

# IDENTITY(IES)

A MULTICULTURAL AND  
MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

ANA PAULA ARNAUT  
(ORG.)

IMPRESA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA  
COIMBRA UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## LANGUAGE LOSS AND CHANGING IDENTITIES IN THE MIRANDESE COMMUNITY

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**Abstract:** Mirandese is a minority language spoken in a small area of Northeastern Portugal, on the Portuguese-Spanish border. Having descended from Astur-Leonese (Menéndez Pidal, 1962; Vasconcelos, 1882), one of the romance varieties spoken in the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages, Mirandese has survived in contact with Portuguese (and also with Spanish) over the course of several centuries in small, close-knit, bi- and trilingual communities. However, recent sociolinguistic data highlight the fact that Mirandese is, at present, a *definitively*, or even *severely endangered* minority language (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2003). At the core of language loss in the Mirandese community are the rapidly changing social identities of its bilingual speakers.

**Keywords:** Mirandese, Language Loss, Sociolinguistic Identity

## What is language loss?

*Language loss* can be regarded as a broad term covering a wide variety of processes by which the physical integrity of a given language is affected to different degrees. Language loss phenomena can extend from mild to extreme, ranging from *language attrition* (Opitz et al., 2013) to *language extinction* or *language death* (Crystal, 2000). Even if inherently associated with linguistic variation and change, language loss phenomena do not stem, however, from the same mechanisms underlying the formation of dialects or sociolects, or the historical transformations of a given language. While the latter examples of linguistic variation and change are largely due to the very fact that *languages are actively used* by speakers, manifestations of language loss are, quite on the contrary, a direct result of the *decreasing use of a language* by speakers.

Language loss phenomena develop in different sociolinguistic contexts, all of which seem to share two defining features. In these contexts, (i) the afflicted language has come into contact with another language; (ii) the relationship holding between the languages in contact is asymmetrical, mirroring the unbalanced power dynamics in which their prototypical speakers are involved.

To illustrate, let us consider two typical scenarios in which language loss can occur. In the first of these, a language (A) has come in to contact with another language (B) as a result of the geographical migration of a group of native A-speakers. Consequently, native A-speakers now form a minority group in the otherwise larger B-speaking community and, as first generation immigrants, they also display varying degrees of non-native proficiency in language B. Native A-speakers in this case may choose to assimilate rapidly into the host community, preferring to use the non-native B language as much and in as many situations as possible (and thus actively contributing to a process of *language substitution* within the minority

group), or they may, in contrast, resist prompt cultural and linguistic assimilation by preserving the use of their native language in all verbal interactions involving minority group members. However, and be it as it may, over the course of the native A-speakers' individual life spans, most will eventually display language attrition phenomena of different types in their productive uses of A. Very mild language attrition will surface for instance in the form of occasional difficulties in lexical retrieval, but more profound markers of this same general phenomenon can also be expected to arise in the phonology and the morphosyntax of the native language A.

Structural attrition of the type described tends to increase significantly in second-generation emigrants, speakers of what is now commonly referred to as a *heritage language* (Cummins, as cited in Polinsky and Kagan, 2007). More relevantly to our present discussion, what starts out as structural attrition in the heritage language spoken by first and second generation immigrants usually culminates, by the third generation, in complete or near complete *language substitution*. As the cycle of language substitution comes to a full circle, the heritage language can be said to be *lost* in the community. Notwithstanding, and even if the heritage language ceases to be used by individual speakers, family groups or a larger community in immigration settings, it often continues to be spoken elsewhere in the world, by other speakers, in other communities. Thus, in this first scenario, language A doesn't actually die, even if it does, in fact, lose a group of its potential speakers.

A quite distinct outcome unfolds in the second scenario. In this case, a particular language ceases over time to be used by *anyone, anywhere, at all*. This is *language death* (Crystal, 2000), and it is nothing other than the culmination of a prior multi-stage process in which phases of increasing severity of language endangerment advance in sequence. Examples of this very process are, quite unfortunately, very easy to come by. Recent evaluations have

rated more than a third of the existing 6000 world languages as *vulnerable*, *definitely endangered*, *severely endangered* or *critically endangered* (Moseley, 2010), and it is needless to say that, on this scale, only *extinct* follows the *critically endangered* category (UNESCO 2003).

Mirandese is precisely one of these threatened languages of the world, falling between the *definitely endangered* and *severely endangered* categories on the UNESCO (2013) scale. In the following sections, data sustaining this classification will be presented and discussed.

### **What is Mirandese and why has it survived?**

Mirandese is a minority language spoken in a over a dozen rural communities in Northeastern Portugal, on the Portuguese-Spanish border. The language historically descends from Astur-Leonese (Menéndez Pidal, 1962; Vasconcelos, 1882), one of the romance varieties spoken in the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages. Mirandese has been spoken throughout several centuries in a small area of roughly 500 km<sup>2</sup> of the Portuguese territory, coexisting with Portuguese, and also, even if to a lesser extent, with Spanish, and it shares many structural properties with both of these languages (Martins, 2009; Martins, 2014; Vasconcelos, 1900).

A number of factors have favored the maintenance of Mirandese over time (Cahen, 2009; Carvalho, 1973; Martins, 1994b; Merlan, 2009; Vasconcelos, 1900), namely the geographical isolation of the region where the minority language is spoken, the traditional insufficiency of telecommunication systems and of roads linking the region to the rest of the country, the prevailing primary sector based economy, and the traditional communitarian model for managing local affairs.

It is not surprising then, that Mirandese speaking communities have also always been very small and close-knit. Every inhabitant of a Mirandese rural locality is typically acquainted to every other inhabitant, a fact that contributes to the dense interconnectivity of the social networks represented by each local community. Interpersonal relationships also tend to be founded on a number of redundant personal and professional bonds, a feature that acts as a powerful reinforcement mechanism of the existing links in each network. It is common, for example, for two Mirandese speakers to be both neighbors and co-workers, while also belonging to the same extended family. Thus said, the Mirandese speaking communities consist in what sociolinguists regard as *high density* and *multiplex social networks*. As stated by Milroy (1980: 52), “multiplexity and density are conditions which often co-occur, and both increase the effectiveness of the network as a norm-enforcement mechanism”.

The structural properties of the social networks to which Mirandese speakers typically belong are crucial in understanding the manner in which the minority language has interacted with Portuguese and with Spanish at the symbolic level. Drawing on Gumperz’s (1982) classic dichotomies, Mirandese has traditionally functioned as the *we-code*, thus symbolizing the minority *in-group*. Portuguese, on the other hand, was generally viewed as the *they-code*, representing one of the relevant *out-groups* to be considered in this particular context, and Spanish (taking Gumperz’s categories a bit further than Gumperz himself) has normally been looked upon as more of a *they-they-code*, given its direct association with an *out-group* that is simultaneously perceived as being *foreign* (Martins, 1997).

In this balanced arrangement, that was still clearly in place until the mid-twentieth century (Santos, 1967), each of the languages in contact, representing different symbolic values, also took on distinct communicative functions, according to the language-verbal interaction domain pairings presented in table 1.

**Table 1 – Traditional language and verbal interaction domain pairings (Martins, 2008)**

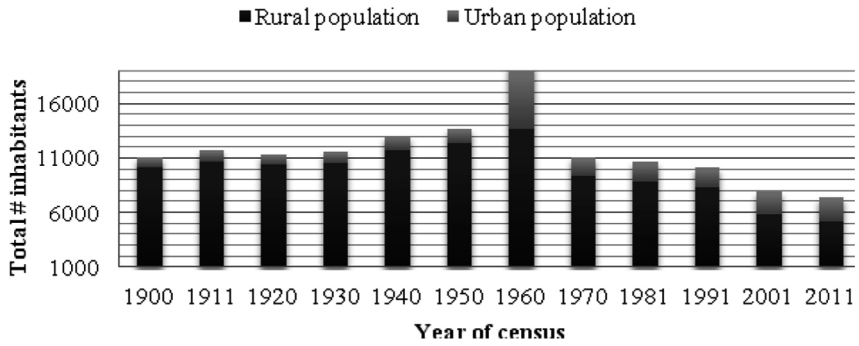
<b>Languages</b>	<b>Traditional verbal interaction domains</b>
Mirandese	informal, intimate, domestic, local affairs
Portuguese	formal, institutional (administration, church, school officials)
Spanish	all verbal interactions involving Spanish nationals

Hence, the three languages, functionally distributed in this complementary and uncompetitive manner, were able to coexist in these communities during a long period of time, in a very stable *diglossic* framework (Ferguson, 1959; Fishman, 1967).

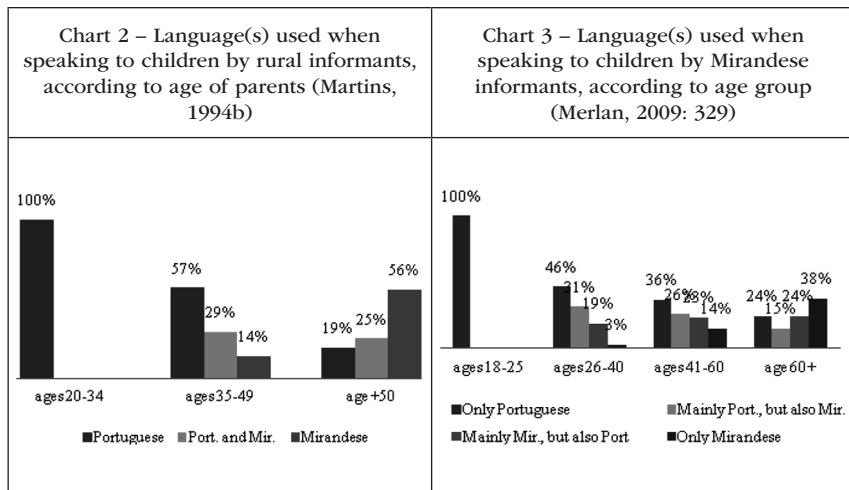
### **What happened to the Mirandese speaking communities? Evaluating trends in vitality**

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, the active use of Mirandese has declined at a pace and to an extent that is unprecedented in its century-long history. It is needless to say that the first contributing factor to this falling trend is demographic. Current estimates of the number of active speakers of Mirandese fall somewhere between 5000 and 6000 individuals, representing only 0.05% of the general Portuguese population. As chart 1 reveals, the number of local residents, i.e., the number of the potential speakers of the minority language has declined dramatically since the sixties of the twentieth century.

**Chart 1 – Number of residents in the Mirandese speaking area from 1900 to 2011 (source: Portuguese National Censuses)**



Furthermore, intergenerational language transmission patterns observed by Martins (1994b) (chart 2), and more recently by Merlan (2009) (chart 3), clearly indicate that the youngest generation of parents no longer prefer the minority language in verbal interactions with their children. This is a crucial indicator for the assessment of language vitality, since the interruption of intergenerational transmission of a language has been repeatedly shown to be extremely difficult to revert (Barreña et al., 2006, Batibo, 2005).





The process leading up to language death obviously involves the complex interplay of other variables, besides demography and intergenerational transmission levels. In fact, it can be argued that patterns of intergenerational transmission of a minority language are, in themselves, a behavioral symptom of underlying subjective variables, namely those related to speakers' language attitudes. An analysis of the trends in existing language domains (factor 4 on the UNESCO language vitality evaluation checklist), and of the community members' attitudes toward their own language (factor 8 on the same checklist) are thus also crucial in understanding the dynamics of language loss. We will first look at the available data regarding the first of these relevant factors.

As was explained above, in the Mirandese speaking communities the minority language coexisted over the centuries with Portuguese and also with Spanish in a very stable diglossic arrangement. However, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, *diglossia leakage* (Fasold, 1984) emerged as evidence of the disruption of the stable associations previously in place between each of the languages and their traditional verbal interaction domains (table 1). In short, Mirandese speakers progressively started to prefer Portuguese during informal verbal interactions involving local affairs and intimate matters and also, very significantly, in their own households, and they did so at the cost of their minority language.

The reasons for this change in behavior are objective, but also subjective. Objective factors include the growing generalization of basic formal education (in Portuguese) amongst the local Mirandese residents, but also, and crucially, the social contact with a large number of Portuguese monolingual speakers who migrated to the Mirandese speaking area during the sixties of the twentieth century in order to work on the hydroelectric projects that were being developed there at the time (cf. the demographic spike in chart 1).

For the local Mirandese speaking population, both events represented a significant increase in their exposure not only to the linguistic habits of Portuguese monolinguals, but also to negative attitudes towards the minority language. The new residents were reported to be generally unappreciative of Mirandese, frequently mocking the minority language speakers (Santos, 1967). Elementary schoolteachers also represented a pervasive source of negative attitudes towards Mirandese, as they often attributed the learning difficulties experienced by their students in developing Portuguese reading and writing skills to negative transfer effects from the minority language (Martins, 2008).

Increased exposure to the monolingual Portuguese speakers deeply contributed to a reinforcement of the already existing negative attitudes that the Mirandese *themselves* nurtured towards their minority language. To be true, in the eyes of its own speakers, Mirandese had for long been felt to be a double-faced coin, simultaneously representing some positive attributes, such as in-group solidarity, honesty and integrity, but also a number of important negative traits, of which ignorance and lack of cultural sophistication are examples (Martins, 1994a; Martins, 1994b; Martins 1997). The negative attributes breach from the fact that the minority language has traditionally been spoken by a population of uneducated peasants, who have experienced little or no social mobility. Thus, the Mirandese language has never really provided its speakers with highly attractive social payoffs. Portuguese, on the other hand, has consistently functioned as a one-way ticket to move up the social ladder and to eventually move out of the community.

By letting Portuguese progressively invade the informal verbal interactions regarding local affairs and the intimate conversations in their homes, Mirandese speakers have actually signaled a very significant change in the symbolic values attributed to at least two of the three languages operating in their community. Accordingly, in

the last few decades, Mirandese has shifted from being the *we-code* to the *only-some-of-us-code*, while, at the same time, Portuguese has progressed from its former *they-code* status and is now functioning as a local *we-code*. Spanish, in contrast, has maintained its traditional symbolic status and is still considered to be a *they-they-code* in the community.

At the core of the swift pace of language loss in the Mirandese community are, above all, the rapidly changing social identities of its bi- and trilingual members. The use of the minority language has progressively receded in local conversations and, more importantly, in adult-child interactions because Mirandese speakers no longer fully identify with the minority group to which they belong and wish to assimilate (to some extent) into the majority group. Research on linguistic minorities in other settings has in fact shown that “only those individuals already enjoying favored social status feel able to indulge in ethnic preservation activities while those in more subordinate social positions are eager for assimilation” (Ryan, 1974:154).

### **Why should anyone care about language loss?**

To end, and even if on a somewhat speculative and perhaps provocative note, my attempt will be to argue that language loss, as illustrated here by the case of the Mirandese community, might actually be an *identity* problem that *all* humans should be concerned about.

My final thoughts, while not exactly reproducing the detailed arguments put forth more than a decade ago by Juan Uriagereka (2000), have, however, been strongly inspired by the author’s article *Linguistic Variation and the New World Order*. In a (very small) nutshell, Uriagereka (2000: 25) argues that “if we do not keep

[linguistic] variation alive, we may be in deep trouble”, and does so by summoning linguistic properties that illustrate the necessary interplay between nature and nurture in determining linguistic variability as we know it. Linguistic diversity is thus, arguably, not only shaped by social interaction and culture (a commonly accepted fact), but it is also grounded in the biology of the human language faculty.

If one is willing to accept this premise, then it is perhaps also admissible to sustain that the language faculty, as we know it, thrives on linguistic variation. If one is furthermore willing to concede that human minds, as we know them, have been shaped by the language faculty, then the next logical step in this line of reasoning would be that human minds, as we know them, actually depend on the very existence of linguistic diversity. *Ergo*, “if we do not keep [linguistic] variation alive, we may be in deep trouble” (Uriagereka, 2000: 25).

But for those who prefer to rule out this type of logical exercise (with its catastrophic outcome) in which I have chosen to engage, considering it to be too far-fetched and/or even loosely-founded, may still, notwithstanding, be willing to keep an open mind for other more generally accepted arguments in favor of the preservation of linguistic diversity. To this effect, and to end with a perhaps less controversial argument, let us just posit that cultural diversity is a defining feature of a civilized world, and that languages are manifestations of the intangible cultural heritage of humans. Monuments in ruins are recovered every day because they represent cultural value (and often even added economic value) not only for local communities, but for human heritage. Perhaps endangered languages can be regarded similarly.

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