in new clothes.

Just a glimpse at the Laban interviews suffices to provide confirmation of the reality upon which I touch.

The Portuguese-speaking African writers have a great model in front of them — Brazil— a country that recreated the Portuguese language while the Portuguese were engulfed in their domestic quarrels, until one day they awoke to find a literature written in a refreshing, relaxed, lively Portuguese. It has taken, I must say, a long time for this "disorderly child" to be accepted back home. In recent decades, the *telenovelas* have helped the cause a great deal. I suppose that Literature itself helped as well, though to a lesser extent, given that not many Portuguese would ever "waste their time" reading Brazilian literature. Despite all this, Saramago apparently still considers the Brazilian version of his native language some kind of deviation.

issue on Fernando Pessoa, n.9, Fall 1996, pp. 225-236. I have also tried to show how the quote repeated *ad nauseam* from Pessoa's semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares "a minha pátria é a língua portuguesa" (my country is the Portuguese language) does not allow for the abusive nationalistic interpretations it has received. See "Sobre o sentido de 'A minha pátria é a língua portuguesa' (Pessoa-Bernardo Soares)", *Colóquio-Letras*, n. 97 (1987), pp. 37-47.

The African transformation of the Portuguese language is more recent, and more scrutinized by those from the former colonizing nation. The African writers, meanwhile, have been doing a marvelous job at transforming the language and making ring true Pessoa's saying *a minha pátria é a língua portuguesa* — my country is the Portuguese language. See as examples of this happy occurrence Jofre Rocha,¹⁵ Suleiman Cassamo,¹⁶ Henrique Teixeira de Sousa,¹⁷ Raul David,¹⁸ or Paulina Chiziane who said, “One thing I make very clear: standard Portuguese, never! I am not interested!¹⁹). Angolan writer Boaventura Cardoso put it succinctly:

This language is being enriched in an accelerated form, and it is moving more and more from the spoken norm in Portugal. It will not be a different language, will not be another language, but there will certainly be many new contributions that will result from the coexistence of the Portuguese language and from the national languages. Because Portuguese coexists with those national languages, and, naturally, from this coexistence a series of borrowings will result—both for the Portuguese language as well as for the national languages. I think that the Portuguese language of Angola will go through profound transformations—it is actually going through them at this very moment- and in some cases, there will be a remarkable drifting away from the Portuguese spoken in Portugal.²⁰

Luandino Vieira (a splendid fiction writer who learned well from Brazilian writer Guimarães Rosa how to transform everyday language into an art form — a chain that also inspired Mia Couto) put it in a nutshell:

I have no doubt... our children will not speak the Portuguese of Portugal. We do not understand yet how it will be... but the result will be different....²¹

¹⁵ Angola, vol. II, p.675.

¹⁶ Responding to the question, “but what exactly were your conclusions?”, Cassamo states: “that Portuguese could be formed from local materials. Using psychology, the poetry of the everyday, the cultural substratum of the native language, whenever that may be advantageous in terms of economy of expression. In terms of imagery, etc., and with the flavor, of course, of the baroque. One of the most interesting characteristics of our native languages is that they function based exclusively on figures of style.” Vol. III, pp. 1138-9.

¹⁷ Cabo Verde, vol.I, p.pp.210-211.

¹⁸ Angola, vol. I, p. 51-52.

¹⁹ Moçambique, vol. III, p. 982.

²⁰ Boaventura Cardoso, Angola, vo. II, p. 828

²¹ Angola, vol. I, p. 420.

There will not be a stone raft, but a language adrift, and in fact this drifting is already occurring. For some time now, Portuguese dictionaries have resisted following the Anglo-American tradition of absorbing words from all over the world into their official vocabulary by codifying them through incorporation into their lexicons. The Portuguese love to repeat that the Japanese language has 200 words of Portuguese origin, but the reverse movement of foreign words to Portuguese is not particularly appreciated. They battle a foreign term or an expression as much as possible before its adoption is finally tolerated. The country's attitude toward African languages and African terms has been extremely conservative and defensive. Just look at any Portuguese dictionary and you will scarcely see the signs of 500 years of a transcontinental empire.

This attitude towards language is identical to the attitude towards culture and values in general, even though many might say that Portugal has completely opened up its borders in what concerns the importation of foreign values. Ultimately, what happens in language is an epiphenomenal expression (Chomsky's surface structure) of what happens at the deeper level of culture.

Another story is relevant. According to what was reported in the news, Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio urged his country to find "the means and ambition" to strengthen the Portuguese language in the world, which he considered to be "the great civilizational link with which Portugal has left its imprint on the world"²². The president of the Portuguese Republic put it in acceptable terms. He referred to language as "a civilizational link", shying away from attributing to language (as others have done) a "civilizing role".

Our contemporary understanding of how languages function prevents us from actually saying that language "civilizes." And I am not referring here to the questionable Eurocentric feeling of superiority vis-à-vis the cultures of the non-white world. I am

simply referring to the role language plays in the process of communication. Language *per se* does not convey or transmit culture or values. Language is a vehicle. It establishes networks and somehow demarcates the extent of the connections and interactions of its speakers by containing them in its circles. The transmission of values is something else. It may or may not occur. Despite sharing a common language, the United States does not think, or behave, like Ireland or the United Kingdom, not to mention South Africa. (Winston Churchill put it well when he said that the US and England were two countries divided by the same language). One can think of Ulster, Northern Ireland, alone, where the same language is spoken and yet the cultures are so divided. Moreover, in the English-speaking US one can find all sorts of values. Just juxtapose Texas to Boston. (I recall having heard John Kenneth Galbraith once say during a lecture at Brown University that a Republican in Rhode Island—the smallest state of the Union, up in New England—is more liberal than a Democrat in Texas). Of course, familiarity can be facilitated by language such that it tends to generate proximity, similarity of tastes and, at minimum, a commonality of references. But language does not automatically do the supposed job of civilizing.

Steven Pinker's work *The Language Instinct*, is one excellent example among recent theoretical linguistic treatments that dispatches, rapidly and with force, the seductive arguments that attribute an exaggerated power to language. But the authority of his work is not indispensable to make the argument. One does not need a well-reasoned critical argument to understand intuitively that language is a little bit of many things: it is the repository of the cultural experiences of a people, reflecting their diverse worldviews (I make a point of stressing this diversity, because no cultural group is homogenous). Perhaps it does in some ways imprison its speakers in particular universes, inasmuch as language is loaded with semantic particularities shared at least

22 *Público*, August 1, 2004. The President was speaking at a ceremony on the occasion of the

by specific communities. Languages, however, are as malleable and as “fraternal” as their speakers are capable of being. They can be as useful to science or to philosophy as are their speakers are able to conduct scientific and philosophical inquiry. Greek and German philosophers worked to develop the features of Greek and German philosophy, just as the Romans developed law, the French the culinary arts and Americans computer sciences, and so on and so forth. It is true that, structurally, the creation of these fields was developed in the language of their respective linguistic practitioners, but the languages themselves also evolved as the fields were being created.²³

Language is rather a reflection, or mirror, of the collective self, instead of the other way around. In other words, we are not what we are because of the language that we speak. Conversely, our language is no better than any other language in those areas where we are no better than others. The Brazilians “dress down” their Portuguese (as Vinicius de Moraes might say²⁴) and the language that they spoke was once ours, the baroque language of the 17th and 18th centuries. And in similar fashion, Americans rolled

awarding of the Grand Prize for the Portuguese Novel.

²³ *The Chronicler of Higher Education* recently reported a scientific study that supposedly explains why East Asian students score high in Math. Part of the answer is found in the language patterns of Chinese, Japanese and Korean. Speakers of those languages have it easier than speakers of English or Romance languages. “Those East Asian languages have a more informative way of designating the numbers between 11 and 19”, since “in English the information is backward”. “American children are confused by the fact that you name seventeen but you write ten-seven,” says Kevin F. Miller, a professor of education and psychology at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. “Most first graders, at the end of the school year, if you ask them how many tens there are in 17, they will say 7”. (“Why Chinese Students Score High in Math”, *The Chronicler of Higher Education*, March 4, 2005, p. A16.

Children may have this problem initially, until they assign a meaning to the words and stop thinking of the logic behind it. In Romance languages the situation is different from English, and the first time I realized this was just now, when this study pointed out the difference. I fail to see what problems such a difference can cause. To use so small a difference in language, which does not seem to cause problems at all, and use it to explain such big problems, seems to be really far-fetched.

²⁴ In a famous exchange in the late 60’s at the house of fado singer Amália Rodrigues, and later recorded and published on an LP, the Brazilian poet Vinicius de Moraes (the celebrated author of the poem “Garota de Ipanema” – “The girl from Ipanema”) said that the Portuguese had to take off their ties (*desengravatar*). But the sentence also meant that the Portuguese language had to be untied. (*Vinicius em casa de Amália*)

up their British trousers and dressed themselves in jeans. Language did not do it. Brazilians and Americans were actually the ones who transformed their language.

The Portuguese language is no more or less “fraternal” than any other, nor is it any more or less domineering or dialogistic than its counterparts (Alfredo Margarido recalls the grammarian João Ribeiro for whom the Portuguese language was not “a language of conversation, but rather a language of domination and order.”²⁵) The Portuguese language that was stiff and straight-jacketed during the dictatorship, was the same one that descended from Eça and Camões. Today the Portuguese language is loose (for some maybe too loose), because today, the Portuguese themselves are loose, or at least, more relaxed and more in touch with the rest of the world. Yet, who would deny that during the post-April 25th period, the Portuguese language liberated itself because the Portuguese themselves were liberated? It suffices to compare the Dictator-era language with what was written in the newspapers and spoken on the television during the years following the April Revolution.

It was this that Mia Couto captured marvelously in his paraphrase of Pessoa/Bernardo Soares: “My country is my Portuguese language,”²⁶ that is, his Portuguese from Mozambique. For others it may be the Portuguese of Brazil, of Cape Verde, of the Azores. A language multiplies along with its speakers, who may be conservatives, communists or liberals, or who were at one time or another. During the imperial period, the Portuguese language contained monarchists and inquisitors, merchants and missionaries, maritime explorers and traffickers in slaves, colonists and adventurers. The language of these individuals recorded all of this imperial experience

25 Op. cit., p. 74.

26 See the following statement from Mia Couto: The only thing I can say is that I am trying to create beauty, to show a little bit of what it is to make a language one’s own. To create from the starting point of the muddying of the primary creative instruments – language, speech, and the various narrative modes. For example, to erase the line between poetry and prose.” In Patrick Chabal, *Literatura e Nacionalidade* (Lisboa: Vega, 1994, pp. 289-290.

and hence today we try to cleanse it and modernize it. But this occurs because we also attempt to do the same to the culture that is expressed by the language and in which we now live.

Perhaps we can speak of a *Prison House of Language*, as Frederic Jameson does. However, it would be better if we expressed the idea differently. Language allows us to recognize and maintain networks of contact, thus establishing a common dialogue between groups of people within common circles of contact. Language opens channels of communication, cooperation and reciprocal dialogue, should its speakers be so inclined. Especially if they are willing to forget the bad moments in which the opposite took place, preferring instead to focus on the positive elements of that common past, and particularly on the possibilities of the future. Because, after all, if in theory certain philosophical flights of fancy about the capacity of language are indefensible, in practice we are in some way conditioned by, and from the start connected to, a network of speakers. It would be suicidal to conclude that it is better to learn the languages of other bigger worlds, and forget our own because it might reduce our scope of action.

It makes perfect sense to rely upon the common historical conditions generated by a common past, as in the case of Brazil, or more recently, of Angola or Mozambique, in order to turn that past into creative potential. But this requires that we forget anachronistic triumphalisms, and realistically confront the present context and its realities. If here and there some leftovers of the old Imperial triumphalism still exist, perhaps it is because we have not completely liberated ourselves from this specter. In any event, language cannot be faulted for the stains that we still collectively carry hidden in our clothes, or in our subconscious. The language that we speak only reflects these stains, lets them breathe, lets them be noticed by an unguarded ear. It was not language that created them. Language is merely their keeper when its speakers stubbornly retain them.

One could then suggest that languages establish the networks of contact and, as such, they limit and condition the speakers to that very network, i. e., to the range of speakers with whom those speakers interact and carry on exchanges – value or cultural exchanges, if you will. Thus, one could say that, from a political point of view, what matters most is not the language (or, in Saussure’s terms, the signifier), but the signified – that is, the culture that comes with it.

Language is, then, just the tip of the iceberg. It gives us a clue as to where the real thing lies. (One is here reminded of the Indian proverb, “a fool is the one who, when someone points to the moon, looks at the finger pointing to it”). In practice, it may be easier to just use the general term “language”, since it incorporates both the signifiers and the signified, the linguistic terms and the cultural images which come attached to them (in the image of Saussure, like a sheet of paper with two sides, one inevitably tied to the other). The problem is that we often forget that language has two dimensions and we attribute to one the power that only comes from both sides. Or, put more specifically, that comes mainly from the other side, the side of the signifier. Many loose statements could have remained unsaid if one were aware of such widespread confusion.²⁷

²⁷ I would like to thank Miguel Moniz, Robert Newcomb, and Leonor Simas-Almeida for their editorial help and suggestions.