TALK RIGHT, INDIAN! LANGUAGE POLICIES AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN BRAZIL

Antonio José Silva Santana**

1 TO KICK OFF THE DISCUSSION...

There is no official document which specifically tracks the directives for indigenous language policy in Brazil. Thus, this article tries to paint a “portrait” of language policy in the country, describing the relationship between what appears in documents and indigenous practices, especially in the field of formal school education, extracting from this source what corresponds to the policy for indigenous language in Brazil.

Language policy, in this article, employs the definition accepted in sociolinguistics of Calvet (2002, p. 145), i.e., “as a set of conscious choices referring to the relationship between language and social life.” Thus, when I refer to language policy for indigenous peoples in this country, I am alluding to the “set of conscious choices” and the decisions the Brazilian government has made with respect to indigenous languages, manifested in the language used in official documents and activities which might have the effect either of ethnic affirming or colonizing these peoples.

Thus, this article includes a concern with understanding the strategies and policies adopted to govern or administer problems arising from the diversity and multiplicity created by multicultural societies (Hall, 2003), such as Brazil. I also focus on the sphere of political strategies used to deal with problems arising from linguistic diversity existing due to the plurilingual situation in the country. I investigate the issue of language diversity based in a discursive perspective, which is perceived as a multicultural paradigm by Semprini (1999, p. 66) because it provides the opportunity to work with language, identifying it not just as “the place where the relationship of exclusion and domination is crystallized, but also where these relations are negotiated, produced and reproduced.” According to this view, language is not limited to

** Master’s candidate at the Linguistics Program of the University of Texas at Austin. FORD Fellow.
recording realities, but “contributes to their production, modeling society’s perception of itself and all the groups that comprise it” (Ibid, p. 67).

Brazil expresses both \textit{multi-nationality} and \textit{pluri-lingualism} in its \textit{multi-culturalism}. According to Kymlicka (1996, p. 25), multiculturalism refers to a country that contains minority groups who demand that their identities be recognized and that their cultural differences be accommodated.

Multi-nationality refers to the coexistence of more than one nation within the same territory. Nation, according to the author “signifies an historical community, more or less institutionally complete that occupies a territory or a certain land and that shares a distinctive language and culture” (Ibid., p. 26) This view undermines the ideology that permeates official policy, which affirms that Brazil is a nation state and Portuguese the national language Kymlicka (op.cit) states that “A country which contains more than one nation is not, therefore, a nation-state, but a multinational state, where the smaller cultures constitute ‘the national minorities’.” Considering that the history of occupation of this territory by indigenous peoples predates the existence of Brazil; that these peoples still maintain their own forms of organization; that they have such diverse language and cultures, which are “minor” (in number and due to limitations on their power), the indigenous are national minorities in Brazil. From this perspective, indigenous languages are national languages since, as Guimarães (2000, p.22) says “a national language is the language of a people, as a language that characterizes it, that gives its speech a relationship of belonging to this people.”

Pluri-lingualism has been a reality in Brazil since its “inception.” According to Rodrigues’ estimates (2005, p. 35), prior to European colonization around 1,200 languages were spoken in the territory we now call Brazil. In the course of these 500 years, this number has been reduced to about 181 (op.cit.). As classified by the same author (Rodrigues, 1986), four indigenous languages are spoken in the state of Maranhão – three of which are from the Tupi-Guarani family (Tenetehára, Guajá and Urubu-Kaapór) and one from the Jê family (Timbira). For this author, the Tenetehára language includes the Guajajara dialects spoken in Maranhão, Tembé in Pará, and the Timbira language, which is subdivided into the dialects Canela.
Apâniekra, Canela Ramkókamekra, Gavião of Maranhão (Pukobyé), Krêyê (Krenjé) and Krikati (Krinkati), in Maranhão, Krahô, in Tocantins, and Parakáteye, in Pará (sic.).

The differences among these languages and between them and Portuguese are not just of a structural order, but are intimately related to the social connections among the speakers. A language, however, is first of all, an interaction among subjects, not limited to a formal system, an instrument of communication. Thus, “we cannot study it outside society since its constitutive processes are historical and social (Orlandi, 1987, p. 82).

The perspective of discourse studies make it possible to analyze this process of constitution, as it seeks to discover the relationships with the outside that created it, since as Bourdieu (1996, p. 126) states, “there is no science of speech considered in and of itself.” From this analytical perspective, “language is discursive materiality, i.e., the material dimension of speech” (Possenti, 2004, p. 362) and “speech is less a transmission of information than the effect of the senses” (Orlandi, 1987, p. 83).

Trying to understand the indigenous language policy in Brazil, I realized that the imposition of an official language, Portuguese, is a constant in the context of indigenist school education. 1 This act is updated by official decrees and by practices that link the Portuguese language to symbolic profits. It is an imposition of a tongue as a formal and symbolic system, as well as language, of the bureaucratic logic of the Brazilian legal system. Thus, speaking the same language as the state is not just speaking Portuguese, but means fitting into, or at least trying to dialogue with the government within the rationale of Brazilian society and the symbols and “labels” imposed by it. This practice is implemented independently of the specificities of the indigenous peoples. This political and linguistic system is imposed on Indians (with a generic concept of them). There seems to be an underlying discourse in this process that “translates” as “Talk right, indian!” This message is presented, however, using euphemisms and legal and academic techno-speak as camouflage and to select the readers who can “see-it”: individuals with dominion over knowledge about the world in a certain field of knowledge manifested by the

---

1 I contrast the terms indigenous and indigenist, because what has happened in large part over the years, is that indigenist education is one whose guidelines and legislation are formulated and implemented (or attempted to be implemented) by non-Indians for Indians. Therefore, what we have is Indigenist School Education.
specific vocabulary of a variety of the Portuguese language, and with a good critical sense to perceive its imposition.

2 I AM THE WAY, THE LIGHT AND THE LANGUAGE

Government actions, whether by the Portuguese with respect to the colonies or by Brazilians with respect to national minorities (interior colonialism\textsuperscript{2}), had the goal of eliminating differences and creating a unified national worldview. One of these activities was directly related to the imposition of an official language: Portuguese\textsuperscript{3}.

The reduction of the number of indigenous languages in Brazil was the result of physical extermination and of linguistic plans and policies carried to these peoples, which were made concrete in formal school education.

According to Silva (2004, p.15), the history of “indigenist schooling” began in 1549 with Jesuit activities designed to teach children “to read and write,” at boarding schools established by the policies of colonizer D. João III. In this period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, missionaries learned [indigenous] languages for religious purposes and linked a policy of catechizing to that of “civilizing”. Learning indigenous languages made it easier to “convince” people to renounce their customs in favor of a western Christian ideology. This negation was correlated with the ethnocentric colonial policy according to which, the farther away from their lifestyles they got, the more “civilized” these peoples would become.

The first studies based in indigenous languages were done by these priests. I say based, because these were not studies that revealed the nature of the indigenous languages

\textsuperscript{2} Coelho (2002, p.68) discusses this scenario of the Brazil of the colonized and the colonizer based on the notion of internal colonialism in Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira, 1966. According to the author “the confrontation of the metropolis/colony which characterizes the domination of the natives by the Portuguese is reproduced internally, and the Brazilian state takes over as the colonizer of indigenous peoples.

\textsuperscript{3} Portuguese should be read as \textit{a Portuguese}, bearing in mind that the language imposed by the state is an artificially-developed historical variety, legitimized by linguistic instruments such as dictionaries and grammatical norms, which does not correspond to the linguistic situation of Portuguese speakers. This position exercises the power of exclusion (in the sense of lack of access to decision-making power) of those who do not speak this variety of Portuguese: speakers of other varieties of Portuguese, indigenous languages and other languages.
spoken at the time, since “the Tupi that the first European expositions provided us was not exactly the language that the indigenous exactly spoke: it was a simplified systematization, developed to proceed to introducing religious propaganda into the indigenous environment.” (Camara Jr. 1979, p. 101.. Studies of indigenous languages began, therefore, for utilitarian reasons - in this case to establish a lingua franca.

Jesuit activity spread throughout the country. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Portuguese were fewer in number than the Tupinambá (the people in whose language, the general language was usually based), and these Portuguese learned that language. The population that made up the colonial system at the time, whether black, mestizo, Indian or Portuguese, used the general language. In certain regions of Brazil, the general language was spoken in the home. Rodrigues, relying on a statement by Vieira from 1694, cited in his book (1986, p.101) [says] that “It is true that the families of the Portuguese and the Indians in São Paulo and the children they raised inside and outside the home and the language that these families spoke at home was that of Indians. Portuguese was for children to learn at school.” Portuguese was learned as a second language (L2). The general language was the language of Amazon occupation during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and in this context was used not just for catechesis, but was also used for “the social and political activities of the Portuguese and Luso-Brazilians up until the nineteenth century.” During this long period of occupation it left its influences in the Portuguese lexicon in the names of people and places in Brazil and in the evolutions of the semantics of Brazilian Portuguese.

Nonetheless, since the policy of the colonizer state was to impose not just its system of government, but its language as well, in 1755, the Directorate of the Marquês de Pombal issued instructions prohibiting the use of any language other than Portuguese. This was the first document to establish rules, signaling a new language policy for the then colony. In Section 6 of this document4

“It has always been the maxim and invariable practice of all the nations who conquer new domains to right away introduce their language to the conquered peoples because it is indisputable that this is one of the most effective means of banish the barbarism of their old customs from rustic peoples (...). To root out this pernicious abuse, it will be

4 The usage of the day has been maintained, but the writing has been adapted to the present day.
one of the main precautions of the directors to establish the use of the Portuguese language in their respective populations, *never consenting in any way that young boys and girls who attend the schools, and all the Indians, who are capable of being instructed in this subject, use the language belonging to their nations, or what is known as the general language, but only Portuguese*’ (emphasis mine)

There is a clear notion that the loss of indigenous languages due to the imposition of Portuguese, and of the values tied to it, implies a number of losses of the social practices associated to them. Indigenous languages, therefore, were an obstacle to colonization. Even though the intention was to extinguish the use of indigenous languages spoken at the time, the document recognizes the existence of and the role of these languages as one of the factors that affirmed the identity of the nations which speak them. Since it was not in the interest of colonial policy to maintain these identities, in addition to imposing a schooling process (which already constituted violence), it also imposed the mandatory use of the *language of His Majesty*. Replacing the general language with Portuguese, however, did not alter the initial intention of the policy, since the use of both relied on the same principle: the dissolution of difference.

Jesuit education was affected by Pombal’s educational reforms. Thus, the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1759 reflected Portuguese interest in promoting education that served the economic and social profile of the time, and not any humanistic or literary education to which education of the elites was devoted (Silva, 2001).

Silva (2001) focuses on the course that indigenist school education has taken from the time of the colony to the 1970s. Based on this author’s research, from the time of the Pombal laws until the Republic, “news of schooling for the indigenous is sparse.” With the separation of the church from the State under the Republic and the consequent absence of government oversight of both Catholic and Protestant missionaries, their missionary activity became more aggressive and spread throughout the country.

With the creation of the Indian Protective Service (SPI) in 1920 under Rondon’s direction, separating indigenous families (as had been done by the missionaries) was forbidden, even for the purpose of educating and catechizing their children. In the SPI period (1910-1967), formal education for the indigenous, whether promoted by missionaries or government employees, was monolingual in Portuguese.
According to Barros (1994, p.27), the SPI schools followed the rural school model where literacy was taught in Portuguese, along with techniques for sewing, carpentry, brick masonry, metal working and “notions of hygiene”. Writing, however, was not given much emphasis in the school system, since, according to the reigning intent to integration, only rural spoken Portuguese was necessary in the world of the rural Brazilians, where “the Indian would be included.” Therefore, bilingual education was not of interest to the proposal for indigenous schools at the time.

This position becomes clearer given the SPI’s refusal, during the meeting of the Inter-American Indigenous Institute in 1954, of an offer by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) to provide linguistic consulting with a program for bilingual education along the lines of what was being developed in Peru and Mexico.

3 “SILENCE!” WHAT THE SIL COVERS UP AND WHAT IT “SAYS”

The SIL had been unsuccessful with the SPI which did not accept the participation of foreigners or religious personnel in “national” affairs, due to its positivist ideology. The SIL then offered to carry out “disinterested” studies on indigenous languages, thus making way for their first agreement in the country, which was signed with the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro in 1957.

This agreement was possible due to the prestige of the SIL members, since they were identified in the academic community as disciples of Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, the “American language experts”. The National Museum evaluated the SIL’s activities after they were finished in 1977, to see what had been done and discovered that the activities had not respected the study plan initially presented, since there had been little language analysis and a large quantity of didactic material. The initial plan had been to adequately analyze the languages and their phonetics-phonology, syntax, morphology and lexicon in order to develop material at the last stage (a stage they call applied linguistics). These were signs that revealed what in practice SIL discourse covered up: its emphasis on language literacy for more effective catechesis where
language used as a strategy for speech control and its premises as a utilitarian instrument for evangelization activities.

The discourse on bilingualism in indigenous indigenist education only took on an official character in Brazil in 1966 when Executive Order no. 58824, which promulgated Convention 107 on the “protection and integration of indigenous and other tribal and semi-tribal populations of independent countries.” Among the articles in the document, the following stand out:

“Art. 23
-1 Instruction in reading and writing for children of those populations who are interested will be given in their mother tongue or, if that is impossible, in the language most commonly used by the group to which they belong,
-2 A progressive transition from the mother tongue or vernacular language to the national language or to another official language of the country will be guaranteed.
-3 In so far as possible, due precautions to safeguard the mother language or vernacular will be taken”. (emphasis mine)

Even while recognizing the possibility of using indigenous language for school education, this stance does not appear to recognize difference, but rather a possible route to more effective means of assimilation of the Portuguese language and its western knowledge.

The discourse of the article shares the same vision of integration reigning at the time, that is, an ideology that viewed indigenous peoples as a transitional “state,” fated to disappear and that education should be one of the positions assumed to make it possible to arrive at another “state”, that of integration in “national society.” This intention becomes clear beginning with the imposition of an official language, by means of a transitional bilingualism, with a substrate, which is, the abandonment of indigenous languages in the final stages of the schooling process.

The Statute on the Indigenous (Law 6.001 of December 19, 1973) already prioritized the use of the people’s languages, but alongside Portuguese. Art. 49 states: “Literacy education for Indians will be done in the language of the group to which they belong and in Portuguese, defending the use of the first.” Nevertheless, there are articles that speak clearly of the intention
of integration into the surrounding society by means of a process in which indigenous languages figure as “facilitators.” This notion expresses itself right off in Article 1 of Title I.

“This law regulates the legal system of the Indians or native peoples and the indigenous community for the purpose of preserving their culture and integrating them progressively and harmoniously into the national communion. (emphasis mine)

This is ambiguous discourse, since the recognition of culture (which is mutable, as in any society) does not lead to the recognition of their differences as distinctive nations from the rationales of diverse governments. According to the bias in the document, the indigenous are just “communities” that should be integrated into the Brazilian people.

The activities of SIL, the main group responsible for dissemination of bilingual education, took on an official nature with the signing of an agreement with the National Indian Foundation - FUNAI (created to replace the SPI in 1967), and eventually officially controlled indigenous school education through its training centers for indigenous teachers.

In 1973, FUNAI made the SIL schooling model official, “making what had been a strategic need for a strategy of conversion by translation into a right” (Barros, 1994). The indigenist agency issued Directive 75N/72, which states:

a) “Education for indigenous groups with language barriers will always be bilingual.”
b) “The national language will only be used with indigenous groups who use it as their habitual language, without impeding the provision of knowledge of native languages as a structural supplement.”

According to Silva (2001, p. 19), “to implant bilingual education as dictated by the administrative order, FUNAI signed a contract with the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL)” and the first projects were developed with the Kaingang, Maxacali, Xavante, Karajá and Tenetehára indigenous peoples.
SIL activities influenced (and influence) many actors in indigenist education. SIL’s linguistic practices, which mask the religious and political nature of its intentions, have effected the most diverse readers in different ways.

In linguistics, for example, it had an effect on the self concept of educators, whose function is to describe indigenous languages, tied to creating writing to develop more effective literacy work, as a way of “saving” these languages from the danger of “death.” It is worth stressing that describing indigenous languages involves a greater commitment to linguistics than to the demands of the peoples and that this work in itself, does not guarantee the survival of these languages (Oliveira, 1999).

On the other hand, the involvement of sectors who do not have the goal of using indigenous school education for religious activities, provide an opportunity to think about developing an indigenous written tradition as a means of affirming identity, of valuing difference, and as a mode of “overcoming the status of a minority” (Oliveira, 1998).

Authors such as Silva (2001) point out that a great stride toward recognition of difference in Brazil was embodied in the Constitution of 1988. According to this author (op.cit, p.23):

“Brazil’s constitution guarantees the indigenous a specific and differentiated school education, that is, an education based in the sociocultural, linguistic and economic context, conceived in a bilingual, pluralistic and intercultural vision.”

It is necessary, however, to know how this discourse on bilingualism and plurilingualism is stated in the constitution and what effects it might provoke, in addition to those explained by Silva.

4 TALK RIGHT, INDIAN! (OR IS THAT, SPEAK UP FOR YOUR RIGHTS, INDIAN?)

Since “independence” in Brazil and the formation of a new “national state,” the formula State = one culture = one language = one nation permeated the members of the
constituent assemblies of the time, who consecrated Portuguese as the national language, with no mention of indigenous languages, with the intention of developing the ideal of a monolingual country. These documents, also omitted other languages brought by immigrants, which also are learned as mother languages in the Brazilian national territory. In the Constitution of 1967, Title II, Chapter 2, paragraph 3 of Article 147, states that those who cannot express themselves in the national language cannot vote. The Constitution of 1967 therefore makes clear its intent to integrate indigenous peoples into Brazilian society and to deny them the fundamental right to use their language and to choose their representatives in Brazilian government.

Title IV on Family, Education and Culture, paragraph 3 – I of the Constitution of 1967 states that “primary education can only be administered in the national language,” thus forcing the indigenous to learn to read and write in Portuguese in the formal schooling process (once again treated as the national language).

The silence of the members of the constituent assembly regarding the language situation in Brazil was only broken (in part, since immigrant languages remained silenced) with the promulgation of the Constitution of 1988. Due to the efforts of several moments in favor of indigenous rights, indigenous languages are recognized in this document even though they are not designated as national, nor official languages. This is the first recognition of the multilingual nature of the country. Until the Constitution of 1988, with the exception of Law 6001, other official documents either omit or prohibit the use of languages other than Portuguese in formal education for the indigenous. The first of these was the already cited Directorate of Pombal.

With respect to the recognition (in the sense of making room for their use) of indigenous languages by the Constitution of 1988, this is only partially true, since the official language continues to be Portuguese and this places limits on other languages. According to Guimarães (2005, p. 22) an official language “is the language of a state, that which is obligatory in formal state activities, in its legal acts.” Immediately, recognition of use of indigenous language is restricted to school education. Article 210, section 2 of the Constitution states that:
“Regular fundamental education will be administered in the Portuguese language, guaranteeing to the indigenous communities also the use of their mother tongues and their own learning processes.” (emphasis mine)

In this excerpt, one notes that the “also” grants priority to the use of Portuguese to the detriment of indigenous languages, relegating them to a second plane, making the discourse on the recognition of different linguistic and cultural difference less emphatic. The Constitution recognized difference in articles such as 231:

“Indian social organization, customs, languages, beliefs and traditions are recognized as well as their original rights to the lands they traditionally occupy. The demarcation of these lands, their protection and ensuring respect for all their assets will be under the jurisdiction of the federal government” (sic).

However, in other articles, such as no. 210, this recognition is not stated. There is no room, for example, for the exclusive use of indigenous languages in the school. This is the imposition of the official languages on peoples (not all) who have their own language and who could have the right to decide not to use the official language in their school education processes. Other documents, legislation or policies\(^5\) in the national or regional spheres that deal with the importance of indigenous languages and the practice of bilingualism in indigenous school education, arose beginning with the Constitution of 1988.

Even though indigenous education has its specificities (including linguistic) guaranteed and ruled by these laws, it is worth recalling that these official documents are benchmarks for the national state, which makes all this discourse ambiguous. How is it possible to reconcile the differences of each people and, at the same time, fit them into national paradigms? One can also perceive that recognition of linguistic diversity is restricted to formal education, since opportunities to use minority languages in public spaces are not provided, even when the majority of the population in a certain place speaks these languages.

The linguistic minorities descended from immigrants are not contemplated in these documents. all of the documents related to formal indigenous education include bilingualism as

---

\(^5\) These documents, legislation and policies, as well as the language policies of the state of Maranhão are the subject of analysis in a chapter of the book of the Research Group on the Multicultural State and Public Policy, that is in press.
indispensable to specific and differentiated education. It is worth stressing that school education, to be indigenous (not indigenist) depends on the schools of the people themselves and the existence of non-bilingualism among the alternatives. The fact that a language exists at a school does not guarantee its “Indian-ness” since there could be indigenist schools with indigenous words. (Meliá, 2000), but emptied of their linguistic meaning and devoid of the worldview of these peoples.

5 SINCE I MUST BRING THIS TO AN END....

Government language policies for indigenous peoples have been characterized by the imposition of an official language. First, they are manifested through an explicit discourse which negates indigenous languages, and at a second moment, contemplated bilingual underpinnings as a strategy for integration indigenous peoples into Brazilian society, and lastly, they have an ambiguous discourse, in which they try to fit “respect for indigenous differences” into a national system of school education. This ambiguity is also noted in the affirmation of bilingualism that emerged from missionary practices and discourse, but which is presently presented as a principal of respect for linguistic diversity, since that would be an “opening” for the use of indigenous languages in education in the formal school space. On the other hand, the use of Portuguese is determined as a constant presence during the process of schooling, while the indigenous languages “also” figure as a suggestion among possible usages.

Bilingualism, as a principle of official policy, reveals this tension that the state experiences keeping in mind that, on the one hand, it tries to administer language diversity (often by denying it) granting “permission” to use one of the indigenous languages; and on the other, imposes Portuguese on every instance of relating to the official system.

The state is concerned with “maintaining sovereignty”. This is the reason for the predominance of homogenizing policies that live alongside initiatives that contemplate the particular. This ambiguity within government reveals that the very notion of state cannot be thought of as homogeneous, since there are internal disputes resulting from the presence of actors with different conceptions.
6 REFERENCES


___________. Decreto presidencial n° 58824 que promulga a convenção 107, de 1966.


*Directório que se deve observar nas povoações dos índios do Pará e Maranhão enquanto sua Majestade não mandar o contrário (1758)*


