

REVIEW

# The Brazilian Portuguese as a colonial language

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## ABSTRACT

In this text, we review the lecture delivered by Professor Esmeralda Vailati Negrão in the cycle of lectures promoted by Abralín Ao Vivo. In this lecture, Negrão discusses syntactic aspects of Portuguese that may be the result of linguistic contact between different people that shared the territorial space of Brazil and other topics. The professor argues that, in order to understand the structure of the language, it is necessary to think of Brazilian Portuguese as a colonial language, resulting from the multilingualism that used to exist during its consolidation. The discussion presented by Negrão helps us to expand new horizons about the constitution of Brazilian Portuguese, focused on its structure and on its socio-historical context of emergence.

## RESUMO

Neste texto, resenhamos a conferência proferida pela professora Esmeralda Vailati Negrão no ciclo de conferências promovido pela Abralín Ao Vivo. Nessa conferência, Negrão discorre, entre outros tópicos, sobre aspectos sintáticos do português que podem ser resultado do contato linguístico entre diferentes povos que dividiam o espaço territorial do Brasil. A autora defende que, para que se possa compreender a estrutura da língua, é preciso que se pense o português brasileiro como uma língua colonial, resultante do multilinguismo existente durante sua consolidação. Com isso, a discussão levantada por Negrão ajuda-nos a expandir novos olhares em relação à constituição do português brasileiro, tanto voltados a sua estrutura, quanto voltados ao seu contexto sócio-histórico de surgimento.



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Syntax of Brazilian Portuguese. Contact. Multilingualism.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Sintaxe do português brasileiro. Contato. Multilinguismo.

The lecture delivered by Professor Esmeralda Vailati Negrão happened on May 4th, 2020. Negrão is a professor at the University of São Paulo (USP), holds a bachelor degree in Languages (1975), a teaching degree in Languages (1974) from the University of São Paulo, a doctoral degree by the University of Wisconsin - Madison (1986), in the United States, and did a postdoctoral internship at the University of Los Angeles, also in the United States. In her researches, Negrão observes the interface between syntax and semantics. Currently, her research focus is in the impact of contact between African and indigenous languages for the formation of Brazilian Portuguese.

Negrão organizes her conference entitled *Aspectos da sintaxe do português brasileiro: emergência de uma língua colonial* in which she establishes parallels that justify the behavior of Brazilian Portuguese (PB), a variety of Portuguese that presents distinctions (in the syntax, morphology, phonetic/phonology, and prosody) of its original variety, European Portuguese. The lecture is divided in two parts, which we present below.

In the first part of the conference, Esmeralda discusses the idea that PB was, in its origin, a colonial language: in the colonial period, Brazil was a multilingual society, where different languages circulated throughout Brazilian territory: indigenous languages, African languages, colonizer languages, etc. Through this plurality of languages, syntactic, phonetic/phonological, and morphological aspects of the Portuguese language were changed, incorporated, and created so that the variety of Portuguese spoken in Brazil could emerge (which is far from being uniform).

During her discussion, the professor presents other hypotheses about what makes PB as it is today: i) Naro and Scherre (2007), who argues for a drift in the language – the changes that occurred in the language were already programmed in its structure; ii) Guy (1981), who claims that PB is a derivative of a creole language; iii) Holm (1987), who proposes that PB, in its initial state, had become creolized (in a light way), then underwent a decreolization, which resulted in the language spoken today; iv) and Baxter (1992), for whom PB is the result of an irregular linguistic transmission: Portuguese was learned in a defective way by the enslaved and indigenous people as L2, and it was later passed on to their descendants, who learned it as L1.

Negrão presented the idea that linguistic contact is the main force for the constitution of the PB: the colonization system in Brazilian territory provided relationships among Europeans, Africans, and Indigenous people. There was a multilingualism, with two or more ethnolinguistically distinct populations sharing the same territory, where they could interact with each other. This multilingual

environment was divided into two periods: i) at first, there was a concentration on the coast, where the main focus was on the production of sugar cane and the international market; ii) in a second stage, the focus was the *Corrida de Ouro* (Gold Rush), with a new wave of immigrants coming to Brazil in addition to the slave labor. As a result, socio-historical periods in colonial Brazil are central to the understanding of the language as a new reality to be described.

In the second part of the lecture, Esmeralda presents the following question: “what can some peculiarities of the Brazilian Portuguese syntax, seen as a new colonial language, tell us about linguistic evolution?”. For the professor, understanding the aspects of PB syntax as a result of multilingualism can offer explanations on how a language changes in time and space, since the formation of this variety of language is relatively recent. Information about the contacts among languages that could influence the structure of PB might be more accessible, which would provide great support for the discussion.

As a complement to her discussion, Negrão presents linguistic evidences to support what was previously said: she establishes syntactic comparisons among other African-based languages. One of the points observed is the marking of the third person of the plural. For the lecturer, the instability of this marking in Kimbundu and other Bantu languages created the necessary conditions for the impersonality in PB.

Negrão argues that studying PB as a colonial language, i.e. a language originated in a territory with multilingualism, provides a basis for understanding syntactic characteristics of PB, which offers new perspectives about phenomena which have been explored in studies of this language, such as the marking of the subject and impersonality.

The discussion proposed by the professor provides a new vision about the PB syntactic behavior, which diverge from well-known proposals such as the ones by Naro and Scherre (2007) and Baxter (1992). Treating the linguistic reality of the constitution of the language, in accordance with the colonial concept of ethnic and linguistic plurality helps us to understand the environment to which the language was exposed.

This discussion revives a scenario that seemed to have been fully explored. It brought language aspects that have been already described but under new perspectives, supporting investigations regarding syntactic aspects of Brazilian Portuguese. Understanding Brazilian Portuguese as a contact language is to understand that different people contributed to its constitution.

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