

The Orthographic (Dis)Agreement and the Portuguese Identity Threat

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the Portuguese people's opinion of the orthographic agreement recently implemented among the members of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries. This agreement aims to make Portuguese orthography uniform. A survey was conducted about this issue in Portugal. Our hypothesis was that the Portuguese people would reject this agreement because it would be seen as an identity threat, a kind of submission by the former colonizer (Portugal) to the former colony (Brazil). As expected, the level of rejection of the agreement was very high. In this essay, the discourse of the rejection of the agreement and the kinds of motives invoked by Portuguese respondents are discussed, integrating the contributions of social representations theory.

KEYWORDS: orthographic agreement, identity threat, social representations.

Introduction

This article analyzes Portuguese opinion on the orthographic agreement recently implemented among the members of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa, or CPLP).¹ The CPLP, established in 1996, is a highly heterogeneous and dispersed geolinguistic community of eight “lusophone” countries: Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, East Timor, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal, and São Tomé and Príncipe.

According to Luís António Santos (2003), this community institutionally formalized a postimperial relationship between Portugal and its former colonies. One of the difficulties Portugal faced in establishing this community was the need to avoid the charge that the CPLP was designed to support a “neocolonialist” agenda. According to its constitutive declaration, the CPLP aims to “promote and expand the Portuguese language” and to preserve “a historical link and a shared patrimony resulting from centuries of common experiences” (17 July 1996, <http://www.cplp.org>). The establishment of an orthographic agree-

ment among the Portuguese-speaking countries was one of the CPLP's major goals. Several early attempts failed, but recently, after years of tense negotiations among its members, especially between Brazil and Portugal, the agreement was formalized. The agreement entered into force in January 2009 in Brazil and in May 2009 in Portugal. However, the period of transition has been longer in Portugal, and the deadline for implementing the orthographic agreement there is 2015, whereas in Brazil the deadline falls in 2012.

This agreement aims to make Portuguese orthography uniform by reducing substantially the discrepancy between the Brazilian and the Portuguese versions of the language. However, these changes are not symmetrical, since the orthographic agreement implies more changes in Portuguese spelling than in Brazilian. Taking into account the importance of this agreement and the anticipated resistance to it by Portuguese people, we conducted a survey in Portugal in October 2009, in order to analyze the factors that might contribute to this resistance.

In light of previous studies of Portuguese identity, our hypothesis was that Portuguese university students would reject this agreement, viewing it as an identity threat, that is, as entailing a kind of submission by the former colonizer to a former colony (some people labeled it the "Brazilian Agreement").

In this essay we analyze the discourse of nonacceptance of the agreement and the reasons participants gave for their positions. We then discuss the results in the context of other studies of lusophone issues, integrating the contributions of social identity theory (Tajfel 1982) and social representations theory (Moscovici 1988).

The Orthographic Agreement

The orthographic agreement is a treaty that unifies the writing systems of the Portuguese-speaking countries. The attempt at unification is not new, having been tried since 1924 (Fiorin 2008). In 1945 unification became law in Portugal but was not approved by the Brazilian National Congress. According to Fiorin, Brazil rejected unification because, after Brazilian independence from Portugal, Brazil's leaders believed that independence had to be not only political but also cultural. For this reason, Fiorin observes, "Brazil has never recognized the linguistic authority of Portugal."

In 1971 in Brazil and 1973 in Portugal, legislation was enacted that reduced orthographic differences between the two countries. Even with these efforts, disparities continued to exist between the two orthographic systems. Thus in

1975 another attempt at unification was made, but it too failed because of political differences. A decade later, in a 1986 meeting in Rio de Janeiro attended by representatives from Portugal, Brazil, and five African countries, a new agreement was reached, but it was subsequently rejected owing to controversy and opposition, mainly in Portugal (*Diário da República* 193 [1991]: 4382). According to the *Diário da República*, one of the biggest obstacles to all of the agreements attempted between 1945 and 1986 was their effort to impose absolute, 100 percent unification.

In Fiorin's view, the orthographic differences between Brazilian Portuguese and Portugal's version of the language are minimal, which is why texts in either spelling are easily understood by Portuguese speakers. But the orthographic diversity affects the international dissemination and use of Portuguese. For example, official documents from organizations that adopt Portuguese as their official language need to be written in two versions, because the variations are considered unacceptable. The writer Geoffrey de Oliveira Neto, president of the Committee on Portuguese Language of the Ministry of Education during the government of Lula da Silva (see Leoni 2008), points out that this problem does not exist in the cases of British and American English or Spanish and Argentinian Spanish.

In 1990 another attempt was made to reach an agreement to reduce the inconsistencies between the different spellings of the Portuguese language. According to Fiorin (2008), this agreement was to take effect on 1 January 1994, after its ratification by the eight countries of the CPLP. Once again, however, ratification was not forthcoming. Ten years later, in 2004, yet another attempt was made; this agreement was designed to take effect when ratified by at least three of the eight Portuguese-speaking countries.

Although Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, Brazil, and Portugal ratified this latest orthographic agreement in 2008, it was not implemented at the same time in all four countries. In Brazil and Portugal, for example, the agreement took effect in 2009.

Imperial Nostalgia

To understand Portuguese public opinion on this issue, one must take into account the role that colonial empire has played in the development of Portuguese identity. The Portuguese empire was the last European empire to fall, a process completed only in 1975, in an era usually considered postcolonial. Bra-

zil was the first colony to declare independence, in 1822 (it was recognized by Portugal in 1825). The African colonies achieved independence only after the Carnation Revolution (25 April 1974), which ended the longest dictatorship in Western Europe and triggered the process of decolonization. Despite the huge socioeconomic and cultural changes that have taken place in Portugal since the decolonization process, and the country's entrance into the European Union (1986), some observers maintain that the experience of empire has left a lasting impression on many people's minds (Cabecinhas and Feijó, 2010).

In fact, in Portugal today, lusophone rhetoric frequently assumes the form of "imperial nostalgia" (Martins 2006, 80), giving rise to conflicts and misunderstandings, both in international affairs and in interpersonal relations. Despite the lusophone rhetoric, people from the former Portuguese colonies still suffer discrimination, and old racial stereotypes and paternalistic prejudices (even if more subtle than in the past) persist (e.g., Cabecinhas and Feijó 2010; Vala, Lopes, and Lima, 2008).

The poem *Os Lusíadas*, an icon of Portuguese literature that tells through an idealized narrative the story of Portugal from its early days until the period of Camões, plays an important role in Portuguese education. According to its author, it became a symbol of Portuguese identity, especially in difficult moments of the country's history. During the Spanish occupation, or dual monarchy, it was read aloud regularly at moments of crisis, as when Portugal was under hostile siege, and gave the Portuguese the moral strength to resist their enemies (Rebelo 2003, 116). More recently, during Salazar's dictatorship, it was used as colonialist propaganda. Even today the poem is held up as representative of Portuguese identity.

According to Reiter (2005, 89), "the legacy of colonialism still strongly informs the ways in which Portugal defines national belonging." Reiter argues that Portugal's position as a "nation in between" (81), occupying an ambivalent position in the international hierarchy, has created a double tension: "On the one hand, national pride, damaged by potentially humiliating comparisons with richer and more powerful European nations, demanded the evocation of Portugal's 'glorious past.' But distance from aspects of that past was also required. . . . The result was a kind of Portuguese neurosis over its colonial past" (87).

Baptista adds, "From a national perspective, it seems that the time for a serious, dispassionate, thorough and systematic look in the direction of our co-

lonial past has not been reached yet. We are currently in a moment that, psychoanalytically and symbolically, might be called ‘repression and denial’” (2006, 25). According to Baptista, looking at the past requires a certain detachment that Portuguese society has not yet mastered. The very recentness of decolonization has discouraged the kind of searching self-analysis that the Portuguese need. Much distance remains to be traveled before a productive political, economic, cultural, and historical relationship with the lusophone countries can be achieved.

Several empirical studies conducted in the past decade point to the importance the Portuguese attribute to their “glorious past”—the “golden age” associated with the voyages of discovery (e.g., Cabecinhas, Lima, and Chaves 2006; Vala and Saint-Maurice 2004). Cabecinhas et al. (2006) conducted research on the historical perceptions of young Brazilians and Portuguese in which participants in both countries were asked to identify the events and personalities they saw as most important in world history and in the national histories of the respective countries.

The Portuguese participants considered the Portuguese discoveries the fourth-most important event in world history, and chose many Portuguese statesmen and navigators as among the world’s most outstanding personalities. Moreover, more than two-thirds of the participants saw the Portuguese discoveries as having a major positive impact for all humanity, and associated them with such positive emotions as pride, admiration, and happiness. These results suggest the hegemonic social representation (Moscovici 1988) of the Portuguese discoveries as the “golden age” of the nation. Brazilian participants, by contrast, expressed mixed feelings about the Portuguese “discovery” of Brazil.

These findings are consistent with those of other studies, conducted in both Brazil and Portugal, of representations of the “discovery of Brazil” on the occasion of the quinentennial commemoration (e.g., Möller, Sá, and Bezerra 2004; Sá, Oliveira, and Prado 2004; Vala and Saint-Maurice 2004). According to Möller, Sá, and Bezerra (2004), Brazilians recognized some merit in the colonization but identified more negative aspects of the Portuguese occupation. Brazilians’ feelings about the colonization were more varied than those of the Portuguese.

According to Wertsch, “collective remembering typically provides an essential basis for the creation and maintenance of groups” (2002, 67). Collective memory provides a “usable past” that can serve present-day purposes, namely, fostering collective identity claims. Wertsch argues that collective remembering

has three important dimensions. First, it is an active process: “rather than being a thing, or possession, remembering is best understood as a form of action. Specifically, it is a form of mediated action, meaning that it is fundamentally distributed between active agents, on the one hand, and the cultural tools—especially narrative texts—that they employ, on the other.” Second, it is essentially mediated by textual resources: “Instead of being neutral, or asocial, the textual resources employed in collective remembering bring with them a social position and perspective” (172). Third, collective remembering is dynamic, even if it often makes claims of stability and constancy.

Similarly, Cunha argues that images of the past generally legitimate the present-day social order. But such images can also serve to refute that order; thus social memory can be understood “as a field of battle, for social control and the exercise of power, the ability to define what is memorable and what to be forgotten” (2003, 86).

There is constant interplay between social identity and social representations of history. As Liu and Hilton point out, history “defines a trajectory which helps construct the essence of a group’s identity, how it relates to other groups, and ascertains what its options are for facing present challenges” (2005, 537).

Portugal is one of the poorest countries in the Eurozone today, while Brazil is an increasingly important player in the global economy. Brazil’s rise relative to Portugal’s economic weakness represents a perceived threat to Portuguese identity, which has exacerbated the difficulty of reaching agreement on the orthographic issue as an attempt to preserve the cultural heritage of the Portuguese language.

Methodology

We designed a survey composed of both narrow and open-ended questions, allowing Portuguese respondents to express, explain, and support their opinions. We used the criteria of place of birth; citizenship and previous migration experiences; socioeconomic and cultural background; contact with Brazilian immigrants; feelings toward and stereotypes of Brazilian immigrants; opinions about cultural diversity, and so on. On the issue of the orthographic agreement, we posed a specific, narrowly defined question: “Do you agree with the orthographic agreement among the Portuguese-speaking countries?” Participants were to check “yes” or “no” and then justify their answers.

The sampling was nonprobabilistic, so the results should not be extrapo-

lated to the entire Portuguese population. We were interested in the opinions of university students in particular, since they could be expected to constitute a more informed group than the general population. The survey was administered to a sample of 198 undergraduate students at the University of Minho, 95 females and 103 males, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. The survey was conducted in university classrooms and participation was voluntary.

We subjected the data to a thematic analysis, a methodological approach that consists in looking at the main themes presented in the data set. According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (2006, 79). The thematic analysis is a suitable methodological approach for exploratory studies like the one reported here because of its flexibility, in terms of both the variety of data sets to which it can be applied and its compatibility with different research paradigms for the in-depth analysis of one or more of the themes that emerge as structuring a particular data set.

Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) corroborate the soundness of this approach and cite Daly, Kellehear, and Gliksman (1997, 82) to make the point that “thematic analysis is a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon.”

Findings

This essay is concerned only with the results of the question “Do you agree with the orthographic agreement among the Portuguese-speaking countries?” In our sample of 198 respondents, 140 (70.7 percent) opposed the agreement. When asked to explain their position, the respondents offered three basic arguments. Most linked their rejection of the agreement to the need to protect Portuguese cultural identity and preserve the cultural heritage of Portugal’s leading role during the period of empire. Typical responses included the following:

I believe the agreement will facilitate the homogenization of Portuguese orthography among the countries that have Portuguese as their official language, but its implementation means the loss of the cultural/traditional roots of our country, we are losing our identity. (23-year-old male)

Because somehow we are destroying more and more the essence of our language. (18-year-old female)

Destruction of cultural heritage of our specific language/culture. This agreement is due more to economic than social reasons, is unacceptable. The other Portuguese-speaking countries contributed to the degradation of the language and now the country's native language is going to adopt this degradation! Is unacceptable! (21-year-old male)

I am firmly against globalization, I consider this agreement as a loss of identity by those who signed it. (17-year-old female)

I think we should try to maintain our cultural identity, even considering that the language is not something static. The various Portuguese-speaking countries should maintain their differences. (18-year-old female)

I feel that we may lose our identity, I think our "Portuguese" is the correct one, and is vital to learn how to communicate correctly. (27-year-old male)

These participants saw the orthographic agreement as undermining the historical hegemony and sovereignty of the Portuguese people, who still glorify the age of discovery. They viewed the agreement as menacing the perceived high status of Portugal in relation to its former colonies. Everything that might compromise this perceived high status was to be avoided, especially in view of the fact that the former colony of Brazil was gaining international economic influence relative to Portugal (Pires 2000, 8). In this respect, the majority of the participants refused to acknowledge any influence on the part of Brazilian Portuguese, which they saw as a threat to the more authentic and more sophisticated original Portuguese language. They claimed that the Portuguese of Portugal was the "correct" version of the language, evoking the importance of Portugal's historical importance, which, they felt, should be respected.

Participants also reacted negatively to the leading role played by Brazil in the negotiations on the agreement, and felt that Portugal should play a more decisive role.

I think we should teach the proper Portuguese to the Brazilians instead of changing our language, because what is better for one will be worse for the other, the rules should not be changed to the advantage of some majorities. (20-year-old male)

The Brazilians do not know how to write or conjugate verbs. The language is “Portuguese” and not “Brazilian.” The agreement is disadvantageous, because the Portuguese language is very rich and very historic. (20-year-old male)

I do not agree with the orthographic agreement among the Portuguese-speaking countries because, I think, we were the colonizers and we should not submit our mother tongue to some details created by the colonized peoples. (18-year-old female)

The agreement undoes former spelling rules of our language and makes the European Portuguese a copy of the Portuguese of Brazil. (17-year-old male)

Especially for Portugal, since this is the old country, the orthographic agreement came disproportionately, since it implies a new approach to learn the language. (18-year-old female)

We are proud of our language because it is complex and refined, it will lose its value with these adaptations. (18-year-old female)

Because if the language is originally from Portugal, the Portuguese-speaking countries should write Portuguese as we do, never the originating country of the language writing as they do. (24-year-old male)

With the agreement, many words would be more like the Brazilian Portuguese than the Portuguese of Portugal. (28-year-old female)

It might even be good for all Portuguese-speaking countries to have the same spelling, but doesn’t make any sense that Portugal, from which the Portuguese language comes, changes the original spelling. Countries that deviate should adapt. (20-year-old male)

These answers not only show how the historical argument predominated among the Portuguese students but also reflect a strong resistance to change. As several authors have stressed, change is not always easy, and people generally are afraid of the new. McLuhan (2003), for example, says that when technol-

ogy changes, humankind changes. People are often unwilling to change, and in some cases the resistance to change will override curiosity. However, our respondents did not express their resistance to change as an individual preference but attempted to justify it with dispassionate arguments, citing, for example, the difficulties that this change would cause in pedagogical terms:

For people of my generation such an agreement would be absurd now because we will need to learn everything again, we are used to writing and reading in a certain way. There are things more important to be solved in our country. (21-year-old female)

Because I do not see any advantage in unifying the records of Portuguese-speaking countries. I also disagree since it will make it difficult for children to learn new rules. (18-year-old male)

I do not agree because we have learned a particular form of grammar so far, and suddenly, this change happens. (18-year-old male)

Because if these spelling differences exist I don't see any reason to change it. This is a characteristic of each country, and for whoever learned it in this way it is difficult to change from one moment to another. (19-year-old female)

These excerpts also reflect a lack of information about the potential benefits of the orthographic agreement. Many of these responses focus on a feared loss of identity and the complete displacement of the Portuguese of Portugal by Brazilian Portuguese. In fact, the orthographic agreement involves spelling changes only in some words and not the language as a whole. Under the agreement, some spelling variations will continue to exist.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper we analyzed the results of a survey about Portuguese students' opinions on the orthographic agreement recently approved among the Portuguese-speaking countries. The vast majority of the participants in this research declared their opposition to the orthographic agreement on the grounds that, in their view, the language originated in Portugal and not in other countries. For this reason they considered it "unacceptable" that Portugal would have to adapt to the "perverted" spelling rules of Brazilian Portuguese.

Portuguese students saw the agreement as a threat to Portuguese identity, as a kind of submission by the former colonizer to a former colony, a former colony that they perceived as leading the outcome of the agreement. They argued that Portugal should not submit to the agreement because it benefits the Brazilian version of Portuguese, which they saw as a simplified and distorted version of the “authentic” Portuguese language.

Research carried out on the Web sites of two Portuguese newspapers (*Expresso* and *Jornal de Notícias*) produced different results. According to Carvalho (2011) those who took part in the newspaper surveys supported the orthographic agreement. This outcome may be explained by the extensive reporting of the issue in both newspapers. According to Carvalho, the newspapers reflected the ideas of the elite more than of the general public, taking into account the dominance of institutionalized voices in both newspapers.

None of the student respondents in our survey mentioned the importance of the Portuguese language worldwide, which, according to the latest edition of *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (Lewis 2009) is the seventh-most spoken language on the globe, although it has yet to be formally adopted by international bodies. According to experts, the biggest problem until now has been the inconsistency between the Portuguese language of Brazil and that of Portugal. Standardizing the language, they argue, will increase the influence of Portuguese internationally. None of our respondents referred to the “real reason” for the agreement which, according to its proponents, is to reinforce the importance of the Portuguese language worldwide.

Another factor to be considered in the discourse of rejection is the lack of information concerning the degree of change expected to result from the orthographic agreement. Our respondents believed that adjusting to the new written language would constitute a hardship for students who have already learned the language in a certain way. They claimed that the agreement would change the language as a whole, although this is not in fact the case, since, as noted above, the number of changes is limited.

In summary, our findings are consistent with results obtained in previous studies conducted among the Portuguese population in documenting the persistence of “imperial nostalgia” among Portuguese participants, who referred repeatedly to Portugal’s historical role in colonization in support of their conviction that Portugal should have played a leading role in the negotiations on the orthographic agreement. Moscovici (1961, 26), in his theory of social representations, mentions

that the social process generally occurs as a dynamic of familiarization in which objects and people are understood and distinguished on the basis of previous models or perceptions. What we observe in the Portuguese imagination about the orthographic agreement is thus a reflection of the cognitive and social processes resulting from the privileged position of the country in the past, which serves as a paradigm for understanding positions taken in the present. Demystifying the agreement, especially among young people, is thus a challenging but necessary task. Changing these social representations can have a positive impact not only on the issue of the orthographic agreement but also in international relations with countries of the CPLP, as well as in daily interpersonal relations.

NOTE

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