Monolinguisim is a Disease

by Bruna Franchetto

I have written a short, tempestuous and basically provocative text, far from what the proponents of this seminar called for. I speak (write) from the frontiers of the world, that we, from the academy, inhabit and that at times some of us, from the academy, feel the obligation to visit, to traverse.

The phrase “monolinguism is a disease” appeared on a bumper sticker in Australia, more than a few years ago. It was a provocation by movements of aborigine populations and their allies, at a time when there was global growth of denunciations about the fast and growing disappearance or obsolescence of thousands of minority languages. At the end of the last century, the forecast was that of the world’s 5,000-6,000 existing languages, 90% risk extinction in this century.

The documentation of the so-called “threatened languages” became a considerable market for financing for international programs for projects aimed at the construction of broad digital, multimedia bodies, through the registration in locos (in the field) of as much data as could be registered. A language dies, but at least its documentation remains, for the satisfaction of the scholars of linguistic typology. In some cases, they speak of collaborative or participatory documentation, of “empowerment” through the education of local (indigenous) researchers who can “autonomously” conduct documentation activities. This can certainly be a double-edged sword, which simultaneously weakens and reinforces the use of the languages and attitudes of valorization. At times these efforts mobilize, for intermittent and fragile periods, some youth, and or parts of a community.

What, in fact, is a minority language?

Portuguese is considered an “international language,” which is dominated on a global scale and simultaneously dominant on a regional, local, supra-local scale. There are native regional languages that suffocate dozens of subjugated native languages.

At the extreme of a complex hierarchy, there are, for example, the 160 indigenous languages that are still surviving in Brazilian territory, some of which have been decreed extinct in the past two years; the last (semi) speaker of Apiaká died at the beginning of 2012, for example. Other languages have less than 10 speakers, others still display vitality, but with various signs of decline, like the abandonment of verbal arts, of parts of the crucial cultural lexicon, the use of Portuguese as a lingua-franca, the growing bilingualism of an indigenous language or languages and Portuguese. The absolute majority of native languages are “threatened.” Many more of them are threatened than are officially declared as such - if we adopt the international criteria that defines as “languages in danger” those that have less than one thousand speakers.

Based on the last census (2010), reported by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), only 37.4% of the 896,917 Brazilians who declare themselves to be indigenous speak their native language, that of their parents or grandparents. Only 17.5% do not know Portuguese. The census also revealed that 42.3% of Brazilian Indians no longer live on their reservations and that 36% are settled in cities, with their urbanization (in the peripheries) growing. Of those who are no longer on indigenous lands, only 12.7% speak their native languages. Portuguese was spoken by 605.2 thousand individuals (76.9%) and by practically all of those who live off of their lands (96.5%). The proportion of the indigenous from 5 – 14 years old who speak an indigenous language was 45.9%, 59.1% of whom are on Indian lands and 16.2% off
of them. Of those from 15 – 49 and for those 50 and older, the percentage of speakers declined with the increase of age (35.8% and 28.5%). Among these three age groups, on the indigenous lands, nearly all the speakers of the indigenous language do not speak Portuguese, with the highest percentage found among those 50 or older (97.3%), while off the lands, in this same age group, the 2010 Census revealed the lowest percentage, 40.7%, of those who only speak the indigenous language.

The situation is clear: the natural transmission between generations is interrupted, even indigenous teachers imbued with the official rhetoric that calls for school education that is “bilingual, intercultural, differentiated and specific,” adopt Portuguese in their homes, in the primary socialization of their children, incorporating in them what is already incorporated in themselves, the shame of speaking “slang,” a language that they define as “tough” (with sounds felt to be “strange” and ugly, compared with the dominant language) and difficult to write (since it has been “born” with a writing).

There is another side. The official national language (in this case, Portuguese) dominates all of them through writing, schooling and the media, and is insinuated in each individual through words, morphemes grammars, discursive markers, complete expressions, giving origin to “mixed” languages spoken by the very young. Languages die and new languages rise from the cracks, at the border, in a constant process of expressive creativity, in new oral and written varieties (for example, the “mixed” indigenous-Portuguese “Internetese,” used in e-mail communications, Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Languages die and are buried in rushed funerals (what a shame! It was impossible to save them...); languages survive in unexpected varieties, ignored phenomenon, at least in Brazil. On the other hand, indigenous youth skip entire chapters of the history of Western literacy, passing from one form of orality (the “traditional”) for another (videos, television, films, music, design, etc.), incessantly inventing new poetics, new objects, new ironies, new metaphors, new curses, in their “mixed” languages. We are in a complete “glocal” situation, the explosion of the local in the heart of the global. The Indians were always bilingual and multilingual, even before the Whites arrived.

At the extreme of the extreme of this complicated “glocal” situation are individuals like the author of this text, who navigate on another frontier, between linguistics and anthropology, multilingual by chance, a researcher who needs to speak and publish in English (which, sincerely, is not the main and most interesting problem). As a producer of knowledge and of documentation of indigenous languages, I live with the battle, not at all victoriously, for the revitalization of these radically minority languages. In political practice I am a militant for multilingualism and diversity. I experience paradoxes and contradictions. I write about the impact of writing, linguistic policies, verbal arts, challenges/pleasures/translation traps, to ameliorate some of the pain. In this position, and by doing this, there are two aspects that I would like to bring to the discussion.

First, I refer to the continuous experience of impasses, clashes, misunderstandings, and their consequences, at the genesis, tension and consolidation of relations of inequality and power, in the so-called “ethnographic encounters,” in the field researcher experience, between a researcher who is a carrier of signs of power, one of which is a dominant language (or a dominant variety of a language) and a human-social group carrier of a language or variety that is radically dominated and an absolute minority. I recall an annotation in one of my first field notebooks, from 1977, during my first real field research among the Kuikuro of the Upper Xingu: “I observe them and I write, they watch me write and they speak, I do not understand them.”
In second place, I remember the false liberty of linguistic choice in the academy, which enthroned the colonial legacy: an unquestionable lingua franca, English. A few languages that were dominant on the global scene, known as “international” languages, were formally admitted on the global stage, but still very much on a secondary plane. It appears to me that there is a tacit but firm agreement from which it is not possible to escape in this linguistic endo-hierarchy. Returning to the beginning, the radically minority languages, spoken by the preferred objects of anthropological research, are definitively excluded, they are dying. What are the reasons for the fact that no Brazilian anthropologist is engaged, for example, in the task of discussing the inexistence of a linguistic policy in Brazil, a country that is still multilingual, with one of the world's largest linguistic diversities? And the linguists? Few of them are engaged in this discussion, which is a political struggle that is worth maintaining, even if its dark outcome is known. Why are the anthropologists and linguists who “work with” native populations increasingly less interested in and willing to learn and speak their languages? The resistance of the minority speakers coincides with other resistances, above all from the mouths of those to whom they intend to give voice. What would happen if the indigenous languages would invade non-indigenous schools, cities, universities, the media, congresses, seminars, literature, cinema, with good translations (in both directions)? Shamanic or love songs would become poems, the Odyssey in Kuikiro or Guarani...narratives about the encounter with the Whites would tell other stories.....the hearings at Belo Monte would not be false pantomines for “listening to the Indians” without understanding what they say...