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## **The language issue in Brazil: when local knowledge clashes with expert knowledge**

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### **1. Setting the stage**

Local knowledge all too frequently finds itself in direct confrontation with knowledge that specialists would like to bring to bear on local issues. Generally speaking, specialist knowledge is knowledge produced and disseminated in the heartland of academia, composed mainly of high-profile universities, prestigious research centers and the like that somehow manage to exist in cozy and self-imposed isolation from the communities that host and maintain them. As it happens, scholars who are actively engaged in the production and dissemination of specialized knowledge are generally persons with plenty of bookish knowledge but often with little practical or hands-on experience. Small wonder therefore that, in the last two decades or so, these scholars have increasingly become easy target for charges of elitism and social irrelevance, coming from both the Left and the Right of the political spectrum. According to those who look at the problem from a leftist point of view, many of these intellectuals have opted to quarantine themselves from the community outside the campuses with whose members they used to work in close unison in the past. And even more disappointingly, they have allowed themselves to be co-opted into the power structures represented by the university (Jacoby 1987). Those who criticize them from a rightist perspective would like to see these 'public intellectuals' made more and more accountable to the public at large and the results of their research subjected to market forces and quality controls, in such a way that success becomes synonymous with survival in "the public intellectual market." (Posner 2000)

Specialist or expert knowledge is all-embracing in its ambitions and global in its reach and, in order to maintain it that way, researchers concentrate on what is universally valid, sweeping aside everything that is subjective, occasional, sporadic or ephemeral. The so-called experts typically approach local problems with concepts and categories of analysis that were formulated *a priori* and without taking into account the specificities as well as the diversities of local environments. It is the logic of rationalist thought functioning at its relentless best. According to that logic, individual cases must somehow all be 'cribb'd, cabin'd and confin'd' in terms of pre-conceived conceptual grids before they can be accounted for or explained away—that is to say, brought underneath an overarching explanatory framework even if this means forcing each and every one of those cases, including the ones that reveal themselves to be stubbornly recalcitrant, into the Procrustean bed of readymade definitions valid for all times and climes.

In this paper, my aim is to turn the spotlight onto one such case of conflict between expert and local knowledge. The expert knowledge that I shall look at is the knowledge accumulated over the years—well-nigh a century to date—by the science of 'modern linguistics', where the qualifier 'modern' is meant to be a constant reminder of the discipline's self-proclaimed status as the sole custodian of sound, scientific knowledge about language, against all rival claims. To take a typical example, here is what Postman and Weingartner (1966: 5) had to say as they sought to explicate the scientific nature of the discipline:

The facts of linguistic science in 1935 may be different from the facts of linguistic science in 1960, which in turn may be different from the facts of linguistic science in 1980. But what remain essentially unchanged and continually productive are the process of inquiry that we define as *linguistics* or, if you will, the *linguistic enterprise*.

In other words, part of what is meant when its practitioners call linguistics a science is that the kind of knowledge it produces is timeless. Furthermore, it is believed to be equally well applicable to *all* cases, no matter how geographically or culturally diverse they may happen to be from one another. Notice, incidentally, that the authors of the passage cited above make no reference to dates earlier than 1935. This is by no means fortuitous, because the science of modern linguistics is also anxious to deny its own historicity (Ehlich, 1981: 154). Just as modern chemistry is anxious to distance itself from alchemy from which it historically evolved, so too modern linguistics will have no trucks with philology which preceded it. The 'linguistic enterprise' consists, so it is claimed, in a certain *attitude* to the very business of inquiry, not in this

or that specific finding it may provisionally arrive at at any given moment. Linguistics is a science in that it aims at overarching explanatory frameworks, where all individual cases past or present or the ones yet to present themselves can be neatly accommodated.

The local knowledge that I shall be looking at in this paper is what is often pejoratively referred to as 'folk wisdom' about what natural languages are and how they function in real life. All cultures, all societies, have their own 'home-grown' theories about language, how individual languages came into being etc. Furthermore, in any given culture, ordinary men and women are typically wont to say that they know enough about language to be able to give their own opinions concerning how languages should be taught, cultivated, preserved and protected against forces of deterioration or defilement etc. Unfortunately, professional linguists tend to brush aside all those opinions and beliefs, which they consider worthy of being studied at best as a matter of anthropological curiosity. In other words, modern linguists, who pride themselves on being the only scholars who approach language in a truly scientific spirit, are loath to listen to the ordinary person in the street, preferring to dismiss all folk wisdom as naïve, pre-scientific, or irremediably muddle-headed.

The specific case that I shall zero in on is a spirited debate over language currently under way in Brazil. Brazil stands apart from the twelve other nations that, together with it, make up the continent of South America, in that it is the only country which has Portuguese as its national language (Spanish being the overwhelmingly predominant language in the rest of the continent, spoken alongside a number of indigenous languages spoken by isolated pockets of native Indian populations scattered across the entire continent—most of them on the verge of extinction, and a sprinkling of French, English, and Dutch, mostly confined to the Guianas). In Brazil, as already noted, the language issue is at this moment one of the most passionately disputed ones. On one side of the dispute are those who think that Portuguese is under an imminent threat from English and believe that there is an urgent need to do something about it, such as the enactment of appropriate laws to curb the advance of the world's leading lingua franca etc. lest its growing presence in the country should negatively impact the local culture and, with it, jeopardize the very survival of the national language, Portuguese. On the other side are those who believe that there is no such threat to begin with and that what the advocates of legislative intervention into the linguistic reality badly need is some familiarity, however modest, with the enormous wealth of scientific knowledge about language, painstakingly accumulated over the years by

professional linguists. Linguistics, it is argued, has long tackled the issue of language change and that the predominant view among linguists is that change is neither for the better nor for the worse, but simply takes place in tandem with changing relations of contact and approximation amongst different speech communities. The controversy over whether or not to enact laws to protect Brazil's national language, (Brazilian) Portuguese, reveals a scenario in which the local knowledge of lay persons is at loggerheads with the global knowledge that linguists, persons who claim to be specialists on language, would like to bring to bear on the same issues.

It is reasonable to expect that an examination of the way the dispute has been conducted over the last few years, as well as the arguments used by both sides to advance their claims, and the rhetorical ploys used by each side to dismiss or belittle the opponent's arguments, will shed some light on the kind of stalemate which usually results from such confrontations and which the Brazilian case seems to confirm. Needless to say, it would be ironic, not to say foolhardy, to expect to derive global, universally valid lessons from a study of individual cases of clash between global and local knowledge, although one should not rule out the prospect of there emerging some discernible tendencies. What I do hope to achieve is, more modestly, a clearer appreciation of the reasons for the continuing stand-off between expert and lay knowledge as brought to the fore by the Brazilian example, and the need or otherwise for attempting, before anything else, to bridge the communication gap observed to exist in this situation, and make some speculative remarks as to what sort of concessions either side may need to make in order that conditions for a fruitful dialogue might be made available.

As the controversy rages and the battle lines are drawn with increasing precision, it has become clear that linguists have suddenly found themselves having to combat not only public opinion at large, but rival 'specialists' who claim expertise of their own on language: so-called 'traditional grammarians'. Now, old-fashioned grammarians have served as the linguists' favorite 'sparring partners' ever since the discipline consolidated itself. Professional linguists characteristically see them as the main culprits for the perpetuation and proliferation of so many false ideas about language in the society at large. Students of introductory courses in linguistics are routinely told that it is the grammarian who stands in the way of popular knowledge about language taking the scientific turn. For the grammarian typically dictates how language *should be* used, in sharp contrast with the scientifically oriented linguist who is interested in finding out how language *is* used. The one

*prescribes* where the other *describes*. Unlike the grammarian who, according to the linguists, stipulates the do's and don'ts of usage, and is a 'self-appointed gatekeeper' of the community's language and a 'pompous meddler' in matters linguistic, the linguist is a 'neutral' observer who is careful not to take sides. On their part, the traditional grammarians are no less suspicious of the linguist who is, in their view, an upstart and a late-comer to the field who has no real sensibility for language nor respect for the wealth of literature produced by generations of its speakers.

What is seldom if at all admitted by the linguists is that there are a number of intricate ties between folk wisdom and the traditional grammar. A notable early exception is Bloomfield, who pointed out that the former is frequently invested with a certain air of authority by being incorporated into volumes of reference grammar and learned treatises on language:

Traditional lore [...] is occasionally put into literary form and developed in detail, as in the well known treatise of Richard Grant White, *Words and Their Uses, Past and Present: a Study of the English Language* (New York, 1870). (Bloomfield 1944)

In many societies, the grammarians are looked upon as veritable savants, the true guardians of their languages. Many of the ideas contained in folk wisdom probably had their origin in the compendiums of grammar. In their turn, as pointed out by Bloomfield, grammarians often reproduce deeply ingrained beliefs (including prejudices) about language that are widely disseminated in the societies in which they live and work. Thus the idea that there is a correct way to speak one's own mother tongue whose rules have to be learned as such is just as much part of the folk wisdom in many societies in the world as it is a guiding principle of traditional, prescriptive grammars. In this case, as in several other similar cases, it is difficult to tell where the idea first originated.

Once again, it is important to refrain from making hasty generalizations. There is nothing universal about the felt need to control linguistic usage through normative rules. Among scholars who have contested the idea of language standardization as a universal tendency in all speech communities is Milroy. Milroy argues that the very idea of there being a 'correct' or canonical form of language is the result of what he refers to as "the ideology of the standard language." (Milroy 2001). In his view, "standardization consists of the imposition of uniformity upon a class of objects [namely, in our case, usages]" (Milroy 2001: 531). Milroy goes on to argue that there are many societies

where the idea of standardization is still an alien concept and whose languages are considered 'primitive' (for, among other things, *precisely* this reason).

It is important to point out that the linguists' distrust of folk wisdom and traditional grammar is due not always to a perception that the latter have *no* theory to back them up. It is rather that they are based on the *wrong* kind of theory, often followed without any awareness of it. Furthermore, the kind of informal theory from which they draw their sustenance has no scientific rigor. Indeed, as a matter of general rule, it is hardly ever the case that a person's reasoned claims are based on no theory at all. Thus ordinary, everyday expressions like 'to learn something by heart' or the word 'sanguine' meaning 'hopeful' which we routinely use in our everyday speech betray past theories about where the seat of learning was believed to be or what caused emotions to rise etc, although those who use these expressions regularly may not be conscious of that fact. The fact that we continue to use 'to learn by heart' no more commits us to the theory that initially justified it but no longer does than does the use of 'sunrise' and 'sunset' which, if literally true, would mean that the solar system still works the way Ptolemy thought it did. What this goes to prove is that, in the present stand-off between the linguist and the lay person, as revealed by the evolving language dispute in Brazil, the expert (the linguist) is not posing themselves as the one who 'knows everything one needs to know,' locked in an unequal dispute with someone who 'knows nothing' but unfortunately is unaware of even that. Linguists know only too well that the lay person is as convinced about the 'rationality' of their arguments as is the linguist; the only difference between them has to do with the kind of authority they each invoke and the criteria they employ to justify that rationality.

Modern, scientifically oriented linguists (from now on, simply linguists) often do concede that the ordinary people have their 'informal' theories about language. But they typically either ignore them or treat them as 'museum pieces,' at best interesting from an anthropological perspective (Niedzielski and Preston 1999). Contemporary linguistics is, one may say, founded upon the outright rejection of what the ordinary person has to say about language (Hutton, 1996). Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), universally hailed as 'the father of modern linguistics', was openly scornful of folk wisdom about language, and Leonard Bloomfield, his North-American counterpart (referred to as the "real father of American linguistics" – Hall, 1955: 41) advised young field linguists to turn a deaf ear whenever their informants would volunteer opinions *about* their language (Bloomfield 1944). Despite all his

revolutionary zeal and desire to turn the tables on his structuralist predecessors, Noam Chomsky declared absolute fidelity to the founding principle of the discipline when he said that a truly scientific grammar “attempts to specify what the speaker actually knows, not what he may report *about* his knowledge.” (emphasis mine) Chomsky (1965: 8)

In what follows, I shall first present a bird’s eye view of the controversy between local and specialized knowledge, between folk linguistics and ‘scientific’ linguistics, as it is currently playing itself out in Brazil. In sections 2 and 3, I shall look at the controversy from the perspective of each of the contending sides. In section 4, I shall attempt to draw some lessons from it, offering some explanations as to why I think no genuine dialogue is possible under the existing circumstances. The final section, 5, will contain some tentative proposals for possible solutions.

## **2. The Portuguese language in Brazil and the threat believed to be posed by English**

Over the last few years, Brazil’s intelligentsia has been riven by a growing dispute over a supposed threat to the country’s national language, Portuguese. At the root of the problem is the speed with which English has been replacing French as the country’s favored foreign language and is being welcomed by the upper and middle classes as the language of the globalized world and the road to success in the emerging world order. A clear sign of the insatiable demand for learning English is the amazing number of language schools opening new branches throughout the length and breadth of the country, their enrollment figures swelling by geometric proportions. (cf. Rajagopalan and Rajagopalan, forthcoming). An advertisement recently put out in one of the country’s leading newspapers by one of these language schools told the reader that eighty per cent of world’s income is in the hands of English speakers (native or non-native) and that in many cases a knowledge of English helps double your pay-check. “It is a must,” the copy-writer concluded, “in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” However, alarmed by the increasing presence of English in the country’s day-to-day life, more and more people, including many who have acquired a reasonable degree of proficiency in the language, are starting to believe that there is an urgent need to put a damper on the relentless advance of the ‘alien’ language and thereby guarantee—in their view—the survival of their native language.

Now, it is a well known fact that national languages often function as extremely powerful flags of allegiance (Rajagopalan, 2002). "Languages," as Dr. Johnson (cited in Sneed 1990: 231) put it, "are the pedigree of nations." A threat to a nation's language is all too often interpreted to be a threat to that nation's very integrity. The crucial connection between the two was pointed out by Buck several decades ago.

Of all the institutions which mark a common nationality, language is the one of which a people is most conscious and to which it is most fanatically attached. It is the one conspicuous banner of nationality, to be defended against encroachment, as it is the first object of attack on the part of a power aiming to crush out a distinction of nationality among its subject peoples. (Buck 1916; cited in Greenfield 1998: 635)

Small wonder therefore that the alleged threat to Brazil's national language has become a burning issue and attracted a considerable amount of public attention. There have even sprung up local movements such as the Rio de Janeiro-based "Movement for the Valorisation of the Culture, Language and Riches of Brazil" (MV-Brasil), founded by groups of concerned citizens with the explicit purpose of bringing the weight of their opinion to bear on their elected representatives.

Their numbers have been steadily increasing, as can be easily attested by the media attention the topic has received in recent years. Thus hardly a day passes by without an extremely worried member of the public sending a letter to their local newspaper voicing their apprehension about the presence of English words in their language. English words have been incorporated into Portuguese in their thousands, often supplanting already available native equivalents. Called *estrangirismos* ('foreignisms'), these words have become the lightning rod for public criticism concerning the growing presence of English in their midst which is typically viewed as the most visible sign of globalization and what many critics see as Brazil's inadvertent and ill-advised entry into a new world order where the country has, in their view, more to lose than gain.

Sometimes their fury is targeted against the very media to which they turn in order to air their grievances. Some time ago, *Folha de São Paulo*, one of Brazil's leading national newspapers, published a letter from an enraged reader condemning what he felt was the completely unwarranted use of English words even in titles given to the different supplements of the very newspaper: the supplement devoted to

adolescents is called *Folhateen* (where the suffix *teen* is a straightforward borrowing from English) and the one on finances and money investments is called *Folhainvest*. "Is it really indispensable to have recourse to foreign languages to name the different sections of the newspaper?," asked the irate reader who wrapped up his brief note of protest with the following ironic punch line: "Or could it be the case that it has somehow escaped my attention that the newspaper is already circulating in the United States?" (Rocha, 2001).

Indeed, so sensitive has the whole issue become that some politicians, eager to reap electoral benefits from the whole situation, have come up with suggestions for legislative measures aimed at curbing the use of English. One such step is a bill proposed by a Congressman by name Aldo Rebelo which has already passed muster in the lower house of Brazil's legislature and is waiting for its turn for discussion in the upper house, the Senate. The bill proposes, among other things, tough penalties, including hefty fines, for the use of foreignisms in all but a handful of situations. A copy cat bill by a state representative by name Jussara Cony is being debated by the legislative assembly of the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. Another bill, presented by Senator Gilvan Borges, aims at forbidding universities and other institutions of higher learning in the country from stipulating prior knowledge of foreign languages (generally English, French and German) as a prerequisite for admission to graduate programs for the alleged reason that the vast majority of the country's population do not have a working command of any of them. Encouraged by the huge repercussion of these legislative proposals in the media, many other politicians have actively joined the crusade and others are struggling to come up with ingenious proposals of their own. A municipal councilor in the city of São Carlos (the State of São Paulo) by name Idelso Marques de Souza lost no time in presenting a bill prohibiting the use of English words on all signboards, posters, neon signs, newspaper advertisements, publicity leaflets etc. within the jurisdiction of the city.

The following remark by Congressman Rebelo, explaining the *raison d'être* for his proposed bill synthesizes the main political argument for legislative intervention:

How can one explain this undesirable phenomenon [the transformation of Portuguese by the invasion of foreignisms], a potential threat to one of the most vital elements of our cultural heritage, the mother-tongue, which has been under way with growing intensity in the last 10 to 20 years? How can one explain it except by pointing to the state of ignorance, to the absence of critical and esthetic sense, and even to the lack of

self-respect [of segments of our country's population]? (Rebelo 1999:184-185)

Politicians are not the only ones who have added fuel to the fire of popular discontent over the way the government has handled language policy in the country. Many academics, including notably traditional grammarians, have joined the fray on behalf of those who urge the government to step in. Pasquale Cipro Neto, a grammarian who has a widely read syndicated weekly column in the country's leading newspapers, is among those harsh critics whose number is today legion. Here is an excerpt from one of his recent write-ups :

The other day, in a radio news bulletin I heard something I just couldn't believe. Referring to the selling price of a certain product on the world market, the newsreader said that it cost "8 *dolares*" (Eight US dollars) and "43 cents". I confess I simply go mad every time I hear one of these barbarisms in the mass media. Well, the expression I would personally prefer to use is not exactly "barbarism", it is something else, perhaps unprintable. "Cents" is the plural of "cent" in English. I would very much like to know what led the newsreader, who is presumably a speaker of Brazilian Portuguese, to pronounce the word "cents" [rather than "*centavos*"]. Why "*dolares*" in Portuguese and "cents" in English? There is only one word for it: underdevelopment. Deep-rooted. Cultural. (Cipro Neto, 2001)

Such outbursts of anger might lead someone unaccustomed to the politics of language currently playing itself out in Brazil to conclude that they are simply the typical reaction from purists unwilling to accept neologisms or changes of whatever kind in their language.

It so happens, however, that the language issue in Brazil is—as it is possibly elsewhere in the world—deeply implicated in the geopolitics of the whole region. In most of Latin America, the advance of the English language is typically viewed as the most visible sign of the role played by the US as the post-cold war period's only remaining superpower. There is widespread resentment about the fact that, in the emerging world order, the countries in South America are being reduced to the status of mere satellite nations. "[T]he distrust of foreignisms," wrote Garcez and Zilles (2001: 22), "is the distrust of Anglophone presence in the day-to-day life in Brazil, especially that of the symbolic omnipresence of North-American corporate interests." The following remark by Pennycook (1994: 23) is very much to the point: "[...] a more critical analysis of the global spread of English reveals a broad range of

questions about its connection to social and economic power with and between nations, to the global expansion of various forms of culture and knowledge, and various forces that are shaping the modern world.”

In order to get a grip on what is really going in Brazil at this moment, it is absolutely crucial that we understand the reasons for the growing public apprehension at the (real or imagined) prospect of being systematically robbed of their national identity, thanks to the presence of an alien language in their midst. It is important to recognize that that the rise of nationalism in many parts of the world today is a perfectly understandable (albeit, ultimately indefensible) reaction to what the ordinary people see as the aggressive incursion into their lives of alien values and life styles, paraded before them as symbols of the new spirit of globalism and internationalism currently sweeping across the continents. As Giroux (1994: 29) has put it,

As old borders and zones of cultural difference become more porous or eventually collapse, questions of culture become increasingly interlaced with issues of power, representation and identity. Dominant cultural traditions once self-confidently secure in their modernist discourse of progress, universalism and objectivism are now interrogated as ideological beachheads used to police and contain subordinate groups, oppositional discourses, and dissenting social movements.

Now, it is all too easy (but, as I shall argue below, totally counterproductive) to dismiss the growing popular reaction in Brazil against the unbridled advance of the English language as an irrational outburst of pent-up fury and frustration from a misinformed and frenzied mob, of the kind uncharitably described by Shakespeare as “the blunt monster with uncounted heads, the still discordant wavering multitude”. Confronted with mob mentality, experts typically tend to brush it aside as unworthy of attention. However, we ignore at our own peril the fact that, in the absence of a more tangible alternative, these ordinary persons in the street are finding themselves left with no option but to assume an openly defiant stance that is, perhaps unbeknownst to themselves, dangerously chauvinistic (Rajagopalan, 2002). Interestingly enough, the very same persons, when consulted in their more sober moods, are likely to express opinions in favor of greater contacts between peoples and cultures around the world. Opinion polls have repeatedly shown that sizeable segments of the country’s population are satisfied with the way Brazil has, over the last decade or so, opened itself to greater contact with the rest of the world. Barring very few exceptions, no one wants to go back to the days of isolationism and the disastrous policy of narcissistic navel-gazing in the name of self-reliance

that marked populist governments in the past, not only in Brazil but right across the entire South American continent.

In other words, it is important to point out that local knowledge is often hopelessly riddled with internal contradictions. Folk wisdom seldom comes under critical scrutiny at the hands of people at large themselves. As a result, one should not be surprised to find radical and reactionary elements peacefully cohabiting in these thought patterns. It is here that the need for expert critical intervention arises, aimed at, before everything else, teasing out the contradictions that plague those structures. We shall return to this issue later on. Meanwhile, it might be interesting to take a look at the way professional linguists in the country—the self-styled experts on matters linguistic in Brazil and indeed elsewhere—have reacted to the challenge from the streets. As we shall see, dogmatic and often arrogant postures of experts in their effort to deal with local knowledge only help make things worse than they already are, instead of helping to defuse the standoff.

### **3. The role of academic linguists in the ongoing dispute**

The initial reactions from linguists to the growing demand for legislative measures to curb the advance of English in Brazil were mostly muted, marked by stunned silence and total disorientation. Slowly but steadily, however, they recovered their nerves and, as a first step, closed their ranks. An early reaction came from Carlos Alberto Faraco, an influential linguist, who wrote the following in a widely commented article published in *Folha de São Paulo*:

It is probably no exaggeration to suggest that for most people the claim that human languages can be the object of science may sound rather strange. Normally, it is believed that the old compendiums of grammar contain everything that needs to be said about a given language. There is even a quasi religious reverence towards works of grammar. At the same time, common sense saddles the language with a set of categorical (not demonstrated) statements that together constitute a powerfully mystical discourse of great social penetration. (Faraco, 2001a: 37)

These opening words were followed by the self-reassuring remark:

Be that as it may, since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there has been in steady process of construction a body of scientific

knowledge about human languages. This science—linguistics—is already established securely in universities all over the world and has steadily been piling up a respectable wealth of knowledge, comprising observations and analyses, that corrode to its very entrails the quasi religious veneration of old grammar books, in its [self-assumed] role as the mythical discourse of common sense. (ibid.)

The passages just cited confirm a number of the characteristic features of the typical attitude of linguists vis-à-vis all other discourses about language that compete with their exclusive and exclusionary claims to truth. Here is the most important amongst them. The choice between linguistics on the one hand and folk wisdom as encapsulated in traditional grammar on the other is a choice between modern science and old-fashioned religion (twice referred to in quick succession). Linguistics is thus a true child of the Enlightenment spirit that is believed to have helped drive away all mystical and religious superstitions and in Kant's celebrated words, borrowed from Horace, paved the way for the new role of man as the maker of his own destiny: "*Sapere aude*" (Have the courage to use your own reason).

The Popperian idea of science as a cumulative enterprise is also very clearly evident in the eagerness with which Faraco delves into history in order to stretch the historicity of the 'modern science of language' farther back in time than most authors of introductory textbooks seem willing to go. Presumably, the contending Kuhnian view of science as 'progressing' by fits and starts, stumbling along from paradigm to paradigm, would probably have meant having to seriously consider the possibility that the tussle between modern linguistics and traditional grammar is one between a latter-day paradigm still struggling for recognition by the public at large and a fully consolidated one within a long tradition of thinking about language rather than one between science and superstition, as Faraco is eager to portray it.

The universality of the kind of knowledge accumulated over the years by linguists is also highlighted in the reference to "universities all over the world." The unstated claim here is that linguistic knowledge cuts across language boundaries. Linguistics is universal in that scholars who pursue the study know no linguistic or cultural barriers. What a Brazilian linguist has to say is readily understood by their Japanese counterpart, whose views, in their turn—insofar as they are rigorously scientific—have nothing so exclusively Japanese about them that they cannot be readily comprehended by, say, a Kenyan linguist groomed in the same scientific 'culture'. The language of science is truly universal. In fact, it is the possession of this wonderful asset that makes a linguist

different from the lay person. Whereas the latter is parochial in their world-view as well their aspirations, the former is a true 'citizen of the world.' In short the linguist is a scientist, in possession of the metalanguage of science which is fully free from the cultural elements that characterize the language of ordinary people. As Davis (1997: 33) puts it: "The reason linguists are still firmly attached to believing that there is and must remain a major difference between lay and theoretical metadiscursive remarks is that linguists are still tied to believing in the objectivity of linguistic facts." And also, as he might have added, tied to believing the fully transparent nature of the metalanguage at their disposal—"writing degree zero" as Roland Barthes (1975) famously characterized it—making it eminently suitable for representing those objective facts with no distortion whatever. The universal aspirations of the language of modern science were eloquently made clear by Leibniz who, thoroughly impressed by the impeccably universal character of the language of mathematics, is said to have speculated that if God Almighty were someday to vouchsafe a tête-à-tête with ordinary mortals on earth made in His own image, the only language of communication they could possibly have between them would be that of mathematics! (i.e., an all-perfect God must use an all-perfect language to communicate His thoughts).

Other Brazilian linguists have not been slow in voicing their concern over the political fall-out from the ongoing controversy. If Faraco, as we have seen, vindicates the superiority of the science of language by invoking such of its characteristics as its institutional prestige, its universality and its cumulative nature, Garcez and Zilles (2001) insist on the timelessness of the linguists' claims. By contrast, commonsense is tied to the 'here' and 'now' of particular historical moments whose interest and validity may or may not outlast the very moment in which they are deemed relevant or topical. In other words, the common person is unwilling and, more importantly, unable, to step outside the specificities of the particular historical moment in which they find themselves and, as a result, is prevented from identifying the true universal ensconced in particular events and episodes. At the same time, the person in the street is also given to unwarrantedly universalising events that are in fact episodic and of passing historical significance, thanks to their refusal or inability to take a transcendental view in respect of their lived experience. All these ideas are there as a backdrop when the authors claim:

Many of those who discuss the question seem to believe that foreignisms are a phenomenon unique to the contemporary historical moment, symptomatic of an insidious alien invasion

by means of language. Upon observing the frequency, no doubt very high indeed, of elements from the English language in [contemporary] Brazilian Portuguese, a presence that can also be observed in other languages such as German, there are those who imagine that the agenda of Anglo-American imperialism is being put into practice by undermining the thought processes of Portuguese speakers through the introduction of words from English. If this were indeed the case, it would make perfect sense to mobilize all resources to defend the Portuguese language and the Brazilian people from the attack under way. (Garcez and Zilles, 2001: 24)

Another linguist, Marcos Bagno, uses no self-restraint while venting his fury over the fact that Congressman Rebelo, who is currently spearheading the national debate on behalf of public opinion and lay wisdom, frequently invokes the authority of traditional grammarians like Evanildo Bechara and the members of *Brazilian Academy of Letters*. In his own words:

For God's sake, why should a caucus of forty or so people—in their majority, not even writers, not even philologists—there being amongst their ranks medical doctors, journalists, jurists, business entrepreneurs, army officers, clerics, economists etc.—be entrusted with the task of making decisions about the destiny of a language spoken and written in a country of 170 million inhabitants? What scientific credentials do these vainglorious ladies and gentlemen have in order to legislate over the issue? Wouldn't it be more reasonable to consult, for example, the nearly two thousand members of the Brazilian Association of Linguistics which has amongst its ranks scientists, researchers, teachers and other specialists on questions relating to language, linguistic communication and teaching of languages? After all, who would dare propose a law on surgical procedures if it were rejected, *in limine*, by the *Federal Advisory Board on Medical Practices*? Who would go ahead with a legislative bid to discipline the practice of jurisprudence, if it were rejected as preposterous by Brazil's *Order of Advocates*? (Bagno, 2001: 52)

The above passage is interesting for several reasons. The tone of incredulity and impatience regarding public ignorance of the achievements of modern linguistics and also a blind trust on their part in the authority of the 'immortals' of the (largely ceremonial) Academy of Letters needs no further comment. What does impress the reader though is the author's insistence on indulging in recriminations against all those who fail to see the rights of professional linguists to be consulted on all linguistic matters and to be treated on a par with

doctors and lawyers, whose opinions are often taken to be the last word insofar as their respective areas of expertise are concerned. Thus Bagno continues:

Nonetheless, although we have in Brazil centers of teaching and research concerned with linguistics and recognized internationally as centers of excellence in the area and from where have come forth negative reactions to the bill proposed by the congressman, there seems to be a general tendency among the lay public to listen—when the topic of discussion is language—to persons who have at most heard the cock crow, but have no idea where, nor for that matter *when*, given that the vast majority of the superstitions that flourish in the common sense view of language have their origin in a pre-historic period well before the birth of Christ and, hence, well before the era of modern science as we know it. (Bagno, *ibid.*)

Another linguist expressed his resentment thus:

Why is it that linguistics does not get attention from the media? Because it is liberatory: what it has to say—namely, that everybody is capable of speaking quite appropriately the language they speak, or that there is no such thing as wrong speech or dialect, from the point of view grammatical organization—will not only deprive the [traditional] grammarians of their livelihood, but more importantly, will make ordinary people think that they can open their mouths and speak out, registering their desires and their grievances, without fear of having to feel ashamed about not knowing their language well enough. (Guedes 2001; 129)

To recapitulate the point developed in this section: if one attempts to capture the general tone of the reaction from linguists to the growing clamor from the streets to legislatively intervene in the linguistic situation in Brazil, one will find that the consensus view among those who have expressed their opinions in this regard is that the linguists have been unfairly set aside in the whole discussion. To make matters worse, they complain, the discussion so far has been practically dominated by traditional grammarians and other self-styled pundits who do not have the necessary scientific training to back up their views.

#### **4. The continuing stalemate**

The debate over the language issue in Brazil has so far produced more heat than light. And, as far as one can tell, there is no immediate

prospect for a negotiated settlement of the issues that divide linguists and the public at large, egged on by traditional grammarians as their self-appointed champions. As we have seen, the only argument that linguists have been able to put forward is that their opponents, mainly traditional grammarians, have no clue as to the real nature of language. So, in their view, the only solution is taking the message of linguistics to the wider public. Here is an example:

Linguistics has not yet succeeded in going beyond the four walls of the centers of research and spreading its message across the society at large so that its discourse could serve as a foil to the other discourses that address the language issue in Brazil [...] Insofar as the national language issue is concerned, we seem to be living in a pre-scientific, dogmatic and obscurantist period. (Faraco, 2001)

It is the same Enlightenment message of the darkness of ignorance being dispelled by the refulgent light of genuine science (The actual origins of this powerful metaphor may in fact date back to pre-Socratic Greece. Cf. Borzacchini 2001). As self-styled heirs to that scientific tradition, the linguists are saying that the lay persons are being misled by what Francis Bacon, in his *Novum Organum*, condemned as the four 'idols' of the mind: namely, (1) the idols of the tribe (*idola tribus*), (2) the idols of the cave (*idola specus*), (3) the idols of the marketplace (*idola fori*), and (4) the idols of the theater (*idola theatri*). Idols of the first two kinds refer to the typical tendency among ordinary persons to conceive of ordinary things anthropomorphically (In the case of language study, this tendency manifests itself whenever we speak of the birth, growth, and death of individual languages and also when we refer to some of them as sister languages, deriving from a common parent language etc.) and the tendency to accept unconditionally views that have been handed down from generation to generation, respectively. By (3), Bacon meant deception by the very language we speak and by (4) deception by established opinions, whose very antiquity often confers upon them an air of awe-inspiring respectability and unquestionable authority. From the contemporary scientific linguist's point of view, the two are best represented by the distrust of common, everyday speech (whereof the quest for a *metalanguage* as the proper medium of scientific discourse) and the unconcealed disdain for the traditional grammarians (seen as the champions of deeply entrenched prejudices).

The only problem with such a rhetorical strategy is that it has so far failed to produce any satisfactory results. If anything, the general public seems to be growing more and more impatient and unwilling to grant the linguists the last word. Their distrust of the 'self-styled experts

on language' was exploited in a masterly fashion by Congressman Rebelo in a rebuttal of Faraco's criticism of his proposed bill. In his reply, the Congressman proclaimed:

Language, like the Indian club, the sword, the gunpowder, and modern technology, has been a powerful instrument of conquest. The dominant culture forces its vocabulary on the culture under domination. When the Indonesian troops occupied East Timor in 1974, the first step taken by the invaders was to prohibit the teaching and the use of Portuguese. Banned from the schools, Portuguese was from then on defended by the armed guerrillas of Fretilin, who re-instituted the use of the language, as soon as they gained autonomy for the ex-Portuguese colony. There is an eloquent example in Brazilian history of the use of the word for the conquest of nations and territories. When Portugal decided to colonize the land, it also decided to impose a language so as to be able to communicate with the natives. (Rebelo 2001a)

What makes a passage such as the one above different is that there is no sign of pent up rancor or apparent ill-feeling (or, if there is, it has been superbly well concealed) towards those who do not share the same viewpoint. Instead of appealing to the authority of science or whatever, the argument is based on facts of history that most ordinary persons in Brazil are already familiar with. As a seasoned politician, the Congressman knows that an argument is won, not necessarily by dint of logically fool-proof arguments backed up solid scientific reasoning, but by means persuasion and the use of a rhetorical style, at once simple and aimed at striking a favourable chord in the minds of those to whom the argument is addressed. Besides, no one can disagree with the Congressman when he calls attention to the political use of the language issue and cites concrete examples from history.

Now, as it happens, the typical reaction from linguists to such arguments of extraordinary persuasive power has been to insist that natural languages are integral wholes that can, as it were, 'take care of themselves' and are best left to themselves and not tampered with. As Bagno put it,

The use of language needs no legislation. Language is a self-regulating system, it takes care of its own necessities. On its own, it absorbs what is useful to its needs and throws out what it can do without. ... A language does not need to be "defended", much less defended from its own speakers, who are its legitimate users and as such ought to have the liberty to do with it what it best pleases them to do. (Bagno, 2000: 61)

In so putting forward their case, linguists like Bagno are being rigorously faithful to their structuralist origins. Isn't a structure, by definition, integrated and fully self-sufficient unto itself? Doesn't the much-celebrated *clôture* of a structure guarantee for it a high degree of resilience from outside pressures?

The only hitch is that, prized off from their historically determinate context, such claims tend to strike the ordinary people, untutored in the kind of discursive practices linguists are familiar with, as contrary to common sense. If languages are such self-contained wholes, immune to pressures from the outside, how come—they ask—that they are capable of being planned? Isn't language planning at all possible precisely because individual languages do react to outside pressures?

The fact of the matter is that they—the non-linguists—are dead right on this last point. No matter what the linguists might wish languages were like in an ideal world, in actual reality there are plenty of cases where the destinies of individual languages have been sealed by decisions taken by a handful of persons, mainly politicians and dictators. And history is all too full of examples of languages being moulded to suit political interests. The ban on the use of Portuguese in East Timore by the Indonesian occupation forces that the congressman refers to is a case in point. Equally importantly, in any society the need (real or presumed) to protect the society's language against foreign influences is a powerful rallying point, behind which politicians know they can drum up all the popular support they need. Ordinary people are particularly sensitive to the appeal of what Fishman (1968) called 'nationism' meaning the need to legislatively intervene in the linguistic reality of a nation-state.

It may well be worth asking at this stage why it is that linguists have systematically turned a blind eye to what has been happening all over the world. Why are they reluctant to admit that human languages are often subject—whether for the better or the worse—to policy decisions made by governments? The short answer is that they have been prevented from admitting that national languages are charged with immense political connotations, thanks to one of the axiomatic principles that they have accepted as part of the design features of their discipline: the idea that a scientific study of human languages should consider those languages *apart* from the ideas and attitudes ordinary people entertain about them. Barring very few exceptions, linguists are still given to thinking of languages as though they existed quite apart from

the social settings in which they are spoken and hence free from the political connotations with which they are infused.

As we saw in Section 1 of this paper, the very discipline of linguistics is founded on a summary dismissal of what the ordinary folks 'out there' think and believe about language. As scientists, linguists think they are entitled to such an act of distancing from those who act as their informants and who furnish them with the data they work on. In this, they believe they are acting just like, say, physicians. A doctor is not obligated (except for reasons other than strictly scientific or medical) to listen to the kind of explanation their patients might have concerning the malady they suffer from. A doctor's patients typically have no specialist knowledge about medicine, so their opinions simply should not count when the doctor is engaged in diagnosing their illnesses or in deciding on the right therapy.

However, as linguists in Brazil (and possibly elsewhere in the world) are slowly beginning to discover to their consternation, it is one thing to admit that language is a social phenomenon, but a completely different matter to fully face up to the implications of that admission. Individual languages are also social *possessions*. Ordinary speakers are as convinced as their more erudite counterparts on campuses, that they have an equal stake in the destiny of their language. And, to be sure, they do. It is not by flaunting their academic and scientific credentials that professional linguists are going to make any headway in their relations with the community at large. Before anything else, they need to *talk* to them. And in talking to them, it is important that they start with what the ordinary people think and believe about language.

In other words, it is the unavailability as yet of a common language in which to thrash out their differences that is making it extremely difficult to find a solution to the continuing standoff between expert and local knowledge on the issue of language as it is currently playing itself out in Brazil. Neither side is willing to listen, let alone budge from the position each has already assumed. The experts will not listen to the lay public for reasons we have already looked into; it is, as far as they are concerned, a sheer waste of time. The ordinary people do not have the intellectual wherewithal in order to make sense of what they, the self-appointed experts and guardians of the only scientific knowledge on the subject, are talking about. In their turn, the public at large will not listen to the linguists either, because they think that the kind of expertise they have to offer is too otherworldly to be of any practical use or immediate relevance to their concerns. Against the perfectly understandable, down-to-earth concerns voiced by the

ordinary persons in the street, all that the professional linguists have to offer is high-falutin' theory (and a dismissive shrug of their shoulders), packaged in an impenetrable jargon that sounds even more alien to their ears than the foreign language, whose growing presence in their midst was what set off the whole public debate to begin with.

To go back to the point about languages as self-contained wholes, often used by linguists to counteract demands for intervention into specific practices involving language, it is interesting to note that the political implications of such a stance actually play into the hands of those who advocate linguistic engineering. In a pungently worded reply to the attacks from linguists entitled 'Neoliberal neo-language,' Congressman Rebelo rebuffed his detractors in the following words:

Is language, like the market, in that neither needs the mediation by laws and nation-states? Or could it be that the one just as much as the other [...] is urgently in need of rules that will restrain the economic, social, and linguistic Darwinism they have set off? (Rebelo, 2001b)

In one swift stroke, the Congressman thus politicizes the whole issue, or rather, shows how decisions taken allegedly on purely theoretical grounds, nonetheless have important political implications. Where the linguists see science, the politicians sense politics. In this case, what the astute politician is doing is cashing in on the powerful anti-globalization feelings sweeping across many countries, especially in the developing world, where the local populations have been getting more and more worried about being left behind in the mad rat race to which they think the world economy has been reduced. He is reminding his readers that just as the market has become a free-for-all where the powerful call all the shots precisely in virtue of the state's refusal to interfere in the economy, so too a national language left to its own fortunes can easily play into the hands of powerful interest groups from the outside who have no commitment to local concerns. No wonder that ordinary Brazilians are easily swayed by an argument such as this which highlights the political dimensions of a nation's language.

## **5. Concluding remarks.**

In all fairness, it should be noted that, in the context of the evolving language dispute in Brazil, the country's linguists have also

realized that it is a political struggle that they have ahead of them. Faraco expressed this in no uncertain terms:

Linguists are faced with the challenge of approaching these questions as fundamentally political questions and thinking about ways of making their voices heard, thus contributing to the beginning of an urgently needed cultural war among contending discourses that address the language of Brazil. (Faraco, 2001: 31)

But politics here is practically synonymous with lobbying. It is, in other words, all a matter of putting political pressure on those who have the final say on the issue. One step in that direction was taken when, in an open letter signed by the presidents of the *Brazilian Association of Linguistics* (ABRALIN), *Association of Applied Linguistics of Brazil* (ALAB) and *National Association of Graduate Programs in Letters and Linguistics* (ANPOLL), and addressed to the president of the Special Commission on Education of Brazil's Senate, the need for establishing guidelines for a linguistic policy at a federal level was highlighted. Among the key features of the set of guidelines were a systematic effort to combat linguistic prejudices of all kinds and a plain recognition of Brazil's status as a multilingual nation.

Apart from the jitters that talk of Brazil's status as a multilingual state is most likely to cause (especially amongst the law makers in the country who know only too well that such an admission would inevitably entail new demands from minority groups to receive education in their own languages and is therefore completely unhelpful as an argumentative move at this stage), the tone of the letter also betrays a deep-seated conviction on the part of linguists. It is as though they were saying that they know for sure what the exact status of Portuguese in Brazil is. "All we need is your backing to eradicate all the prejudices and erroneous beliefs that proliferate amongst the lay public." What is not at all being considered is the crucial fact that their credentials as reliable experts to be consulted on issues related to language are precisely what need to be established first, at least as far as the members of the legislative bodies are concerned. For, after all, these law makers themselves represent a cross-section of the very population whose members are, as we have already seen, more prone to be swayed by the arguments of the traditional grammarians, whom they have for long held in high esteem and whose authority they have no convincing reason as yet to call into question.

But, perhaps even more importantly, what is egregiously missing in the stance taken by linguists in Brazil vis-à-vis the ongoing dispute

involving the country's national language is a willingness to consider the possibility that there may be a need to review some of the postulates of their own science in light of the concrete case that they have decided to address themselves to. What the linguists urgently need to recognize is that there is more to language policy than the linguistics of it. As Kaplan put it recently:

Language policy is, in fact, a manifestation of *human* resource development policy, and many polities have chosen not to engage in such policy development or have done so in an ad hoc manner, often with unfortunate results. By way of contrast, nations have frequently undertaken *natural* resource development planning—the building of the Aswan Dam in Egypt, or of the complex Three Gorges dam project currently being undertaken in the people's Republic of China are examples that come readily to mind. (Kaplan 2001: 81)

So long as those who claim to possess global, specialist knowledge refuse to consider it even as a remote possibility that they may need to make some fundamental readjustments in their mindset to suit local circumstances, it is unlikely that their efforts will bear any fruit. Needless to say, for a genuine dialogue to take place, both sides will need to give in. Together, they will need to negotiate an intermediate position that will steer clear of, on the one hand, the Scylla of passive acquiescence and, on the other, the Charybdis of defiant chauvinism, up till now considered the only viable alternatives. This can only be done if the experts recognize the importance of engaging the lay public in a genuine dialogue and, in their turn, the ordinary persons admit the possibility that their perfectly legitimate grievances over and spontaneous reactions to such an emotive issue as their national language do need to be submitted to close scrutiny with the aid of cool reason before they can be incorporated into a plan of action. If there is any lesson to be learned from the Brazilian case, it is that there is also a need to address the common people in the kind of (meta)language they are most used to, respecting their opinions for what they are worth, and trying to build on from what there is already in place. Insofar as it is a matter of utmost political urgency, the issue of a country's national language must be approached, not in the spirit of cold and dispassionate scientific reason but with the tact and rhetorical skills that all politically sensitive issues call for. Finally, what the other side needs to offer in their turn is a willingness to listen.

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