

**PORTUGUESE, AN ACENTRIC LANGUAGE: REFLECTIONS FROM A
TEACHING PORTUGUESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN CHINA
PERSPECTIVE**

***PORTUGUÊS, LÍNGUA ACÊNTRICA: REFLEXÕES PELA MÃO DO ENSINO DE PLE
NA CHINA***

***PORTUGUÉS, LENGUA ACÉNTRICA: REFLEXIONES DESDE LA PERSPECTIVA
DE LA ENSEÑANZA DEL PORTUGUÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA EN CHINA***

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ABSTRACT: This article promotes an essayistic reflection on the Portuguese language, its spaces, changes, and (in)definitions based on perspectives arising from the experience of teaching Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PLE) in China over a decade. In this context, we criticize the concept of pluricentric language for making the diversity or decentralization of the Portuguese language depend on the imperatives of linguistic norms, extending a normative, polarized, and, essentially, a bicentric perspective of the Portuguese language. In this article, we defend the readjustment of the concept of pluricentric language to plurinormative language (because its scope is not in spaces or diversity, but the political-linguistic standardization of the Portuguese language) and we promote the concept of Portuguese as an acentric language, made of multiple and interconnected cultures, identities, and references.

KEYWORDS: Portuguese. Acentric language. Plurinormative. Portuguese as a foreign language. China.

RESUMO: *Este artigo promove uma reflexão ensaística sobre a língua portuguesa, os seus espaços, cambiantes e (in)definições com base nas perspectivas decorrentes da experiência de ensinar Português Língua Estrangeira (PLE) na China ao longo de uma década. Neste âmbito, criticamos o conceito de língua pluricêntrica no âmbito do ensino de PLE por fazer depender a diversidade ou descentralização da língua portuguesa dos imperativos das normas linguísticas, prolongando uma visão normativa, polarizada e, essencialmente, bicêntrica da língua portuguesa. Neste artigo defendemos o reajustamento do conceito de língua pluricêntrica para língua plurinormativa (porque o seu escopo não está nos espaços ou na diversidade, mas na normatização político-linguística da língua portuguesa) e promovemos o conceito de português enquanto língua acêntrica, feita de múltiplas e interligadas culturas, identidades e referências.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Português. Língua acêntrica. Plurinormativa. PLE. China.*

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RESUMEN: *Este artículo promueve una reflexión ensayística sobre la lengua portuguesa, sus espacios y (in)definiciones a partir de perspectivas surgidas de la experiencia de la enseñanza del portugués como lengua extranjera (PLE) en China durante la última década. En este contexto, criticamos el concepto de lengua pluricéntrica en el contexto de la enseñanza de PLE por hacer depender la diversidad o descentralización de la lengua portuguesa de los imperativos de las normas lingüísticas, perpetuando una visión normativa, polarizada y, esencialmente, bicéntrica de la lengua portuguesa. En este artículo defendemos el reajuste del concepto de lengua pluricéntrica a lengua plurinormativa (porque su alcance no está en los espacios o la diversidad, sino en la estandarización político-lingüística de la lengua portuguesa) y promovemos el concepto del portugués como lengua acéntrica, hecha de culturas, identidades y referencias múltiples e interconectadas.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Portugués. Lengua acéntrica. Plurinormativa. Portugués como lengua extranjera. China.*

Introduction

In this article, we intend to make an analysis of the concept of Portuguese multicentric language, currently revisited and in vogue in the field of Applied Linguistics and Language Didactics. To this end, we study the meanings of this concept and uncover the limitations or inaccuracies of its theoretical foundation and its approach in the area of language teaching. Through the analysis of the literature on this subject and the experience of teaching PLE in China, a territory where the teaching of Portuguese has been acquiring relevance and prominence, we elaborate alternatives to this concept in terms of nomenclature, and we discuss the pluricentric issue applied to the Portuguese language. It is a language with more than one national standard (two, concretely) and therefore binormative (or plurinormative, if one prefers to avoid the prefix bi- and the exclusionary and binary connotation that expresses). We understand that all languages require a normative character to establish, study, and teach. However, the focus on pluricentric discussion reduces language to its normative, political and polarized dimension. The Portuguese language is made of freedom and plurality so reducing it to its normative aspect or to certain geographical spaces is to depersonalize it, diminish it and oppress it. The personality of the Portuguese language should be pluri-, but not centric, for the sake of its teaching, its future and its identity(s).

Pluricentric definitions and interpretations

The concept of pluricentric language, although not recent, has been recovered, studied and discussed in the field of Linguistics and Portuguese Language. According to Clyne (1992) a pluricentric language has several standardized or interacting forms, which usually correspond to different countries, unlike monocentric languages, which have only a formally standardized version. In other words, this concept implies the existence of several centers in interaction with their own national variety and the existence of codified language standards. In addition to this network of contiguous varieties with several centers, all languages are somewhat pluricentric, in that they inevitably contain internal variation and different local norms (SILVA, 2013).

Individuals develop skills in various language codes, by will or by necessity, to respond to the needs of communicating with others who do not share the same codes. The heterogeneity of the language makes each norm necessarily have in itself the presence of the other. In the case Portuguese, there are numerous variations that breathe within each of the countries where the language is official (BATOREO; SILVA, 2012; SILVA, 2018).

For these reasons, pluricentric languages are "unifying and dividing peoples" because they unify people through the use of language and divide them through the development of norms and national and linguistic variables (SILVA, 2018, p. 1).

In this article, we highlight the definition advanced by Batoreo (2014) when he states that in relation to the Portuguese language, pluricentrism is divided between two national centers, Portuguese and Brazilian, as well as local registers present in African countries such as Angola or Mozambique:

Pluricentrism means that we are faced with two national varieties of the Portuguese language, the Portuguese standard and the Brazilian norm (regardless of the dialectal variation existing in each of these countries) as well as the local varieties spoken in each of the other countries (BATOREO, 2014, p. 4, our translation).

The pluricentrism of the Portuguese language has an essentially bipolar character, based on Portugal and Brazil and, therefore, is not exempt from disputes over the geopolitical space of the language. As Clyne (1992, p. 1) argues, linguists based in historically older or more political and economically more powerful centers tend to view other varieties as deviations from their norm, or on an equal footing with regional dialects. Although it has been three decades since the author signed these words, some of these visions solidified over time are still felt, more or less underhanded, among academics who are dedicated to the study of the

Portuguese language. Next, we will look at the ambiguity that the concept of pluricentrism applied to the context of the Portuguese language seems to denote.

Portuguese language: from pluricentrism to plurinormativism

The literature indicates that the pluricentric discussion is established around linguistic variants and norms, so the most appropriate term could be that of plurinormative language. In our view, the multinormative adjective, concerning plurinormativism, contains greater accuracy and allows a better basis for dialogue, because it does not refer to a centric or exclusive meaning. Although in the literature in Portuguese on language teaching we have not found records of its use, we found that it has been present among theoretical studies in the field of French (BLANCHET, 1998) or Spanish (HERRERO, 2019; 2019) language studies; (MASUDA, 2020).

For Blanchet (1998), the concept of multinormative language has a structuralist character very much linked to language levels or registers, while Herrero (2019) expresses a more current and comprehensive contribution of plurinormativism that stands against the belief in the superiority of one variety, considered exemplary, in relation to the others:

The recognition of plurinormativism is pronounced in the opposite direction to lectocentrism. It is part of cultural relativism, which practices respect for other cultures (languages) while valuing one's own. This leads to the acceptance of cultural plurality (HERRERO, 2019, p. 137, our translation).

From Herrero's perspective, plurinormativism has a clearer and more inclusive dimension concerning the acceptance of linguistic plurality, which does not refer to a centric view, that is, it does not emphasize centrisms while announcing plurality and diversity.

The analysis of the literature allows us to verify that most of the studies dedicated to the pluricentrism of the Portuguese language are limited to the exclusive and binominal circuit Portugal/Brazil with some sporadic references to the Portuguese of Angola, and less to that of Mozambique or Cape Verde, most often to highlight its similarities and proximity to the Portuguese of Portugal, and thus further depersonalizing and marginalizing them. This pluricentric statement may thus be fallacious, that is, leafy to the ear by its encompassor and plural prefix, but semantically centered almost absolutely in a fossilized normative, bipolar and essentially bicentric perspective of the Portuguese language, from which it needs to release.

The almost unethical message of pluricentrism, in which *the center* appears linked to the delineation or definition of an established and politically recognized norm, can itself be an

obstacle to inclusive dialogue, diversity, multitudes and multiculturalism, as well as to the true international dimension of the Portuguese language by capitalizing on the same socio-spatial references (centers) and reducing the language to its political-linguistic character, making it, therefore, conservative and less flexible or plural. The concept of pluricentric language announces plurality, but ends up fomenting fiefdoms or borders, being mostly marked, "manipulated" or "disputed" between linguists and theorists of Portugal and Brazil, as Mozambican writer Mia Couto (2008, p. 8, our translation) refers:

I think it's serious to have manipulations... On the part of those who want to be more than others, of those who dispute others! I think the dispute is between Portugal and Brazil, who want to use this flag as an instrument to seek privilege in the relationship with other Portuguese-speaking countries."

These manipulations and contentions hide under the concept of pluricentric language, whose approach conceals the same often (bi)polarization of the Portuguese language while proclaiming plurality, as if it needed to convince oneself, to believe in its own round words by force of so much pronouncing them, instead of feeling or genuinely defending them.

For example, some studies on this theme, such as Duarte's (2016) on the norm to be taught in the context of Portuguese as a pluricentric language, often mention that the Mozambique Portuguese or the Angola Portuguese approach the European Portuguese, thus presenting the latter, in a very natural and unchallenged way as a model or "centric" example, Herrero (2019) and, previously, Clyne (1992).

But why is the Portuguese or Mozambican being more like the Portuguese of Portugal? If we consider it unreasonable to say that Angolans or Mozambicans are more like the Portuguese than with any other peoples, why do we insist on saying that the Portuguese of Angola is closer to the Portuguese of Portugal if it has its identity, its characteristics, its worlds and if it is an expression of its society and its unique experiences and realities?

In normative terms, the Portuguese of Portugal and the Portuguese of Brazil are still today basic and assumed references from which we have difficulty in freeing ourselves even if sometimes we seem to defend or try to convince otherwise.

In this article, we position ourselves against the demagogic pluricentrism made of main centers (and urban) and peripheral and dependent centers as if they were, at the core, branches or subsidiaries of the Portuguese-speaking company. Based on our world-class knowledge arising from Portuguese's teaching experience in China, which we will then elucidate, we advocate a *renewed*, inclusive and free language from the anchors that attach it to the same spaces and to the same models or conceptions.

An acentric view of the Portuguese language by the hand of PLE teaching in China

China currently represents an important space in the dissemination of the Portuguese language due to the economic dimension and the global interests of competitiveness and employability associated with it. If we exclude countries with vast communities of emigrants from Portuguese-speaking countries, China and Senegal, where Portuguese is taught as an optional subject in the country's official education system to about 44,000 students (RAMOS, 2020), are the countries where Portuguese's education has been growing more markedly. This growth in education Portuguese China in recent years has been reflected in an increase in the number of institutions, teachers and students. Recent data point to about 50 higher education institutions with Portuguese courses in China that include approximately five thousand students (JATOBÁ, 2020; YAN; ALBUQUERQUE, 2019). In this context, we consider it appropriate to develop research into the specificities surrounding the teaching and learning of Portuguese China.

China's openness abroad and the strengthening of bilateral relations with Portuguese-speaking countries has led to a proliferation of higher institutions with Portuguese. This expansion of education in China was closely linked to the intensification of China's economic and trade relations with Brazil and Angola (YE, 2014, p. 53). The economic reasons for the establishment of business and commercial links with Brazil and with the Portuguese-speaking African countries, of which Angola stands out, have led to a high demand and employability of young graduates in Portuguese. The affirmation and internationalization of the Portuguese language linked to its economic value has found in China an important ally to reinforce its importance worldwide. Every year, hundreds of Chinese students choose to join this huge Portuguese-speaking family.

We believe that all teachers who teach Portuguese abroad will recall some not so obvious reasons that cause students to embrace this language. We would have numerous to mention since in China we have already introduced the Portuguese language to the most diverse audiences, such as workers from companies in the process of going to Brazil, Angola or Mozambique, children to join family members in Portugal and Brazil, avid language collectors and even holders of golden visas in Portugal. Typically, the reasons that lead young Chinese people to study Portuguese are the instrumental issues related to the prospects for a professional future (YE, 2014) or family reasons for underage young people to be able to join their families abroad and thus have the opportunity to attend more flexible education systems and less subject to competition and succession of exams (PIRES, 2019). However, the motivation to study

Portuguese also makes several exceptions or fortuitous, such as those we experienced and started to mention: a student who joined the Portuguese because she had as idol the Brazilian pilot Rubens Barrichello (Kaká, Arthur Zanetti, Cristiano Ronaldo or Michel Teló are other personalities of which we have already registered the contribution to bring students to the family of the Portuguese); three students who came to meet the Portuguese to read Fernando Pessoa in the original (it is not of the most unusual motivations due to the influence of literature in this process – Clarice Lispector, José Saramago and Jorge Amado are other registered names); a student attracted by the figure of Vasco da Gama (it is part of the history curriculum of Chinese secondary education); a student with a great admiration for volleyball and, in particular, for the Brazilian Olympic teams of this sport. Among many others, such as the young woman who after finishing her degree in journalism at another university, decided to take a sabbatical and look for us to learn Portuguese. After a year of enormous perseverance, the young woman took the proficiency exam and was able to obtain the certification that allowed her to access the master's degree she now attends in Lisbon. The student's motivation to accomplish this goal? Act. The Faúlha that connected her to the Portuguese language were the songs of Agir. She became so passionate or stuck in the songs of the artist Portuguese Agir, even though she did not understand the lyrics at that time, which eventually directed her life to the Portuguese language and then to Portugal. That is, it is not only the economic and professional value of the language, often the interest or motivation is born of personal tastes, affinities and of events or unforeseen events that make unique the days and lives of each person.

Based on these peculiarities of the Portuguese Foreign Language, we question whether it will represent the vitality of the Portuguese of China, in the light of the shake of pluricentric flag-goers, one of the (pluri)centers of the Portuguese language? Is the Portuguese of Senegal where education has spread in the public education system another center? And what about the countries or regions where the various communities with Portuguese-speaking people are present?

The pluricentric theory applied to the teaching of language suggests to be much more centric than plural, because it does not involve all plurality or diversity that lives within the Portuguese language, and that constitute its greatest richness and one of its most beautiful distinctive features. The cultures and nuances that build it and spread throughout the world, even the most remote and unofficial. A language that expresses and mixes everything a little, revealing from its intricacies the classic and tropical, the sea and the desert and people of all nature. A language that has germinated others and left offspring, from the Creole of West Africa to those of India and Southeast Asia, from the Patuá of Macau to the Papiamento of the

Caribbean Antilles. A language that even has the *Amazonian*, a kind of synopsis of the Portuguese language itself. The Portuguese language has so much nature, so many worlds, lives in so many places that we do not know all its scope and fullness.

But the Portuguese language is today much more than this knitting of us and historical skeins, exploring and living in the most dispersed spaces and acquired in various ways, from the classrooms to digital applications. The Portuguese language has a life that in today's globalized world goes far beyond its traditional spatial references. Thus, in the light of PLE's teaching, the pluricentric discussion assumes an antagonistic, adverse value, because it reduces, individualizes and centralizes it when the goal should be to spread the language, promote it and take it to more people and places, creating new references and connections. For these purposes, division or fragmentation are weakening and counterproductive, because what should be taught is only the Portuguese language.

The pluricentric theme may have relevance at the level of the national and internal varieties of the language, but the academic discussion that has focused on the norm that should be taught in PLE seems to us ancillary to the promotion of its international dimension and for the convergence and intercomprehension for the teaching of the Portuguese language, regardless of the standard adopted.

For a PLE teacher it should be more important to take into account the context in which it is included and the needs of its learners in order to be able to teach the language more fruitfully, than to make concerns, most often fruitless, about the standard used. It is, above all, important that teachers see a current, international and inclusive perspective that awakens students to the plurality and linguistic diversity (including the recognition of local languages in some countries), social and cultural language, regardless of the language standard they use. As Mia Couto (2008) points out, with regard to Portuguese-speaking countries, it is more important to disclose what each people is building, their common history, as well as their common identity assets, than to focus on agreements or norms that, in most cases, only reinforce divisions.

Inferences: manifest by an acentric language

In this article, we position ourselves by the affirmation and vigor of the Portuguese language without normative overlaps or the recurrent centrisms camouflaged with good-looking synonymy.

We advocate the promotion of an acentric Portuguese language that considers its spaces, its uses and its people equally. For a Portuguese language that is no more linguists than literate,

it is no more artists than artisans, religious than agnostics. Its strength, its soul lies precisely in the fact that it has no owners or corifeus, however much norms, ties or theoretical chains that want to put on it.

We welcome the increasingly expressive voice that African countries are bringing to the scientific discussion of issues related to the Portuguese language, promoting new perspectives and approaches that include the role and space of other national languages (MINGAS, 2007; MADEIRA, 2013; NGUNGA, 2012), freeing itself from the peripheral and secondary role to which they have always been voted and *disputed*.

We call for dialogue and cooperation between Portuguese-speaking African countries not to perpetuate this false impression (and depersonalization) that African variants are "similar" either to the Portuguese of Portugal or with the Portuguese of Brazil, much by the fruit of their study, their artistic expression, and their voice being announced through these two countries.

As Mia Couto (2008, p. 1) states, Portuguese-speaking African countries "are at zero degree" of mutual cultural knowledge, and there is still a "typically colonial triangle" and the absence of exchanges in the field of literature, art or culture:

To know what's going on or what's going on in Cape Verde or Angola or Guinea-Bissau or in Sao Tome and Principe I have to go to Europe, I pass by Portugal. This typically colonial triangle continues to exist (MIA COUTO, 2018, p. 1, our translation)

We promote a Portuguese language without centers or capitals where all in their own way contribute to its boiling. We consider that the Portuguese language has as many centers as its speakers and that all differences must be celebrated, without, however, allowing them to divide us.

We believe that one of the characteristics of an international language must be its acentrism, that is, the absence of centers. The opposite of an acentric language such as Portuguese can be verified through Chinese or Mandarin.

In China although there are hundreds of languages (which are officially considered dialects) through the vast territory of the world's most populous country, only the national language, or *common language*, is taught and recognized globally (FRANCIS, 2016; HU, 2017, KURPASKA, 2017). In addition, Chinese have a clearly assumed and defined center by both teaching and linguistic policy agents and Chinese culture and society. The standardization of the common language was elaborated around Chinese used in the North region, specifically in

Beijing (FRANCIS, 2016). Even students who learn Mandarin to foreigners prioritize exchanges at higher education institutions in Beijing or Tianjin because they openly agree that Mandarin in the North region is the most *correct*, most erudite, with the best pronunciation and on which the language standard is based. This is an example of a political, socially and culturally centric language with a clearly recognized and globally accepted pole.

The Portuguese as a language of diversity, of many spaces, people and identities, must preserve and promote its inherently acentric nature. Moreover, it must be a language without the pride of having or measuring centers (my center is better than yours), which have the consequence of stimulating demarcation or segregation.

The borders of the Portuguese language are increasingly tenuous. The borders are no longer only the sea, which the Portuguese language sees or contemplates, but above all the people who use it and recreate it through several and scattered corners of the world. The richness and diversity of a safe language of its multiple identities, and its interconnected cultures and references is not done through the construction of centric or pluricentric walls, but of openness, equidifference and active dialogue and interaction. By an acentric language, by the Portuguese language.

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