Breaking the ice: Brief commentary on the texts of Bruna Franchetto and Christine Jourdan

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I

Bruna Franchetto's text – "Monolinglotism is a disease" - is exciting and, above all, provocative. It is noteworthy that Bruna is one of the leading experts in this vast universe we call in Brazil "indigenous languages", part of which is defined in direct relation with the imminence of their disappearance. Indeed, with regard to the number of indigenous languages in Brazil, the superlative does not fail to impress: although they are spoken by a minimum percentage of the total population in the country's territory that, nonetheless, is the holder of a vast knowledge repertoire. The same prejudice behind the currency of the infamous phrase – "too much land for too few Indians" – would match common prejudices backing a widespread perspective on the languages – "too many languages for too few speakers". So many languages that seem to be crushed by a giant who sees itself as monoglot! There were many times when, commenting on the different aspects of recognizably polyglot regions – such as any African or European country –, I came across a persistently similar reaction from Brazilian colleagues: "here we don't have such 'problems': from one end to the other of the country, we all speak 'Portuguese'".

The assertion is recurrent among colleagues in academic circles, often exasperated by my fascination with multilingual contexts such as Spain or Guinea-Bissau or by my insistence on the "rights" of minority languages in Europe. Both recurrent and deeply disturbing, and here I echo Franchetto's text: Brazil and the Brazilians continue to be portrayed as some kind of substance, deeply seductive, tending to feed on (and subsequently eliminate) any diversity that could scratch the varnish of its charm.

Academics – and not a few anthropologists among them – seem deeply satisfied with a giant that imagines itself laying in splendor, but is in fact deeply violent towards anything willing to present itself as proud diversity. The alleged monoglotism from one end to the other must be understood in different ways:

1. On one hand, it does not exist: in addition to the 160 indigenous languages "still surviving" in Brazil, there were many communities that resisted the assimilationist dictatorship, and there are even today in Brazil significant numbers of speakers of variants of German, Italian and Japanese, to mention only a few minority languages that stand out;

2. 'Portuguese' cannot be perceived as a homogenous whole either, as it is also stressed in Franchetto's text: beyond the fact that we have radically moved away from the European Portuguese standard – to the point of actually compromising mutual understanding (ie, "we do not understand each other in Portuguese") –, I dare to say that the internal diversity in Brazil has not been subject to the scrutiny anthropologists and other social scientists as it should. Here the model centered around São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro seems to swallow it all, and regional and class variations invariably emerge stigmatized as something that should rather disappear, at least from areas perceived as 'enlightened' by profoundly ignorant elites. The diversity of dialects in Brazil is primarily used as an engine to reproduce inequality and the ensuing incommunicability does not seem in the slightest to be disturbing to anybody in the mainstream: there are many who seem to be seen as people who have nothing to say, their voices (with their specific vocabularies, their particular grammatical structures, their
accents) are downright silenced within a national substrate, which never gets tired of proudly asserting itself as the legitimate (or sole) bearer of Brazilianness (whatever that might mean);

3. Finally, it is hard not to express surprise at the pride taken on genocide or repression. Linguistic authoritarianism here looms as a seductive assimilationism – after all, who does not want to speak Brazil's sweet Portuguese? Whoever does not want it deserves to die or be silenced. It is something at least disconcerting, especially if we consider that, as sons and daughters of the last century, we should at least have incorporated some minimal level of critique of various forms of genocide and ethnocide that have also taken place elsewhere.

II

Christine Jourdan's text raises multiple questions that cannot be properly developed in this brief note. I shall highlight only that those aspects the author stresses in the case of Francophony can be applied also to other phonies, for instance, to (supposedly) lusophone contexts, but sometimes in the opposite direction with respect to the configuration of the axis former metropolis/former colony.

1. In the case of the Portuguese language, it is with surprise that speakers of the Brazilian variant react when, upon arrival in Portugal, realize they speak "Brazilian". After all, all have learnt that in Brazil we speak and write Portuguese and the Portuguese speakers in Portugal speak Portuguese 'with a strong accent' (most often incomprehensible to those originating from Brazil);

2. Just as pointed out by Jourdan, Creoles lexicalized from a matrix based on Portuguese such as those spoken in former colonies as Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau (or Brazil, for that matter) are perceived as an integral part of the moral, historical and linguistic heritage bestowed upon the world by Portugal and the Portuguese. So much so that it is reasonable for a Portuguese not to speak Creole at all in Guinea or even unceremoniously portuguesify it, while nothing like that would be permitted to those coming from other places. The same could be said for the Haitian Kreyòl regarding France's insistence on the fact that Haiti is a Francophone country (sic).

But I believe that what Jourdan's text highlights is a certain discomfort of those who, while firmly believing they speak an international language (such as French and Portuguese), eventually must realize that, in certain contexts, their language is not as international as they might wish, especially when we find ourselves within an academic world where English seems to have imposed itself at an incredible pace - at least in contexts other than French-speaking or Portuguese-speaking. Demands and complaints associated with these two languages, that, according would be oppressed (sic) by the English language, comfortably ignore their own oppression regarding languages classified as minority languages (in relation to English or Mandarin, French and Portuguese are certainly a minority language). In the case of French and Portuguese, this seems to be the case not only in former colonies, but also on metropolitan ground.

Let us focus on the French case. It can be surprising how sensitive Paris is in face of the advances of the English language when French itself was and even today still is is enforced daily on the inhabitants of the Republic (and on behalf of the Republic). Thus, Catalan, Basque, Corsican or variants of German who have retained some vitality in French territory are constantly submitted to unrelenting pressure from the Parisian Jacobins, which most of the time ignore, often repress, and almost always despise their speakers. In other countries, it is not different, and there are a few skirmishes between the Catalan and the Spaniards (sic).
Recently, the Minister of Education in the Spanish cabinet announce his plan to *spanishify* Catalan children, thus assuming they are lacking in Spanishness, which only served to feed Catalan secessionist desires. What is a minority in certain contexts (Quebecois in face of Canadian English) is a majority in others (French in France, in spite of how hysterically threatened this French may feel by the international English language).

Regarding the anthropological literature, I believe that subsuming to English can represent a liberation from other frankly repressive languages such as French, Portuguese and Spanish in different continents. The anthropologist could thus write and communicate perfectly well with his or her sources and audience in English and Kreyòl, without any need to resort to French; in English and Catalan, without having to go through Spanish and French; and in English and Ronga (a perfectly literate language of Southern Mozambique thanks to the secular efforts of Protestant missionaries); or in English and Guarani, without any mediation of Portuguese or Spanish.

Anyway, it is once again the national melting pot, without its Republican or petty-tropicalist penchant, which presents itself as a problem for minority languages, under the guise of a supposed majoritarianism.