

Oral traditions in a quilombo community near Cametá in the Brazilian state of Pará

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1. Introduction

For linguists the Amazon region presents a rich array of topics to be investigated; not only are there still indigenous languages to be documented, but also varieties of Portuguese spoken by communities founded by runaway slaves (quilombos) and/or by people of different ethnic and linguistic origin living along the rivers in the hinterland, or even mixtures of varieties spoken in the ever-growing metropolises.

The study financed by *Gesellschaft für Bedrohte Sprachen* was carried out in the quilombo-community “Associação Terra da Liberdade” in the Juaba district near the town of Cametá (Tocantins River) in the Brazilian state of Pará. The overall community consists of eight small villages of which we managed to visit six during our field-trips. Currently the quilombo is formed by around 200 households. However, the number is decreasing continuously because younger community-members tend to leave the area in order to settle in a small-town nearby or upriver (Cametá, Tucuruí) or in Belém, the capital of the state at the mouth of the Amazon River, where they have the opportunity to continue their studies or to find a job that does not involve physical work. The inhabitants of the quilombo (quilombolas) live from subsistence farming and from the production of manioc flower and starch which they sell on Sundays at a local market place, the village of Juaba where the ‘people of the islands’ meet the ‘people of the center’ (i.e. from the mainland) to exchange their goods. Only the two smaller ones of the eight individual settlements of the quilombo do not have their own elementary school. The schools are usually run by one or two local teachers. The eight settlements constituting the quilombo are connected either by waterway or by dirt roads or paths which may be partially impassable during the rainy season. The quilombolas use motor-boats and bicycles as means of transport. Younger men tend to have their own motorbikes.

There has been a permanent power supply for less than five years in the region, but already 20 years ago people regularly listened to the radio and had started to fuel television-sets with car-batteries or generators which were operated in the evenings, with a whole community assembled in front of a single TV screen. Nowadays there is a TV in each house; and as a last activity each night before going to bed families watch the news and the telenovela (Brazilian soap-opera). Those people who regularly go to town have mobile phones, but the overall reception in the area is very poor. There is no access to the internet.

2. Goals of the study

The major goal of our study was to capture elements of oral discourse, especially ideophones and the accompanying gesture production, in the variety of Brazilian Portuguese spoken in the quilombo. A secondary goal was to analyse in more detail the structure of the ideophones in order to find out more about their linguistic origin. These elements, described as “marked words that depict sensory imagery” (Dingemanse 2011:1), were first reported for African languages¹ and have also been observed in oral discourse of indigenous languages all over the Amazon.² Since ideophones are produced in a less conscious manner than other elements, they tend to be less affected by change³. A working hypothesis of our study was therefore that they might even have their origins in languages that were spoken by members

¹ Doke (1935).

² Cf. Reiter (2012), chapter 1.3.

³ Cf. Munro (1998), who observed that in a monolingual English Chickasaw community expressive vocabulary of this type still had the structure of a Muskogean language.

of a speech community before they changed to another language. Since the quilombo had been founded by African slaves who managed to escape from plantations, there was a slight possibility for the ideophones to be of African origin.



Fig. 1: The village of Juaba on a Sunday (view from Tocantins River)



Fig. 2: The Juaba market-place

According to the information of former community members, ideophones used to be very common in the speech of the quilombo inhabitants about two or three decades ago and still occur in personal narratives. However, when quilombolas change to an urban environment, this expressive manner of communication becomes socially marked, revealing them as

migrants from a rural area, and they tend to avoid it. Another factor for the disappearance of the ideophones from oral discourse is the general disappearance of the story-telling tradition since electricity and consequently mass media (radio and TV) became available in the area.

3. Fieldwork

Data was collected during two field-trips in January and December of 2015. We traveled by coach from Belém to Cametá and from there took several boats to arrive at the community of Mola which is the geographic centre of the quilombo. Mola, first mentioned in the mid 18th century as a major focus of African resistance in the Tocantins region,⁴ used to be the village with the highest population but is now inhabited mostly by older people and children. From Mola five other small communities (Itapocú, Itabatinga, Tomázia, Bom Fim and Taxizal) could be reached by motorbike.

BUDGET	
Field-trip 1 + 2 (2 researchers)	
Travel costs (coach, boat, motorbike)	260 €
Accommodation	280 €
Compensation (speakers/ guide)	110 €
Conversion of data (DV) into current format	50 €
TOTAL:	700 €



Fig. 3: Quilombo-community of Mola

During the first field-trip in January we collected more than nine hours of video data, added by another 7.5 hours in December. In order to gather appropriate material for the analysis of ideophones, the interviewed speakers, adult community-members of both sexes from the age of 29 to 80, were asked to remember events of personal involvement (hunting-tales, encounters with supernatural beings, accidents). We also attempted to make them remember stories that they used to tell their children, but although they all could recall to

⁴ Cf. Moraes Pinto (2001: 337).

having heard such narratives from grandparents or – in the case of people above the age of 60 – from their parents, they seem to have completely lost this discourse genre. After having obtained some ideophones in context, we checked and confirmed their meanings with other community-members. More ideophones were elicited in groups by describing to them activities from their daily routine that are typically depicted by such elements.

While the recordings during the first field-trip were made with a Panasonic Camcorder (NV-GS500) on digital video tapes, the data during the second field-trip could be recorded with a Sony Handycam and directly transferred to a computer for further processing. For the time being, five hours have been thoroughly transcribed, while other data were primarily checked for ideophones and synchronous gesture production.



Fig. 4: Village school in Tomázia

5. First results

The variety of Portuguese spoken in the quilombo-community “Associação Terra da Liberdade” has got certain characteristics by which it differs from surrounding varieties. Variation on a phonetic, syntactic and lexical level could be identified and documented by the video recordings. However, with regard to the use of ideophones – our primary subject of investigation – the study revealed that these have become rare in oral discourse. One reason may be found in the disappearance of a story-telling tradition, still remembered by those born in the 1970s and earlier, which nowadays has been replaced by television. Another observation in this context is that there also seems to have been a rupture with regard to the collective memory of the group which corresponds to the findings of earlier studies according to which in the quilombos of the Tocantins region only fragments of a group history are remembered.⁵ The information given by an older quilombola regarding the group’s origin turned out to be a “modern myth”, i.e. the appropriation of the well-known history of migration of a different quilombo-group of which he had read in a book.

Although we did not manage to visit the older community-members who live in the small-town of Cametá, our interviews within the quilombo area with eight speakers, who were born between 1934 and 1946, confirmed that ideophones are more frequent in their speech than in

⁵ Cf. Moraes Pinto (2001: 338/9).

that of younger people. Members of this age-group were exposed to mass media to a lesser extent and are often illiterate or have a basic school-education of only a few years.

With regard to properties of the ideophones encountered in the data or elicited in groups we could find out that semantically they depict activities or parts of activities that are typically accompanied by a sound. These activities are either punctual or iterative. No example of complex activities depicted by a sequence of several activities occurred in the data. Most of the ideophones, even though they are not used very often any more, are conventionalized, i.e. community-members could identify their meaning in isolation. In syllable-structure the ideophones resemble those encountered in indigenous languages of the Amazon.⁶ The proximity to indigenous culture could also be observed ethnographically: in their personal narratives people made reference to spiritual entities encountered in the forest that correspond to those mentioned, for example, by Tupian groups and partially carry indigenous names ('Anhanga', 'Ojara'). Healers and midwives are people with a special gift. To cure minor diseases people perform so-called 'simpatias', small rituals, sometimes involving animals and accompanied by a spell. These cultural practices are currently much criticized by the evangelical preachers who have started to do missionary work in the area.

As can be said about the majority of traditional populations (including many indigenous peoples) of Brazil⁷, the quilombolas are of mixed ethnic origin, in this specific case African slaves and indigenous people not further specified. Consequently, their traditional culture, which developed from the second half of the 18th century onward, has got properties of diverse origin, too. Not much is known about the history of these communities in the state of Pará, but a detailed study of their ideophones, as long as these are remembered, may be an important piece in the overall puzzle to be solved.

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⁶ A detailed analysis and comparison of data with ideophones from Tupian and other indigenous languages is in preparation.

⁷ Cf. Carneiro da Cunha (2014: 249).