

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE CONCEPTS OF LANGUAGE AND DIALECT: A LOOK ON THE CASE OF ASURINÍ OF TOCANTINS AND PARAKANÃ

Aryon Dall’Igna Rodrigues¹

Ana Suelly Arruda Câmara Cabral²

aryon.rodrigues@pq.cnpq.br

ana.cabral@pq.cnpq.br

ABSTRACT: After a brief historical survey of the development of Brazilian research on the indigenous languages, this paper focuses on the concept of dialect as applicable to Amerindian languages and the problems that may arise both for the research work and, worse, for each community as a consequence of a premature decision on language identity. The case of two mutually intelligible Tupí-Guaranian languages, Parakanã and Asurini of Tocantins is presented and discussed.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic research and documentation; Brazilian Indian languages; Languages and dialects.

1. INTRODUCTION

For more than forty years the need for research and documentation of Brazilian Indian languages has been stressed. Câmara Jr. (1965) in his conferences to the anthropologists of the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro and Rodrigues (1966) in his paper on the tasks of linguistics in Brazil have both strongly stressed this need. In another paper published in 1985, Rodrigues presented an evaluation of the scientific knowledge on the native languages already developed by that time and, in 1986, published a book divulging such a knowledge. By the same time, the first steps were given for a governmental police of support to the scientific research on the indigenous languages, with the launching by the National Research Council (CNPq), as a special project, of the *Programa de Pesquisa Científica das Línguas Indígenas*

¹ Laboratório de Línguas Indígenas, Instituto de Letras – Universidade de Brasília.

² Laboratório de Línguas Indígenas, Instituto de Letras – Universidade de Brasília / CNPq.

Brasileiras (PPCLIB), under the coordination of Rodrigues (by that time professor at the State University of Campinas, UNICAMP).

The implementation of this project was strongly helped by Marisa Cassim, then technical advisor to CNPq, and was helped also by Ruth M. F. Monserrat, professor of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, then cooperating with the Fundação Nacional Pró-Memória. In the implementation of this project four kinds of action were stimulated: (1) short duration courses intended to prepare linguistic students for the documentation of indigenous languages, (2) grants for doctoral study abroad, (3) grants for master's study on indigenous languages in Brazilian universities, and (4) support for field work on indigenous languages. The project took into consideration the inventory of languages by Rodrigues (1985, 1986).

A few years later, under the federal government of President Fernando Collor, the administration of CNPq was changed and all special projects were suppressed. However for some years the priority for research and study on indigenous languages was observed. Among others, the following linguists have been benefited by the project coordinated by Rodrigues: Dennis A. Moore, Ana Suelly A. C. Cabral, Filomena Sandalo, Alzerinda Braga, Nilson Gabas Jr., Ana Vilaci Galúcio, Sidney Facundes, Raquel Guirardello, Antônio Augusto S. Mello, Cristiane de Oliveira, Sílvia L. B. Braggio.

From 1 to 5 September 2001, there happened at the Federal University of Belém a big international conference “Línguas Indígenas Brasileiras: Fonologia, Gramática e História”, organized by Ana Suelly A. C. Cabral and Aryon D. Rodrigues (Cabral e Rodrigues 2002). During this first big conference 70 papers were presented on different aspects of native Indian Languages of Brazil and neighboring areas, which were published in the two volumes of the meeting proceedings (Belém, Edufpa, 2002).

Short after this big conference, a series of meetings on the Macro-Jê languages and cultures was started at the State University of Londrina, Paraná, and in the following years continued at the State University of Campinas (São Paulo), the University of Brasília, the State University of São Paulo, the Federal University of Pernambuco, and the Federal University of Goiás; the next Macro-Jê meeting, the seventh one, will be again at the University of Brasília next year.

Another series of meetings, now on the Tupí languages and cultures, has been held at the University of Brasilia since 2004, when a first international meeting took place in October. The second of this series was in October 2007 and immediately following it we have had a first international meeting on endangered languages and language revitalization, whose

keynote speaker was Leanne Hinton. A third meeting on the Tupian languages and cultures and a second one on endangered languages and revitalization are planned for 2010.

On the academic scene something of importance for the next future is also happening: the education of indigenous linguists. Four years ago for the first time a Brazilian Indian got the master's degree in linguistics at the State University of Campinas, with the analysis of aspects of his own language, Xokleng, a member of the Kaingáng branch of the Jê linguistic family in the state of Santa Catarina, in southern Brazil. Three years ago a Pankararú lady, member of an indigenous people in the state of Pernambuco whose language is dead, earned the doctor degree in linguistics at the Federal University of Alagoas with a dissertation based on field work on Ofayé, a Macro-Jê language with a score of speakers in Mato Grosso do Sul.

Two years ago we succeeded in convincing the department of linguistics of the University of Brasília to admit members of indigenous communities who speak their own language in the graduate program without the proof of English language normally required from the other students, by arguing that Portuguese is their second language and English in their case would be a third one, to be acquired along the graduate studies. The first student admitted in this condition, a Baniwa Indian from the Upper Rio Negro in the state Amazonas, has just received the master's degree in linguistics with a thesis on the classificatory system of his language, which belongs to the Arawakan family. The final examination of his thesis was during the meeting of the Associação Brasileira de Linguística in the month of March and one member of the jury was the renowned south-americanist Willem Adelaar of Leiden University.

At the same meeting of the Brazilian Linguistic Society, another indigenous student admitted in 2007 to the same linguistic program of the University of Brasília presented a paper discussing the nature of a subclass of verbs in his language, Kamayurá, a Tupí-Guaranían one spoken in the Upper Xingu area in Mato Grosso. This Kamayurá student is working on the linguistic properties of oratory texts delivered by some of the elders of his community. The other student admitted in the Program is a Tikúna lady, who is beginning to observe the development of phonology in Tikúna children. This year another Indian student has been admitted in our master's program, a Kaxinawá teacher, who is confronting the big collection of texts gathered a century ago and published in 1914 by Capistrano de Abreu, many of them of mythical nature, with the corresponding versions known today in his community. While Tikúna is an isolated language, Kaxinawá is a member of the Páno family.

2. ON THE CONCEPTS OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

One of the most difficult tasks for the linguist has been to establish criteria for deciding whether two communities speak two varieties of one and the same language or two distinct languages. Hock (1988:380-381), for instance, defines the term “dialect” as applying to similar speech varieties, whose differences are *relatively small*; a “language” would be a set of dialects. And, according with Hock, varieties that show *greater* differences are different languages. Such definitions are clearly open to subjective interpretations and arbitrary applications. One of the most used criteria among linguists is the mutual intelligibility. Hock (1988:381) regrets that intelligibility tests not always give clear results and their application show that there is no clear line distinguishing different dialects from different languages. Linguistic similarities and differences are not a yes or no, but a more or less issue; they are gradual and not discrete. And what is more important, as Hock states, mutual intelligibility depends not only on linguistic factors, but also on sociolinguistic ones.

The definition of the status of two linguistic varieties as being dialects of one language only or of two languages presupposes a wide knowledge of the varieties submitted to the classification and also of the sociolinguistic situation of each of them. Therefore, if a diagnosis does not consider seriously such criteria, its results will have neither practical nor scientific validity. The results of such a diagnosis may be extremely harmful for the development of research that depends on financial support by other institutions. But they may be more prejudicial for the communities that speak such languages and that have them as one of their major cultural goods for the affirmation of their identity, which politically and culturally distinguishes them from other communities or peoples, with their own rights to particular benefits from the Brazilian state, such as land, health, and education.

A third important step is being given just now by the Brazilian Census agency, the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), which for the first time is introducing in the planning of the next decennial general census in 2010, at least for people declaring themselves as indigenous, some questions on the language spoken at home. This will be the first time that each indigenous language will be considered in an official statistics and acquire therefore a governmental reconnaissance. The census officials must work on the basis of a list of languages as complete as possible and not with one reduced by premature estimates of dialectal variation.

If, when asked by the census agents, members of two or more communities identify themselves as speaking the same language, this will be an important information acquired by the census, which must be taken into account by linguists and other people dealing with the interests of such communities. What is not acceptable is the reduction of the number of languages by some linguists who pretend to have better knowledge than their colleagues or, worse, that intend to preclude official support for projects of other linguists aiming at the study of varieties of the language they have previously worked with.

3. EXPLORING A CASE OF LINGUISTIC VARIETIES: PARAKANĀ AND TOCANTINS ASURINÍ

Parakanā and Tocantins Asuriní are close related members of branch IV of the Tupí-Guaraní linguistic family (Rodrigues 1985b). Both may be considered to be relatively well documented if the knowledge on them is compared with what we know on many other Brazilian indigenous languages with very few records. Parakanā has at least two known varieties: the Maroxewára and Apyteréwa variety and the Paranatinga variety. For the first variety we have available a paper on the segmental phonology (Silva 1995), two master's theses, one on grammatical issues (Silva 1999a) and another on lexical aspects (da Silva 2003), and a paper on negation (Silva 1999b). For the second variety there is a CD-Rom with a vocabulary of 2,000 words and texts with translations to Portuguese (Simões 2005).

The differences between these varieties of Parakanā are of phonological, lexical, and grammatical nature, such as the following:

- For the reconstructed phoneme **j* of Proto-Tupí-Guaraní the Paranatinga Parakanā has [j] at word-beginning and [j] ~ [ʒ] between vowels, but Maroxewára and Apyteréwa Parakanā has [tʃ] ~ [dʒ] in both environments: PTG **oje 'ʔeŋ*, Paranatinga Parakanā [oʃe'ʔeŋ ~ [oʒe'ʔeŋ] but Maroxewára and Apyteréwa Parakanā [otʃe'ʔeŋ] ~ [odʒe'ʔeŋ] 'he speaks'. The reflexes of the PTG sequence **ti* are [tʃi] in both varieties, so that in Maroxewára and Apyteréwa Parakanā there is an apparent merger with the reflexes of **j*, but with the difference that the reflexes of **ti* do not occur as [dʒi].
- [h] as a reflex of both PTG **c* and **tʃ* was retained in several words (in others it was lost) in both varieties, but in some words it was retained only in Maroxewára and

Apyteréwa Parakanã, as is the case of Maroxewára and Apyteréwa Parakanã [tʃa'hia] and Paranatinga [ʃa'ia] ‘moon’.

- In transitive constructions with 1st person agent and 2nd person plural patient, Maroxewára and Apyteréwa Parakanã has the pattern illustrated by *anopó awá pen ohí*, litt. ‘I hit persons from you’, whereas in Paranatinga Parakanã young people say *anopó pehé*, litt. ‘I hit you (plural)’.
- There are also lexical differences, such as Paranatinga *maʒeaiga*, Maroxewára and Apyteréwa *ahiwaʒe* ‘a sick one’; Paranatinga *akona*, Maroxewára and Apyteréwa *akonja* ‘penis’; Paranatinga *tamona*, Maroxewára and Apyteréwa *amojje* ‘grandfather’; Paranatinga *toripe*, Maroxewára and Apyteréwa *toriperon* ‘cockroach’; Paranatinga *igara*, Maroxewára and Apyteréwa *iʒara* ‘canoe’.

Even though Paranatinga as well as Maroxewára and Apyteréwa Parakanã may use different words for some concepts, this does not eliminate the possibility that each of these words belong to the vocabularies of both varieties, with their usage depending on different discursive contexts. Any language is deeply associated with the distinct aspects of the culture, so that the description of any of its varieties implies the observation and recording of the corresponding cultural knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Since linguistic diversity is always correlated with cultural diversity, the study of language varieties must take into account this correlation. Let’s take as examples the food taboos recorded for the two Parakanã groups.

In the following narration by Arakita Parakanã from the Paranatinga village, published by Simões (2005), there are general and particular food interdictions and, among the particular ones, those belonging to the period of abstinence after a childbirth, which are observed by both the woman and the man:

Maira, the creator hero, has lived for a long time among the Awaete. With him they have learned which wild animals they could eat without harming the people. Wyrapina, who always was next to Maira, asked every time he saw an animal:

- May we eat this?

- This you may, but that other you may not, Maira answered, and explained why. Nobody should eat anteaters and snakes, because the

*anteaters control the ants so that these do not become too many and destroy the forest, and the snakes are bad and venomous. The **canastra** armadillo may be eaten only by old people, because it makes them stronger, but if young persons eat it, they will soon become old. Nobody should eat the sloth in order not to become like it.*

*When a woman has a child, she and the father may not eat banana, fish, **jacu**, **inambu**, nor eggs for some time. If any of them eat such food short after the birth of their child, this will become sick and will possibly die. And the mother will become very weak.*

Until today the Parakanã observe Maira's teachings and eat only the animals he approved.

Silva (2003:116) states the following about the abstinence among the Apyterawa Parakanã:

*The Parakanã abstinence consists in the avoidance of some foods by the father after the birth of his child. This applies also to the hunting of some animals. If the father eats corn the child may become swollen. If the father eats deer the child will be trembling; if he eats **mutum**, the child will get a long nose. If the father kills a jaguar or a **paca**, the child will cry frequently. (Information given by Tewirera and Panama Parakanã, April 1998).*

As may be remarked, the information on the abstinence differs clearly as to the women: among the Apyteréwa it appears to be restricted to the men, but among the Maroxewára not only the men, but also the women must observe it. Since linguistic documentation must account for cultural diversity, if one language has variants or dialects the information on the cultural differences that characterize the speakers of the dialects should be taken into account. This is true not only for the lexical entries in the dictionary and in the collection of texts, but also for the cultural information contained in grammatical examples.

Let's proceed now to Tocantins Asuriní, also known as Trocará Asuriní. A superficial comparison of phonological, lexical, and grammatical elements of this language with the varieties of Parakanã might give the impression that Tocantins Asuriní is a further dialect of the same language. Asuriní, for instance, has the variants [tʃ] ~ [ʃ] ~ [ts] ~ [s] as reflexes of PTG *j (with [s] predominating among speakers under 30 years old). This is very near to both varieties of Parakanã, Paranatinga with [ʃ] ~ [ʒ] and Apyteréwa and Maraxoara with [tʃ] ~ [dʒ]. Asuriní has preserved more [h] reflexes of both PTG *ts and *tʃ than Parakanã, even though Apyteréwa has retained more reflexes of these PT sounds than Moroxewára, as seen by correspondences such as Asuriní [moháj], Apyteréwa has [moaŋ] 'medicine'.

Tocantins Asuriní has many phonological, morphological, and syntactic similarities with the two varieties of Parakanã and the phonemic writing of these languages makes them appear even more similar, but the differences among their respective phonetic segments together with differences in their stress rhythm and intonation of sentences differentiate clearly both languages for those who have a greater familiarity with them, such as their own speakers. As to the vocabulary, even though Asuriní shares many cognates with Parakanã, there are many different words for the same meaning and cases of different semantic interpretation of the same word form. Some examples may be taken from the basic vocabulary, such as ‘shoulder’, Asuriní *ati?íwa*, Paranatinga *xíwaipi*; ‘neck bone’, Asuriní *atowákínga*, Paranatinga *awaking*; ‘louse’, Asuriní *kíwa*, Paranatinga *?awakíw*; ‘bacurau’, Asuriní *iwisa?ówa*, Paranatinga *iwixa?ó*; ‘red’, Asuriní *piróng*, Paranatinga *pitong*; ‘oven’, Asuriní *-esa?éméw*, Paranatinga *xamew*.

In its morphosyntax Asuriní is very alike Parakanã, but there are some important differences. In Asuriní, for instance, the nucleus of the verbal predicate in the mood Indicative II, such as in most other Tupí-Guaraní languages, does not take personal prefixes, but relational prefixes instead and a suffix *-i*, and is used when an adverbial expression precedes the predicate. In Apyteréwa, however, the form of the Indicative II appears to occur independently of the adverbial expression, as seen in the following example taken from Silva (2003): *Heta anokoa ixé'egi ka'ape toroenomne ixé'ekawa* ‘there are many parrots singing in the woods so that we can hear their playfulness’ (p. 83); *Itoni oawyrípe* ‘he stays at his own home’ (p.123). In the first example the predicate *ixé'egi* ‘singing’ is in the Indicative II with its suffix *-i* and with the relational prefix *i-*, but no adverbial expression precedes it. Note that *heta* ‘many’ is not an adverbial expression, but a noun in the other TG languages, where it does not prompt Indicative II; cf. Tocantins Asuriní *sawára hetá oporo'ó* ‘the jaguars are many and eat people’ (Cabral & Rodrigues 2003:98), with the verb *oporo'ó* in the Indicative I with its personal prefix *o-*. In the second example the Apyteréwa predicate *itoni* is in the Indicative II, but again no adverbial expression precedes it. This is another difference between Tocantins Asuriní and Parakanã.

Relevant for this discussion is also the history lived by each community. On the basis of linguistic criteria it was previously said that the definitive separation of the Parakanã and the Asuriní would be not older than 150 years. Since then these two peoples have lived under situations that differ in several aspects.

When the Tocantins Asuriní were contacted in the first half of the last century (cf. Ricardo 1985, Andrade 1992), they were already divided into two groups, one near the

Tocantins river and the other remaining in the area of the Pacajá river, near the city Portel. The displacement of this latter group to the Trocará was in the '60s and de oldest persons recall several facts related to that displacement.

The narrations recorded from the oldest survivors of both groups reveal that they maintained contacts with one another, but were already independent when they met the non Indians, about 70 years ago. Several mythic episodes gathered from the Parakanã by members of the Parakanã Project share persons and facts with those obtained by us among the Asuriní, but with considerable differences in the narrative contents.

Finally it is important to take into consideration the evaluation made by the speakers of each language about the identity or difference of their languages. The Asuriní recognize that their language resembles that of the Parakanã, but for them the latter speak wrongly. They are sure that their language and their culture are independent from others.

4. SOME CONCLUSIONS

Diagnoses for classifying degrees of genetic relationship between languages based only in mutual intelligibility and similarities of some structural aspects are in general prone to reduce the linguistic and cultural diversity of the peoples, with negative consequences to the development of the linguistic research that should promote the widest scientific knowledge of the languages and of the ways of thinking and behaving of their speakers, with the particularities that distinguish them. Such a reduction is also harmful for the indigenous minorities, since every community has the well founded conscience that its linguistic variant is truly *the language*, basic element of their ethnic identity, whose recognition it must defend in the sociopolitical setting of the country.

In Brazil neither the Tembê wish to be seen as speakers of a variety of the Guajajára language (now with more prestige in the evangelical organizations for having received the first complete translation of the Bible), nor the Apinajé wish to be considered speakers of a dialect of Mebengokrê neither the Mebengokrê wish to be considered speakers of a dialect of Apinajé, as assumed by Lea in her presentation in the VI Macro-Jê, held at the Federal University of Goiás in November, 2008.

REFERENCES

1. Aguirre, Dirceu, e A. D. Rodrigues. 1985. *Povos indígenas no Brasil e presença missionária*. Mapa 1:8.000.000. Brasília: CIMI.
2. Andrade, Lúcia Mendonça Morato de. 1992. O corpo e o cosmos: relações de gênero e o sobrenatural entre os Asurini do Tocantins. Dissertação de mestrado, Universidade de São Paulo.
3. Cabral, Ana Suelly A. C.; Rodrigues, Aryon D. 2002. *Línguas Indígenas Brasileiras: Fonologia, Gramática e História*. Atas do I Encontro Internacional do Grupo de Trabalho sobre Línguas Indígenas da ANPOLL, tomo I. Belém: EDUFPA.
4. Cabral, Ana Suelly A. C.; Rodrigues, Aryon D. 2003. *Dicionário Asuriní do Tocantins – Português*, Belém: Gráfica Universitária da UFPA.
5. Câmara Jr., J. M. 1965. *Introdução às línguas indígenas brasileiras*. Rio de Janeiro: Museu Nacional.
6. Ricardo, C. A. (Coordenador-Geral). 1985. *Povos Indígenas no Brasil: Sudeste do Pará*
7. *(Tocantins)*. v. 8. São Paulo: CEDI (Centro Ecumênico de Documentação e
8. Informação).
9. Rodrigues, A. D. 1966. Tarefas da Lingüística no Brasil. *Estudos Lingüísticos*, São Paulo, v. 1, n. 1, p. 4-15.
10. Rodrigues, A. D. 1985. The Present State of the Study of Brazilian Indian Languages. In: Harriet M. Klein; Luisa R. Stark. (org.). *South American Indian Languages: Retrospect And Prospect*. Austin: University of Texas Press, v. , p. 405-439.
11. Rodrigues, A. D. 1985b. Relações Internas Na Família Lingüística Tupi-Guarani. *Revista de Antropologia*, São Paulo, v. 27, p. 33-53,.
12. Rodrigues, A. D. . *Línguas brasileiras: para o conhecimento das línguas indígenas*. 2. ed. São Paulo: Loyola, 1994. v. 1. 135 p.
13. Silva, Auristéa C. S. 1995. Fonologia segmental da língua Parakanã. Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso. UFPA, Altamira.
14. _____. 1999a. Aspectos da referência alternada em Parakanã. Dissertação de mestrado, Universidade Federal do Pará.
15. _____. 1999b A morfologia flexional da Língua Parakanã. *Moara* 11:133-149.
16. Silva, Gino Ferreira da. 2003. Construindo um dicionário Parakanã-Português. Dissertação de Mestrado, Universidade Federal do Pará,

17. Simões, M. do S. 2005. *Parakanã*. CD-ROM. Belém: IFNOPAP, Universidade Federal do Pará.

RESUMO: Depois de apresentar um breve histórico do desenvolvimento da pesquisa brasileira sobre as línguas indígenas, este artigo focaliza o conceito de dialeto aplicável a línguas ameríndias e aos problemas que podem surgir, tanto para o trabalho de pesquisa e, mais ainda, para as comunidades que as falam, como consequência da prematura decisão sobre a identidade dessas línguas. É apresentado e discutido o caso de duas línguas Tupí-Guaraní mutuamente inteligíveis, Parakanã e Asuriní do Tocantins.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Pesquisa lingüística e documentação; Línguas Indígenas Brasileiras; Línguas e dialetos.

ABSTRACT: After a brief historical survey of the development of Brazilian research on the indigenous languages, this paper focuses on the concept of dialect as applicable to Amerindian languages and the problems that may arise both for the research work and, worse, for each community as a consequence of a premature decision on language identity. The case of two mutually intelligible Tupí-Guaraní languages, Parakanã and Asuriní of Tocantins is presented and discussed.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic research and documentation; Brazilian Indian languages; Languages and dialects.