

Layla Jochmann

Português como Língua de Herança

A coesão em textos escritos por crianças plurilíngues



PETER LANG

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1. Introduction

Teacher, I will not write in Portuguese
because I do not know how to speak
Portuguese...
let alone write in it.¹

The speech transcribed in the title of this introduction is the sincere statement of a 9-year-old child who innocently perpetuates the common sense that a language is only spoken when the proficiency is equivalent to that of a native monolingual speaker. Born in Berlin, the son of a Brazilian mother and father, this child uses Brazilian Portuguese to communicate with his parents and older brother. Upon entering school, the use of the German language started taking up more space in his life. His current non-equivalent proficiency in the two languages (greater fluency in the German language) leads him to see himself not as a Portuguese speaker.

In 2015, the news about an event known as ‘II SEPOLH – European Symposium on the Teaching of Portuguese as a Heritage Language’, which would take place at the end of that same year in Munich, became widely known. At that time, this doctorate project was in the beginning, and the project called for some work with the speech of Brazilian immigrants who had been living in Germany for more than 10 years in order to verify the influences of the German language in the speech of these Brazilians. With the project proposal in hand, I attended the second edition of the SEPOLH and there I had the opportunity to get to know the work of many researchers across Europe about Portuguese as a Heritage Language (Português como Língua de Herança, POLH). It was the first time that I had heard about Heritage Language, and attending many seminars not only awakened my interest in the subject, but it also brought about many questions. The discussions in those seminars were enriching and I returned to Berlin with the intention of deepening my research on the topic.

1 Brazilian Portuguese Heritage speaker, 9 years old, Brazilian parents, born in Berlin. That speech was recorded during a class of Portuguese as a Heritage Language at the Bilingua Association in the city of Berlin on April 1st, 2017.

In early 2016, I contacted the coordinator of the Bilingua Association² by e-mail and, in the middle of the year, I started sitting in on the POLH classes (audit student). In the beginning, even before I started attending classes, I thought they were teaching Portuguese as a mother tongue. Over time, I found that even children who were in the same group had different levels of proficiency from one another, which was a constant challenge for the teacher.

Although it is theoretically possible to develop equivalent skills in more than one language, speakers rarely have access to two languages in exactly the same contexts in all domains of interaction and, in general, they do not have the opportunity to use two or more languages while playing the same roles with all the people they interact with (Valdés, 2001: 40–41). Thus, the first questions arose: what are the contexts of use of the languages in these children's repertoire? What is the mastery of each language in these contexts? What roles do languages play in the different day-to-day interactions of these children? The contact with text productions intensified these inquiries, as if the answers could explain the various linguistic characteristics observed in verbal and written productions.

From the beginning, as an observer to the classes, special attention was paid to the children's speech and writing. At first, syntactic and orthographic aspects caught my attention, such as the influence of the German language when speaking and writing in Portuguese. The first field notes prioritized these influences. In September 2016, I replaced a teacher who became ill in a classroom composed of older children of the association. That group was called "Owls" (Corujas), and since then, I have taken on the responsibility of an associate teacher until the end of the school year, in June of 2017. At the time, the group had eleven children and my job was to help those who had more difficulty in carrying out the written activities, in addition to helping the homeroom teacher to prepare classes and class projects. Due to the influence of my teacher training, I decided to prioritize the teaching of written production in the classes I planned. In one of the compositions proposed, a particular text intrigued me:

2 www.bilingua-berlin.de

