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History and Linguistics

An Interdisciplinary Approach

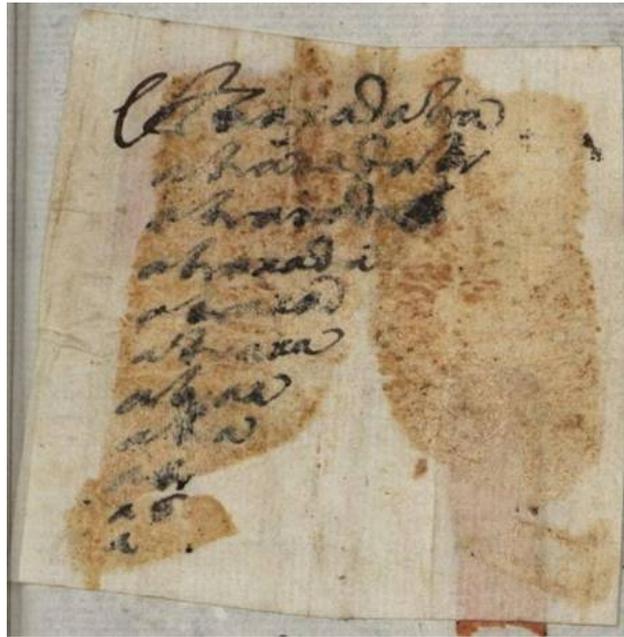
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Early this morning we heard about an advanced way, tried by Miguel Soares, and his team, of dealing with infections like malaria.

Well, if their method fails, there's still the option of returning to an older system, when all you could try was to put around your neck an *abracadabra* charm, wait for a while, and hope that it worked. The method is known since the Antiquity, but we have one of those artefacts kept among original documents of 17th century Portugal. As it happened, a priest in Southern Portugal, a part of the country where mosquitoes proliferate, used to write *abracadabra* in small squares of paper of roughly 3 inches in the following way: the first line would read the entire word *abracadabra*; then, the next 10 lines had the same word minus the last letter, until the eleventh line would show only the letter *a*. Afterwards, the priest would seal the small bits of paper with an "almost-saint" glue, using the same kind of dough catholic communion wafers were made from. Then, he would give patients infected with *malaria* those pieces of paper, suspended from red strips in the form of necklaces. Once the device was on, it was believed that, immediately on the first day, or else, infallibly, on the 11th day, their malaria attack would disappear.

If I am able now to show you a picture of this device, it is because the Portuguese Inquisition received a complaint on the priest's conduct and opened an investigation.



Abracadabra charm

Translation of the correspondent description made by a witness heard by the Inquisition in 1682: *He saw that it contained the word Abraxadabra, and this word would get smaller and smaller with each new line, losing one letter per line, until only the letter A would remain.*¹

My point is this. We still belong to that same culture in several senses: 1. We feel that we have to save those patients' lives, instead of giving up on the frail members of our flock. 2. Malaria keeps hiding secrets from us, secrets that still puzzle biology advanced research. 3. We keep imagining new ways of making written documents speak for ourselves, louder than ourselves (if sources are right, *abracadabra* could mean, in Aramaic, «I have created through my speech»).

On the other hand, of course, we have come a long way from superstitious beliefs, like those *abracadabras*, although it was a continuous path, with discoverers seeing farther on the horizon only because, as Isaac Newton said in his famous metaphor, they can stand on the shoulders of giants.

Language historians, like myself, try to see farther in time, looking towards the past and hoping to discover more details on how languages were spoken and on how they did change along the centuries. But we can only do it because we have

¹ Original text: *Vio que continha a palavra, Abraxadabra, e esta tal palavra se vai deminuindo nas regras seguintes, deminuindosse a cada regra hũa letra, ate ficar na primeira letra que he A.* Source: Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Inquisição de Évora, liv. 237, *Cadernos do Promotor*, fl. 122r.

the textual artefacts that once belonged to ancient speakers and now belong to us, as members of the same long-term community. We are expected to search for those artefacts, to collect and analyze them with the same care we put on inspecting data from the living world that surrounds us today. Those artefacts had specific interpretations at the time they were crafted, but they survived into a future that has developed new ways of reading their meanings. In terms of linguistic research, they can prove to us how solid and even universal are some properties within our languages, and, on the other hand, how other properties are novelties that can one day disappear as suddenly as they arrived.

Language historians must also be able to distinguish between the more spontaneous and the more artificial utterances inside written documents. It is a well established principle, within linguistics, that naturally produced speech is much more reliable, for empirical matters, than the type of sophisticated speech we find in literary or institutional texts. Unfortunately, in the past social agents didn't have records for their naturally produced speech; they had no audio-tapes, nor did they have video-tapes. So we must fall back on documents written for private use, which only accidentally escaped destruction, papers written with little care, because they were not meant to survive or to be shown around. Such kinds of almost carefree writings can be found, indeed by the thousands, hidden inside judicial archives. That is why, in the last seven years, mostly thanks to FCT specific funding, I have been searching, with my team, for private letters kept in the files of Inquisition courts and the civil courts of Early Modern Portugal. They interest us only in the case of having been seized as material proof for the courts to decide on the guilt or innocence of the accused people. This means, above all, that the papers were not written with the purpose of being read by the judges. They were meant to private addressees and landed in court by accident.

We have discovered 2.000 of such private letters during our "Por Toda a Parte"² and "Cards"³ projects. This means a huge investment in human resources since

² Instituto Camões / Programa Lusitânia, Project *Por toda a parte ... Uma certa história da língua portuguesa* (2005-2006).

³ FCT, Todos os Domínios Científicos, FCT/PTDC/LIN/64472/2006, *CARDS, Cartas Desconhecidas 1500-1900*. Followed by Project PTDC/CLE-LIN/098393/2008, *FLY, Forgotten Letters Years 1900-1974*, dedicated to the study of private correspondence in the 20th century.

the letters are a treasure, but they are a well hidden one, and tens of thousands of court proceedings, often voluminous, had to be searched before arriving to such a result.

The language those letters reveal to us is the speech of slaves, servants and children, the speech of house-wives, lovers and thieves, the speech of soldiers, craftsmen, and many more types of social agents who lived 200, 300, 400 years ago. No such variety or quality of witnesses for old language use can be found in the traditional sources, more at hand in libraries or archives.

The resulting database, because we followed up-to-date digital methods, long-standing philology care, and a rich annotation system, can be accessed freely on-line both by the general public and by specialized researchers. This was a crucial point because no parallel collection for any other historical language, at least attaining such figures and bearing such an internal variety, can be found elsewhere.

The general public finds here, for instance, a documented proof that there were many more heroes in the past, and many more scoundrels too, than those who were selected for us by the official versions of Portuguese history. We never learnt about those nameless-ones in school, nor read about them in novels or saw their deeds performed in the movies. This is the kind of evidence we need in order to grasp the randomness that can sometimes lie behind the making of so many collective symbols, that we take for granted.

The specialized public, on the other hand, can extract more linguistics from these data, and more history too. The important thing is to be able to look at that collection of documents with an interdisciplinary and comparative gaze.

Now, thanks to ERC funding, and for the next five years, we can count on a team (the team of the P.S. project⁴) that will collect a larger sample of letters, half in Spanish and half in Portuguese, dating from the 17th, the 18th, and the early 19th century. Interdisciplinary work between historians and linguists will be the *motto*.

⁴ ERC AdvGrant 2011-295562, Project *P.S. Post Scriptum: A Digital Archive of Ordinary Writings (Early Modern Portugal and Spain)*.

To start with, all members of the team will work side by side in the philology tasks, and thus learn to naturalize the speech of those ancient texts and the type of common reality their authors and readers were taking for granted when they were alive.

Linguists in the P.S. team will then rely on historians advice in order to help reconstruct the more complex reference worlds of those speakers. As for the historians, they will need the linguists to help them separate two parts within the texts: the ones that can allow freedom of interpretation because they were performance of culture, and the ones that don't allow it, because they were performance of grammar.

Together we hope to devise a new way of proving that two common beliefs, today, persist in our minds as superstitious knowledge: in fact, neither people have all the power necessary to shape language nor language has all the power necessary to shape us.