Brazilian Portuguese as a transatlantic language: Agents of linguistic contact

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Abstract. This paper aims at presenting a picture of the situation of language contact in which Brazilian Portuguese emerged. This variety of Portuguese exhibits many characteristics that set it apart from European Portuguese, and that may be the outcome of the intense and extensive contact between 16th-century Portuguese and many African languages in Africa and in Brazil, and with an immense variety of Native Brazilian languages in the colonial territory. Although Brazilian Portuguese emerged in a multilingual colonial setting, it cannot be considered a creole language. This is due to the fact that the somewhat close contact between Portuguese and Africans which started in Africa, albeit not egalitarian, was maintained in the new American colony. The model of language evolution and change proposed by Mufwene (2001, 2008) is used to suggest how Brazilian Portuguese can be considered as the outcome of language contact.

Keywords. Brazilian Portuguese, language contact, multilingualism, African languages, colonization of West and Central Africa.

The objective of this paper is to discuss the emergence of Brazilian Portuguese from the point of view of the history of the contact between 16th-century Portuguese and a variety of languages from different linguistic families during the period of the European colonial expansion. We will seek elements to propose a reconstruction of the history of interactions between Portuguese explorers and the peoples living in West and West Central Africa, and of the transplantation of the languages spoken by both explorers and Africans to the Portuguese colony in South America.

As expected, one of the ever-present items on the research agenda of linguistics in Brazil is the comparison, both synchronic and diachronic, between the Brazilian and the European varieties of Portuguese. Contrastive studies pursuing this topic of research have been successful in highlighting some of the main grammatical features of Brazilian Portuguese, which set it apart from
European Portuguese as a language in its own right. Important differences in the syntactic position of sentence subjects; in the preferred position of elitic pronouns; in the pronominal paradigm; in nominal and verbal agreement patterns; in the structure of relative clauses; and in the range of verbs which can participate in absolute constructions have been the subject matter of comparative descriptions and analyses stemming from different theoretical perspectives.¹

The investigation of the grammatical peculiarities of Brazilian Portuguese led to a search for their origins. Some studies have looked for an explanation for the emergence of Brazilian Portuguese grammar from a language-internal perspective, be it within a generative approach related to parameter resetting (e.g., Roberts & Kato, 1993), or within the Sapirian tradition which sees grammatical changes as the result of a language’s natural drift (e.g., Naro & Scherre, 2007). Differently, other studies have preferred to explain some of the grammatical characteristics of Brazilian Portuguese as a consequence of the overwhelming language contact which took place in the first centuries of Brazilian history (e.g., Lucchesi, Baxter, & Ribeiro, 2009; Noll & Dietrich, 2010).

The discussion proposed in this paper partially aligns with the studies developed in accordance with the second perspective mentioned above. Grammatical differences exhibited by Brazilian Portuguese in relation to European Portuguese and to other Romance languages can, and in our view should, be explained as resulting from language contact. We, however, are not in agreement with most of the best known works on linguistic contact which consider Brazilian Portuguese—or at least some of its dialects—either as a creole (Guy, 1981); or as a semi-creole (Holm, 1992); or as resulting from an irregular language acquisition process followed by a decreolization process (Baxter, 1992). Based on Mufwene (2008), we suggest that Brazilian Portuguese emerged as a colonial vernacular whose grammar results from a process of selection of linguistic features out of a pool of features contributed by 16th-century vernacular Portuguese (among other European languages); by African languages from different linguistic families and with different histories of linguistic contact; and by the many indigenous languages of Brazil. As we will show in the discussion that follows, what eventually became Brazilian Portuguese was first moulded in the commercial expansion voyages sponsored by the Portuguese kingdom, along the West and Central African coast.² Much of the Portuguese language brought to the Brazilian colony had already been impacted by the different kinds of interactions between Europeans and Africans in African territory and in Europe some decades before the Portuguese arrived at the Brazilian shores. Hence the idea that Brazilian Portuguese is a transatlantic language: Its development followed a route which led from Portugal to Africa, and from Africa to Brazil, and from Brazil back to Africa, and to Portugal.³
Assuming that Brazilian Portuguese was forged in an ecology of intense multilingualism compels us to attempt to reconstruct this ecology as clearly as we possibly can, in all of its aspects. It is not enough to raise the possible linguistic features contributed by the various languages in contact. An understanding of the history of the contact among speakers of different languages and of the socio-economic relations which held among these individuals, such as the balance of power between employers and members of the working class, allied with the distance or proximity of their daily contact, is what will ultimately build the background for the understanding of the emergence of new language varieties (Mufwene, 2008, pp. 115–132).

We start by discussing why, from a sociohistorical point of view, the idea of understanding language change from a completely language-internal perspective is difficult to sustain, not only in the specific case of Brazilian Portuguese, but in general terms as well.4 It is the same sociohistorical point of view which will help us question the idea that Brazilian Portuguese is a creole language, or the result of a decreolization process, or the outcome of an irregular acquisition process. The discussion we want to bring to the fore is on linguistic interactions which took place around five centuries ago, it is impossible to reconstruct, with a minimum degree of certitude, the actual speech of the people involved in these interactions. But this impossibility should not prevent us from asking questions about what these interactions must have been like.

The role of language contact in language change
One of the truisms about linguistics in general is that, as a science, it fights all kinds of biases related to languages, dialects, and idiolects. No language or linguistic variety should be considered ‘purer’, ‘richer’, or more ‘regular’ than others. When it comes to the study of language change, however, one still runs the risk of assuming positions which may lead to an evaluative differentiation among languages. This seems to be the case of studies which contend that internally motivated changes differ in nature from changes induced by contact, inasmuch as only the first are considered to be able to account for the notion of language diversification as entertained by the historic-comparative method developed during the 19th century to map our language genealogy.5 According to this view, changes revealing some type of ‘irregularity’ with respect to the paradigms of language family relations established by the comparative method should be attributed to language contact (Thomason, 2001, among others). In other words, changes following the regularities foreseen by the comparative method are considered to be language-internal (so much so that they can be predicted); those which create deviations from what should be expected are
taken to be externally motivated. A corollary of this position is that all languages that emerge out of situations of language contact are to be considered ‘irregular’, when compared to those which are ‘protected’ from the influence of other languages.

The strict dichotomy established between internally and externally motivated change is problematic in two ways. From a descriptive perspective, it seems impossible to guarantee that features shared by languages of the same family, existing in the same linguistic area, are necessarily the result of common inheritance; they may be due to long-time contact between the languages and subsequent areal diffusion (Heine & Kuteva, 2005). From a sociopolitical point of view, the dichotomy may be particularly harmful to the understanding of languages which clearly emerged in situations of language contact, such as the colonial languages which resulted from the European colonization of the world, the so-called creole languages in particular (DeGraff, 2003; Mufwene, 2008). Since they first began to be studied, creole languages have mostly been considered to form a special group of languages distinct from ‘normal’ languages. The idea behind this notion is that creole languages exhibit peculiar structural properties which, in turn, are associated with the idea that their acquisition is different from that of any other language (DeGraff, 2003, p. 391).

The question to be asked is this: From a descriptive and acquisitional point of view, are there any scientific bases for considering that the emergence of creoles or any other recent colonial language should be different from the emergence of Romance languages, for example? As Mufwene (2008) points out, the constitution of the Roman Empire is nothing but an old-time example of colonization: Romans invaded territories occupied by different peoples who spoke languages other than Latin. Romance languages resulted from these population movements and linguistic contact. Their particular characteristics are not simply the result of internally motivated changes which started in Classical Latin; they are due to restructurings induced by the intense language contact which took place during the Roman expansion (p. 31).

Language change and language diversification are processes which start in events of language use, from the interaction of speakers and the contact of their individual idiolects. The interlocutors’ first and foremost objective is the joint construction of meaning, be that when they are speakers of the same language, or when they speak different languages. They are not concerned about the ‘protection’ of their languages or idiolects from any kind of influence. If approximating their idiolects from their interlocutor’s should in any way help the joint project of meaning construction, that approximation will probably take place. Understanding the role of individual agents in the process of inter-idiolectal or inter-linguistic communication is what will help us figure out what language change is and how new varieties of a language emerge. In the case of the emergence of Brazilian Portuguese we must first understand the involvement of the European and African peoples and the history of their interactions before they reached South America.
Agents of language contact in the 16th-century South Atlantic: Portugal and Africa

The literature on the history of the Portuguese expansion overseas is vast and well documented (e.g., Bethencourt & Curto, 2007). But, in general, and as expected, historians do not focus their attention on the linguistic aspects associated with historical events, unless they are relevant to the explanation of the facts and documents under investigation. Our intent is to establish some preliminary hypotheses about what must have been the history of language contact in the 16th-century South Atlantic, based on the overall history of the European expansion.

When we approach the study of language contact from the perspective of the involvement of speakers, we soon realize that we need to forgo some of the working idealizations in linguistics. ‘Language’ is an abstract notion which neutralizes all possible speech variations. Strictly speaking, we cannot then talk about ‘language’ contact. It is rather the idiolects of individual speakers which come into contact, and variation is a key characteristic of idiolects. We need to keep in mind that among the speakers of Portuguese or the speakers of any one of the African languages with which they were in touch, there was probably very little linguistic homogeneity.

One other fact to keep in mind is that in the 15th and 16th centuries the European national languages of today had just begun to emerge as full-fledged languages. The boundaries between them were still very unclear. And people needed to communicate: Wars, disease, and famine in Europe caused constant migrations of people from different origins and different languages; commerce and progress also made people dislocate to sell their products, to build new towns, etc. The boundaries between Portuguese and Castilian, for example, were not as clear then as they are today. These two languages became even closer from 1580 to 1640, when the kingdoms of Portugal and Spain were united under one king. During this period, the interaction between the people of both nations, including explorers, sailors, and settlers was more constant, which approximated both languages even more.

The pervasiveness of language contact at that time leads us to suppose that the situation was not different aboard the ships which sailed the Atlantic first to discover and explore new territories, then to find new routes to Asia and eventually attain America and the rest of the world. Be the voyages financed by the governments of Portugal, Spain, France, the Netherlands, or by private investors, the ships’ crews probably included sailors coming from different places in Europe (and from more distant places in the world). These individuals, accustomed to an ecology of vivid linguistic contact in their homeland and in their place of work, possibly represent the first agents of contact between European languages and languages of West and Central Africa.

On the African continent, the situation of multilingualism and of intense linguistic contact seemed to be even richer. A Eurocentric view on the subject
of the first contacts between Europeans and Africans has narrowed its focus to the European commercial interests in the continent, particularly in all aspects of the slave trade, to the detriment of the cultures and languages Europeans found in their first incursions into African territory. Since the early 1980s, however, new lines of investigation have searched for ways to reconstruct the world of the Africans themselves, their identities, and their cultures (Heywood & Thornton, 2007, p. 1). Rather than seeing Africans as mere passive elements in the history of the colonial expansion, these recent works have highlighted the participation of Africans in the Atlantic world, their economic and cultural development before the arrival of the Europeans, and their active participation in trade with Europe, including the slave trade (Thornton, 1992, pp. 22–23).

With respect to the study of language contact, this shift in perspective can hold interesting consequences: If the role of Africans in the making of the Atlantic world is more active than it was first thought to be, what part did their languages and their cultures play in this making and in the constitution of the new languages which emerged along with it?

From the second half of the 15th century through all of the 16th century, the Portuguese were the dominant European presence on the African coast and in the slave trade. Some of the first interactions of the Portuguese with Africans took place on the coast of Senegal in 1444, with the Europeans timidly capturing fishermen to sell as slaves in Europe (Alencastro, 2000, p. 44; Heywood & Thornton, 2007, p. 9). They had come prepared for war, and with the intent to conquer new territories. The Senegalese reacted, fighting the Portuguese and defeating them with their poisoned arrows and their shallow-water boats, which could come off better on the coast than the big Portuguese ships. Because of these unsuccessful attempts to dominate the coastal inhabitants of West Africa, Portugal suspended the attacks, and agreed to establish commercial relations with the Senegalese: Africans would exchange gold and slaves they had captured from their own internal enemies for European and North African goods. According to Heywood and Thornton (2007), by the mid-16th century, Africans would receive Europeans of all nationalities—not just the Portuguese—interested in buying slaves according to the African laws and customs (p. 9).

From a linguistic point of view, there are two aspects of interest in the events just described. The first is the fact that Africans were not submissive; they did not surrender to the Europeans militarily, or diplomatically. They were able to negotiate with the Portuguese to get their own way. What was the language used in these business interactions? How did Europeans and Africans manage to communicate and reach an agreement? As is well known, this trade model is the typical situation in which *pidgins* have emerged. At such an early time in the history of interactions between Europeans and Africans, interpreters were probably still not available. But these first encounters, and the
commercial advantages they brought to both parties, certainly showed that neither of them would be able to rely on pidgins for too long. The concern for training people to act as interpreters soon arose: The Portuguese took some Africans back to Lisbon so that they learned Portuguese, and some Europeans, left in Africa for various reasons, ended up learning the local languages and were later recruited to mediate the transactions between the Europeans and the African rulers. Although

The second linguistic point of interest related to the history of the first contacts between Portuguese explorers and African natives on the Senegalese coast in the mid-15th century has to do with the captives offered to the Portuguese by the Africans in exchange for European merchandise. These captives had been enslaved as a result of African wars amongst different ethnic groups. They were kept together, but not all of them spoke the same language. In the context of the European colonial expansion, language contact was, then, something that happened not only between Europeans and Africans, but also among Africans themselves. With time, to prevent riots, the Portuguese intensified this practice of mixing captives of different ethnic groups and different languages. These people would be kept together for a certain amount of time, waiting for the ships which would transport them to the Portuguese colonies overseas. Sometimes they had to wait so long, that they even worked the land around their place of captivity to produce their own food (Bonvini, 2008, pp. 27, 31; Boxer, 1973, p. 243). In this context of reciprocal collaboration, they must have developed a vehicular language not only to communicate among themselves, but also with the Portuguese in charge of watching them. Portuguese was a language which was certainly not strange to African captives long before they were transported across the Atlantic.

The interest of Africans in establishing relations with Europeans—the Portuguese in particular—becomes clearer when we learn of their encounters in Central Africa (Kongo and Angola), the region from which came almost half of all the Africans who were forcefully brought to the American colonies, especially Brazil (Heywood, 2002, p. 8; Vansina, 2002, p. xi). According to Heywood and Thornton (2007), the relationship between Europeans and the peoples of West Central Africa resulted in a cultural blend of African and European features, unique in the history of South Atlantic colonization (p. 49).

The first contacts between the Portuguese and West Central Africans took place in 1483, in the kingdom of Kongo. These contacts later expanded to include the kingdoms of Ndongo (1518), Benguela (1546), and Angola (1575). Five years later, the kingdom of Loango contacted Portugal, asking the Portuguese government and church to send Christian missionaries to their territory. These kingdoms shared reasonably similar cultures and sociopolitical forms of organization. And although the kingdoms stretched over quite a vast territory, only two languages were spoken: Kikongo and Kimbundu. As both languages belong to the family of West Bantu languages, communication among their speakers was not too difficult. Linguistic interactions were so
unproblematic that around the middle of the 18th century, the Portuguese considered Kimbundu to be the *língua geral* of West Central Africa (Vansina, 2002, p. xii).

The initial relations between the Portuguese and the Africans of the kingdom of Kongo were particularly interesting, because they triggered a major cultural transformation in Africa, which, from the point of view of linguistic contact, is emblematic. Soon after the arrival of the explorers at the mouth of the Kongo River, a mission of Portuguese representatives was sent to the capital city of the kingdom, Mbanza Kongo, situated on the Western edge of the interior highlands. As it took these representatives some time to go back to the coast, the Portuguese ships returned to Portugal, taking along some of the coastal Kongolese inhabitants, one of whom was Kasuta, a noble of the royal house, who eventually was baptized in Portugal. In the meantime, Nzinga a Nkuwu, the Kongolese ruler, during his contact with his European visitors, developed an interest in the Portuguese culture. When Kasuta returned to Africa, Nzinga appointed him as his ambassador to Portugal. Kasuta went back to Europe with the mission of sending priests, masons, and carpenters to build churches in Kongo; farmers to teach the Kongolese to work the land; and women to teach them to bake bread. Most importantly, Kongolese children were sent to Portugal to learn to read and write, and to become Christian. When they went back to Kongo, these children, now bilingual and bicultural, were put in charge of spreading what they learned in Europe to the inhabitants of the kingdom. A school was established, Nzinga was baptized, becoming João I of Kongo, and a new cooperation system and a new culture emerged. A couple of years later (1516), under the reign of Afonso I, Nzinga’s son, schools were set up to teach more than 1,000 members of the noble families, while some other notables were sent to study in Portugal. But education did not seem to be restricted to the nobility: Carmelite missionaries crossing Southwest Kongo in 1584 reported that many villages had their own lay teachers (Heywood & Thornton, 2007, pp. 60–67).

The relevance of facts such as these goes virtually unnoticed in traditional works which view the history of the initial relations between Europe and Africa from the perspective of the slave trade. From the standpoint of more recent studies, the events described above indicate the emergence of a new culture which cannot be understood as a simple combination of European and African elements. It is, rather, a culture that started afresh, from the interpretations by Central Africans of European ethical and religious concepts, music, food, agricultural techniques, legal systems, and building styles, adapted then to their own interests and necessities.

This culture is what Heywood and Thornton (2007) call ‘the Atlantic creole culture.’ It involved the adoption of an African version of Christianity, the knowledge of European languages, some literacy, some political ideas, the adoption of mixed African and European names, clothes made of imported material, accessory items which combined European and African styles, music
which shared instruments and rhythms from both cultures, and new ways to prepare food. This new culture did not spread uniformly to all regions of Kongo, or to all social classes. It was most prominent at the provincial capitals and the settlements where the Portuguese traders resided, but all Kongolese had at least some contact with it (p. 67).

In Angola, the initial relations between Africans and Portuguese, around 1575, were less pacific. Changes in the policy of the Portuguese kingdom towards Africa now involved not only conquering and subjugating, but also specifically evangelizing the inhabitants of the region. As the Portuguese did not have the necessary military force to carry out that project, they had to rely on many alliances with different peoples of the regions, the Kongolese in particular. After several intermittent battles and wars, the African queen, Mbandi a Ngola, accepted baptism, adopted the Portuguese name of Dona Ana de Sousa, and promised to become a vassal of Portugal. The peace did not last long, however. In any case, amidst so many hostilities, Angola eventually became another important center of Atlantic creole culture (Heywood & Thornton 2007, p. 98). The contact with Christianity in Angola had started through the relations between the Angolans and the Kongolese, long before Portugal had decided to conquer the region. Later, Jesuit missions which came to Angola with the Portuguese governor helped spread the Christian faith, generating religious practices which combined Catholic and African rites. Heywood and Thornton (2007) report that the Jesuits working in the Luanda area could count with the help of an interpreter, a bilingual Portuguese born in São Tomé, who translated the Christian prayers into Kimbundu, forming “the basis for the kind of linguistic melding of traditions that took place earlier in Kongo and that would form the touchstone for Jesuit teaching” (p. 99).

Differently from what happened in Kongo, where the Kongolese rulers freely opened themselves to Christianity and European customs, in Angola the baptism of the sobas—local community leaders who acted as intermediary agents between the community and the government—albeit many times sought by them, was accompanied by their submission to vassalage, thus guaranteeing the Portuguese authority in Angola. In the ceremonies of soba baptism, they would take Portuguese names, wear clothes made of European fabric, and burn images of African idols. Baptized sobas would be given a Portuguese protector, thus increasing the contact between Europeans and Africans and leveraging the emergent Atlantic creole culture, which was supported also by the massive presence of Kongolese in the area, many of whom worked as lay teachers (Heywood & Thornton 2007, pp. 100–102).

Despite the differences between the historical circumstances in which the relations between the Portuguese and Africans were forged in Kongo and Angola, in both regions the contact among people coming from different cultures and speaking different languages was quite close. This proximity allowed for the constitution of a new ecology of cultural and linguistic traits contributed by both Europeans and Africans, and interpreted by the individuals
from both origins. This new ecology affected Africa and also Portugal. A growing number of Portuguese and Africans who were used to this new culture went to Portugal, taking with them the marks of the cultural and linguistic contact they had experienced. For the specific purposes of this paper, two facts are of particular relevance: many of the Portuguese participants in the slave trade in Africa, who were used to this new culture and to the new language varieties which emerged in its context, eventually visited Brazil, sometimes quite frequently; and, especially, a huge number of Central Africans from Kongo and Angola, forced to cross the Atlantic as slaves, had at least some familiarity with the Atlantic creole culture and the languages involved in its emergence long before they first arrived in the Americas (Heywood, 2002, p. 12).

Agents of language contact in the 16th-century South Atlantic: Africa and Brazil

The contact between Portuguese and Africans in Africa, the multilingual and multicultural environment created by this contact, and the new Atlantic creole culture, which emerged out of this contact in Central Africa, permeated the slave traffic as well. The first period of transplantation of African captives to the colonies involved a triangular movement by which the slave ships would leave the African ports, go to Lisbon, and then cross the Atlantic. But this route would soon be abandoned. With time, private entrepreneurs living both in Africa and in Brazil started to take control of the slave traffic. The Portuguese crown backed off, forgoing its monopoly on the slave trade, and authorizing the direct shipment of slaves from Africa to Brazil, thus narrowing not only the geographic but also the cultural and linguistic distances between the two places (Bonvini, 2008, p. 27).

The economic proximity between Africa (especially Angola) and Brazil from the 16th to the 19th centuries, in the view of Alencastro (2000), should be considered the fundamental basis upon which Brazil has grown as a nation. More than the exploration and colonization of the territory by European settlers, it was the commercial relations between Luso-Africans, Luso-Brazilians, and Africans, established in a transcontinental space—the Atlantic Ocean—that propelled the development of the new Portuguese colony in South America.

These close relations between Brazil and Africa were certainly mainly motivated by the growing need of slave labor in the sugar cane plantations along the coast of Brazil. But one geographical factor facilitated them: sea currents and winds made the voyages from the Brazilian to the African coast easier. It was more convenient for the inhabitants of the coast of Brazil to do business with people in Africa than with settlers of the northern region of Brazil, or with traders in the European metropolis. The commercial interests and the maritime routes linking Africa to Brazil expedited a different kind of connection, one which went far beyond the commercial enterprise: the cultural
and linguistic relationships built between the people of the Portuguese colonies on both sides of the Atlantic.

As seen, a great number of the Africans from West Central Africa who were forced to emigrate to Brazil had already had some contact with the Portuguese in Africa, or had been part of the emergent Atlantic creole culture resulting from the relations between Europeans and Africans in Kongo or in Angola. Many were Christian and had Portuguese names. Some of those who were originally alien to this new culture must have had at least some notion of it because of the contact they had with slaves coming from the regions where it originated, while waiting for the ships which would transport them to Brazil. Amidst all the disruption that the slave trade represents, and the suffering of the people forced to leave their families, their lands, their cultures, and their languages, in the case of the traffic to Brazil, at least some continuity can be found: Portuguese was not totally strange to many of them; some form of Christianity was familiar to quite a few of them; and they were used to communication in situations of multilingualism. This is in part what they found in Brazil (Bonvini, 2008, p. 32).

Many African languages were brought to Brazil during the slave trade, of which two seem to have become vehicular languages among the slaves: Kimbundu in the North and South, and Yoruba in Bahia (Rodrigues, 1977, p. 127). Languages live in a particular ecology of people and their socio-economic relations in a certain sociodemographic environment. When they leave this ecology, they change. The African languages brought to Brazil were thus uprooted languages. Still in Africa, they were also exposed to all sorts of contact with other African languages and with Portuguese; in Brazil, with a number of Amerindian languages. So, these languages cannot be thought of as being exactly identical to the idealized versions of languages spoken in Africa.

In Brazil, the Portuguese and the African slaves had to interact on a daily basis. On the plantations, in the villages, or in the European households, the proximity between Africans and Portuguese was considerable. Despite the fact that the African population was substantially larger, Portuguese was the economically dominant language. It seemed natural, then, that the slaves would attempt to speak Portuguese, a task which would probably seem less heavy for the many who had already had some contact with Portuguese in Africa. Even so, their learning of Portuguese must have followed the pattern of all adult second-language learning, which usually shows extensive interference of the first language grammar in the process of building the grammar of the so-called target language. In constant interaction with so many Africans speaking different varieties of Portuguese as a second language, it is reasonable to suppose that the native speakers of Portuguese may have been influenced by these different varieties, causing their own idiolects to adapt to the new linguistic situations they were facing. As pointed out before, in situations of language contact, speakers are interested in joint projects of meaning construction, not in preserving the structure of their own native languages.
The same can be said about Portuguese. As uprooted as any of the African languages, and as subject to the influence of a multitude of different languages spoken in Europe and in Africa, the Portuguese spoken in the colony was, from the start, different from the idealized version of Portuguese spoken in Europe at the same time. Moreover, as seen, today it is impossible to even think of homogeneity when we consider any kind of linguistic interaction, let alone in colonial times, when the European languages had just started showing specific differentiations among themselves.

Considering the scenario of intensive contact between African languages and Portuguese both in Africa and in the colony, it seems to us that the participation of African languages in the emergence of Brazilian Portuguese grammar is undeniable. Two questions must be addressed now: (a) why isn’t Brazilian Portuguese a creole language (or the result of a decreolization process)?; and (b) how can some of the grammatical characteristics of Brazilian Portuguese be explained from the perspective of linguistic contact?

Why Brazilian Portuguese is not a creole language

The so-called creole languages are languages which have evolved from the continuous contact of non-European with European populations, usually of low socio-economic background. Most creoles have emerged in colonies in which the plantation system was the main economic activity (Chaudenson, 2001; Muñwene, 2008).

Contrary to what the literature on creoles contends, Muñwene (2008) explains the emergence of creoles as a long and gradual development from vernaculars spoken by a population of both European and non-European descent in the communities which preceded the establishment of plantations. This population of mixed origins did not live in egalitarian conditions, but there did not seem to be a substantial distance between the group of Europeans and non-Europeans. For many years in the beginning of the colonization process both groups worked in close daily contact in small farms until the European settlers had enough money to start the plantation enterprise. It was only then that the slaves were separated from the European population. By this time, they could speak the European language of the colony with a certain level of proficiency. But with less frequent contact with speakers of European languages, the new colonial language spoken by the slaves lacked new input. As slaves basically now communicated only among themselves, it was only natural that the traces of features of their native languages present in the new vernacular tended to be reinforced. With the arrival of new groups of workers from Africa, more reinforcement was given to the African traces of the new vernaculars. Even so, a large proportion of the vocabulary of creole languages and many of their structural characteristics can be traced back to nonstandard varieties of the European languages which participated in their formation.
The difference between creole languages and any other colonial vernacular is not of any linguistic nature; it is due to a social process which characterizes most of the plantation colonial enterprise, by which Africans were segregated from Europeans, thus losing contact with their languages (Chaudenson, 2001; Mufwene, 2008).

This is precisely why Brazilian Portuguese cannot be considered a creole language. Despite the fact that the Brazilian economy relied heavily on large sugar cane plantations during the 16th and 17th centuries, the vernacular which emerged in Brazil cannot be considered to be a creole. And the reason for this is the fact that in Brazil the relative integration of the labor force, regardless of whether it consisted of Africans, Native Brazilians, or European servants, was not completely disrupted by the implementation of the plantation system. In Brazil, miscegenation seems to have been more extensive than in other colonies, preventing the confinement of Africans and the variety of Portuguese they were speaking at that time (Mufwene, 2008, p. 39).

If there is no reason to consider that creoles have ever emerged in Brazil, there is also no reason to think of any process of decreolization. As for the claim that Brazilian Portuguese, especially in its popular variety, is the outcome of a ‘poor’ acquisition of Portuguese by the African slaves (and also by the Native Brazilians) (Lucchesi, 2009, p. 71), it seems to us that there is no reason to suppose that there was any particular characteristic in the second-language acquisition process experienced by Africans and Native Brazilians that may be considered to be ‘poor’; nor is there any reason to suppose that the transmission of the linguistic knowledge of the slaves to their children was somewhat ‘irregular’. Second-language acquisition, especially by adults, is known to produce variable results, regardless of the circumstances in which it takes place. Why should it be different in the case of Africans and Native Brazilians acquiring Portuguese as a second language during the colonial era in Brazil?

One final point to be made is that, as mentioned before, we cannot ascribe the characteristics which set Brazilian Portuguese apart from European Portuguese to Africans and Native Brazilians alone. The alleged ‘irregularities’ in the formation of this new colonial vernacular are as much due to the Portuguese explorers and settlers as to the Africans and Native Brazilians. A basic principle of linguistic use is that all parties involved in any interaction adjust their idiolects; dialect accommodation is a subconscious and automatic process (Trudgill, 2008, p. 252). It is by means of these adjustments that languages evolve and change. The interactions among the Portuguese, who had come from different regions and spoke different dialects, led to a situation of dialect mixture, which is a step in the direction of the formation of a new dialect (p. 242). The interactions between the European settlers and the indigenous and African slaves, who were learning Portuguese as a second
language, led to another process of dialect adjustment, thereby contributing to the changes which were the seeds of present-day Brazilian Portuguese.

Towards an explanation for the features of Brazilian Portuguese which takes language contact into account

Mufwene (2001, 2008) puts forward a challenging proposal to explain language change and language evolution. Language is seen as a heterogeneous population of idiolects. Every speaker of a language has at his disposal a set of variants which may serve the same communicative purpose—alternative words, alternative pronunciations of the same word, alternative grammatical structures, etc. The idiolect of an individual will develop in accordance with the characteristics of the particular social ecology in which language acquisition takes place. This ecology will determine which variant will be dominant in an idiolect; the other variants will be available for the interpretation of the speech of others, or for use to make oneself understood by speakers of different varieties of the language (Mufwene, 2008, p. 115). Participants in any linguistic interaction constantly accommodate each other’s idiolects by means of creative innovations. These innovations result from processes of competition and selection of the available variants, which may trigger changes in the idiolects involved (Mufwene, 2001, p. 12). In other words, the weight originally attributed to each variant may switch, depending on the pressures of the communicative situation the individual is involved in—the variant which used to be the dominant one may become secondary, making way for a less preferred one to become dominant. These changes in weights can be temporary, applying just in the case of one particular interaction; or they may last and spread to the whole speech community.

In situations of multilingualism, a similar process of competition and selection takes place. Mufwene proposes that linguistic contacts give way to the constitution of a ‘feature pool’ (a notion akin to the one of a ‘gene pool’ in biology), formed by features of all the languages in contact. New vernaculars will emerge by means of a process of competition and selection of features out of this feature pool. The notion of competition is related to the different weighting ascribed to each of the features; and selection has to do with the preferences of speakers for one feature over another.

In the case of Brazilian Portuguese, during the colonial years, first in Africa, then in Brazilian territory, feature pools were formed including features of all languages in contact: at least several dialects of 16th-century Portuguese; several African languages in all of their varieties; and later, a huge number of Native Brazilian languages, at least. The new colonial vernacular which is now Brazilian Portuguese emerged out of a process of competition and selection from these pools of features.21

This model of language evolution and change based on the competition and selection of features contributed by all languages in contact is fully appropriate for the description of the situation of language emergence we have
been presenting. First and foremost, it does not entail that the outcome of language contact is but a simple transfer of a lexical item or a grammatical feature from one language to the other. Regardless of what a word or grammatical structure meant, what its function was, or how it behaved morphosyntactically in the language of origin, in the new language it most probably undergoes changes. Apparently, such words may seem identical to their counterparts in the language which contributed the features, but in the new system they may acquire new values, and these new values may reflect something of the other languages which participated in the linguistic contact as well.

Second, the process of competition and selection involves the active participation of the people who live and interact in that ecology of language contact. Human beings are responsible for the weighting of features and for their selection. Establishing the configuration of the speech community in which the process takes place, in terms of socio-economic relations throughout the history of interactions, is then of fundamental importance to the understanding of the broad picture behind the speakers’ options. When this model is applied to a situation of contact which took place many centuries ago, as discussed in this paper, and with the limited historical sources of information about language proper, we must attempt to reconstruct this broad picture from general historical works. That was our objective here.

Final remarks
With the goal of discussing the emergence of Brazilian Portuguese in a multilingual context and the agents involved in it, we started by pointing out that language evolution and change should not be considered as an internally motivated process. Languages are living organisms which emerge, develop, and subsist in an ecology of multiple dimensions. As any living organism, they are subject to the influences and pressures coming from without. To understand how new varieties of languages emerge, we must address issues which go beyond linguistics. In the case of Brazilian Portuguese, History informs us that the Portuguese that was brought to South America in the early years of colonization was already the result of many previous situations of linguistic contact with other European languages, and especially with a variety of African languages spoken in West and Central Africa. In Africa, Portuguese and Africans alike contributed to the development of a new culture formed by both European and African elements and values, all reinterpreted according to the views of the peoples living that particular moment of the Portuguese colonial expansion. This culture and the language varieties of Portuguese and African languages which arose with it were brought to Brazil by Portuguese explorers and by African slaves. From the contacts between these people in Africa, in Brazil, and across the ocean, a new colonial vernacular emerged. Brazilian Portuguese can then be thought of as a transatlantic language, forged by people on both sides of the Atlantic during centuries of close and constant interactions of such magnitude that they have been considered the foundation of Brazil as a nation.
Notes

1 In this respect some important references are Ambar, Gonzaga, & Negrão (2004); Ambar, Negrão, Veloso, & Graça (2009); Galves (2001); Kato & Raposo (1996); Naro & Scherre (2007); Negrão & Viotti (2008, 2010, 2011); Roberts & Kato (1993); and Tarallo (1983), among many others.

2 The first voyages which took the Portuguese to the West and Central African coast were privately funded, but were all royally sponsored. Only when the prospects to circumnavigate Africa and to cross the Atlantic became more real did royal patronage begin to dominate the navigation enterprise (Thornton, 1992, p. 35).

3 In this paper, we will not discuss the contact between European languages and the indigenous languages of Brazil. We will focus on the contact history between 16th-century Portuguese and African languages, precisely because, as we hope to make clear, the variety of Portuguese that met the indigenous languages of the Brazilian colony had already been submitted to the influence of African languages.

4 The claim is that no language is immune to the contact of other languages. Hence, all linguistic development is affected, to a greater or lesser extent, by external pressures from different languages—or different idiolects—in contact (Mufwene, 2008, pp. 31–32; Trudgill, 2008).

5 We refer particularly to the Stammbaum Theorie proposed by August Schleicher in his lifework. See especially Schleicher (1874).

6 In this respect, see Clark (1996), and Tomasello (2003, 2008), among many.

7 One important issue in the study of linguistic contact is related to the question of how changes which started at the individual level spread to the communal level. On that subject, see Weinreich, Labov, & Herzog (1998/2006); Keller (1994); Croft (2000); and Mufwene (2008), among others.

8 People in medieval Europe were not conscious of the differences between Latin and the vernaculars spoken everyday (Lloyd, 1991). In the 13th century, literate people started to realize that similar vernaculars (with some variations) were spoken in coherent areas, and that there were differences between them on the one hand, and Latin, still the preferred language for writing, on the other (Janson, 1991). However, it was only in the 15th century that the European linguistic map began to show some boundaries, albeit still rather fuzzy. Latin lived on, and Greek was studied, but the emergence of a commercial and secular middle class together with the development of the nation states, the translation of the Bible and the use of vernaculars in religious services, and the production of printed books are some of the facts that led to a greater awareness of the linguistic differences in late medieval Europe (Robins, 1988).

9 The commerce between Southern and Northern Europe was so important that this turned out to be an incentive for the development of the navigation routes from the Mediterranean to the North and Baltic seas. As early as 1277, voyages linking the Mediterranean to Northern Europe have been recorded. This is important for two reasons: (a) to show that, as expected, there did not seem to be any serious linguistic and cultural barriers in the interactions among Europeans, regardless of the distance between their places of origin; and (b) it has been argued that the sailors who had been accustomed to these European voyages were the ones to first engage in the larger exploration of the Atlantic (Thornton, 1992, p. 22). Beyond the many different kinds of expertise these people had, they were also very used to linguistic contact.

10 See, for example, Galves & de Sousa (2003).

11 To illustrate this point, we refer to a voyage to the Canary Islands in 1341, realized under Portuguese auspices, with a crew formed by men of mixed origins, and an Italian captain (Thornton, 1992, p. 28).

12 Africa had a more productive and diversified economy than has been normally believed. The trade with Europeans was not of vital necessity for the African economy. From the African point of view, it was possibly just one more step towards diversification. Recent investigations on the interactions between Europeans and Africans have pointed out that the control of these interactions was in the hands of the Africans. As unexpected as it may seem, the Europeans did not have the military power to force the Africans to engage in any trade, unless their rulers agreed to it (Thornton, 1992, p. 7). Seen from the perspective of the Portuguese, when they discovered that there was a well-developed economy in Africa that could bring them all kinds of commercial advantages, they abandoned the raid-and-trade or raid-and-conquer policy attempted previously,
to accept the African terms to their negotiations (Thornton, 1992, p. 38).

13 Pidgins are simplified forms of communication between people or groups of people who speak different languages. As Mufwene (2008) points out, pidgins arise in the case of intermittent but egalitarian contacts among people, such as in situations of trade like the one just described (p. 76).

14 The first Portuguese who stayed in Africa were called lançados. In general, they were outlaws, adventurers, or cristãos-novos (new-Christians) in exile. According to Alencastro (2000), the lançados quickly adapted to the African lifestyle, dressed and marked their faces and bodies according to the custom of the local ethnic groups, and soon became busy slave traders. One of them, originally called João Ferreira, but known to the Fulas as Gana-Goga—‘the man who speaks all languages’—played an important role in the alliances made between native Africans and the Portuguese traders (p. 48).

15 How was it possible for them to communicate? This was not a trading situation, in which communication is more to the point. If Nzinga a Nkuwu became interested in the Portuguese culture, the conversation between the Portuguese representatives and the African rulers must have touched upon some deep subjects. One possible explanation is that the Portuguese may have brought interpreters along with them.

16 The authors credit the term to Ira Berlin. ‘Creole’ seems to be a very appropriate term to describe the culture that emerged in 16th-century Kongo out of the interactions between the Portuguese and the Kongolese. When applied to languages, however, the term ‘creole’ acquires a different connotation. We will come back to this.

17 On the way to Portugal, they would oftentimes stop in the island of São Tomé (a center of sugar growing and also of slave distribution), where captives of different regions were kept together in a rich multicultural and multilingual environment, waiting to be taken away to areas in which the Portuguese had commercial interests. In Lisbon they would meet other Africans waiting to be shipped to Brazil, in a situation of intense multilingualism. Aboard the ships, linguistic contact would again ensue: While crossing the Atlantic, Africans from different backgrounds, speaking different languages, had to find a means to communicate.

18 One fact that can illustrate that people living in different parts of the Brazilian territory had a closer relation with Africa than with other regions of Brazil is that the Luanda diocese was administratively under the archbishop of Bahia; differently, the diocese of Maranhão was under the archbishop of Lisbon, not Bahia (Alencastro, 2000)!

19 Bonvini (2008, 2009) shows that the first grammar of Kimbundu was written in Brazil by a Jesuit priest called Pedro Dias. This fact can be described as evidence that a variety of Kimbundu was in fact spoken in the 17th century.

20 This proposal explains both the emergence of new language varieties and of new cultures, such as the Atlantic creole culture mentioned above, which evolved in Central Africa (and also in the European colonies) in the 15th and 16th centuries.

21 This is a very simplified scenario of what must have been the case. The idea of a feature pool formation and of the process of competition and selection should be understood as a very dynamic and local organization. Certainly, there was not just ‘one’ feature pool, with features of all the languages at the same time. As interactions proceeded, the pool dynamically changed, with certain features becoming preferable to others. A certain preference might spread to a speech community, and then change again when members of this speech community interacted with people from different communities. Brazil is a big territory, comprising then (and now) many different speech communities. The process of competition and selection and language evolution and change should then be understood as a complex system, always self-organizing and adapting according to the speakers’ needs in different interactive situations.

References

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