



Unveiling the formation of Brazilian Portuguese: Yeda Pessoa de Castro's ethnolinguistic view

Descortinando a formação do português brasileiro: a visão etnolinguística de Yeda Pessoa de Castro

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Languages are not neutral or unchanging; on the contrary, the constant interaction between speakers and the language code provides alterations in all levels of a given language, as a direct reflection of social, historical and cultural demands from several ethnic groups which participate in that process. Based on this idea, we consider the situation in which a high number of individuals, something between 3 and 5 million, with their peoples' own distinct languages and worldviews, have forcibly landed on Brazil, a place in the other side of the ocean, with no basic conditions to have their humanity granted. What would be the results of an invariably multilingual context, which has contemplated not only the speak of millions of Black African enslaved people, but also of Native populations and Portuguese settlers? Which sociolinguistic events and aspects of an interethnic interaction have culminated in what we call Brazilian Portuguese (BP) nowadays? These and other questions drive the book *Camões com dendê: o português do Brasil e os falares afro-brasileiros*, by the

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ethnolinguist Yeda Pessoa de Castro and published in 2022 by Topbooks.

Yeda Pessoa de Castro, according to the data in her work, is a PhD in African Languages by National University of Zaire, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She is a scholar internationally known for her work on linguistic and cultural relations between Africa and Brazil, as well as a pioneer in field research on African languages in Brazil. Furthermore, she is a member of the Bahia Academy of Letters and author of two more books: *Falares africanos na Bahia: um vocabulário afro-brasileiro* (2001) and *A Língua mina-jeje no Brasil: um falar africano em Ouro Preto do séc. XVIII* (2002). For at least forty years, her work, between papers, books and conferences, has been revolutionizing studies of sociohistorical formation of BP, since it bases the perspective that such a high number of African languages in direct contact with 16th century Portuguese have contributed, in a decisive way, to the development of linguistic characteristics specific to the Brazilian variant of Portuguese, which go far beyond a group of lexical loans.

With this purpose, this work, made for a target audience composed by graduation students and academic researchers, has the goal of “[...] putting under analysis the most relevant sociohistorical and ethnolinguistic aspects of the interference made by these *africanias* in Brazilian Portuguese’s formation and development” (Castro, 2022, p. 11, highlight by the author, own translation). Regarding this work’s division, *Camões com Dendê: o português do Brasil e os falares afro-brasileiros* is divided in three parts. The first one encompasses the introductory sections *Aos leitores* (For readers), *Prefácio* (Freitas, 2022) (Preface) and *Apresentação* (Queiroz, 2022) (Presentation), which speak of fundamental concepts for comprehension of further chapters, such as *africanias*, *africanidades* and *aportes*, as well as brief considerations on other theories which have analyzed BP. The second part refers to the seven main chapters: I. *As línguas faladas na África* (Languages spoken in Africa); II. *Línguas e povos africanos no Brasil* (African languages and peoples in Brazil); III. *Falares afro-brasileiros nos tempos coloniais* (Afro-Brazilian speak in colonial times); IV. *Categoria*

dos aportes (Contribution categories); V. *Língua e religiosidade, binômio de resistência* (Language and religion, resistance binomial); VI. *Dos precursores aos contemporâneos* (From predecessors to contemporaries); and VII. *Português do Brasil: ancianidade com africania* (Brazilian Portuguese: ancestry with *africania*). The third part is *Vocabulário afro-brasileiro* (Afro-Brazilian vocabulary).

In the **first chapter**, titled *As línguas faladas na África* (Languages spoken in Africa), Castro starts her explanation by describing Africa as a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual continent. The author subverts the myth of the African continent as inferior or less complex, by presenting information on its size, climates, landscapes, housing, ethnicities and languages. Right after, she discusses the history of Africa's formation, its native populations before Portuguese invasions and their technological innovations, such as the Bantus' ironworking techniques. The emphasis on African development and its ethnic groups throughout history is an extremely important initiative for studies on observing, understanding and analyzing this region's characteristics, since it builds this continent's image besides its peoples' slavery, observing what existed way before all destruction and silencing created by colonialism.

In the aftermath, it feeds into pertinent discussion about research on the Bantu ethnolinguistic group, which encompasses about 500 typologically similar languages. This group's uniformity has gotten the attention of researchers, since "for a long time, it has been considered as an autonomous family, with no relation to other groups, despite the fact that they have shown strong resemblance to Western African languages" (Castro, 2022, p. 38, own translation). This concern, according to Castro (2022), was the spark that made Greenberg undertake continuous effort for 15 years to propose, in 1955, a consistent classification for the over two thousand African languages, in which Bantu and Western Sudanese languages are grouped in a single linguistic family, the Niger-Congo. Three other great classes are postulated as well: the Nilo-Saharan, Afro-Asian and Khoisan families. Finally, it presents the stalemate

experienced by Europe-colonized countries in managing a multilingualism which overpasses borders, as well as the need for investing in appreciation and preservation policies for this plurality of regional languages, whose importance is overlooked while favoring Western languages under the guise of a false “neutrality”.

Regarding the **second chapter**, named *Línguas e povos africanos no Brasil* (African languages and peoples in Brazil), Castro goes back to the social and historical aspects of Black African nations plagued by the Atlantic slave trade. Two macro-regions stand out: Bantu Africa and East-Western Africa. Thus, this chapter has topics dedicated to enlighten brief information on nations involved in the Atlantic slave trade and linguistic characteristics shared with the Portuguese language. By deeply exploring the subject of Bantu languages, it explains they share intersection points because of coming from the same mother language, the Proto-Bantu, spoken circa four thousand years ago. Among these languages, the most relevant ones in colonial Brazil were Kikongo, Kimbundu and Umbundu, whose class system composed by paired prefixes might be one of its main common characteristics and the one which has pushed the most change in flexion and agreement in BP. Other verified linguistic characteristics noted by the author in BP's current variant are the falling of semi-nasals /nd/ and /mb/ with prevalence of homorganic consonants /n/ and /m/, the personal pronouns in a proclitic position, and double negatives. Afterwards, the author draws a general context of Bantu peoples in Brazil, in bullet points that contemplate historical information on the ancient kingdoms of Angola, Kongo, Matamba, Loango and Benguela, on its customs and worldview.

About Western Africa, the author highlights these are typologically distinct languages, in contrast with the Bantu family, and that its main languages in Brazil were Ewe-fon or Gbe and Yoruba. In the case of Ewe-fon, she says its speakers were brought in the mid 17th century under the guise of meeting mining demands, which was rising as an economically profitable exploitation in Brazil. Among its most relevant linguistic characteristics, we can name its encompassing of consonantal and

digraph clusters, disposing of unanalyzable lexical words, elaborating of appositional compounds and lack of gender distinction for nouns — differently from other Western African languages presented here. In the case of kingdoms that had most of its population abducted, we have Dahomey, currently Benin, and Hogbonu. Finally, in regard to Yoruba, some of its linguistic characteristics are monosyllabic radicals and syllabic structures consonant + vowel, direct and indirect hyphenated objects placed after the verb, verbal inflection composed only through personal pronouns, and more. Its most relevant nations, named in the book, were the Oyo Empire and the Kingdom of Ketu.

In the **third chapter**, *Falares afro-brasileiros nos tempos coloniais* (Afro-Brazilian speak in colonial times), Castro approaches the rising of dialects that made an interethnic contact possible in different moments and contexts from Brazilian history. In this case, the author does not employ the word “dialect” in its derogatory sense, referring to lower prestige speak, but as its own language which coexists with other current languages. Among the main dialects spoken in Brazilian territory, the ethnolinguist cites (i) the slaves’ quarters’ dialect (from the 16th century to the 19th century), (ii) the rural dialect (from the 16th century to the 19th century), (iii) the mines’ dialect (18th century) and (iv) urban dialects (19th century).

In the subchapter on the slaves’ quarters’ speak, it’s made clear how the enslaved people’s need for communication has favored the selection of *lingua francas* with criteria that ranged from the language with the highest number of speakers to the one that held the most social prestige between the enslaved, which points to the Bantu-based languages, since these populations were the ones that were trafficked the most in the first years of slavery. In the rural dialects’ subchapter, the author approaches the issue of Ladino and Creole enslaved people, pointing to them as the main agents in Portuguese modifications, given their bilingualism, which has given Portuguese characteristics to their African languages and African characteristics to Portuguese until nowadays. She also argues how the Bantu domain has directly influenced the

slaves' quarters' dialect and how most Afro-Brazilian contributions are further away in time, probably having been instituted in BP in that same period.

The change in Brazil's economic axis towards the states of Minas Gerais, Goiás e Mato Grosso, through mining, and towards southern Bahia, through tobacco commerce, are touched upon by Castro in the bullet point *Dialeto das Minas* (Mines' Dialect). This is because that change brought upon a high in the slave trade in Mina Coast. The author states that the presence of so many Black Africans from the same ethnic background, who spoke similar languages, favored the appearance of a vehicular language based on Ewe-fon or Gbe in the pidginization phase, registered by Antônio da Costa Peixoto (1731) in *Obra nova da língua geral de Mina* (New work of the Mina general language), one of the most important documents from colonial times, written in order to make easier the understanding of slave-owners on these peoples' language, for preventing uprisings.

Concluding this chapter, when explaining the urban dialects, the author speaks on how the mines' decline, the rise of coffee cultivation in the South and the colony main city's transfer to Rio de Janeiro have influenced in the multitude of urban speak. She then goes on about how the Portuguese court coming to Brazil in 1808 and their attempts to "expand culture" through educational institutions and cultural centers have influenced the urban residents' perception of language. Then, she ends the chapter observing that the Black African's presence made itself felt in all the country's regions.

In this sense, it's important to emphasize the author's pertinent choice to draw a timeline that contemplates not only the main moments in a colonial Brazilian history's main moments, but also the registers of the main linguistic aspects in the cited dialects, its dissemination agents and the modifications put forth by each context. There is, still, an special focus on registering the ethnic origin of Black Africans involved in this process and what are the most relevant African languages in each time period, which establishes a direct dialogue with the information presented in the

former chapters, where the reader is introduced to these peoples' social, historical, cultural and linguistic particularities. On recognizing these Black African populations, there is a dismemberment of these individuals' epistemic project, since those who used to be an homogeneous and indistinct mass related only to suffering and slavery started to be identified as fully human subjects.

The **fourth chapter**, *Categoria dos aportes* (Contribution categories), is reserved for presenting the verified *africanias* ("Africanities") in Portuguese. The author questions the word "loan" referring to the African linguistic knowledge instituted in the Portuguese language, since she considers that expression as limiting and euphemistic, since the *africanias* observed in BP do not regard the appropriation of an African-based vocabulary, but the changes observed in language and society's deepest layers. The author's position goes against the still very widespread in academia and basic education idea that the Black African population could not alter significantly an Indo-European language, thus "immaculate". Attributing to lexical items most *africanias* seen on BP thus becomes a way to erase and discredit these subjects' participation, since the open and renewable lexical system would then be the only one able to encompass this set of superficial interferences, a conception contested by the author. Through this reflection, she proposes using the term "contribution", considering it of a wider range than the former one. Afterwards, Castro (2022) introduces us to three vocabulary contribution categories: (I) lexical; (II) semantic and decal; and (III) hybrid.

Lexical contributions are defined by the author as the process through which a given language uses frequently and ends up appropriating another language's lexical unit, with the goal of designating a new horizon of formerly unknown tangible objects and cultural notions. This contribution category can be classified according to its constitution (simple and composed), occurrence (ancient and contemporary), and formation (convergent and divergent); these designations are interchangeable, since they denote distinct properties of a same word.

Regarding *semantic contributions and decalcs*, the author explains they occur when the receiving language translates the original term when appropriating a new notion or object, through morpheme substitutions. Other decal possibilities stated by the author are the *sound symbolism approximation*, the *signifier reduplication*, and the *morphosyntactic approximation*. In turn, the *hybrid contributions* are those which encompass all kinds of derivations that occur on African lexical items, that is, “nominal, adjectival, verbal or adverbial, simple or composite” (Castro, 2022, p. 168, own translation). In this topic are presented several examples for each category, with the help of demonstrative tables. Such is the case of (I) *simple* hybrid contributions, which encompass (a) *nominal derivations* (African constitutive + Portuguese suffix, such as *dendezeiro*) and (b) *verbal derivations* (Portuguese prefix + African constitutive, such as *aquilombar*); and (II) *composite* hybrid contributions, which branch out in (a) African constitutive + Portuguese constitutive, such as *samba de roda*, and (b) Portuguese constitutive + African constitutive, such as *azeite de dendê*.

The **fifth chapter**, *Língua e religiosidade, binômio de resistência* (Language and religion, resistance binomial), starts by proposing a debate on how African diáspora religions developed on Brazilian territory had the role of a sign of Black Africans’ resistance and cultural defense. The author explains this is because religion, as a central element of African populations and their cultures’ worldview, is less susceptible to change. Thus, Afro-Brazilian religions’ linguistic repertory maintains African-based lexical items which remain mostly unchanged, since their use has been crystallized and restricted to a very specific domain of insiders. Facing this perspective, the ethnolinguist mentions the African religious manifestations known as *Candomblé*, in Bahia, *Tambor*, in Maranhão, and *Xangô*, in Pernambuco, as Black African cultural heritage exponents. The beliefs, adoration forms and languages in these social and religious organizations are related in a way that they are distinguished mainly by their linguistic repertory’s origin, which can be Bantu or Congo-Angola, Ewe-fon or Mina-Jeje, Yoruba or Nago-Ketu-Ijesha, according to the author.

In the same chapter, the author develops a continuous approach for most African diaspora religions, either practiced in Brazil or rooted in Africa. In face of that, Castro proposes a reading which balanced culture and language aspects which integrate these religious manifestations' universe, directing her analytic look for contexts marginalized by academia, which still have much to offer regarding not only an understanding of Brazilian linguistic formation, but also of our constitution as individuals.

Regarding the **sixth chapter**, *Dos precursores aos contemporâneos* (From predecessors to contemporaries), Castro carries an extensive survey on research related to Black African presence in Brazilian society and its contributions to BP in different periods. The first analyzed studies are those by Sílvio Romero e João Ribeiro. Regarding Ribeiro's grammar dictionary, the author highlights its importance for launching a new chapter in the Portuguese language, since, when introducing the "Black element", it proposes a definition aimed at changes inlaid in Portuguese, which came from African languages. Thus, we can observe the author's dedication to researching studies on *africanias*, given that this rescuing movement sheds light on other definitions and ways to regard African linguistic knowledge, opening space for ascertainment of entries, brief mentions and citations on documents not aimed towards analyzing this subject, but that reveal much on social and linguistic value attributed to the Black element in a given time period. In this case, we verify an inflection point regarding to that period's mainstream studies.

Next, the author writes on Brazilian doctor Nina Rodrigues' participation and influence on what she calls "*yorubacentrismo*" ("*yorubacentrism*"), under a critical perspective. In other words, she attributes to Rodrigues the exaltation of Yoruba peoples in detriment of Bantu nations, whose antiquity and size were much more expressive. This happens because the doctor, by the viewpoint of obsolete racial and biological theories, was interested in collecting data on West African peoples in the city of Salvador. Castro notes, still, the presence of a so-called "Nago" speak in

Salvador, used in Black and mixed peoples' communication, which, contrary to disseminated beliefs, was not an African language, but a *lingua franca* with a Yoruba lexicon; in addition, there is also the Western-centric prestige given to Yoruba for using written code, while most African languages disposed only of orality for cultural manifestations.

After pointing out the misconceptions from scholars that adhered to this theory, the book mentions other researches conducted on all language subsystems, from lexical to grammatical, among which are the books *O elemento afro-negro na língua portuguesa*, by Jacques Raimundo, and *A influência africana no português do Brasil*, by Renato Mendonça. The overview of works made by Castro is very diverse, making itself essential for understanding African Linguistics' development and expansion in Brazil, since the author does not limit herself to referencing scholars from her same theoretical framework, but also seeks to mention the ones she disagrees with, since all of them have contributed, in one way or another, for this area's advances. Mentions to Nina Rodrigues' case, for example, are made with caveat, not endorsing his conduct, but evidencing points which can help understand the situation of African populations in Bahia after the slavery prohibition. It is by no mere chance that the author seeks reference from studies in all language levels which have focused on other Black African nations besides the Bantu ethnolinguistic group.

Towards the book's ending, Professor Yeda goes over the theories of Portuguese language's *crioulização* and *deriva* – currently two of the theoretical frameworks that lead explanations for BP formation – and explains some of her own research path on *africanias* and social and ethnical linguistic relations between Africa and Brazil.

In the **seventh and last chapter**, *Português do Brasil: ancianidade com africania* (Brazilian Portuguese: ancestry with *africania*), Castro goes back to the main subjects discussed along the book, among which the predominance of Bantu peoples in Portuguese language's diffusion and modification. The author also reserves part of this chapter to comment on the kind of trafficking carried on by the Portuguese, whose

strategy was guided by importing and organizing African peoples from distinct ethnicities, attempting to make communication more difficult, which ended up favoring their interference in the Portuguese language and, possibly, prevented the emergence of a Creole language. Defending this viewpoint, Castro argues that the inhibition of a Creole speak in Brazil happened mostly because 16th century Portuguese language and Bantu languages, both in their archaic phase, showed syntactic, morphological and phonological similarities which, with prolonged contact, put forth the conservation of traces already verified in Portuguese or foreseen by linguistic derivation, such as vocalism.

This observation is not made by chance, but is discussed thoroughly along the entire work, where the author collects data and information that prove her thesis. We consider the work carried on by Castro is detailed and consistent, since it scrutinizes African languages' and 16th century Portuguese's structure, presenting their resemblances and differences, and soon after exposing the main propositions on this subject. Thus, the author unites two great theoretical frameworks, often read as dichotomous, but which are, on the contrary, complimentary: the hypotheses of derivation and linguistic contact. This union puts forth theoretical subsides for analysis and research on phenomena seen in other Indo-European languages, without forgetting the social and linguistic impacts from interethnic coexistence.

From this conception, Castro exposes a set of morphosyntactic and phonological tendencies verified on BP and on African variants of Portuguese. Phonologically, we can highlight vocalism, ideophones¹ and nasal consonants; morphosyntactically, we see the remodel of verbal, nominal and pronominal

¹ Castro (2022, p. 253) defines ideophones as "sensorial sounds that carry sense" and exemplifies them with a verse of Haroldo Lobo's Carnival song, "*Allah-lá ô,ôôô/Mas que calor, ôôô*", in which the "oh" sound reduplication is used as a way to positively intensify the heat feeling in the desert.

syntagms, double negatives, a focus subject² and the absence of concordance in gendered inflections, which happens often in possessives in the rural variant. Finally, the author again emphasizes the need for rewriting our history, now looking at Black Africans as agents and not passive. Thus, she highlights that the book seeks to deepen debates on which she has been conducting field research for over forty years, on both sides of the Atlantic. This research, reunited and published in a single work, play the role of a water divider in our country's current educational context, which, even twenty years after Law 10.639/03 being passed, advances slowly to keep up with the debate in a society constantly (re)discovering itself. To know and mostly to formulate possible approaches for these contents in the classroom are fundamental tasks for Portuguese language professionals.

After the chapters, there is the *Vocabulário Afro-brasileiro* (Afro-Brazilian Vocabulary), composed of 3.517 lexical items and distributed along over two hundred pages. From its introductory notes, it is important to mention the fact that the entries' meaning can either be found in dictionaries or come from the author's informants – generally consulted on lexical items that come from African religious contexts. Thus, we highlight the emphasis given to ancestral knowledge developed on academia's margins, which is very positive, since for many centuries the teachings, customs and traditions from Africa were targets for epistemicide and discrediting, for not conforming to the Western-centric knowledge model (Sousa Santos, 2019). Besides, this procedure marks the ethnographic characteristic present in the author's studies, revealing a true regard to language through the social relationships developed from it.

Not by chance, the author also cites the presence of words and expressions not

² Focus, according to Castilho (2019, p. 675), is a “grammatical or prosodic resource for signaling focus”, which can occur through the emphatic pronunciation of what is intended to be highlighted or the use of operators. In this sense, Castro (2022) points out the occurrence of a locution observed in Bahia's linguistic variant, the “lá ele/lá eles” or “lá ela/lá elas”, generally used for highlighting the subject in a phrase (Castro, 2022, p. 267).

necessarily of African origin, but recurrently perceived in Afro-Brazilian speak, especially in religious context. Furthermore, on these terms' origins, Castro cites that, out of the 3.517 entries, "1.322 are Bantu-based (B), 1.299 are Western African, Yoruba and Ewe-fon (O), 34 have an imprecise (B) and/or (O) origin, 853 are Brazilian formed, among which decals, hybrids e regionalisms originated from non-African languages" (Castro, 2022, p. 279, own translation). These words are crucial to the author's methodology not only for their meaning, but also because they point to African languages and peoples' origins in Brazil. These are fundamental data in helping rebuild a history written by Africans and deliberately silenced by their tormentors, becoming key in our social, historical and cultural identity that not even colonialism was capable of erasing.

As this work's main positive point, we highlight the long and detailed description of African languages spoken in Colonial Brazil – either through observation and analysis of Proto-Bantu's reconstructed archaic tendencies or from comparing proposals with these languages' current varieties. Thus, way before being presented to this contact's results, we are guided to recognizing characteristics embedded in BP in such a way that they go unnoticed on their origin. From that, reuniting such an extensive repertory of African linguistic contributions is also a topic worth mentioning, since most studies end up focusing on only one or other linguistic aspect, because of the need for a deeper understanding, while Yeda Pessoa de Castro's work encompasses a great part of Portuguese language's subsystems.

In contrast, we believe that, even by transcribing proverbs and songs that maintain occurrences of these African linguistic manifestations, especially regarding lexicon and morphosyntax, it would be interesting to add registers of current linguistic usages in real interaction contexts to the examples, as a way to attest these properties' current usage in multiple Portuguese language variants, and, at the same time, coming closer to the reader's daily life.

Thus, we recommend *Camões com Dendê: o português do Brasil e os falares afro-*

brasileiros as an essential read not only for scholars on the *africanias* field – as a way to enter this field or even to update on recent findings –, but also to be adopted as base material in Letters courses' curricula in Brazil, since it approaches BP's social and historic formation by another perspective, bringing to light Black African peoples' contributions to our national, individual and linguistic identity. Thus, this is a work that makes possible for Portuguese language teachers to build an anti-racist, Afro-centered and conscious education, while drawing a historical context which starts with Africa before invasions and ends with the current period, always making clear African languages' characteristics verified on BP in all its variants, from those with lesser prestige, such as those from isolated rural communities, to Brazilian hegemonic language. It is a work that subverts the traditional narrative that Black enslaved people were only passive individuals waiting for a savior, unable to interfere significantly in an instance as consolidated as language. Thus, it puts these people in their rightful place: their preeminence in Brazil's population process, in the Portuguese language's dissemination and in building such a culturally rich society as ours.

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