Language Ideology in Brazilian Indigenous Academic Production

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Abstract. The general objective of this paper is to map academic discussions proposed by indigenous researchers. It is justified in a context where people of different ethnicities and backgrounds have been able to access university education and have called into question the hegemonic status of Eurocentric concepts and methods of knowledge production. More specifically, we aim to identify which language ideologies (i.e. beliefs about language use and structure) they mobilize in their discourses and meta-discourses, as well as to notice what subject positions they occupy in the academic environment in light of the topics they address. We selected ten works, among articles, undergraduate and master's dissertations, by self-declared indigenous people which might reflect directly or indirectly on language. We found three major recurrent topics being addressed in these works: (1) the principles of academic education for indigenous teachers who are acting or will act in their community schools, with special attention to their traditional knowledge, belief systems, native linguistic practices, and cultural education; (2) the preservation and/or revitalization of their traditional languages, which have for centuries been lost, suppressed or changed by contact with the Portuguese language and non-indigenous people; (3) the challenges indigenous people have faced during selection processes, undergraduate and graduate studies at universities in Brazil. The results we found show that indigenous academics have been pushing the boundaries of academic orthodoxies in regard to research methodologies and reporting strategies; in their perspective, language is seen as deeply connected to the diverse activities, knowledge, beliefs, history, memories and practices developed in their particular cultural tradition, hardly being taken as an abstract element. Nevertheless, researchers do eventually resort to the essentialist notion of language, dominant in Western academia, in order to facilitate intelligibility in this arena, as well as to emphasize cultural differences and unique traits of their traditional cultural identities.

Keywords. Language Ideology, Indigenous Academic Productions, Decoloniality.

1. Introduction

This work deals with perspectives of language expressed in indigenous academic works. It has been developed within the project *Dialogues and Frictions between Epistemologies, Ontologies and Systems of Value*, as part of the UNIGOU Remote activities.

The general objective of the project is to map, describe, and reflect on ongoing academic discussions that draw upon sources of knowledge and practices other than those hegemonic in the Western tradition in academia. It focuses on how these alternative epistemologies may shed new light on long-established debates in the multifaceted field of Human Sciences, as well as address pressing issues of contemporary times.

This piece of research can be understood as aligned with debates seeking to "decolonize" discourses and practices within Human and Social Sciences. This decolonial effort starts from the premise that concepts that shape our world views and methods that orient our knowledge production have been forged in the modern European epistemic tradition, a perspective which stands on the self-attributed assumption of universal validity – and, therefore, the exclusion of all others [1]. Hence, the urge to deconstruct principles of colonialist origin would be justified not only because of the unsuitability [2] of such a perspective to deal with issues relevant in southern hemisphere countries [3], but also due to their self-centered, self-serving and oppressive nature [1].

The coloniality of knowledge, pervasive in hegemonic epistemology, ontology and system of values of European tradition, has its roots in colonial history. Mignolo [4] argues that, as commercial circuits emerged in the Atlantic around the 16th century, a new symbolic construction of reality was the leading and efficacious strategy that made possible the domination of cultures and peoples, and its justification, by European countries, securing the success and pungency of capitalism. One aspect of this novel symbolic reality consisted of ethnic and racial descriptions (white, black, indigenous) being attributed based on differences between colonizer and colonized [1,4,5].

In the then newly-named continent of America, physical differences, as well as cultural practices,

were taken to characterize Amerindian people as inferior, regardless of any similarities to other ethnicities. As Diego Silva [6] demonstrates, four are the discursive formations that can be identified during the colonial era from the perspective of Europeans. The first describes indigenous people as godless, irrational brutes. The second sees them as innocent and ignorant, whose beliefs consist in no more than superstitions. The third, as objects to the colonizer's scientific curiosity, depicts them as exotic, laughable, ugly, and misshapen in comparison to the Eurocentric aesthetic reference. Lastly, the fourth concedes that there are in fact similar traits/practices between the two peoples; such parallels, however, (in body strength, in the looks of newborns, in how they keep chickens and ducks, or how they design hunting traps) are not enough to position indigenous people as equals.

Another powerful construct of the modernist European tradition, according to Lander [1] was the ontological separation between mind and body, reason and world, operated by Cartesian scientific formulation. As a consequence, knowledge of reality could be objectively conceptualized through logical representations mirrored by human reason. Such ideology, supposedly allowing for access to universal truths, was regarded as sophisticated, superior, and advanced, as opposed to any and all other principles of knowledge production, which were deemed to be flawed, false, outdated, inferior, or mere beliefs.

These notions have produced effects up to now and reveal a clear link between power and knowledge. Eurocentric discourses presuppose a universal validity, consequently allowing no room for other disputing voices. Diego Silva asserts that, when discourses of diversity are produced, "the non-European other is [...] spoken of. They do not speak"[1][6, p. 12]. However much a certain ideology tries to sell itself as unbiased, these historical considerations, though brief, emphasize that different subject positions will uphold their own interests, and knowledge will embed characteristics of that position [7].

The implication of this tradition in language studies cannot be overstated. The allegedly objectivist take on knowledge, drawing on the assumed gap between reason and the world, implies a search for the essence of things, and is the product of a "will to truth", in Foucauldian terms [7]. Along these lines, language would be seen as a means of representation of the world or the mind; its logical domain should reflect essential meanings by granting access to the true nature of things or the self. As Wittgenstein pointed out, this perspective assumes that the main function of language is to name things, and "naming something is like attaching a label to a thing" [8, §15]. Thus, to speak is seen as nothing more than to make a direct and unproblematic description of someone, something or a state of things. Discourse is taken to be a clear mirror of reality. Consequently, concepts

are solidified, identities are essentialized.

As Blommaert puts it, "a language" is perceived as a "bounded artifact consisting of (grammatical) 'structures' with a clear function, denotation"[9, p. 512]. This structuralist and referential view of language, hegemonic in language studies to this day, was a key element in the establishment of 18th Century nation-states. In Portugal, Marquis of Pombal passed a bill which instated that Portuguese must be the official language of public affairs in the colonies, based on the notion that

> the construction of national identity is based on the awareness that the members of a national community had in common the fact of belonging to a given linguistic field [10, p. 14].

That was the rise of an ideology of language that equates, supposedly unproblematically, a language – a people – a nation. Consequently, conflicts intensified. Not only were several indigenous languages in Brazil demeaned and regarded as mere dialects, in comparison to a "superior" Portuguese language, but many native communities were also prohibited from speaking their traditional languages. As a result, a number of these were deeply changed and suppressed, along with their practices, ways of living, and knowledge systems [11–14]

In present day, these power struggles continue. The monolingual ideology, as we will show in following sections, along with the hegemonic knowledge production system, poses a challenge for indigenous communities to have access to other social and political spheres, as well as to resist further invasion of non-indigenous language practices and customs in their ways of living[14].

In Brazil, in the early 2000s, as a result of the demand by indigenous teachers for qualification in higher education, public policies started to be implemented to ensure access and permanence of indigenous people at both public and private universities and faculties [15].

The presence of these people of traditional Brazilian background at universities sparks conflicts of perspectives on language, knowledge, education, identity. The emergence of these other epistemologies, ontologies and knowledge systems in academia adds up to the effort to decolonize practices and beliefs in order for higher education not to be another form of continuity to historical devaluation and subjugation of certain people [15,16]. What is more, it is an extremely enriching contribution to insights into the theoretical understanding of questions that have been prominent in academic tradition, as well as to formulate new possibilities to deal with issues endemic to the context of the southern globe[3,17].

Therefore, the general objective of this paper is to map academic discussions related to language by indigenous researchers and to see how these

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[1] The translations of references in Portuguese are my own.

discourses position them in relation to hegemonic knowledge in the academic environment. Specifically, we wish to identify, in indigenous meta-discourses, what beliefs are conveyed about language structure and use, that is, what Language Ideologies [9,18] can be noticed. As a result, we should be able to observe how the indigenous agency at universities decentralizes notions that have stood strong for centuries in the scientific productions in the human sciences.

2. Methodology

Given our general objective to map recent academic debates by indigenous researchers on issues surrounding the broad topic of language, our first step consisted in finding such published works. Anticipating discussions on topics such as "language conflict" and "bilingualism", these keywords, along with "indigenous languages", containing "Brazil", "language ideology" or "language perspective" as restrictive logical operators, were the first search attempts (in Portuguese) on online academic databases. The search on Scielo database brought up about 55 results, which facilitated the task of browsing through them and picking the best-related ones. On the other hand, the search on Google Scholar showed, in the most restrictive attempts, no fewer than 2,000 results; here, given the practical impossibility to check all of them, we singled out but a few units that were shown in the first few pages and contained the desired keywords and/or possibly related ones. At this point, we started to arrange the potentially interesting texts in a spreadsheet, containing title, author, year, keywords, institution and access link.

By skimming through a few selected articles, we were able to find the first references we were looking for: academic productions by self-declared indigenous people. These first findings led us to a variety of articles, undergradute and master's dissertations. The contact with these texts revealed a larger bibliography than we could hope to examine in the scope of this three-month research project. Likewise, we also organized these texts in a specific section of our spreadsheet so we could keep a record of the texts we found, read and would read. Thus, relying on the aforementioned keywords and perusal of abstracts, we narrowed our analysis down to ten texts by self-declared indigenous people from different ethnic groups, such as Tapirapé, Karajá, Pataxó, Tupinambá, Xakriabá and Xerente. In parallel, employing the same selection strategy, we gathered and examined other articles by academics in general, which commented and reflected upon the presence, challenges, perspectives, works, discourses, and agency of indigenous researchers at university.

For the reading, note-taking, reflection and analysis stages we kept a document in which we wrote a short summary and commentaries of each text we had read, highlighting positive aspects, possible criticisms and potential interest and contribution for the project we were developing. During this process, the theoretical and methodological concept of "Language Ideology" was especially relevant, as a way to guide our attention to a certain "problem" across all these works. In Silverstein's words, a language ideology can be understood as "any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use" [18, p. 193]. These ideologies can be manifold and may, as we shall see, contrast with one another. In other words, this concept is flexible enough to encompass as many different beliefs and characteristics as we can find, not being restricted at all to the "artefactual ideology of language"[9,18] we mentioned before – the most powerful ideology about language among both language experts and the wider public. In addition, as the concept is "neutrally" defined[9], it paves the way for questioning solidified assumptions about notions like "mother language", "first language", "second language", "foreign language" and "bilingualism" [see 16,19].

3. Results

Three major topics were found to be recurrent during the reading and analyses of the indigenous academic texts. These researchers have been especially concerned with (1) the academic education of indigenous teachers to act at the schools in their communities, with particular sensibility to valuing their traditional languages, practices, knowledge, and ways of learning; (2) the preservation and/or revitalization of their traditional languages, which have been invaded and have been continuously changed by influence from Brazilian Portuguese, via contact with non-indigenous people and resources they are now dependent on; (3) the challenges they have encountered both in the selection processes and during the actual university courses, at undergraduate and graduate levels, in terms of dealing with prejudice, language barriers, Western academic knowledge, knowledge production methodologies and report. It is relevant to notice that these themes are interdependent, and they appear in almost all the works we have examined, and are given different emphases depending on the objective of each author.

3.1 Indigenous teacher education

Many of the indigenous students at universities are also teachers or are getting prepared to teach in their communities. This is one of the reasons they claimed for public policies to guarantee their access to higher education [15]. As N. Tupinambá [20, p. 16] puts it, her "insertion in the academic world is part of the struggle for [her] people"; and so is an act of group resistance the effort by which many indigenous tribes claimed access to basic education. I. Tapirapé states that the Avá-Canoeiro group, with whom he worked and lived, were initially motivated to have their own school due to their need to

learn and master the writing codes, both of their mother tongue and of the Portuguese language, to record the social, cultural and linguistic knowledge of their people, and also to prepare certain types of documents to fight for their rights to land, as well as to learn how to prepare a note and letter, which they need in order to interact and communicate with non-indigenous society, mainly with FUNAI and SESAI, with which they maintain contact on a daily basis [21, p. 32-33].

Similar necessities are also reported by other authors [11,20,22]. However, with the schools came the need for adequacy of materials, methodologies and well-prepared teachers to fill in the positions at the schools. G. Tapirapé argues that, upon implementation in the 1970s, schools in Tapirapé/ Karajá communities worked as a "colonizing instrument and extinguisher of indigenous knowledge, since they were taught nothing but non-indigenous knowledge and writing" [22, p. 59]. G. Luciano [14] adds that the bilingual education, as carried out by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in the 20th Century, had the aim to identify and level the diversity of indigenous languages in Brazil and to establish the Portuguese language as dominant at schools and in villages. In recent times, U. Braz [11] reports that, although a part of the curriculum is dedicated to teaching their traditional language and customs, most of the school time is focused on learning Portuguese and other subjects which are taught in Brazilian Portuguese.

Much due to this school design, G. Tapirapé [22] expresses that he himself and classmates used to hold non-indigenous knowledge and language in higher esteem, but asserts that, later, the experiences in the Intercultural Education undergraduate program, at the Federal University of Goiás, and the contact with peers from other villages, were crucial in fomenting an alternative perspective. If, before, school education was seen as a process of transferring information, learning "the book", later, a "transdisciplinary" approach and a group learning perspective as "social interaction" proved to be principles closer to their traditional experiences, so a more meaningful practice, in G. Tapirapé's words, would consist of

> creating new teaching possibilities in the context of their people's own living experience, so that school learning may actually contribute to educating students [22, p. 30].

Hence, in order to better prepare indigenous teachers to act in their schools, to design strategies and materials that are adequate to their realities, to develop meaningful teaching practices according to the specificity of their own context, ways of learning, oral tradition, as well as not to make teaching of Western knowledge a colonizing practice, it is argued that higher education for indigenous teachers (though not only for them) must operate a shift in a series of notions that still uphold an epistemology of exclusion. The notion of "language" and its derivative concepts are one focus of attention [15,16,19]. This topic is elaborated in the next sections.

3.2 Language preservation

It is safe to say that all indigenous researchers have as a primary concern the preservation of their traditional language practices. Some authors explain that their communities still speak their traditional languages, but these have been suffering from contact with Portuguese. Others report that their languages have been mostly changed or lost, but are still present somehow in the way they speak Portuguese.

S. Xerente characterizes her people as bilinguals, that is, they speak both their traditional language and Portuguese, and such use is determined by necessity [23]; it means that each language is associated with certain contexts and activities. For instance, she explains that activities like hunting, fishing, agricultural work, craftwork, rituals, home and other social interactions within the village are associated with the *Akwe* language; on the other hand, discussions on politics, lessons at school, dealings with non-indigenous people, and activities like soccer are linked to Portuguese use. Similar reports are found in other works [22,24–26]. However, these borders in language use are not clear all the time and everywhere. A series of accounts [22–26] point out that, although parents speak their native language with children at home, and learning Portuguese is reserved to school, with increasing exposure to television and the internet, children are acquiring Portuguese before starting formal school education; moreover, with the consumption of material resources such as food and clothing, and of cultural products such as sports and television programs, some traditional practices, like children's plays, have been left aside. As a result, not only has Portuguese "invaded" their linguistic practices to an alarming extent, with vocabulary slipping into their speech and changes in language structure, the language, discourse and knowledge that goes with those practices have been disappearing as well.

In another direction, some language policies within these ethnic groups have been adopted. Karajá and Tapirapé teachers have been responsible for creating words in their native language for objects, practices and notions that have come from outside their villages. These are taken to appreciation by the group and can be validated and adopted for use in their everyday dealings [22,24]. N. Tapirapé [25] emphasizes the role of rituals procedures in keeping the native language practices alive, for the many songs and discourses mobilized play an important practical role in their social education as well as in keeping alive their cosmological views, mythologies, memories and social values [see also 22].

In the context of those who speak now "a variety of Portuguese", U. Braz[11] reports that naming their children with traditional indigenous names has been an act of resistance; in addition, the author proposes the confection of teaching materials to strengthen the teaching, revival and use of their native language at school, since most of their formal education

activities are carried out in Portuguese. J. Abreu[13] tells of the cultural exchange a Xacriabá family has undertaken to a Xerente village to do historical-linguistic research on their ancestral language and to learn the Xerente language, the closest linguistic relative to the Xacriabá group. L. Lopes[12] discusses the social values, along with educational ones, attached to the practice of "playing Loas", a kind of poetic performance in rhyming verses spoken especially at wedding ceremonies, and expresses concern about how younger generations have not been engaged in this kind of practice.

3.3 Academic challenges

As indigenous people are now present at universities and have been taking part in the processes of debating and producing knowledge, a series of frictions can be noticed in this contact. An initial challenge for them is getting access to this environment. Although there are now policies that establish their right to higher education, some of them still deal with barriers in entry assessment due to lack of familiarity with required literacies. N. Tupinambá explains that simply an alternative entry test is not sufficient, what is necessary is to "look to understand another's ways, ways of thinking, seeing and reading the world, and their beliefs about existence itself" [20, p. 33]. In this respect, G. Neto[15], as a university professor engaged in indigenous higher education, reports on different experiences, both failed and successful, in preparing entry assessment for different indigenous groups at Federal University of Minas Gerais, showing awareness to the fact that other epistemologies should be also validated in the academic environment, and that indigenous people, in N. Tupinambá's words, "are not just one people"[20, p. 128; see also 14].

Furthermore, indigenous researchers reveal a more subjective approach to dealing with knowledge in comparison with non-indigenous academics. Much due to their oral tradition, G. Tapirapé [22], in comparison with non-indigenous classmates at university, expresses an attitude of debating ideas that he comes across more easily, of trying to find a connection to his real experiences, and of owning to his voice, in a sense of speaking his mind, although he highlights the knowledge and opinions he shares are socially constructed, not owed to an only one particular person. In short, it is an attitude to make knowledge meaningful in a subjective perspective, whereas other academics would value an objective perspective in the field of human and social sciences, hardly finding room to digest their opinions amidst endless references to others. As Gilson asserts,

> what counts in academia is so-called scientific knowledge, ideas by great authors. They are colonizing writers who do not take into account diversities existing in the universe. So, I tried to use the opportunity many times to oppose it, because science is not unique; there are several sciences, thus putting specific Apyãwa knowledge into debate [22, p. 17].

Such an impression of superiority of Western knowledge, along with the automatic dismissal of native Brazilian epistemologies generate practical situations when indigenous are undermined or do not have their ideas adequately considered. For instance, an interviewee revealed to N. Tupinambá [20] an occasion when, during class in a nutrition course, she had her contribution bluntly dismissed by one of the lecturers based on supposedly metabolic differences of a whole ethnic group in processing açaí berries.

4. Discussion and conclusion

In this array of topics and issues being brought to attention by indigenous researchers, we can find direct and indirect reflections on language, that is, we can notice how different language ideologies are at play in these discourses. The discursive style and research methodologies are far from the traditional, distant and supposedly impartial academic writing (see indigenous references and an analysis by Carvalho and Schlatter [19]). Most, if not all, indigenous academics write vivid autoethnographic [27,28] works. They resort to their oral tradition, the interaction with elders and peers for gathering necessary information, for debating ideas, for shaping their views, and, as a result, digest all of it in academic reports in which the agency of the researcher is visible to the reader, also making use of other references and academic theorists whenever necessary and relevant.

These academics show awareness that certain linguistic repertoires have different functions to them. Their claim for basic education, as stated above, was based on the need to develop specific literacies and linguistic resources that would allow them to act more assertively and self-sufficiently when dealing in different social and political areas. When specifically discussing language preservation, indigenous accounts are clear in showing that language form, discourse, knowledge and action cannot be conceptualized separately [16]. For example, N. Tapirapé shows that their traditional rituals keep their language alive, not only from a formal perspective, but from a discursive one: "the ritual brings to the present mythical narratives and historical facts of the Apyãwa people" [25, p. 6]. But as some practices are changed or begin to disappear, so does the language associated with them.

However, aware of the inevitability of transformations in cultural and linguistic practices, what is being questioned is the colonialist and monolingual ideology, one that crystalizes cultural and social identities, which, as a result, tends to undermine those who do not fit in their ideals. U. Braz [11] denounces this essentialist ideology of language that serves to question indigenous rights when their language and practices do not coincide with an idea of what "real indigenous people" should be like [see also 14,20]. Braz uses the metaphor of a new tree that sprouts from the roots of an older one that has been felled to argue that, although his

community speaks now a variety of Portuguese (given formalist assessment criteria), their linguistic practices, beliefs, knowledge, discourses – therefore the very notion of who they are – are strongly rooted in their native indigenous tradition.

In indigenous texts we do find use of the notions we are trying to question here, that is, concepts rooted in the essentialist language ideology. These uses should not be seen necessarily as incoherent. As Nascimento [16] argues, the use of the term "language" – in the artefactual sense we indicated above – is resorted to as a means of facilitating intelligibility in academic productions [16]. What is more, with Oliveira and Nascimento [29], we could also understand the use of the essentialist ideology in some analyses, not as a way to indicate fixed identities, but as a way to emphasize differences that constitute them whenever simplistic generalizations erase their particularities [20].

Finally, in the indigenous academic works we discussed here, researchers are positioned as social actors engaged in actions that are relevant from the perspective of the group. Taking part in the academic space is one more strategy in their collective struggle for their rights. It is one more opportunity they take to actively challenge discourses that have brought dire consequences to the native American traditional peoples for centuries.

5. References

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