

## How admitting language variation can improve our knowledge of the globe

### *Como o reconhecimento da variação linguística pode aprimorar o nosso conhecimento do mundo*

**Andrei Ferreira de Carvalhaes Pinheiro**

Language and Literature undergraduate student at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Scientific Initiation Fellow (PIBIC/CNPq) in Linguistics, linked to the Program of Studies on Language Use (Programa de Estudos sobre o Uso da Língua – PEUL), under the guidance of Prof. Vera Lucia Paredes Silva. E-mail: andreifcpinheiro@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** Linguistic literature has long established that all languages vary, because their usages orient to and is oriented by different social-political factors. In this sense, the purpose of this essay is to discuss how important it is to admit language variation, inside and outside the scope of one language only, though commenting primarily on Brazilian Portuguese. Then, this essay raises awareness to how language and culture are intrinsically connected, since the ways we perceive ourselves and the world are linked to both language and culture. Finally, the role of English as a *lingua franca* in promoting cultural contact is briefly demonstrated, considering its centrality in a globally connected world.

**Keywords:** Language variation. Language and culture. *Lingua franca*.

**Resumo:** A literatura linguística estabeleceu, já há bastante tempo, que todas as línguas variam, pois seus usos orientam e são orientados por diferentes fatores sócio-políticos. Nesse sentido, o propósito deste ensaio é discutir a importância de que se reconheça a variação linguística, dentro e fora do escopo de uma só língua, ainda que comente, sobretudo, sobre o português brasileiro. Então, esse ensaio busca reforçar uma conscientização de que língua e cultura são intrinsecamente ligadas, visto que as formas pelas quais percebemos a nós mesmos e ao mundo se associam tanto à língua quanto à cultura. Por fim, discute brevemente de que maneira o inglês como língua franca colabora para que se promova contato cultural, considerando a sua centralidade em um mundo globalmente conectado.

**Palavras-chave:** Variação linguística. Língua e cultura. Língua franca.

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### *Introduction*

When we think of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are likely to think of a globally connected world. We owe this, quite broadly, to technology, and particularly to the web; otherwise communication between people from different places would probably still take days – or weeks, or months, or longer – to occur. However, if people from different places, speakers of different mother tongues, can communicate with one another and share their cultural beliefs and practices, we have language to thank; not to any and all languages, because, respecting our learning limitations, one language is necessary to bring people together. Hence, we owe this to English, which seems to be a

*lingua franca* (i.e., a language which speakers of different languages use to talk to one another) rather than the language of specific countries, as the United States, England, or Australia. In fact, as Celce-Murcia (2014) claims, when a non-native speaker of English speaks English to someone else, it is highly possible that this speaker's interlocutor is another non-native speaker of English.

However, considering that our current, globalized moment in History allows, *a priori*, this communicative and cultural expansion, our general posture towards language seems to lead us in a different direction. Why is this so, and what do I, as a Language and Literature college student in Brazil, mean by it?

What I and others – such as Roeper (2007) and Bagno (2008) – believe is that people are still not ready to fully embrace language variation, since we continuously judge people in terms of *how* they speak, rather than *about what* they speak. Therefore, we fail in actually expanding our communicative and cultural horizons: if we are not ready to accept that people *do* speak differently, in and out of their mother tongue's sphere, we cannot fully engage in cultural and – why not? – human exchange with others; we cannot truly embrace different languages, nor different cultures, nor different realities, for all of these are deeply connected. Thus, we limit ourselves, for we limit the ways through which we perceive and understand others.

Therefore, in this essay, I will firstly discuss the importance of recognizing language variation, inside and outside the scope of *one* language. This discussion will be carried out by taking Portuguese as example. Then, I will call attention to how language and culture are intrinsically connected, for both shape and are shaped by how we perceive and talk about the world and ourselves. Finally, understanding what it may take for us to recognize and respect people's different realities, I aim at demonstrating the role of English as a *lingua franca* in promoting cultural contact.

### *Accepting language variation*

How could I, a native speaker of Brazilian Portuguese, begin this discussion if not by bringing Portuguese and my country into it? There is a curious belief among Brazilians: apparently we do not speak “real Portuguese” – even though it is our mother tongue – in contrast to the people born in Portugal, who would master this language perfectly. Most commonly, this is supported by the belief that in Portugal people speak Portuguese better because they have “invented” the language, whereas Brazilians defile it. In several ways, however, this claim is hardly true.

Portugal, indeed, brought the core of the Portuguese language to Brazil, back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the land was ruled by several Indian tribes, the ‘original Brazilians’, as we could perhaps call them. The process of teaching Portuguese to the natives was neither simple nor harmless; it was part of submitting the natives, once free, to the position of people subservient to Portugal. Therefore, based on Sartre's (1968) discussion on colonization in general, by subjugating the natives, their culture – including their languages – was also drawn to a minor position. And I say *languages*, in the plural, because the tribes did not share only one language, which remains true for the tribes that still exist in Brazil. Nonetheless, it does not mean that the natives'

languages did not impact Portuguese; they did, as also did the African languages that were brought to Brazil through slavery.

Actually, since Brazil has not received conquerors only from Portugal, but from other countries as well, such as Spain, France and Holland, their languages, along with the natives' and the Africans', also influenced Portuguese, the colony's official language through the colonizers' perspective. Therefore, there is enough basis for us to establish that Portuguese, as spoken in Brazil – especially by those who were born in Brazil after the colonizers' arrival –, could not be the same Portuguese spoken in Europe. After all, European Portuguese did not have the aforementioned influences. Curiously enough, though, European Portuguese was also not homogeneous, because, as Teyssier (2014) demonstrates, the history of this variety of Portuguese, whose origin comes from Latin, includes contacts with other languages, such as Germanic languages and Arabic. In fact, Latin itself was not homogeneous, and, as it spread through different locations (getting in contact with different cultures), it generated other romances, including French and Italian.

Everything discussed so far was intended to establish that languages, in general, cannot be homogeneous, due to several reasons; and, though I have focused on some historical and geographical reasons, we could dive deeper.

If, as already mentioned, Latin was heterogeneous due to the geographic extension it got spread through, why would this not also be true, for instance, for Brazilian Portuguese, given Brazil's large territory?

Empirically, we know it is true; we know that people from the Southeast region in Brazil speak differently than those from the Northeast, who speak differently than those from the Midwest. We also know that people from different social classes master distinctly different varieties of their mother tongue, which connects to distinct levels of education. We know this, indeed, but, as we can depict through Bagno's (2008) thoughts, we are more concerned with establishing a standard variety of Brazilian Portuguese, than with recognizing the beauty there is in our linguistic differences.

For instance, in 2014, a Linguistic Atlas of Brazilian Portuguese (CARDOSO *et al.*, 2014) was published, covering differences in our lexicon, phonology and morphosyntax. But most people – especially those unrelated to the Linguistic Academy – tend not to know about it, either because they do not care, or because the information is not available to them.

Camara Jr. (1970) claims that language is a result of culture, a means through which culture operates, and, simultaneously, a condition for it to endure. Moreover, Hinkel (2014) says that culture, when related to language, is connected to our sociocultural behaviors, to how we compose the rhetorical structure of our texts, to how we transmit and obtain knowledge, among other aspects. Therefore, by criticizing people based on which linguistic variety they use, we harm communication and fail to recognize both our culture and history in their entire diversity.

### *Improving global participation*

How then does this connect to improving – or failing at doing so more appropriately – our multilingual competence, or our participation in a global scale?

If we understand multilingualism as the use of two or more languages in order to communicate with others, especially with others from different locations, we ought to recognize its central role in global communication and understanding. As already mentioned, English, as Celce-Murcia (2014) argues, has had an important role in fostering intercultural communication. However, how have we perceived the different varieties of English – or ‘World Englishes’, as Celce-Murcia (*ibid.*) refers to them – spoken across the globe? Once again, I depart from my reality in Brazil.

The Linguistic Academy has basically established that there is no proper nor monolithic English, but, rather, different varieties of English – which vary from place to place, from people to people. This is true for every language, as I demonstrated above when discussing language variation within Portuguese. When it comes to English, however, there is a significant distinction. As Celce-Murcia (*ibid.*) shows, only 380 million people speak English as a native language, in contrast to about 1,500 million people who speak English as their second or foreign language, in somewhat traditional terms. Therefore, according to these numbers, only 21% of all English speakers are native users of this language.

This could lead one into arguing that English is not of these 21% to control; instead, it seems that English – if it does belong to somebody – is more connected to the other 79% of its speakers. Evidently, these 79% do not speak the *same* English the other 21% do; in fact, there are already several varieties of English within these 21%. Hence, the term ‘World *Englishes*’.

Focusing once again on the context I write from, Brazilians in general do not see it this way. In fact, as linguistic prejudice is not exclusive to Brazil, I believe that other cultures tend to take a similar stance to the one in my country. Sadly enough, it makes sense; if we do not understand that our own language is heterogeneous, it is hard to accept that English also is, especially if we have still not dissociated English from being ‘the language of some of the world’s biggest potencies’. If we keep looking for ‘good’ varieties of English, we are going to worry only about the form, rather than about the construction of meaning. Hence, we fail at improving our cultural and global knowledge when speaking to others whose realities are different from ours – ‘simply’ because we are more concerned about *how* they speak.

Several researchers have already approximated language to culture and our representations of the world. Moita-Lopes (2006) and Eckert & Mc-Connell-Ginet (2003), for instance, have demonstrated how we construct our identities, our *selves* through language; and, since our identities rely deeply on our cultural backgrounds, these researchers sustain that language and culture are related.

Moreover, we could take back on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (cf. BIDERMAN, 1998), according to which we talk about the world based on how our language allows us to, given its lexicon and grammar. Therefore, when we talk about reality, we do not do this objectively, but rather through our – and our language’s – perspective. Last year, this hypothesis got closer to us through the Oscar-nominated *Arrival* (LEVINE *at al.*, 2016), whose core discussion revolves around how language helps shape our reality, to the extent that it may determine how we understand time. All of this connects language and culture.

The point to which I want to get is the following: nowadays, due to technology, we *can* share our realities with people from different countries (hence from different cultural backgrounds), and we usually do that with the help of English. However, if we do not truly accept that people are, almost inevitably, going to use different varieties of English – because they come from different realities –, we are not going to grasp all the knowledge our interlocutors can offer us.

### *Final thoughts*

English – or, perhaps more appropriately – ‘Englishes’ are today the most practical means through which we can learn more about people from different locations. This is true because English, in all its different varieties, is almost everywhere: it is in the most famous movies, in the most famous songs, in the background of several important books, in academic research, and in advertisements. If we acknowledge these ‘Englishes’, we can improve ourselves, expand our horizons, and understand other people’s different perspectives, avoiding what Adichie (2009) calls ‘the danger of a single story’, thus not telling stories only through the dominant perspective.

Yet, it seems that, for us to achieve such an understanding of ‘World Englishes’, we *must* be aware that the language(s) we have been speaking since birth – as Portuguese here in Brazil – *do* vary, and there is nothing wrong with it. Language variation is not a hypothesis, but a fact, empirically proved by all research in Variationist Sociolinguistics developed so far.

We have the means to improve our global citizenship and our perceptions of the world and of ourselves. We may start doing it by expanding our linguistic horizons.

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