

Taking a ride on the linguistic “trem”: a personal narrative

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I grew up in a small town called Santa Cruz do Capibaribe, in the state of Pernambuco, Brazil. I guess this piece of information reveals a lot about who I am with regard to linguistic and communicative aspects. By now, you must be thinking about what I sound like when I speak. You may even share my boyfriend’s idea that people from the Northeast region speak as if they were singing. Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I most likely sound nothing similar to what you must have imagined. Little did you know that when I was nine, I moved to another state. This was a turning point in my life. A little boy, with his big head, and his “strong” accent would move to a region very far from the old and polluted Capibaribe River, which he could see down his street.

Moving to Goiás, in the Central-West region of Brazil, was a huge step for my family. Changes came from many directions, as expected. However, I had never really thought about how my linguistic identity would be affected. That’s probably a topic that doesn’t cross a nine-year-old’s mind. Anyway, before coming to Goiânia (the capital of the state of Goiás), I remember that my relatives told me something close to this: “Look, when you return here, you’ll be speaking like a ‘paulista’”. At the time, I shook my head and laughed at their comment. Today, at the age of twenty-three, I still laugh at this. It’s a different kind of laughter, though. Do I speak like a “paulista” now? Most definitely not, if you think about people who come from São Paulo. What about if you take into consideration what people from the capital to which I moved sound like? That puts things into perspective, doesn’t it?

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When I arrived here, the linguistic difference was overwhelming. At school, people would use what to me was some sort of different vocabulary to refer to things. Once, a classmate hadn't quite understood what he was supposed to do, and then he told the teacher: "I don't understand what this 'trem' is". I couldn't have heard anything stranger. I thought to myself: "Oh, so that's how they call 'guidelines' here, 'trem'". Later, I would find out that I was completely wrong. In some situations, when I talked to people, they would point out how "differently" I used to speak. Some would even say that my accent was funny. Perhaps I used to think the same about them, especially concerning the "r" sound.

It seems to me that this change of scenarios activated some part of my brain as a Portuguese native speaker. Language awareness started to come out of the dark. By being in contact with a distinct way of speaking, even though it was the same language, I could grasp linguistic diversity in a clearer, but still superficial, way. I had to adapt myself to this new environment. So, as a kid, I learned fast how to be a part of this linguistic group. I replaced my vocabulary for theirs in the blink of an eye. It wasn't a deliberate act, though. This social fact called "language" began to weigh on my shoulders and constrain my tongue. A part of me was being taken away, and I didn't even notice it. It wasn't painful; I didn't consciously fight it. It just happened.

As much as it wasn't painful back then, nowadays, it pains me to look back and see that a part of me is gone. I can never get it back. I do know how people from my region speak. I remember the words, the sounds etc. On the other hand, whenever I try to reproduce my old accent, something doesn't feel right. It just doesn't come naturally, which is a shame. Sometimes, when I talk to my relatives who still live in Pernambuco, that old me wants to come out. He isn't completely gone! Occasionally, he discretely appears on the tip of my tongue; he fights back. He resists whenever I say "laranja-cravo" instead of "mexerica"; whenever I produce the "r" sound; whenever I remember my grandmother's sayings. Some days, out of the blue, he comes to me and whispers in my ears: "Calm down now. I'm still there. You're as much an 'oxe' as you're an 'uai'". This thought is very soothing, I must admit. I'm not one, I'm many. I'm conflict, I'm mixture, I'm diversity. I may not be the driver of this linguistic train, and I don't know where it will take me. But of one thing I'm sure: I must not fear.