

## **The Sociolinguistic Roots of Illiteracy in Brazil**

### **Raízes sociolinguísticas do analfabetismo no Brasil**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Illiteracy is possibly the greatest social problem facing Brazil and is at the root of all of the other social problems. In the first part of this paper, a synchronic analysis of the problem is presented based on official statistics put forth in the Map of Illiteracy. In the second part we look for the social and historical roots of the problem in Brazilian history, beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and thus covering both the colonial period and independence. Both analyses are sociolinguistically oriented.

**Index terms:** illiteracy in Brazil, the sociolinguistic matrix, the Brazilian speech community, historical dimensions.

#### **RESUMO**

O analfabetismo é possivelmente o principal problema social brasileiro, que está na base de todos os demais. Na primeira parte deste estudo, fazemos uma análise sincrônica do analfabetismo, baseada no documento oficial Mapa do Analfabetismo. Na segunda parte procuramos identificar as raízes sócio-históricas do problema na história da colonização brasileira e na constituição do Brasil como nação, desde o século XIV, de uma perspectiva sociolinguística.

**Palavras-chave:** Analfabetismo no Brasil, matriz sociolinguística, a comunidade de fala de português no Brasil, dimensões sócio-históricas.

## 1. Introduction

Illiteracy is the root of all major social problems in Brazil. It is an evil rooted in Brazilian society, practically as old as the country itself, and seemingly immune to the various literacy campaigns that arise in the midst of educational policies. In this context, we wrote this article, which is the product of reflections on the contributions of sociolinguistics to literacy policy in Brazil. We discuss the perverse and persistent nature of illiteracy in Brazil, placing it on the socio-historical matrix and investigating its causes in the ecology of sociolinguistics of the Brazilian Portuguese-speaking community. In this first part, we use census information to raise awareness of the dimensions and characteristics of the problem. These figures show that the rate of literacy in Brazil is one of the lowest in the world, even when considering only the countries of the southern hemisphere. However, when we compare Brazil with other countries, we find that our country has two favorable factors for the spread of literate culture: the language of school instruction in Brazil is Portuguese, which is precisely the native language of over 90% of the population.<sup>1</sup> This is an advantage that few developing countries have, since they are mostly multilingual, making it difficult and costly to teach students literacy in their native languages. Another factor that favors the learning of reading and writing in Brazil is the reasonably phonemic character of the orthographic system of Portuguese. Unlike what happens with Portuguese, in many languages the orthographic coding is far from reflecting current pronunciation. Comparing these two conditions with the statistics on illiteracy, one question arises: Why has Brazil not yet made its population literate? We seek the answer in the

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<sup>1</sup> The constitution of 1988 guaranteed the indigenous people of Brazil the right to a bilingual education whose codes of instruction are Portuguese and the maternal language of the respective group. According to Rodrigues (1986), around 170 indigenous languages are spoken in Brazil.

sociolinguistic matrix of the Brazilian speech community, whose peculiarities are examined in the sociohistorical light that shaped it.

## **2. Some *Data* about the Topic**

Beginning in the nineteenth century, the percentage of illiterate people (defined as anyone who cannot read and write, that is, in the traditional sense of the census) began to fall in Brazil. However, by 1920, the illiteracy rate had exceeded two thirds of the Brazilian population, which amounted to a 64.9% illiteracy rate among those over the age of fifteen. It is assumed that the rate of illiteracy among people in this age group was 77% at the time of the censuses of 1872 and 1890 (on these occasions the census did not specify people's age in surveying literacy rates). In 1920, illiteracy was estimated at 65%; thirty years later, that rate dropped to 50% and took more than thirty years to fall to 25% in 1980 (FERRARO, 2004).

Note also the change in the concept of illiteracy. In 1958, UNESCO defines an illiterate person as someone who cannot read or write something simple. Two decades later, it is replaced by the concept of *functional illiterate*: an individual who, while knowing how to read and write simple sentences, does not have the necessary skills to get through the demands of his day-to-day routine and grow personally and professionally.

The fifth *National Indicator of Functional Literacy* (INAF) released in September 2005 by the Paulo Montenegro Institute (IPM, [www.ipm.org.br](http://www.ipm.org.br)), showed that only 26% of Brazilians ages 15 to 64 are fully literate. Of these, 53% are women, 47% men and 70% are 34 and younger.

The 2000 census of the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) considered as illiterate 10.6% of the population between ages 15 and 64, or 11,180,813 people in a population of 104,997,015.

In 2003, the absolute illiteracy rate detected by IPM, responsible for the research that supports the INAF, was around 8% and about 30% of this population had a rudimentary literacy level. Two years later, a new study by IPM records a one percentage point drop in the illiteracy rate. According to *data* submitted by the IBGE census and other evaluation systems, we realized that there was no significant decrease but rather slow and gradual movement in the rates. It is concluded therefore that government programs and campaigns aimed at eradicating illiteracy in the country since the end of the twentieth century did not take into account the enabling of the population to read and write, skills essential to the exercise of citizenship in an increasingly literate society.

From 1920 to 1980, we noticed a drop in percentage terms, but the absolute numbers increased from 11.4 million in 1920 to 18.7 million in 1980. Only in the 1990s did the numbers begin to show a slight decrease, falling to 16.3 million in 2000, considering, as always, only people over the age of fifteen.

According to the United Nations' Human Development Report of 2001, 55% of the world's countries have higher rates of literacy than Brazil. In Latin America, 72% of the nations have lower illiteracy rates than Brazil's. International statistics also show that Brazil's relative position concerning the illiteracy rate does not reflect its relative situation in terms of income *per capita*. Consider the following: Only 34% of countries in the world and 28% in Latin America have higher *per capita* income than Brazil, but the Brazilian illiteracy rate is more than double the typical rate shown by countries with the same income *per capita*.

Illiteracy is a historical problem. Looking at it from this perspective, we find that it has old and new features at the same time. This is a relatively new problem because it was only characterized as such from the nineteenth century forward, and it is also an old problem because, since its origin, it has

been related to socio-demographic factors, such as gender, race, geography, age, family income and especially to the urbanization process.

Reliable *data* on the issue are now available on the **Map of Illiteracy in Brazil**, which offers an updated diagnosis, gathering demographic *data*, considered in their different dimensions. This is an initiative of the INEP (National Institute of Studies and Educational Research Anísio Teixeira), which processed the results from MEC<sup>2</sup> School Census, IBGE<sup>3</sup> and PNUD (United Nations Development Program - UNDP). The information was pooled for all of the municipalities in the country, considering the political-administrative division of the year 2000, which allowed for individualized consultation.

According to this map, the number of illiterates varies greatly region to region. In the Northeast, the number of illiterates is much larger than in the South and Southeast regions. In the city of *Guaribas, Piauí*, for example, the illiteracy rate reaches 59%, while in *Niterói, in Rio de Janeiro*, the illiteracy rate is only 3.6%. There is indeed a strong negative correlation between illiteracy rates and IDH<sup>4</sup> in each region.

With regard to family income, calculated from minimum wage, we see that the higher the income, the greater access a family has to literacy. Illiteracy is up to 20 times higher in poor families. In households with income greater than ten times minimum wage, the illiteracy rate is only 1.4%. In households whose income is less than minimum wage, the

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<sup>2</sup> MEC is the Ministry of Brazilian Education and Culture in Brazil.

<sup>3</sup> IBGE: Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics

<sup>4</sup> The IDH (Índice de Human Development), developed by PNUD/UN since 1990, aims to be a synthetic standard measurement of human development. In addition to calculating the GDP per capita, after adjusting it for the country's currency's purchasing power, the IDH takes into account two other components: longevity and education. In order to gauge longevity, the indicator uses numbers regarding life expectancy. Education is evaluated based on the level of illiteracy and by the rate of matriculation at all levels of education. Income is measured by GDP per capita, in "PPC" dollars (parity in purchasing power, which eliminates the differences in the cost of living among countries). These three dimensions have the same importance in the index, which varies from zero to one ([www.pnud.org.br/idh](http://www.pnud.org.br/idh)).

illiteracy rate reaches 29%. The relationship between income and literacy becomes extremely serious when one takes into account that Brazil has one of the worst income distribution rates in the world, losing only to Sierra Leone in Africa. In 2003, 1% of the population had an income equivalent to that of the 50% poorest ([www.ipea.gov.br](http://www.ipea.gov.br)). Income distribution public policies in recent years have tried to correct this distortion, but the results are still modest.

In relation to gender, it was observed that women have a literacy rate superior to men. This result confirmed information from the 2001 INAF that women excel more than men in matters that involve reading and writing.

Another variable studied by INEP in relation to illiteracy was race. It was found that there are three times more literate whites than literate blacks and mulattos, which confirms the importance of race as a factor in Brazilian social inequality.

While not ignoring the differences between these social segments, surveys confirm that illiteracy is not restricted to any one group: it is a disease that strikes children, adolescents, adults and above all the elderly. According to available *data*, 7.4% of the population between the ages of 10 and 19 is illiterate, while the illiteracy rate in those 60 and older reaches 34%.

With regard to the urban versus rural dichotomy in the country, it must be noted that in the Brazilian countryside, the illiteracy rate is three times that of the urban population. The rural population has an illiteracy rate of 28.7%, compared to a rate of 9.5% in urban communities. It should be noted that it is common to find in the population rooted in the countryside people, more often men, who cannot read and write, but who have reasonable skill in handling numbers and quantities. The competency they demonstrate in mathematical literacy social practices, or numeracy, is acquired in their routine buying and selling of agricultural products and banking transactions.

The mere verification of the percentage of illiterates in urban areas can lead us to the wrong conclusion that in these regions illiteracy is a social problem of little relevance. Not so. A high proportion of Brazil's non-literate population lives in large cities. In 125 municipalities (of a total of 5507), live one quarter of the whole illiterate Brazilian population, and 586 municipalities correspond with half of the illiterate population ages 15 and older. Among the 100 municipalities with the largest number of illiterates are 24 capitals. In the city of São Paulo, 383,000 people are registered as illiterates and in Rio de Janeiro, 199,000. This concentration of illiterate people in big cities is explained by the high number of migrants who leave rural areas and go to urban centers in search of better conditions, eventually settling on the outskirts of medium and large cities. In these places, many aspects of pre-migratory culture are reproduced and preserved, including language characteristics. They are people who can be described as *rurbanas*<sup>5</sup> (BORTONI-RICARDO, 1985).

In urban areas, *data* about literacy makes clear two important dimensions in the characterization of the rural roots of Brazilian society: the *rurban* nature of social groups that inhabit the periphery of the cities already mentioned, and distortions in the very characterization of what are urban and rural areas in the country. Social scientists, such as Professor Eli da Veiga (2002) and his associates have shown that official statistics on the issue are wanting of an up-to-date methodology.

In his book *Imaginary Cities*, Eli da Veiga believes that the criteria used by the IBGE are wrong. The mistake in census methodology stems from a decree of the New State in 1938, according to which all municipality or district centers are classified as urban areas, regardless of their size and the characteristics of the populations' production. The author argues that the parameters of OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and

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<sup>5</sup> Bortoni-Ricardo created this word *rurbana* or *rurban*, which is the combination of the Portuguese words *rural* + *urbana*, or in English *rural* + *urban*.

Development) are more suitable than the official methodology of IBGE. According to the OECD, to be considered an urban municipality, it must have a density of 150 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> and a minimum population of 50,000 inhabitants. If these parameters are applied, the 5,507 Brazilian municipalities considered urban (according to IBGE) fall to 411.

The analysis of the illiteracy numbers, which takes into account socio-demographic variables such as income and regional IDH, among others, makes clear that Brazil has its own apartheid (professor Cristovam Buarque called it "social *apartação*"<sup>6</sup>): on the one hand, a population whose income provides access to consumer goods, including social practices of literacy, and the other, a population excluded from these practices, whose culture is predominantly oral.

The study "A Portrait of Reading in Brazil," published by *Época* magazine in July 2001 and an initiative of the Brazilian Book Chamber (CBL), the National Association of Book Publishers (SNEL), the Brazilian Books Editors Association (Abrelivros) and the Brazilian Pulp and Paper Association (Bracelpa) conducted interviews with 5,503 people ages 14 and up with at least three years of schooling, in 40 Brazilian cities, representing a universe estimated at 86 million citizens. The results showed that 62% of respondents - about 53.3 million people - had read one book in the last year. This percentage is higher in Brazil than in Portugal. It also showed that only 20% of respondents had bought the books they read, 78% of respondents like books and 89% see books as a means of transmitting ideas. This research has made clear that the habit of reading is consolidated in only a minor percentage of the population. Among college graduates, the habit of reading is almost four times more common than among Brazilians who left school between first and fourth grade. Furthermore, familiarity with reading

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<sup>6</sup> *Apertação* is a neologism in Portuguese formed by the words *apartheid* and *ação* (action) that means in Portuguese an action that intentionally favors the existence of social classes in Brazil.



is also an inter-generational legacy because parents' reading habits influence children's development as readers.

Buying books is expensive for much of the population. One of the effects of this is the thinness of private collections; according to the same survey, 47% of respondents have no more than ten books at home and two-thirds of Brazilians have no more than 25 books on their shelves. Furthermore, free access to books is limited. The network of public libraries is calculated to include less than 5,000 units - less than one library per municipality, according to figures from the Secretary of the Book and Reading of the Ministry of Culture.

Two sociolinguistic studies with *rurban* populations confirm that these groups' participation in literate social practices is very limited. The first was conducted in Brazlândia, in the Federal District, at the beginning of the 1980s (BORTONI-RICARDO, 1985; 2005). In a group of 118 individuals of rural origin, of whom 59% had zero to three years of education, only 19% reported reading books regularly, usually the Bible or other religious books; 24% occasionally read books and 47% had never read a book. A more recent study (LOPES, 2004), conducted in a low-income community on the outskirts of Teresina, showed that reading activities always have an instrumental dimension in that community. Group members only read texts with necessary information for their daily lives: electricity bills, bus passes, prescriptions, business signs, invoices, etc. Some young people who had a higher level of competency acted as scribes for writing family letters and notes.

To complement this socio-demographic illiteracy survey in Brazil, it should be noted that despite the high rates of illiteracy and its slow decline, two factors may be considered favorable to the spread of literacy in our society. We must keep in mind the fact that over 99% of the population counts Portuguese as a native language, which is also the vehicle of

instruction in primary schools (art. 210, § 2 of the Constitution of 1988), as well as the relatively phonemic nature of Portuguese orthography.

In 1953, UNESCO recognized that learners' mother tongue is the best way to implement their school education, from both a sociological and psychological point of view. However, many countries have difficulty in achieving this goal due to the large number of languages and dialects present in their populations' repertoire. Empowering every child with an education program in her mother tongue is costly and difficult to operate in sociolinguistic and political terms. This is the case, for example, of India with more than 200 languages and Tanzania with over 135 (cf. FASOLD and ZUENGLER, 1984; 1985). In Brazil, this problem does not assume a national dimension and is restricted to a few communities.

The other fact that facilitates literacy in our country refers to the systematization of Portuguese orthography that is sensitive to "the phonemic call," a trend that Mattoso Camera (1977) attributes to the Portuguese phonologist Gonçalves Viana, whose works date from the last decades of the nineteenth century. In languages whose spelling – coded for several centuries – has not undergone reforms, they are far from reflecting current pronunciation. This is the case of English, for example. The following anecdote attributed to Bernard Shaw (STUBBS, 1980) is illustrative of the distance between spelling conventions and pronunciation of contemporary English. To Shaw the word "fish" could be written "ghoti," considering that: gh = f, as *enough*, o = i, as in *women*, and finally ti = sh, as in *nation*. In the second part of this study, to be published soon, we will discuss in detail the relationship between the pronunciation of contemporary Brazilian Portuguese and its spelling conventions. Yet we can say that, in this respect, we have an advantage over many other national societies.

These two advantages that we briefly described do not appear to be contributing to the universal diffusion of literacy skills in our speech community. Why does this happen? To get answers to this question and to

better understand why some groups are more afflicted by illiteracy, we will seek to identify the roots of this evil in the history outside of the Portuguese language in Brazil.

### 3. Final Thoughts

The sociolinguistic analysis of the Brazilian speech community implies understanding of the socio-historical matrix in which this community was created and shaped. For purposes of this article, we highlight some aspects of this matrix, including the rural character of Brazilian society until almost the twentieth century, the process of urbanization, migration in this century and the contemporariness of various stages of development. The Brazilian sociological tradition is unanimous in emphasizing the primacy of rural culture in Brazil. For Buarque de Holanda (1997), in colonial Brazil and in other countries of recent colonial history, there barely existed types of human settlement in between urban and rural; the first in this country, restricted to the coastal strip and spreading out into the interior regions, as the lands were cleared and succeeded cycles in agricultural production. Since the beginning of colonization in March 1549 – when Thomas de Souza, first governor of Brazil, arrived in the village of *Pereira*, in *Bahia de Todos os Santos* – until the end of the seventeenth century, an unstable bilingualism prevailed in the colony. In this phase of our history, the co-existing languages were what came to be known as the general language (or the language originally spoken by the indigenous tribes called *Tupinambá*, which spread along the Brazilian coast from São Paulo to the northeastern coast)<sup>7</sup> and Portuguese (NARO and SCHERRE, 2007).

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<sup>7</sup> According to Rodrigues (1986), the Tupinambá language was not called the “general language” during the first two centuries of colonization. Joseph de Achieta referred to the language as “the language most used along the coast of Brazil.” Other authors named it the “language of Brazil,” “language of the earth” and “language of the sea.” After the 18th century, the name “Brasilica language” became common, as it was often found in the texts of that era.

Portuguese came with the Jesuits, the administrative elite and the Lusitanian adventurers who came in search of quick riches. The *Brasilica* language was gradually giving way, in the repertoire of the indigenous, to the inter-language that they employed in an effort to communicate with the Europeans. Silva Neto (1977, p. 34-5) provides a good example of inter-language used by native populations, who learned by ear the colonizer's language. Note also that until the seventeenth century, the pioneers from São Paulo preserved the *Tupi* language, a little different from *Tupinambá*. At the end of the third century of colonization, *Tupinambá* had disappeared from the coastal strip, although it was preserved in some localities in the Amazon basin, where it is known as Nheengatú.<sup>8</sup> The missionaries of the *Company of Jesus*, who were involved in the catechism and instruction of the indigenous people, taught them Portuguese but they also tried to learn the indigenous languages, even creating grammar books. The most well-known of these early teachers of Brazil was Father José de Anchieta, author of *The First Grammar Book of the Most-Used Language on the Coast of Brazil*, printed in 1595 in Portugal, two years before his death (MIRANDA, 1966). In 1759, the Marquis of Pombal expelled the Company of Jesus from the entire Portuguese territory, including its colonies. Work in Jesuit schools in Brazil is interrupted and the incipient effort to educate the local population – indigenous, mulatto or of Portuguese descent – was not taken up again for more than a decade and in a very intermittent and irregular manner.

The environment of language contact in colonial Brazil was ideal for triggering rapid changes in the drift of the Portuguese language, in the absence of an education policy, as well as vehicles of written language,

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<sup>8</sup> The generic language of the Amazon today, Nheengatú (“good language”), differs not only from Tupinambá, but also from the general Amazonic language of the eighteenth century, which is explained by the long lapse in time (close to 250 years) between Tupinambá, which was the lingua franca at the beginning of colonization and the current Nheengatú RODRIGUES (1986).

which have an important effect in curbing sudden changes in the drift of a language.

In fact the sociolinguistic conditions in the early centuries of colonization were very favorable to the emergence of a Portuguese-derived pidgin. Today linguists have controversial positions regarding the development of a pidgin in the early years of Brazilian colonization. Some argue that it would not have formed because its natural course would be to develop into a creole language, as happened in the other Portuguese colonies, but this did not happen. But one could argue, conversely, that evolution has been stunted by increasing the number of speakers of Portuguese beginning in the seventeenth century, when gold and precious stones were discovered in *Minas Gerais* (BORTONI-RICARDO, 1985). Either way, contact between the languages, the absence of an education system and low circulation of written texts in Portuguese – since until 1809, any printing or press activity was forbidden in Brazil – contributed to form in Brazil a variety of oral Portuguese dialects, very different from the language spoken and written in Portugal's urban centers, and later, in Brazil. With small regional differences, this variety has spread throughout Brazil, with more vitality in large rural areas, because in incipient cities it would compete with Lusitanian Portuguese, already making progress in standardizing its written form.

If it seems rash to conjecture on the emergence of a pidgin in colonial Brazil since there are no records to confirm this, it can be stated, with reasonable assurance, that contact with vernaculars and the consequent emergence of interlingua among those learning Portuguese as a foreign language influenced the Portuguese spoken by the colonial masses.

Far from the standardizing effect of literate culture, cultivated by the urban institutions that are literacy agents, the variety in language used by rural and interior populations was marked by a radical reduction in inflectional morphology and lexicon of a strong *Tupi* influence. This is the

origin of the *caipira*<sup>9</sup> language and culture, which was first described in 1920 in *O dialeto caipira*<sup>10</sup> of Amadeu Amaral.

We cannot forget that the multilingualism of Brazilian society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries became more complex with the arrival of African slaves, who were not carriers of a homogeneous language or culture because they came from different ethnic groups: the *Yoruba*, called *nagô*; the *Dahomey*, named *gegê* and the *Fanti-Ashanti*, known as *minas*, and other smaller groups, according to DARCY RIBEIRO (1995), based on Nina Rodrigues and Arthur Ramos' pioneering studies. As the slave trade lasted about three centuries, there was a permanent interaction between slaves' different generations in colonial society. It is estimated that about 3,300,000 slaves were brought to Brazil and were either distributed in farming areas or housed in the cities in family homes as domestic slaves. This large contingency of Africans brought to Brazil never had the opportunity to systematically learn Portuguese. The schools, which already were rare, were not open to slaves, who gained freedom only near the end of the nineteenth century, without the necessary conditions to enter into the production system. They remained outside this system, away from schools and literate culture, and formed the large numbers of unskilled cheap labor even after the country later entered into the industrial era.

The standardization of Brazilian Portuguese ran parallel to the process of urbanization, both subject to intermittency, and as noted by Ribeiro (1995), in relation to the formation of our towns and cities, in a chaotic fashion. It is true that already in 1770 the Portuguese Prime Minister, the Marquis of Pombal, imposed a single grammar book in all schools in Portugal and overseas. But this step had little effect since, as

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<sup>9</sup> *Caipira* is a Brazilian word that comes from *Tupi* that means, since the colonial era, a country dweller, the mulattos of white and indigenous blood, who in the 18th century were classified in censuses as "bastards," the racially impure miscegenation of the indigenous with the Portuguese.

<sup>10</sup> The Caipira Dialect.

noted, the Brazilian populace had no access to either school or literacy practices, restricted as they were to the clergy and the elite who represented the Portuguese state in the colony.

It appears then that Brazilian apartheid, which separates those who participate effectively in the literary culture and those outside this culture, as we have seen so far, has its origins in the social organization of this country since its birth.

In Europe, industrialization preceded urbanization and there is a relationship of cause and effect between them. In Brazil, as in the rest of third world countries, urbanization was not a consequence of industrialization and is explained instead by historical circumstances and economic pressures deriving from it. We can identify two periods in Brazilian urbanization (PEREIRA DE QUEIROZ, 1978). The first begins with colonization, when the coastal urban centers of colonial Brazil were created. *Salvador* was built from 1549 to house the colonial administration; the founding of *Recife* and *Olinda* is associated with Dutch invasions still in the early sixteenth century and the founding of Rio de Janeiro with French invasions in 1565. But the *carioca*<sup>11</sup> population only begins to adopt the habits of bourgeois society when the city becomes the headquarters of the Portuguese kingdom in late 1808, after the arrival of the court, which was fleeing the momentum of Napoleon Bonaparte quest of conquest. About 30 years later, the bourgeois way of life would come to *São Paulo* which, in the next century, is consolidated as a great metropolis thanks to coffee farming. The first cities of the state of *Minas Gerais* arose with gold mining at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Gold and diamonds financed their churches, houses and all of their urban structure.

As the bourgeois way of life gained prestige, the division between urban culture and the traditional culture of the interior grew deeper. Cities

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<sup>11</sup> *Carioca* is a word used in Portuguese that refers to a person born in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

have become the *locus* par excellence of literacy culture, while in the interior a predominantly oral culture was perpetuated. According to Cândido (1964), the way of life on the land preserved the *caipira* culture, conditioned by its nomadic origins and its subsistence economy.

The industrialization process in Brazil only began in the late 1940s. It began around the second phase of urbanization. According to Pereira de Queiroz, the absence of an industrial base in the nineteenth and early twentieth century meant that only a few cities developed a stratified social system. In smaller cities and poorer regions, uniformity and rural life traditions were maintained.

The dissemination of urban habits has deepened the divide between urban culture – directly influenced by European models – and rural culture, and led the cities to assume a position of superiority in relation to the lifestyle of those in the interior. In the following decades, some of these areas were affected by modernization, while others preserved their traditional culture. For the author, this explains the existence of two parallel societies in Brazil. In different regions, these two parallel societies were consolidated at different moments, resulting in the contemporary nature of the various stages of development. In the twentieth century, Brazilian urbanization accelerated, implemented by the introduction of technology in rural areas, the massive rural exodus and improvements in communication and transportation. However, as we have already seen, the rural population that moved to the cities created *rurban* cultural spaces in their new habitat. Their effective integration into the urban way of life was slow and depended heavily on the opportunities for access to school and writing practices.

One way of analyzing the rural-urban relationship in Brazil, in its dimensions related to literacy and communities' sociolinguistic repertoire, is the postulation of a methodological apparatus in which two *continua* are delineated: urbanization and literacy (BORTONI-RICARDO, 2004; 2005). The first goes from the most isolated rural communities to the cosmopolitan



centers. Between these two poles lies a *rurban* area. Every speaker of Portuguese in Brazil is located at a given point along the continuum, but he can move toward any of the poles, depending on his social network, his inclusion in social literacy practices and his participation in the production system as well as his gender, age and other components of his social identity. The urbanization continuum also allows for distinguishing of gradually variable rules that are present throughout the continuum and for discontinuous rules, characteristics of the repertoire of the population located in the rural pole and *rurban* area. The literacy continuum is functional for classifying international events such as literacy or oral social practices, considering always the possible gradations between these two poles.

The systematic analysis of Portuguese sociolinguistics matrix in Brazil, as summarized here, will demonstrate that the heterogeneity in our language, whose origins date back to social inequalities from the colonial period, is directly related to access that social groups have to the literate and hegemonic culture, cultivated primarily by urban elites. One cannot implement an effective national literacy policy without taking into account the linguistic variations distributed along the urbanization continuum and stratified according to income and socioeconomic status, because standard language is primarily associated with social class in this country.

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