

A very brief history of the Portuguese language indeed

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Here I describe the history of the Portuguese language in a nutshell, mainly to supplement a paper I wrote on language and identity for readers with no knowledge whatsoever of the lusophone culture.¹ A short history is also presented, in a very superficial and uncritical way, simply to give some idea of the issues and beliefs in Portugal. Readers are strongly encouraged to consult the references mentioned to learn more about the subject.

The Iberian peninsula seems to have been integrated in the Roman Empire in two different phases, possibly according to the local regional power balance from before Roman conquest. In Augustus's time, there were three Roman provinces, namely *Betica*, *Tarraconensis* and *Lusitania*, see the map in Figure 1.

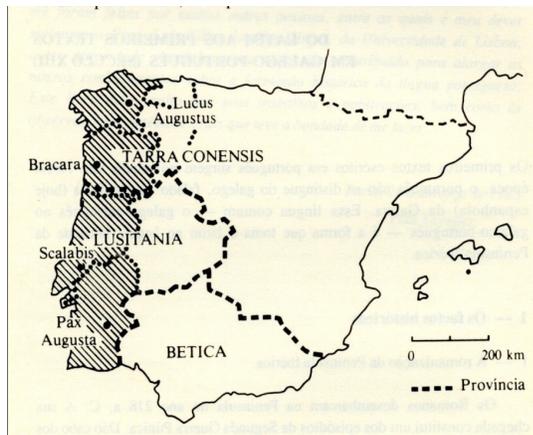


Figure 1. The Iberian peninsula at Augustus's time, Teyssier (1984)

In the fifth century, scholars mean that the Latin spoken in the peninsula (the Ibero-romance branch, as it is now known) was already distinguishable from the other Latins (namely the one spoken in the Italian peninsula and in Gaul). Swabian and Visigoth settlements (418-711) had light influence in the language, mainly in warfare terms. The Arab invasion (started in 711, and with Muslim rule in the (now) Portuguese territory until 1250) gave rise to the *Moçárabe* phenomenon (see Figure 2), namely a Christian (and also Jewish) population who kept their Latin, and was, linguistically speaking, very conservative.

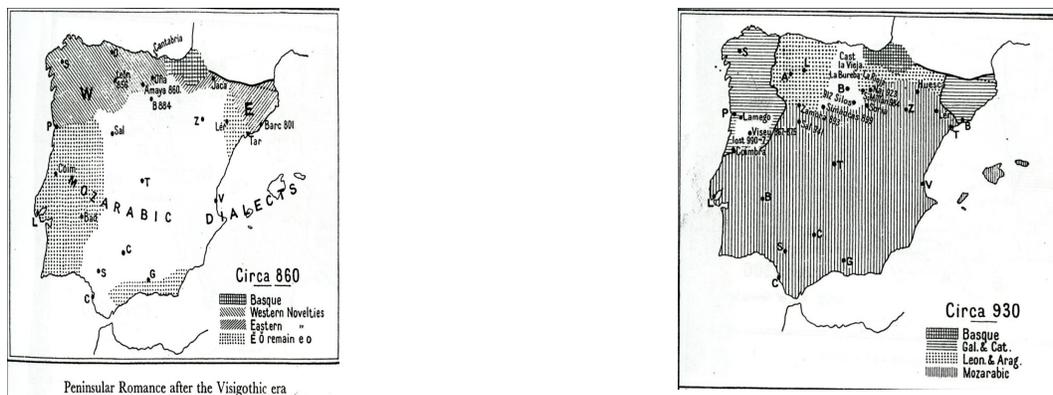


Figure 2. Mozarabic dialect maps, from Entwhistle (1983)

With the *Reconquista* (Re-conquest, name given to the process of Christian forces regaining domination of the previously Muslim-administrated territories), started around 1000 AD, larger numbers of people found themselves under Christian domination, and war brought about migrations and new settlements which produced a leveling of the dialects/languages spoken and have been used as an explanation for a relatively uniform speech in the country.

The three next maps, from 1072, 1200 and 1300, show, in the area occupied by current Portugal, that there are basically two different Latin substrates, that will go on throughout history, one above and another below Tejo, or above and below

¹“Lusophone” is the proper denomination for Portuguese speaking, and comes from the Lusitan folk, a shepherd tribe who produced the first hero in the fight against the Roman invasion, Viriato.

Serra da Estrela.

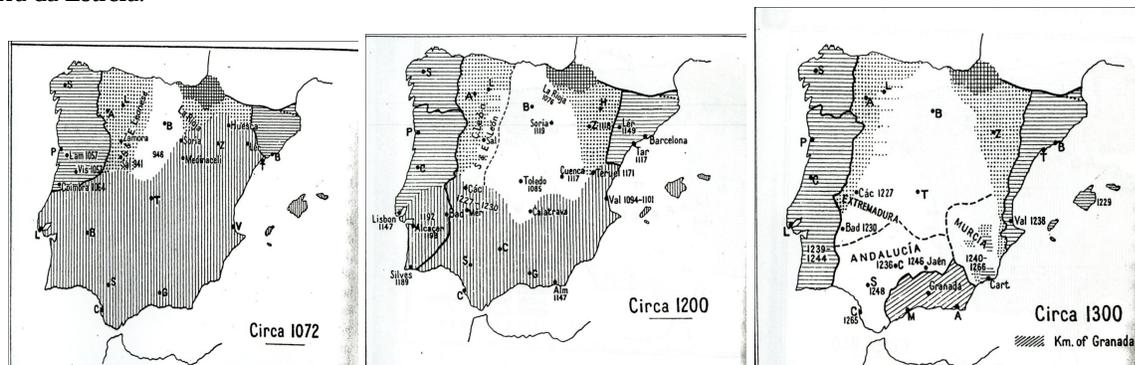


Figure 3. The linguistic map of the Pemsinsula 1005-1300, *ibid.*

1143 is the conventionalized date of Portugal's birth, brought about by Afonso Henriques not honouring his status of vassal (underorder) to the king of Leão and Castela, and therefore turning *Condado Portucalense* (CP, a county given to his father Henrique de Borgonha) into an independent kingdom with the name of Portugal. It is interesting to emphasize that, linguistically and culturally, the two most western and northern regions (CP and Galicia, see Stanislawski (1959)) were quite similar, and for quite a long time the language spoken there, Galician-Portuguese, was considered the same.² The two counties had a quite different history, though, since Galicia was never to be independent from the different Spanish powers, while Portugal has ever since enjoyed the status of a different nation.³

While war and instability continued pestering the rest of the peninsula after 1250, Portugal was free to prepare its future and to start a period of maritime discoveries (see Russell-Wood, 1992), which would bring wealth and power to the country, but whose most important consequence for the present paper is the globalization of the Portuguese language. In fact, as several authors point out, Portuguese was in the XVth and XVIth century a *lingua franca* in Africa, Asia and America, and, according to official historiography – were it not for the mad dreams of a young king, D. Sebastião, who wanted to be a new crusader – the power of Portugal as the first global power (see Page, 2007) might have continued much longer. But since he died without heirs, the Spanish crown was in charge of the Portuguese throne for sixty years and happened to destroy the fleet and most of Portuguese power, with the defeat of the *Invencível Armada* and other wars and problems.

If on the political side this was a definite turndown for Portugal, in the literature world there was a Renascentist poet who saved Portugal from oblivion and gave it its first universal identity: Camões (who according to legend died precisely in 1580) wrote *Os Lusíadas*, an epic poem about Portuguese discoveries, most specifically Vasco da Gama's trip to India, and fixed the language and his place as the most important writer of Portuguese ever. For Camões, see i.a. Ferreira (1983) and Saraiva (1883).

So, when Portugal regained its independence in 1640, it was no longer Portugal the superpower. It had lost its place to the Low Countries and England in the Far East, as readers undoubtedly know. Still, Portuguese had become the language of commerce (and indirectly of conversion, and of cultural East-West communication) in large areas bordered by the Indic and Pacific oceans,⁴ as well as the language of communication among slaves across the Atlantic and in the two sides of it. This is independently confirmed by the existence of Portuguese-based creoles all over the world.⁵ So it is undeniable that Portuguese was the first world-wide language, although such “honour” is ignored by most English-speaking or Spanish-speaking scholars, more concerned with their own imperial histories.⁶

Anyway, if English and Dutch sailors took our place in the far seas, there still remained the African coast places, and Brazil, both of which were to play a key role in Portugal's destiny. Firstly, during the eighteenth century Portugal did quite well (despite a terrible earthquake in 1755) in using the gold and the slaves to a solid economic advantage. One linguistic-political measure which was enforced in this period and which had profound relevance for the history of the Portuguese language was the prohibition of using Tupi as *lingua franca* in Brazil, issued by *Marquês de Pombal*, the strong Portuguese prime-minister who took control of the country after the 1755 earthquake, and who was the introducer of

2 In fact, to this day there are people who defend it is the same language still.

3 Even during the short 60-year period (1580-1640) when Portugal and Spain shared kings, namely Filipe I, II and III, they were always referred as “king of Spain and Portugal”, and were even distinct in their denomination: for example, Filipe second of Spain and first of Portugal.

4 Remember that, in 1495, Portugal and Spain had divided the whole world between the two through signing *Tratado de Tordesilhas*, and Africa, India and the Far East were in the Portuguese half.

5 According to <http://observatorio-lp.sapo.pt/geopolitica/lingua-estrategica1> (last access: 20 December 2013), creoles of five major families can be identified around the world, namely Alta Guiné, Golfo da Guiné, Indo-Portuguese, Malay-Portuguese and Sino-Portuguese.

6 An interesting anecdote on this respect can be found in B.S.Santos (2011): American anthropologists studying the Saramaka Maroon people in Suriname, descending from rebel slaves who had run away in the seventeenth century, claimed their African origin by their use of... two Portuguese words.

Enlightenment in Portugal. While this measure was related to the ruthless persecution of Jesuits done by Pombal (it was mostly Jesuits who controlled Brazil at that time), part of its rationale may also have been the increase of the monarch's absolute power in the Portuguese empire.

But the situation in the rest of Europe, with Napoleon invasions and the Napoleonic wars, was going to influence again the fate of this, after all, quite small country: the king and the royal family had to flee to Brazil where they were safe (see Gomes, 2007), but this move was to have unforeseen consequences: the young prince D. Pedro (IV of Portugal, I of Brazil) chose to become Brazil's emperor and granted independence to Brazil in 1822, while also fighting for the liberal ideas and the Portuguese constitution in Portugal in the years to follow.

Linguistically, this move of the Portuguese “intelligentsia” to Brazil resulted in a strengthening of the Portuguese language and culture in the Brazilian territory, as well as in a significant enforcement of bureaucracy and bureaucratic language. Also, it brought about comparatively little animosity against Portugal – since no independence war took place, language-separatist movements were not natural.⁷ After all, at the time of the king's exile, one third of Rio de Janeiro's population was Portuguese – which incidentally may account for many of the features of Rio's dialect, see Bechara (1986), Head (1988) and Neto (1957).⁸

So, during the nineteenth century, and as a consequence of losing Brazil, Portugal had again to redirect its politics, now to Africa. Linguistically it suffered some influence from French as the language of culture (possibly also from English, due to the many English businessmen who settled in Porto and Madeira, but apparently only in commercial or technical language⁹). According to language historians (Teyssier (1984), Mattos e Silva (1988), Castro (2006) and Cardeira (2006)), there were several innovations in the Lisbon dialect at this time which made Portuguese from Portugal differ more markedly from the Portuguese spoken in Brazil, India, Africa and Oceania.

The end of the nineteenth century was a difficult period for Portugal, because again its empire/redefinition was assaulted, due to the division of Africa among European powers, and the infamous episode of the *Mapa cor de rosa*, rose map. This, in addition to have inspired waves of nationalism and interest in national history, also brought about the end of monarchy, considered, possibly unjustly, not to have been able to deal adequately with the problem.

Portugal had a successful Republican coup d'état in 1910, and has had a democratic and liberal but turbulent period until a military coup in 1933 establishes a fascist dictatorship which lasted 48 years, falling in 1974 with the Carnation Revolution, due to popular discontent with the colonial war that was going on since 1961. A revolutionary period ensues, with a left constitution and almost immediate freedom for the African colonies, which in turn brings a large number of African people into continental Portugal, the *retornados*. Also, freedom of expression increases drastically the number of books published and translated in Portugal, and the influence of Brazilian Portuguese through the media, especially TV, raises as well. An enormous rise in literacy also brought changes to the language of both the people and the media, not only what the people spoke about, but who spoke. All these changes have contributed to changes in the Portuguese language. In the 90's there was also a change in immigration patterns, with many Eastern European immigrants, so that currently the issue of teaching Portuguese in schools to people of other native languages is relevant for the first time in History. Finally, in the last decades many Brazilian have emigrated to Portugal as well, and they managed to change quite a few of the ways of language there, while also making the Portuguese more aware of variety differences and the dialects spoken in Brazil.

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7 To be sure, I do not want to deny that Brazilian Portuguese has developed differently and that the subject of a national language and its freeing from (the language spoken in) Portugal has given rise to hot debates and is still a matter of dispute in Brazil – see Varejão (2006) for an historical overview. I am just stating that I believe this was not specifically connected to hate towards the colonial power.

8 An interesting because counter-intuitive suggestion for the maintenance of an overall similar language across such a large territory as Brazil with so many immigrants from different countries is the hypothesis that the more diversified the background of the participants, the more global and homogeneous a language is, a thesis that has also been invoked for the US language in comparison with Great Britain.

9 A curious aside: the differentiation of British and American English that can be observed in technical language gave rise to a parallel one in the loan words from English in Portugal and Brazil, thus *comboio* (PP) and *trem* (PB), or *caminho de ferro* (PP) and *estrada de ferro* (PB), respectively from *convoy* and *train*, and from *railway* and *railroad*.

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