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Xokó identity and ethnogenesis – Indigenous identity and the development of Brazilian Portuguese

Abstract

The paper discusses the self-identification of the Xokó people as an indigenous ethnicity in the context of Brazilian Portuguese (BP). Like other Brazilian ethnicities, the Xokó are monolingual in BP. This cannot be directly attributed to the loss of a native language, since they are emergent Indians, with a history of social and cultural admixture with non-Indian populations. This situation makes the Xokó poor subjects for indigenous language studies and linguistically indistinguishable from non-Indian speakers of the same variety of BP. Yet, language is crucial in their identification as members of an ethnic group. Studying the Xokó language as a space of interactions may contribute to understand the agency of BP in their ethnogenesis processes and shed some light to the diversity of pluricentric languages in Amerindian contexts.

1. Introduction – Native Brazilians and interethnic encounters

When the first Portuguese *caravelas* arrived, five centuries ago, it is estimated that five million people occupied the territory that would be called Brazil[1]. The number corresponds to five times the population of Portugal at the same period, and linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversity was even greater in the west of the Atlantic. While in Europe one single language family, Indo-European, dominated most of the continent, and European communities shared a relatively similar way of life throughout the new-rising nation states, in 16th century Brazil, 1200 languages[2] belonging to dozens of language families were spoken by hundreds of ethnic groups, among many of which strong cultural and social-economic differences existed.

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1 Santili (2000:22).

2 Rodrigues (2005:35).

Stories of a past Amerindian diversity are generally followed by an account of their losses in the colonial endeavour. Indeed, rapid socio-economic changes, diseases, slavery and genocide, followed by massive depopulation, and degradation of natural resources led to a correspondent degradation of linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity in the Americas. This process was deemed by the late Brazilian Anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro to have been the most impressive case of "cultural uniformisation" and "ethnic transfiguration"[3] in world history.

But this is not the whole story. South America's near insular geography kept its populations isolated from foreign contact for thousands of years[4] and, yet, internal diversity was old enough to maintain a vast net of exchanges, which were capable of producing an ongoing rise of cultural forms before, during and after colonialism. Because Indians outnumbered the Europeans and possessed intimate knowledge of the landscape and its human and non-human inhabitants (which Western Civilization could only apprehend as "resources"), cultural assimilation in colonial Brazil was necessarily a two-way road. It was systemic, no matter how asymmetrical the relations appeared to be, in the sense that transformations affected all groups involved, not only Amerindians. It was also a contingent process, in the sense that its result, that is, cultural change, was dependent on local circumstances at every moment. Colonialism was a European project, and many human and material resources were recruited for its accomplishment. Its outcome was the rise of "new peoples"[5], not simply a native population deprived of an original (and thus, "true") space of socio-cultural and ecological relations.

The early economic enterprises promoted by Portugal, and the settlement of Europeans, *índios amansados* ("domesticated" Indians), enslaved Africans, and their respectively *mameluco* and *mulato* (inter-racial) offspring in Brazil, were only made possible by adopting native ecological, cultural and linguistic strategies. The *bandeiras*, expeditions that penetrated the interior of Brazil in the 17th century to find new lands and resources, capture *índios bravos* (savage Indians)

3 Ribeiro (1995:30,159).

4 Rodrigues (1999:12).

5 In the 1970s, Ribeiro (2001) proposed a classification scheme for the American societies generated in the colonial process, identifying as „new peoples" the result of merged cultures (e.g., Brazil, Venezuela), as „testimony peoples" the remnants of ancient civilizations (Mexico, Bolivia) and as „transplanted peoples" (Argentina, North of US) essentially Western societies, formed after massive European immigration and genocide of native population. The system is not strictly followed in contemporary studies, but it remains useful for conceptualizing some broad similarities and differences still observed between American societies.

and fight the *quilombolas* (inhabitants of the *quilombos*, communities of escaped slaves), were headed by Amerindian descendents, all native speakers of a native language, mostly from a Tupi stock, prevalent among coastal tribes. Being an Indian, thinking and acting as one, was a necessary condition to interact successfully with human and non-human actors in Brazilian environment. The image of the pioneer as a white explorer, who marvelled at the mysteries of a land unknown, is unconceivable in the Brazilian context.

As Brazil became industrialised and urbanised, stories of physical elimination and cultural assimilation of native peoples flourished through the 19th century and became the official version in the 20th century, especially during the 1964–1985 dictatorship[6], with the help of mass media and the educational system. Even today, some Brazilians think there are no true Indians left, and the remaining individuals are too insignificant or far too deep in the jungle to deserve attention[7]. This is not surprising, considering that propaganda about non-extant or false Indians[8] continues to be instrumental in legitimating anti-Indian policies of all kinds, favouring either government or private interests, usually both[9].

Despite the beliefs in (or desires for) uniformity, Brazilians are still ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse, thanks, in part, to the reinvention of native life forms. Today, about 300 indigenous ethnic groups are recognised in Brazil, and this number is actually growing[10]. Unlike 500 years ago, cultural diversity depends on the kind and on the degree of contact, the groups establish with, or within, Western society. But the variables "kind" and "degree" do not solely refer to aspects of the native culture that are lost, replaced by exogenous practices, or to how much they have changed in relation to some original condition. It also refers to the groups' internal dynamics, their ongoing history of conversation with themselves and non-Western *Others*, including other Indians, other ethnic groups (as the *quilombolas*) and non-human actors.

One meaningful change in the last five decades is the increase in the number of Western-educated indigenous leaders, which has helped their communities to fight in the political and legal arena of the Whites. This led the late dictatorial

6 Vianna (2014).

7 Santili (2000: 21–22).

8 A recent article in Veja, the most read weekly magazine in Brazil, denounced the fabrication of „false Indians" with the help of anthropologists. The article was later discredited, but its publication in a medium of such wide reach shows how easily public opinion in Brazil accepts prejudicial concepts of ethnic identity. (Vianna, 2015:1–2).

9 Carneiro da Cunha (2012:127).

10 Melatti (2007:47–48).

government, through the national agency for Indian affairs, the *Fundação Nacional do Índio* to propose, in 1980, criteria of indigeneity that would promote compulsory emancipation of "acculturated" Indians, including the new leaders, in an attempt to weaken the Amerindian political movement[11].

What was said of the dynamics of cultural change in interethnic encounters, applies to language contact in Brazilian socio-genesis. Portuguese – understood either as the normative European vernacular or as a group of related dialects spoken in Portugal – was the language of the conquerors, a fact that should account for its adoption by the conquered as their national and official language. But the explanation cannot be that simple, for the phenomenon it tries to explain is more controversial. European Portuguese (EP) has never been fully adopted in linguistic interactions in Brazil, neither in colonial times, when more than one lingua franca was available, nor now, when a group of derived norms, collectively called Brazilian Portuguese (BP), is advertised as the one and only national language of Brazil.

The Xokó, a Portuguese-speaker indigenous community, may help us understand part of the controversy. Like the Greek god Janus, the Xokó are condemned to face two opposite directions when it comes to describing their linguistic context: they have lost their original language, but at the same time, and for as long as they can remember, they have always spoken Portuguese, for it was in that language that they learned to see themselves as an ethnic unity.

The issue, here, is not a 19th century-style, nationalistic claim for a Brazilian language, emancipate from its European stock. Pluricentricity of Portuguese is recognised[12], and variation is not an exclusive BP phenomenon, since it occurs in Portugal as well. Even if we argue that BP (the collective grammar of Brazilian varieties) presents sufficient structural differences from EP (the collective grammar of Portuguese varieties) to deserve a distinct status, the solution does not help us understand its usage by Amerindian groups. Neither the name of the language nor some comparative, structural description accounts for its *agency*, the role played by linguistic interactions in the necessarily complex and actually controversial issues of self-identification and ethnogenesis. Before focusing on the Xokó, we must look at the context of BP formation, and the relation of that language with its different speech communities.

11 Carneiro da Cunha (2012:101).

12 Soares da Silva (2014).

2. Brazilian Portuguese: nativisation and anthropophagy

Brazilian citizens are constantly taught by public administration, mass media, the education system and through daily conversations that they live in a monolingual country. The Constitution, in its 13th article, tells us that Portuguese is "the official language of the República Federativa do Brasil"[13], and the country's international image follows this one-nation-one-language scenario (a government pamphlet for foreign audiences says: "except for the languages spoken by indigenous tribes living in reservations, it is the only language of daily life")[14]. However, this well disseminated and institutionalised truth is contradicted by the actual linguistic context in three different, but related, aspects: the diversity of Brazilian languages, the historical formation of BP, and a diglossic situation, with profound social and political implications to its speakers.

BP may be the language of the majority, but it is not the language of all. As it happened to other American nations, an old linguistic diversity in Brazil was subjected to a violent, but much more recent process of transfiguration during colonial and post-colonial times, which changed the scenario in different levels for different people. The linguistic map went through a series of readjustments and it now accommodates nearly 200 distinct languages, including Portuguese-related, Amerindian (around 180), African-based, immigration (mostly German-based, Italian-based and Japanese, but many others), frontier and mixed (mostly Spanish-based), sign (official and Amerindian), creoles of various affiliations, and a number of language contact situations involving these speech communities[15].

The second problem with accepting monolingualism in Brazil comes from the historical formation of BP. It is well known that BP, in both its normative and popular varieties, presents important structural differences from EP. The historical motivation of those differences is still object of disagreement. Three competing explanations can be found:

a) a process of creolisation of EP and its posterior decreolisation, in which a Portuguese-based creole was initially formed with contributions of African and, to a lesser degree, Amerindian grammars;
b) the continuation or drift of structural tendencies already present in 15th century EP in a new, multilingual, environment (while EP experienced a different path from 18th century onward); and

13 Brasil (1988:12).
14 Dornelles (2011:32).
15 Dornelles (2011:29–30); Mello et al (2011).

c) the emergence of a new grammar in the 19th century, driven by the differences in the language spoken in Brazil.[16]

The "creolistic" hypothesis doesn't share the same prestige of the rival "continuity" and "emergence" explanations, but it has the merit of drawing attention to the rich multilingual environment in the formation years of BP. The problem is that there is no evidence of a historical creole stage of BP. As Naro and Scherre (2007:30) point out, the reason why it is so difficult to find documentation of a long-lived Portuguese Creole in colonial Brazil is because it has never existed. The authors, who support the continuity hypothesis, argue that the absence is justifiable, since other contact languages were available in colonial times: the so called *Lingua de Preto* ("black language"): a Portuguese-based pidgin used in the African trade, possibly worldwide, since the 15th century[17], and mastered by many African subjects before they were sent to Brazil as slaves. It was the most widespread lingua francas in colonial Brasil, the *Linguas Gerais* (general languages), including *Lingua Geral Amazônica*, in the North, and *Lingua Geral Paulista*, in the South, both based on coastal Tupi-Guarani[18] languages, especially Tupinambá[19].

The Lingua Geral was grammaticised and disseminated by Jesuit priests in the *aldeamentos*, the confinement of different Indigenous groups in villages (*aldeias*). The language crossed the villages' limits and soon, *índios bravos*, Europeans and Afro descendents were all using some variety of Lingua Geral as their first or vehicular language. At the end of the 18th century, it was forbidden and only Portuguese could be officially used in Brazil, which did not prevent general population from speaking Lingua Geral until the 19th century. A Northern variety, Nheengatu, is still used as L1 and L2 in the Amazon[20], and has become a co-official language in the city of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, together with BP and the native Baniwa and Tukano[21]. This means that, before BP assumed its dominant status, another system was available as vehicle of cultural uniformization in Brazil. Some scholars call this phenomenon

16 See Soares da Silva (2014:147–148);), for a number of studies which deal with the emergence of BP; see also Naro and Scherre (2007:29–30) for a different interpretation of Brazilian grammatical features, sustaining the hypothesis of "drift".

17 Naro and Scherre (2007:27).

18 The term „Tupi" applies to three different linguistic levels: the largest language stock in Brazil, with nine families and 38 languages; the largest Tupi language family, Tupi-Guarani; and the generic name of extinct Tupi-Guarani languages spoken in colonial Brazil, particularly Tupinambá and Tupiniquim (Melatti, 2007:61).

19 Borges (2003:115–116).

20 Schmidt-Riese (2003:147).

21 Oliveira (2005:90).

tupinization[22] of Brazilian populations: the imposition of a Tupi-based system (which included other cultural practices besides language) to many, culturally and linguistically very different, ethnic groups throughout the Brazilian territory.

If we view BP as a drift of old EP, or as the rise of a new grammar, it is assumed that its formation took place in a diverse cultural and linguistic environment by opposing the force of uniformisation (through tupinisation and spread of the Lingua Geral, and through Westernization and spread of Portuguese) promoted the appropriation by native and other Brazilian populations of an exogenous system. In the linguistic tradition, the term nativisation is used when a language "gains" native speakers, as in creolisation processes. But the emphasis, here, is on the agency of language in the interactional processes of their speakers, and this cannot be conceptualised as a code change between generations. We must refer to the transformation of language to meet the life forms of its speakers, and, at the same time, the transformation of its speakers – social, if not ethnic, transfiguration – through the new distinctions made possible in the nativised language. I propose the concept of *antropophagic nativisation*: the "insertion" of an exogenous system with mutual transformation of the system and its users. The new speaker does not transform her/himself into the system's previous user, but recreates his/her own identity through the relationship established with the inserted Other.[23]

The third aspect of the Brazilian linguistic context that questions the Portuguese-only discourse is the deep social separation between popular and prestigious varieties of BP, including its normative version. The issue is not how structurally different these systems are (a prestigious BP variant may differ from the idealised norm as much as a non-prestigious one). The diglossic situation opposes both the usage-based (characteristics of urban, educated speakers) and the idealised norm[24], to popular varieties used by a large sector of Brazilian society, historically confined to lower-class, uneducated citizens, rural populations, *favela* inhabitants in the big cities and forest dwellers, such as the Amerindians and *quilombolas*[25]. This sector is represented by any community that does not historically share an ever-changing urban culture, which constantly redefines itself through the manipulation of institutional, educational and communication channels. These three aspects of the Brazilian linguistic context – diversity of Brazilian languages, (anthropophagic) nativisation of Portuguese, and social and

22 Cruz (2014:72).

23 There is a long discussion in Antropology about an anthropophagic *ethos* in Brazilian Amerindians. See, for example, Viveiros de Castros (2015:161).

24 Soares da Silva (2014:148).

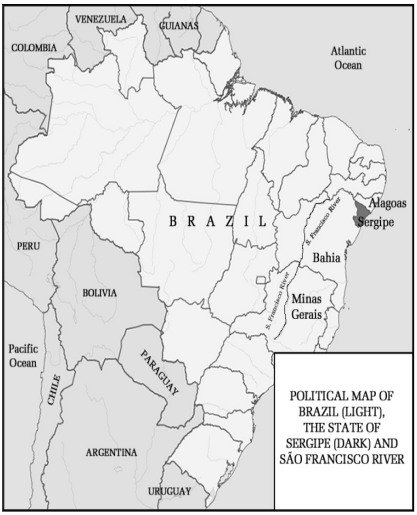
25 People living in a hideout for runaway slaves.

political diglossia within BP – become crucial elements when we speak of a BP variety used in an indigenous community, as is the case of the Xokó.

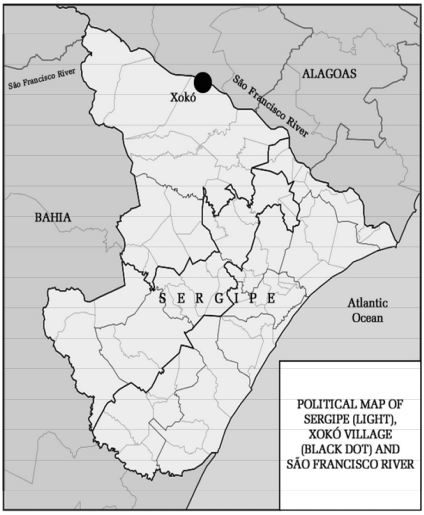
3. The Xokó and the Northeast Indians

The Xokó are the only recognised indigenous group in the Northeastern Brazilian state of Sergipe (see Map 1).

Map 1: Brazil and the state of Sergipe



Map 2: Sergipe and the Xoxó village



The Xokó village lies in the lower part of the river, about 200 km from the river mouth (Maps 1 and 2). Their village, with around 500 people, is located in the island of São Pedro, in São Francisco river. It is the longest one to run entirely in the Brazilian territory. From its source in the state of Minas Gerais, the river flows 2.914 km through the states of Bahia, Pernambuco, Alagoas and Sergipe, before it flows into the Atlantic Ocean.

The Xokó speak a local, non-dominant variety of Brazil's major pluricentric language, Portuguese. Literature on the Xokó is mostly restricted to the area of Cultural Anthropology and, to date, no linguistic research on the Xokó has been published. This is not surprising, since they are nearly invisible to linguistic studies. Recognised as Indians only 40 years ago, with no record of a native language, the Xokó make poor subjects for indigenous language studies. In sociolinguistic terms, the Xokó are expected to be undistinguishable from their non-Indian neighbours,

with whom they have been mixing for decades, maybe centuries.[26] To the Xokó, known for the absence of phenotypic traits traditionally regarded as Amerindian, language seems to add yet another negative attribute.

The group that physically resembles the Xokó the most are their neighbours from the *Quilombo* of Mocambo. Only recently have the Mocambo people claimed their ethnic distinction as *Quilombolas*. Prior to public recognition of their respective ethnicity, the Xokó and Mocambo peoples were seen as one undistinguished group of *Sertanejos*, the impoverished rural labourers of Northeast. Racial typologies were instrumental to 19th century farmers, for it was necessary to overcome a legislation that protected Amerindian lands since the beginning of colonization. With the 1850 *lei das terras* (law of the lands), it became easier for local governments and their allies to deny the presence of Indians in a given area, with the argument of loss of original traits[27]. While a 1849 document clearly refers to the Indians of São Pedro island, another official paper, only seven years later, is much more ambiguous, denying their existence but, at the same time, reporting the presence of missionaries in the village[28].

Finally, in 1878, a document declares the *aldeamento* extinct, and its lands available for sale, arguing that there are "…no villages, not even true Indians"[29] in that exact location. Ethnic "ambivalence" and linguistic uniformity share the same historical background and has become related agents in Xokó ethnogenesis. We should also pay attention to the broader context of Portuguese-only Amerindian speakers, which is not the prevalent situation in Brazil, but it is the rule (with one proving exception) in the Northeast. From almost 300 indigenous groups in Brazil, about 40 exclusively speak BP, 30 of them in the Northeast, the total number of tribes in that region were it not for the Fulniô of Pernambuco, who speak Yatê, a language of Macro-Jê stock[30].

Northeastern Indians were the first to be met by Europeans, the first to experience genocide campaigns, and those who suffered more vividly the colonial and post-colonial strategy to deprive Indians from their lands. They were subjected to the *aldeamentos*, when tribal Indians were captured and concentrated in multiethnic villages, and later expelled from those very villages, becoming a source of labour to Northeast's near-feudal agrarian system. Emergent ethnicities abound in that region for, since the 19th century and until very recently, its Indians were not allowed to

26 French (2009:3–4).

27 Arruti (2001:220).

28 Dantas and Dallari (1980:35).

29 Arruti (2001:222). Translation is mine.

30 Macro-Jê is the second largest language stock in Brazil, after Tupi, with 8 families, including Jê, and 17 living languages (Mellati, 2007:64–66).

be called as such. They have developed different strategies to become ethnically invisible within Western society, while still regarding themselves as a distinct group.

The larger concentration of Northeast tribes is near the medium and lower São Francisco. There live, among many others, the *Xukuru* of Pernambuco, the *Kiriri* of Bahia, the *Xucuru-Kariri* of Alagoas, and the *Xokó* of Sergipe. Many are remnants of extinct *aldeamentos* and share a common ancestry, and similar names reflect their "fission-fusion" processes in colonial and more recent times. The Kariri-Xocó are an example of new ethnic configuration. Some Xokó left the island in the beginning of the 20th century and joined the Kariri in Alagoas, where they could preserve their identity, leading to the composite ethonym. The Xokó who remained in Sergipe were called *Caboclos*, a local term meaning "half-breed", or "would-be Indians", a condition the Xokó shared with other São Francisco groups before they resurface, in the last decades, as emergent ethnicities claiming their ancestors' lands. The Kariri-Xocó and other São Francisco Indians, as the mentioned *Fulniô*, managed to preserve their identity and, through a regional interchange net, helped other groups in their processes of ethnic emergence, creating an indigenous macro-ethnicity around shared cultural practices, such as the *Ouricuri* ritual, the *Toré* dance, and the magical usage of *Jurema* (*Mimosa hostilis*), a northeastern plant with psychoactive properties[31].

The Xokó had to learn from their Northeastern *parentes* how to be "reborn" as Indians. The *Ouricuri* is particularly instrumental in their ethno-genesis, for it is a secret ritual, that is, no one outside the group, besides other guest Indians, can take part, or even watch, the *Ouricuri*. It takes place in the woods, in a village specially built for the rituals. The Indians stay two or more days in the place, where other sacred activities, like the *Toré* and communitarian insertion of *Jurema* are performed. The "language" of *Ouricuri*, that is, the interactions that take place within that space, are not shared with the surrounding, Western society, no matter what linguistic structures are used, and it has consequences to the Xokó's space of relations in everyday life. As Da Mota (1997:41) describes it:

> "All forms of communication and of interpreting the world are encapsulated and preserved within the *Ouricuri*, which provides the participants with a code to interpret daily scripts. Thus they share a language and a universe of meanings."

These practices, together with the condition of being part of a group that sees itself as distinct from the surrounding society, demand the conformity of language to a particular domain of distinctions. We may recognise a "Xokó Portuguese variety" if we view language as a space of relations, instead of a set of linguistic types, or, as

31 Da Mota (1997).

"fixed code" (Roy Harris, 1981: 9). I propose a systemic approach where the distinctions made in language are generated by the group's consensual behaviour in a conversational net. Within this framework, any sound, visual sign or gesture needs to be consensually pointed in a given community, before it refers to anything[32].

The Portuguese word *parente* ("relative") will work well, or generate stable "form-meaning" relations, in a conversation between a BP and an EP speaker. Properly translated, it will also work in a conversation with English speakers. But we may have communication problems hearing this word from a Xokó speaker, for Brazilian Indians use *parente* to refer to another Indian, be it a relative, or not. This is not a polysemy, or "false friend" phenomenon. The distinction depends on the group you are in, or are part of. A different example is the word *cacique*, of Aruak origin. PB and EP speakers use it to name any Amerindian chief, but the groups may have specific names to their chiefs, including more than one name, or no name at all. The Krahô, for example, speakers of a Jê language, have two seasonal "mayors", both called *pahi*.[33] As BP speakers, the Xokó say *cacique* to mention Indian chiefs in general, but they also use that word to refer to their own *cacique*, and, just like the Krahô, the Xokó configure their *cacique* in a very particular way. The same form, the same meaning, and a different relational space to make sense of that form-meaning element.

4. Conclusion

The Xokó ancestors probably spoke a Macro-Jê language, which is inferred from the language spoken today by the Fulniô and from 17th century documents on the extinct Kariri language, used by tribes that migrated to the São Francisco area[34]. The Tupi languages were spoken by coastal tribes, and served as lingua franca in the colonization process, while the São Francisco Indians were the first *tapuias*, which meant "*barbarian*" or "*enemy*", the interior populations who did not speak Tupi nor exhibit their cultural traits[35], and suffered the cultural and linguistic uniformisation around a Tupi life form, or tupinisation. If this is true, and the hypothesis is geographically and linguistically sound, the ethnic transfiguration of the Xokó is older and more profound than a code shift from an original, pre-Colombian condition, to a modern, Portuguese-speaking way of life. Denied the right to be called Indians, the 19th century Xokó had to learn to be *caboclos*, which

32 Vianna (2011).
33 Melatti (2007:156).
34 Ribeiro (2009:63).
35 Ribeiro (2009:63–64).

is actually another way of being Indians, anthropophagically nativising their masters' language and culture in order to survive. Now, as emergent Indians, the Xokó are doing the same, conforming their language and practices to their ethnogenesis, albeit in a more dignifying context.

Portuguese is indeed a pluricentric language, and thanks to the geopolitical prominence of Brazil and its large Portuguese-speaking population, we may consider BP as a dominant, or at least a co-dominant, variety. But in order to do this, we have to legitimise an idealised and a prestigious norm which does not represent and does not resemble, neither grammatically nor politically, the BP varieties that are actually used by the minorities (e.g., the Xokó) and by the majority (almost everyone) in Brazil. These important varieties are definitely non-dominant, and deserve further academic attention.

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