

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Linguistic Variation and Change in the Portuguese of São Tomé

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This dissertation focuses on the variety of Portuguese spoken in São Tomé, the capital of São Tomé and Príncipe. From the sixteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, Forro, Angolar, and Lung'ie (three native creoles) were the most widely spoken languages on the islands. However, the massive arrivals of contract laborers, starting at the end of the nineteenth century, and the increasing use of Portuguese as a lingua franca completely changed the sociolinguistic setting. As a consequence, a process of linguistic shift (from creoles to Portuguese) started to take place. This shift was intensified from the 1960s on, with the rise of the nationalist movement, the independence of the country (in 1975), and generalized access to education. Since then, children have been growing up with the local variety of Portuguese as their first (and often only) language.

The objective of this research is therefore to investigate the emergence of a Santomean variety of Portuguese, with special reference to rhotics and subject pronoun expression, and to contrast Santomean Portuguese with other varieties of Portuguese. In a larger context, it also explores the social and ideological phenomena that explain the linguistic choices, linguistic change, and language shift in São Tomé and Príncipe. The study is based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork and sociolinguistic interviews with 56 native speakers of Santomean Portuguese, aged between 12 and 73 years old, who were born and raised in the capital of São Tomé and its surroundings.

This dissertation comprises nine chapters. The first chapter introduces the reader to this study of language variation and change conducted in São Tomé and Príncipe, and presents the linguistic variables of interest, the motivations for the study, as well as its objectives, research questions, and contributions.

Chapter 2 is a review of the five centuries of Portuguese rule of the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe. The two colonization phases on the islands (the first one related to sugar plantation and slave trade, and the second one related to coffee and cocoa cultivation) were followed by frustrations and revolts among Santomeans, which gave rise to an independence movement and led to the independence of the country in 1975. This chapter also gives information and numbers about São Tomé and Príncipe as it is today, so the reader has a better understanding of present-day Santomean reality.

In Chapter 3, a review of the literature relevant to the topic of the dissertation is presented. It explores the body of research on Portuguese in Africa, the languages spoken in São Tomé and Príncipe, the linguistic features that are characteristic of Santomean Portuguese, and the two features that this study focuses on.

Chapter 4 presents the author's approach to fieldwork and the methodology she used. The objective of this chapter is to give the reader all the information necessary to situate this dissertation against the researcher's own perspective and point of departure.

Chapter 5 is about the interrelation between ethnicity, social hierarchies, political power, and kinship ties. This discussion is relevant to understand who the Forros, the historically dominant group, are, where they stand on the social and ethnic scale, and how they view themselves and the other ethnic groups.

In Chapter 6, the concept of language ideology is used to analyze the language shift from creole to Portuguese in São Tomé, as well as the markedness of strong-R in Santomean Portuguese. Results show that the use of the rhotics in Santomean Portuguese maps onto national distinction, although many Santomeans see this distinctive and salient feature as problematic. The case study of a particular speaker (Célia) allows us to deepen the analysis about how Santomeans who are "users of the strong-R" experience it within their community, and in contact with other Portuguese speakers.

In Chapter 7, rhotics are further investigated, this time from a variationist point of view. The results and discussion on rhotics are divided into three different processes: deletion of (-r), distinctive use of strong-R, and emergence of fricative rhotics in Santomean Portuguese. The results regarding deletion of (-r) show Santomean Portuguese to be comparable to Brazilian and European Portuguese, with a higher rate of deletion in word-final position among less educated people. Concerning the strong-R, the results have shown that Santomeans use it in non-standard positions, and that this distinctive use is a change in progress clearly led by the younger generations. The results also indicate that the use of the weak-r in non-standard positions is possible, reflecting a partial merger between the weak-r and strong-R. Finally, the emerging fricative, which is an alternative to the traditional trill, marks the difference between Santomeans born before and after the independence of the country. The fact that speakers born after independence use it more frequently suggests that this feature might be construed as a marker of national identity, a way to distinguish Santomean Portuguese from European Portuguese, the variety spoken by the former colonizers and the official standard in São Tomé and Príncipe.

Finally, in Chapter 8, subject pronoun expression in Santomean Portuguese is investigated and the results are compared to Brazilian and European Portuguese. Generally speaking, Santomean Portuguese patterns more like European Portuguese in its high rate of use of null subjects. Interestingly, and contrary to previous studies, Santomeans with a higher level of education disfavor the use of null subjects, which is claimed to relate to a sensitivity to grammatical ideology and the favoring of the overt subject in more formal situations. Most of the results regarding the linguistic predictors, which are stronger than the social predictors, relate Santomean Portuguese to other varieties of Portuguese.

This study of rhotics and subject pronoun expression captures the nature of Santomean Portuguese: it reflects a combination of creole influences, innovation, and linguistic conservatism. Indeed, the history of the islands is reflected in its languages: the creole influence that relates to the African origin of Santomean Portuguese, conservative features from European Portuguese that recall the colonial society that endured for 500 years, and innovations that mark the development of São Tomé as an independent nation.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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