

**Linguistic, affective and disciplinary territories:
Teaching Portuguese across the divide.**

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Students often come to the language class with an agenda. They may be motivated by numerous factors be they personal (family, friends, relationships), work-related, culturally motivated (an interest in travel, music, dance, film), or academic (related to their course of study or research interests). In Portuguese, as in other languages, our classes draw students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels from very diverse fields and disciplines, but there is, of course, no right or wrong motivation for learning a language. The lure of the beach, be it one in Rio, the Algarve or Inhambane is as good as any, but more often than not it is our students' newly acquired language skills that take them on an often unexpected journey, both intellectual and physical, to far-flung corners of the world. I am awed by the seemingly infinite possibility for personal and intellectual growth that the language classroom brings about and by the life-altering experiences for which it may pave the way.

In the case of Portuguese, the decision of which variant to teach in our classrooms may hinge upon a number of factors: geographical location and the nature of the local community (whether or not we are teaching heritage learners), institutional history (relationships with the community or study abroad programs), the availability of suitable textbooks (which have, until recently, divided the two variants) and, most importantly, the teaching body. Since the role of the language program, particularly in the case of "lesser taught" languages, where most students are starting *ab initio*, is to recruit at the front lines of the University; small departments will go to great lengths to attract new students. To wit, I have heard the argument made that adding "Brazilian" into the course title ("Brazilian Portuguese") will attract a larger audience, lured by a cultural image that has become mainstream in its perceived exoticism, owing much to the acclaim of contemporary Brazilian cinema, music and literature in the global market and to Brazil's recent economic boom.

That students would be attracted to things Brazilian is no small wonder. Brazil has many affinities with the United States and offers infinite possibilities to the scholar, traveler, or businessperson and indeed all teachers of Portuguese and lusophone cultures stand to gain much from the recent surge in Brazil's prominence in the global consciousness. However, while certain Portuguese programs struggle with the apparent dilemma posed by the Brazil versus Portugal binarism (if we can artificially assume that the Portuguese spoken in Africa falls into the latter category), I have yet to come across courses entitled "Mexican Spanish", or "Australian English". If there may be friction amongst instructors using a standardized Spanish textbook, perhaps the enormous diversity of Latin American Spanish helps to diffuse rather than simply polarize? Or perhaps larger programs simply do not feel the need to find ways to attract an audience?

Although it may be tempting to assume that certain student bodies may be more or less interested in one variant or another, one cannot help but question how most students, particularly those new to the language (many of whom are teenagers who have never left their own country) can know what they are *not* interested in, until they have at the very least been introduced to it. Students may carry out research abroad on architecture in Portugal, religious movements in Mozambique or modern dance in Brazil only *after* discovering the vast possibilities for scholarship offered by learning the Portuguese language in a global cultural context. My aim here is not at all to question or problematize a predominant interest in one culture versus another, but rather to look at how or indeed *if* we may approach teaching the Portuguese language in a "non-polarizing" manner to ensure that our students pursue their own paths.

This persistent division in our language classrooms between Brazil and Portugal seems to exist in spite of the current interest in trans-Atlantic studies, an increasingly comparative approach to the studies of literature and culture, and the many fascinating debates around *lusofonia* and the new Portuguese Spelling Accord. The divide is at times reinforced by linguistically territorial behavior amongst instructors of different lusophone backgrounds. Misunderstandings, antagonism and accusations of incorrect grammar may fly between otherwise amicable colleagues who are either unaware of the other's variant, or refuse to accept it. It can be surprising to see how little these educated individuals appear to know about one another's variant of the same language.

After all, if one reads both Machado de Assis and Eça de Queiroz, how can one avoid a certain level of cross-Atlantic fluency? True, a Carioca today does not speak the Portuguese of Eça, but then, nor does today's Lisboner. Americans read Dickens and English read Hemingway, relying on the ability to switch between geographical and historical filters of language. On a personal level, these observations have served to highlight my own state of linguistic limbo, as someone who now speaks something of a Mid-Atlantic variety of both English and Portuguese and who readily code-switches when traveling abroad. It led me to question whether indeed my own students were losing or perhaps gaining something by this apparent neutrality, or rather, plurality.

Having an ambiguous or not easily identifiable accent is, of course, somewhat unusual, but the territorial aspect of language instruction also points to the role of affective barriers in the classroom. As teachers of language, we are very used to considering affect as it pertains to our students' ability to learn, but we ought perhaps pay closer attention to the part it plays in the work of those who teach, especially when it concerns instructors' relationships with their mother tongue. Can we, or indeed, should we, strike a balance between neutrality and natural cultural subjectivity in our teaching? Especially when that cultural bias (in the form of knowledge, enthusiasm and even bearing) is often what brings the class to life for students in a very positive and stimulating way.

It would be both absurd and unproductive to force Brazilians to adopt European or African variants of Portuguese, or vice-versa, or to adopt some sort of false, "standardized" pronunciation that lies somewhere in between, but it would seem that often language instructors lack a basic cross-cultural linguistic fluency that could benefit our students greatly. This may well speak to a misconception regarding the very nature of language instruction- that being a native speaker is sufficient to make a good teacher, that knowing one's own personal, regional culture is adequate for a language class. Would one not, however, expect a specialist in nineteenth-century Portuguese literature to have a working knowledge of other centuries and indeed of literature in other languages?

Those who work in the field of translation insist on the difference of the regional variants of languages, stressing the importance of creating texts that are culturally specific and appropriate to the target audience; an advertisement that might work in

Brazil might not resonate in Portugal, just as a Chilean joke might be lost on a Mexican audience. I would argue, however, that the goals of a language course are altogether different. Whilst denying or glossing over difference would be absurd and naïve and, most importantly, would be to ignore the rich diversity within widely spoken languages, by presenting language with a certain level of neutrality from the outset, we may avoid dictating our students' paths. Much emphasis is placed on our students' ability to replicate "authentic" language and perfect an accent, to be able to pass for a *paulista* or a *lisboeta*, but might not there not be just as much merit in being culturally flexible, able to move across national, regional and other sociolinguistic groups within the target language with agility?

In addition to internal linguistic territorialism, language programs often find themselves in a territorial struggle within their greater department. While the goals and role of a given program may differ according to the philosophy or mission of the institution or department in which it operates, language programs seem frequently to be plagued by mixed messages and seemingly contradictory stigma: firstly, that they ought not become "service departments", akin to Berlitz courses, providing the University at large with foreign language skills without attracting students to the major or to upper-level courses; secondly, within their department they are often caught in the all too familiar, unproductive and artificial chasm between the teaching of language and literature. To view language as a mere tool is, of course, to divorce it from any notion of intellectual discipline or rigor and to consider it a rather lowly means to a greater end. This flawed argument could similarly (and equally erroneously) be applied to any discipline, be it mathematics or poetry.

There has been an intensifying debate in Foreign Language Departments regarding the shift towards cultural studies and away from theory and literature. Many departments are finding themselves "bottom heavy," with increasing enrollments in language and culture courses but relatively few majors, indicating that many students are interested in learning foreign languages and applying them to other disciplines. Although literature programs rely on language ones to be a vital pipeline and to recruit for the department, they seem often to want only the "right" students, ones who will potentially become majors with a literary focus. Clearly smaller programs cannot afford to target a

limited audience and, especially where students are coming to the language *ab initio*, they must endeavor to bring students up to speed as rapidly as possible.

How then might we bridge some of these gaps? Since our students' first exposure to a new language may have a considerable impact upon their future course of study, and the inspirational and transformative quality of our classes is particularly important where the language program is a vital conduit to the major, our goal should thus be both to attract students and to excite their intellectual curiosity in the field. It is therefore crucial that from the very outset we strive to present Portuguese in its multiple cultural contexts, revealing both the unity of the language and the diversity of its variants as not mutually exclusive qualities. For Portuguese this of course means exploring the lusophone cultures of Africa, Brazil and Portugal and the far-scattered communities of the Diaspora, including those on our doorstep, engaging where possible with local communities during the term time and promoting study or research abroad, encouraging our students to be open to a range of countries and regions.

In the classroom we must strive to provide a solid foundation in linguistic and cultural literacy, within the broadest possible framework, by introducing a wide range of variants and dialects to our students, so that they might feel free to explore new ground. In addition to adopting textbooks and other teaching materials that present language in its global context, I believe we ought also to ensure that our instructors possess or acquire a level of cross-cultural and linguistic fluency and in some cases encourage them to treat their mother tongue somewhat dispassionately, as an academic discipline, rather than wholly personal terrain.

Once our students have attained a solid foundation in grammar and progress to the intermediate level the next gap- that between language and literature- may best be bridged by culture-based courses that simultaneously continue to develop their communicative skills and expose them to a wide range of registers and styles of language. This is where there would appear to be much opportunity for greater collaboration between those who teach language, culture and literature. Offering courses at this level arranged around broad themes (such as migration or the family) or comparing short stories or films from different countries lends a suitable framework for exploring contrasts and parallels between a multitude of cultures and allows one to explore a

sometimes common history and struggle from a number of perspectives. Since it is at this crucial juncture that our students learn to think critically and express their thoughts in the target language, the role of intermediate courses should be to prepare them to make informed choices as they continue their scholarship.

While it is true that great readers and critics require a high level of linguistic proficiency, which must remain a top priority in the language classroom, the literary canon may also be seen as deeply embedded in culture. This is particularly the case in Portugal and Brazil where the canon so often finds itself echoed in pop culture, allowing us to introduce literature in innovative ways early on in our students' linguistic journey. A strong background in textual analysis and a love of working with language itself are highly complementary, for only by building a solid foundation in a language can a reader access the joys of literature and it is so often through literature that the language of our daily life takes on new shape and meaning.

The overwhelming majority of our students may not become specialists in the field, but the time they spend in our classrooms is vital to their intellectual and personal development. In today's world there is an ever-growing demand for both cross-linguistic and cross-cultural literacy and it should be our goal to help create "world citizens" who through their studies have attained a keener understanding of themselves and others. The eclectic nature of *their* projects should be a cue to us. Moving forward, we must continue to seek innovative ways to bridge gaps, cross oceans, collaborate with colleagues and across departments and disciplines, casting as wide a net as we can, with the goal of capturing the imagination of as diverse a student body as possible.