

## A Course in Foreign Languages by Jorge Loureiro Figueira

If you look at it the right way, each person has her/his own personal and untransferable language. It is not even a given that we understand each other well. We barely listen when we talk. What will the reader say about what she/he saw and heard here today? *A Menor Língua do Mundo* is a journey through time, to the past and to the future, with the aim of unknowing the other's language better.

Two years ago, when Materials Diversos team sent an expedition to learn the personal languages of the speakers of *mirandês*, *minderico* and *barranquenho*, and to celebrate the mystery of the foreign language, they did not expect that Alex Cassal and Paula Diogo would come to rescue the languages of all Portuguese and adjacent language speakers, along with the sounds one can hear when calling for someone to come home from the street, of the cats, the cocks and the bells that can be heard at a great distance when a strong wind blows from the northwest.

There are those who leave their apartment in the direction of the hills to see the starry sky without the pollution from the city lights. There are those who fall in love with watching birds in the bogs. And there are those who go out to listen to other sounds, new words, new and beaten phrases, platitudes, commonplaces, spoken anew. There are many who travel to learn new languages.

It was a rescue that happened thanks to the collecting of words and sounds by Alex, Paula, Bibi, Sílvia and Zia. The ideas that words are, were rescued from the passage and erosion of time. Languages leave geological marks, and one must know how to excavate and polish the fossil words before breathing life into them once again and placing them side by side, in the future, with the words more commonly used in theatre. Alex, Paula, Bibi, Sílvia and Zia went by caravan, as one might go by DeLorean, to the past and to the future, as passengers of time. The result is a special dictionary, performed on a special occasion, with numbers, papers and games to unlearn and learn languages.

Once I received a cassette with the recording of the dialogue between the members of a now extinct tribe, a conversation in a branch of the Tupi which no one could translate any longer, I was euphoric to discover, many kilometres away, an elderly Indian woman, perhaps the last survivor of the group who could speak that language. We played the cassette, and the woman began to sing and to reach towards the recorder, she spoke with the machine as if the others were still present, and cried from happiness as if they had all just reunited with each other. They were together, at least while she was alive. By now, she must have died, but at least she heard the sounds of her own once again. We left her the cassette and the recorder of course, it was the least we could do. For a few moments, it occurred to me that the disappearance of the group had been caused by the very act of recording the conversations. Hunting butterflies is above all hunting, and only afterwards butterflies.

So, when Paula, Zia, Bibi, Alex and Sílvia thought they would find a sort of no man's land which separates the armies of the languages currently at war, some because they want to annex others, when they arrived at the frontline, full of idiomatic trenches, orthographic mines and lexical barbed wire, what they found was the linguistic streak, an everyone's land, land of foreigners and mixed languages, where words, up until then strangers, or yet old words, now missed, led to new things and ideas. It is on that sort of ambulatory stage that people take turns being themselves.

If, throughout the streak, from the top of the Miranda Lands to the town of Barrancos, the minority languages are considered contact languages between the massive bodies of Portuguese and Spanish, *minderico* from Serra d'Aire and Candeeiros is a form of de-contacting whoever is not on the inside, and give the run-around to the other-speaker. But the actresses, the Brazilian from Mato Grosso do Sul, Bibi Dória, the authentic Mafra Portuguese, Sílvia Filipe, and the Angolan from Bié, Zia Soares, are informed. We are also in on it, translated by them. By placing the languages on the table, during the play, the whole country is a single sound streak, and linguistic borders are only traces.