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The Unmarked Whiteness of Brazilian Linguistics: From Black-as-Theme to Black-as-Life

The racist ideology of traditional, ruling-class Brazilian nationalism, which denies the existence of racial divisions, is inherently anti-Black. For example, in 2020 the Federal Government of Brazil revoked affirmative action programs for graduate degrees in universities. These anti-black ideologies also influence linguistics in Brazil. In the twenty-first century, one of the high-profile representatives of this initiative is the Educated Urban Linguistic Norm Project that chose the urban speaker, who is mostly white, as the norm for all the speakers. Similarly, a series of daily online lectures hosted by ABRALIN, the national professional association for linguistics, beginning in May 2020, was without Black Brazilian speakers over the first month and a half of the schedule. In this work we seek to provoke discussions towards rethinking the role of whiteness in Brazilian linguistics moving from the Black-as-theme to Black-as-life framework. [ABRALIN, Brazilian linguistics, racism]

The racist ideology of traditional, ruling-class Brazilian nationalism, which denies the existence of racial divisions, is inherently anti-Black. Despite advances in the past decade in some sectors, this ideology has gained ground with the rise of neoconservative movements that cast racism and Blackness itself as external inventions. For example, the Secretary of Education of Rio de Janeiro, César Benjamin, commented, in 2017:

Continuo detestando a racialização do Brasil, uma criação – eu vi – do Departamento de Estado dos Estados Unidos... Nossa maior conquista – o conceito de povo brasileiro – desapareceu entre os bem-pensantes. (Staff reporter, 2017)

Translation: I continue to detest the racialisation of Brazil, a creation - I have seen - of the United States Department of State. Our greatest achievement - the concept of a Brazilian people - has disappeared amongst do-gooders. (Staff reporter, 2017)

Similarly, in 2019, the head of the Palmares Foundation, a Federal agency responsible for promoting Black culture, declared:

Racismo real existe nos Estados Unidos. A negrada daqui reclama porque é imbecil e desinformada pela esquerda. (G1 DF and TV Globo, 2021)

Translation: Real racism exists in the United States. The darkies here complain because they are stupid and misinformed by the left.

In 2020, the Federal Government revoked affirmative action programs for graduate degrees in universities, a move that was later reversed under pressure. Undergraduate affirmative action programs, instituted under the left-wing government of Lula da Silva, will expire in 2022, and the right-wing government of Jair Bolsonaro is hostile to their renewal.

Color-blind nationalism is reflected in a central concern of Brazilian linguistics—to identify a unified national language. As Lucchesi (2001,100) has argued, the focus has consistently been on a national norm based on “educated varieties of Brazilian Portuguese,” a hegemonic project that Plaza Pinto (2012) links to colonial modernity, evident in the work of prominent twentieth century Brazilian linguists (Serafim da Silva Neto, Gladstone Chaves de Melo, Sílvio Elia, Mattoso Câmara Jr, for example). In the twenty-first century, one of the high-profile representatives of this initiative is the Educated Urban Linguistic Norm Project (*Projeto Norma Linguística Urbana Culta - NURC*), initiated in 1970 and hugely influential on the field and on educational textbooks. So-called “Educated Urban Speakers” in Brazil, whose speech makes up the corpus for NURC, are almost inevitably white and wealthy. Just as color-blind nationalism attempts to mask racism, so too does the search for a national linguistic identity in a ruling-class, white norm capable of being taught in schools. Beyond its association with a liberal humanism that is rooted in anti-Blackness, Brazilian linguistics has played a special role in producing a local white-supremacist norm in opposition to the norm of the colonial center of power, Portugal.

Blackness is as fundamental to Brazilian nation-state formation as it is to colonial and imperial projects globally. Anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism is the historical formation that permeates all social relations in the country. This is not to say that anti-Black ideologies are not contested in wider society or that there have not been significant victories, including income redistribution and affirmative action policies under the governments of the Workers’ Party. The Federal university system doubled in size from 2007-2015 through the REUNI program and 50% of undergraduate places were reserved for Black and public-school students—policies that brought the authors of the present paper into the field of Brazilian linguistics (access to university study, in the case of Gabriel, and employment through REUNI, in the case of Joel). Contestation of anti-Black sentiment is evident in tensions in university classrooms between professors, many of whom long for the “good old days,” and the newly diversified undergraduate student body. Academia remains a resolutely anti-Black space at post-graduate and professorial levels. For example, fewer than three percent of professors in post-graduate courses are Black women, and their presence is the fruit of “insistence, imposition and resilience” (Ferreira 2018).

Brazilian linguistics’ focus on linguistic and national unity has obscured a longstanding tradition of enslaved peoples, who altered and contributed greatly to Portuguese, performing what Black scholar and activist Lélia Gonzalez (González 1988; Nascimento 2019) termed *Pretoguês* (connecting *preto* (black) to *Portuguese*). As matter of fact, Pretoguês is an assemblage of the body politics of enslaved and ex-enslaved who made remarkable contributions to Portuguese as it exists in Brazil, such as the use of words from Bantu-languages, which are a natural dimension of the languages currently spoken across the country.

Brazilian linguistics, despite recent studies focusing on language ideologies, variation, etc., has not delved deeply into the roots of racism in the country. *Mestizaje* (the historical process of racial mixing), for instance, taught Black people that to speak is, as Frantz Fanon (2008) argued, to speak like the whites. *Mestizaje* is an anti-Black and anti-Indigenous ideology of race mixture that becomes naturalized as a racial classification. Generations of white linguists reported social inequalities in the absence of Black scholars, adopting what sociologist Guerreiro Ramos (1954) termed “Black-as-theme.” Black-as-theme is defined by Guerreiro Ramos as a mere object of

analysis, by contrast to “Black-as-life,” a dynamic, plural subject which cannot be pinned-down. Black-as-theme characterizes the unmarked and universalizing perspective of the white subject (Menezes de Souza 2018), which in Brazil takes the whiteness of the global north as its exemplar. This Brazilian colonial whiteness looks to European and North American models, but also turns its gaze to local and national projects of power, as illustrated earlier in relation to the establishment of a Brazilian rather than European norm for Portuguese.

As in other settings, national research associations are sites for the construction and contestation of whiteness. Although the Brazilian Black rights movement has been politically and intellectually prominent since the 1930s, it has largely been ignored by the national professional association for linguistics, ABRALIN. For example, its 2019 Conference had no Black keynotes out of a total of 12, and the international speakers were white European and US linguists. Similarly, a series of daily online lectures hosted by ABRALIN, beginning in May 2020, was without Black Brazilian speakers over the first month and a half of the schedule. International speakers were overwhelmingly white men from US Ivy League universities, including Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker. Notably, English was chosen for many lectures, pointing to an understanding of English as the monolingual language of the world, which for Pennycook (2007) is a myth that follows the invention of the western world. This contrasts with the multilingual practices of Brazilian *Pretoguês* (as described earlier, *preto* (black) substitutes the *portu-* of Portuguese in this term to index the plurality of Black speakers and languages used in Brazil).

When ABRALIN began posting supportive hashtags of US Black rights campaigns on its social media in June 2020, its silence on local racism was pointed out by linguists committed to racial justice in Brazil. Online criticism pointed to the association’s inaction regarding the absence of non-white researchers and the superficiality of posting an English-language hashtag. The official response was swift: blocking of critics and deletion of critical comments. Senior linguists closed ranks, casting criticism as “persecution,” a recurrent response to all criticism from Black scholars. In the following weeks, in an apparent gesture toward greater inclusivity, several Black, US-based linguists were invited by ABRALIN present, as was a Black Brazilian author from another field. This move left open the interpretation that there were no noteworthy Black Brazilian linguists working on racial justice or capable of commenting on local Black rights movements. Nothing could be further from that truth, with prominent examples being Kassandra Muniz (2016), Ana Lúcia Souza (2011), Aparecida de Jesus Ferreira (2007), Tânia Rezende (2019), Lúcia Maria Assunção Barbosa (Silva and Barbosa 2019), Gabriel Nascimento (Santos and Windle 2020), Menezes de Souza (Souza 2005), Glenda Melo (2015), among others. A last-minute invitation to lecture received by some Black linguists, including one of the authors (Gabriel) was declined due to the lack of open conversation held by the association with Black scholars in Brazil.

These examples suggest that Black-as-theme persists in the institutionalized spaces of Brazilian linguistics, showing that whiteness is inseparable from power relations in defining who can speak for Black people and which Black people can speak for themselves (Alcoff 2015). This marginalizes the real Black person speaking about his/her own pains and lived experiences (Fanon 2008), which Guerreiro Ramos called “Black-as-life.” In a broader sense, the concept of the white listening subject, as defined by Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa (2015), is valuable for marking the speaker who is embraced in conversations about oppression. As Linda Alcoff (1991) observes, it is the white subject who has the power to decide whether one can speak or not for others in settings of structural racism.

At least two responses are urgently needed to change this situation. The first is to mark institutionalized whiteness and anti-Blackness as part of a system of oppression. This requires white and non-white anti-racist linguists to name and shame racism in our field, including rejecting the discrediting of anti-racist criticism as “persecution” of white linguists and established institutions. The present paper,

authored by a Black linguist and a white one, contributes to this task. The second response is to create new spaces for Black-as-life, and this has occurred through the recent foundation of the Network of Black Researchers of Language Studies (*Rede de Pesquisadores Negres de Estudos da Linguagem* – REPENSE). The intersectional agenda and solidarity of this network is made evident in the gender-inclusive spelling of *negres* (rather than *negros*), another point of contention for conservative white linguists, as highlighted by ABRALIN's online sharing of descriptions of gender-inclusive language as an "aberration."

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