

Caetano Veloso or the Taste for Hybrid Language

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Like many sociocultural phenomena in Brazil, popular music, as everyone knows, is the result of a meeting of influences. It could almost be said that it is born a cross-breed, given the half-European, half-African origins of its best-known first genres, *lundu*, *choro* and *maxixe*. As a result of its history it comes under the sign of the Cannibalism,¹ the metaphor invented by modernist writers in the 1920s to refer to the 'ritual devouring' by which Brazil assimilated foreign values and made them its own.

Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil readily used the concept of Cannibalism at the end of the 1960s, when they founded Tropicalismo, which claimed a mixture of genres, styles and arts as its basis, and married international pop music and Brazilian traditions, electric guitars and *berimbau*. Tropicalismo as such only lasted for a few months, but the ideas which it promoted profoundly marked contemporary Brazilian culture. Caetano Veloso returned to the history of this movement in *Verdade Tropical*,² an autobiographical work in which he reveals his thoughts on a number of subjects close to his heart: music, the cinema, masters/teachers, friends, family, love, sexuality, freedom, prison, exile, books, language, etc. For this author, composer, performer, actor, director, poet and prose writer, inveterate and voracious reader and incorrigible chatterbox, anything to do with human beings is fair game. For Caetano loves words, and loves to talk about words. As early as the acknowledgements page he praises Unamuno, the author, according to him, of comments which are "the most moving that a foreigner has ever written about the Portuguese language". And in a chapter entitled '*Língua*' he mentions not only the songs he has written in English and his interest in the Anglo-Saxon language, but also his attachment to Romance languages in general and Portuguese in particular.

In 1984 Caetano had already paid homage beautifully to his mother tongue in an early rap song recorded on the *Velô* album. This is also entitled *Língua*, and is transcribed and translated here:

Língua

*Gosto de sentir a minha língua roçar
A língua de Luís de Camões
Gosto de ser e de estar
E quero me dedicar
A criar confusões de prosódias
E uma profusão de paródias
Que encurtem dores*

*E furtem cores como camaleões
Gosto de Pessoa na pessoa
Da rosa no Rosa
E sei que a poesia está para a prosa
Assim como o amor está para a amizade
E quem há de negar que esta lhe superior
E deixa os portugueses morrerem a míngua
"Minha pátria é minha língua"
Fala Mangueira! Fala*

*Flor do Lácio sambódromo
Lusamérica latim em pó
O que quer
O que pode
Esta língua? (bis)*

*Vamos atentar para a sintaxe dos paulistas
E o falso inglês relax dos surfistas
Sejamos imperialistas (bis)
Vamos na velô da dicção choo choo de Carmen Miranda
E que o Chico Buarque de Holanda nos resgate
E – xequemate – explique-nos Luanda
Ouçamos com atenção os deles e os delas da TV Globo
Sejamos o lobo do lobo do homem
Adoro nomes
Nomes em ã
De coisas como rã e imã, imã, imã . . .
Nomes de nomes como Scarlet Moon de Chevalier
Glaucó Mattoso e Arrigo Barnabé e Maria da Fé e Arrigo Barnabé*

*Floe de Lácio sambódromo
Lusamérica latim em pó
O que quer
O que pode
Esta língua? (bis)*

*Se você tem uma idéia incrível
É melhor fazer uma canção
Está provado que só é possível
Filosofar em alemão
Blitz quer dizer corisco
Hollywood quer dizer azevedo
E o Recôncavo, e o Recôncavo, o Recôncavo
Meu medo!*

*A língua é minha pátria
E eu não tenho pátria: tenho mátria
E quero frátria (bis)*

Poesia concreta e prosa caótica
Otica futura
Samba-rap, chic-left com banana

(com sotaque português) Será que ele está no Pão-de Açúcar?
Tá craude brô você e tu lhe amo
Que queu te faço, nego?
(com sotaque nordestino) Bote ligeiro

(com sotaque italiano) Ma de brinquinho Ricardo! [. . .]
(com sotaque português) Otavinho, põe esta camisola pra dentro que
assim mais parece um espantalho
I'd like to spend some time in Mozambique.
Aligatô, aligatô

Nós canto-falamos como quem inveja negros
Que sofrem horrores no gueto do Harlem
Livros, discos, vídeos à mancheia
E deixa que digam, que pensem, que falem . . .

Language

I love to feel my tongue brushing against
The language of Luís de Camões
I love the two verbs "to be"
And I want to apply myself
To the creation of a confusion of prosodies
And a profusion of parodies
Which cut short the dolours
And hide the colours like chameleons
I love Pessoa in the person
And the rose in Rosa
And I know that poetry is to prose
What love is to friendship
And who then will dare to deny that the former is superior
And leave the Portugals to die gently
"My country is my language"
Your turn to speak, Mangueira.

Flower of Lazio samba-drome
Powdered Portuguese-American Latin
What does it want
What can it do
This language?

Listen to the syntax of the people of São Paulo
And the casual pseudo-English of the surfers
Let us be imperialistic
Let us follow the choo-choo rapid diction of Carmen Miranda

And let Chico Buarque de Holanda redeem us
And – check-mate – explain Luanda to us.
Let us listen carefully to “them” on Globo Television
Let us be the wolf of the wolf of the man
I love nouns
Nouns ending in *ã*
Things like *rã* [frog] and *ímã ímã ímã* [magnet] . . .
Nouns which are names like Scarlet Moon de Chevalier
Glauco Mattoso and Arrigo Barnabé and Maria da Fé and Arrigo Barnabé

Flower of Lazio samba-drome
Powdered Portuguese-American Latin
What does it want
What can it do
This language?

If you have an impossible idea
It is better to make a song of it
It has been proved that it is only possible
To philosophize in German
Blitz means flash of lightning
Hollywood means holly bush
And the Recôncavo, Recôncavo, Recôncavo
My fear!

Language is my country
And I do not have a fatherland: I have a motherland
And I want a brotherland
Concrete poetry and chaotic prose
Future perspective
Samba-rap, banana-flavoured chewing gum
(with a Portuguese accent) Is there any at the Sugar Loaf Mountain supermarket
Pão-de-Açúcar?
It's crowded, brother, you and you, I love you
What can I do f'you, treasure?
(with a Brazilian Northeast accent) Be quick!

(with an Italian accent) What is that earring
Ricardo? [. . .]
(with a Portuguese accent) Otavinho, put your nightshirt on or you'll look like a scarecrow.
I'd like to spend some time in Mozambique
Aligatô, aligatô
We speak in a sing-song voice as though we envied the blacks
Who suffer the worst horrors in the ghetto in Harlem
Books discs videos aplenty
Let them speak and think and talk.

In this profusion of plays on words, erudite chiasmi, paronomasias and neologisms, where the most unbridled intertextuality rubs shoulders with discrete winks, the Portuguese language is having a field day. Written, sung and spoken language, prose and poetry,

yesterday and today, from Luanda to Lisbon. Language in all its varieties and in all parts of the world. Language used by the erudite writer or the popular composer, the surfer in Rio or the purist in São Paulo, the Japanese immigrant or the Italian-Brazilian. The Portuguese language with its difficulties and subtleties, its two verbs “to be” (1.3), its inflected infinitive (1.14), its two forms of *tratamento* (1.55), its words which change their meaning depending on the region (1.59), its nasal sounds which are so specific – the diphthongs *ão*, *ãe* and *õe* and the words ending in *ã* – phonemes topped with a tilde that can be found, in exceptional circumstances, in doubly accented words (such as *ímã* which the singer enjoys repeating nine times in 1.32). The Portuguese language with its “confusion of prosodies”, restored with humour by Caetano when he imitates, one after the other, Northeast Brazilian (1.57), Italian (1.58) and Portuguese (1.54 and 59) accents³.

Perhaps a few of the allusions should be explained, for some of them will be clear to a reader familiar with Portuguese-Brazilian culture, whilst others are more difficult to understand. The Brazilian artist, Caetano Veloso, begins by embracing the celebrated poet of the Portuguese Renaissance, Luís de Camões, across the centuries and the oceans. Then he pays homage to two geniuses of the Portuguese language, Fernando Pessoa and João Guimarães Rosa, by playing with their names, the feminine nouns ‘rose’ and ‘person’ (we will gloss over here the surprising etymology – *persona*, mask – of the patronymic of the man who has never stopped piling up identities . . .). Caetano continues this game in the following stanza by listing names which are also common nouns, not just in Portuguese, but also in English and French: Maria da Fé (literally Mary of the Faith), a *fado* [popular sentimental Portuguese song] singer well known in Lisbon, Scarlet Moon de Chevalier, a journalist, actress and television star who was the subject of gossip in Rio from 1970–80 and who owes her forename (Scarlet Moon) to the imagination of her father, an Amazonian poet of Franco-Indian origin, whose name was Walmik Ranayana de Chevalier. Caetano Veloso then adds the name of Arrigo Barnabé, stripped of meaning this time, the young experimental Brazilian musician who was a rising star at that time, and finally that of a rather fiendish marginal poet who ran wild in Rio de Janeiro in the 1980s. Handicapped by glaucoma which he hid behind dark glasses, he called himself Glauco Mattoso (glaucomatous). A pseudonym which could perfectly well be a real name in Brazil, the home of strange-sounding forenames, “so Baroque to the European ear” as Lévi Strauss said in *Tristes Tropiques*, as he listed the names of his students in the University of São Paulo⁴.

Caetano then plays on the origin of three names which are also common nouns in German, English and Portuguese: *blitz*, a word which means police raids in Brazil, and which was also the name of a short-lived rock group in the 1980s; Hollywood, an allusion to the cinema, which was another of the author’s passions; and *Recôncavo*, the name of the fertile region situated in the depths of the Baie-de-tous-les-Saints, where the poet was born in 1942, in Santo Amaro da Purificação. ‘Recôncavo’ (‘cavity’, ‘recess’), only means ‘my fear’ in his imagination, probably a memory of childhood fears buried in the depths of his unconscious. As in the preceding list (three real names and a pseudonym), Caetano sends us off on the wrong track, pretending to set up a system but introducing an error in the series.

The author also salutes figures in Brazilian music: Carmen Miranda, whose expressions and rapid diction (*velô-dicção*) he is able to imitate so well, and Chico Buarque de Holanda, his occasional companion and partner, and not the enemy or rival brother that rumour would too often have us believe. Here and there he slips in fragments of Brazilian songs. At the end of the first stanza, *Fala Mangueira*, the title and the first line of a samba

composed in the 1950s in honour of the most traditional samba school, allows the introduction of the refrain, sung by the exuberant *sambista* of the slums of Rio Elza Soares, and the moving force behind the *Sambódromo*, a new area reserved for the Rio carnival inaugurated at the same time in 1984. *Chic-left com banana* is a misquotation of the title of a humorous song which pleads for a better balance in American-Brazilian musical exchanges⁵. The very last line, “*deixa que digam, que pensem, que falem*” picks up the beginning of a tune well-known in the 1960s, performed by Jair Rodrigues in a sing-song style like that of ‘*Língua*’ and the rap from the ghettos of Harlem which took the world by storm.⁶

Other, more literary, allusions are sprinkled through the song. Caetano reaffirms his fidelity to ‘concrete poetry’, an avant-garde poetry movement from the 1950s to which he had already paid homage in *Sampa*, his song about São Paulo. However, here he associates it with, and sets it against, a concept of his own invention, chaotic prose. He returns to a phrase from Pessoa which has become a proverb, taken from the *Livro de Desassossego*: “My country is the Portuguese language”, adapting it to a slightly different, more universal, form: “My country is my language”, and, a few lines further on, inverting it: “Language is my country”. The image which opens the refrain is taken from the first line of a sonnet by the Brazilian poet Olavo Bilac (1865–1919), entitled *Língua Portuguesa* (‘Portuguese language’): “*Última flor do Lácio, inculta e bela*” (“Last flower of Lazio, wild and beautiful”).

The fragment of Bilac’s poem and the doubly truncated quote from Pessoa give depth to Caetano Veloso’s song, though not absolutely. *Língua* in effect forms part of a fertile tradition in Portugal and Brazil, sometimes even demonstrated by foreigners (Unamuno, Valéry Larbaud), and naturalized foreigners (Clarice Lispector), that of praise for the Portuguese language. A particularly topical *topos* indeed, when the national language is under threat. In the sixteenth century, in his *Diálogo em louvor da nossa linguagem* (1540), João de Barros in Portugal echoed the debate which opposed Latin and the vernacular languages, more or less throughout Europe, and showed himself, as a good humanist, to be sensitive to the similarity of Portuguese to Latin. In the same spirit, Camões explained in his *Lusíadas* that Venus favoured the “Lusitanian race”, notably because, in its language, she thought she recognized “the Latin language, hardly corrupted”. And their contemporary, the poet António Ferreira, wanted to see the national idiom grow and become more attractive: “May it flourish, speak, sing, may it be heard and may it live/the Portuguese language and, wherever it goes/ may it show that it is proud of itself and haughty”. And he castigated authors who abandoned Portuguese in favour of Castilian or Latin.⁷

In the following century, during which Portugal was under the Spanish crown and most authors wrote in both languages, a character in *Corte na Aldeia*, by Francisco Rodrigues Lobo, glorified the Portuguese language, which he considered to be equally suitable for speaking, singing, preaching, writing letters and the art of recitation, and which he found possessed the qualities of all other languages. It was close to Latin in pronunciation and to Greek in etymology, familiar like Castilian, gentle like French and elegant like Italian, and suffered from only one defect, that of being misused by those who ought to cherish and honour it.⁸

In Brazil, the problem was presented in different terms. The language question, intimately bound up with that of national identity, was concerned above all with the legitimacy of the Latin-American variant of Portuguese, and came to the fore particularly in times of conflict, when the political or cultural independence of the country was at stake. After the Romantic authors (such as José de Alencar), modernist writers in particular were the ones responsible for its resurgence, thus differentiating themselves from Portugal, underlining

the specific features of standard Brazilian, and claiming a lexis and a syntax *sui generis*, faulty and neologistic though these may have been. Their writings, manifestos, stories and poems teem with striking pleas for a "little grammar of spoken Brazilian" (Mário de Andrade), a "millionaire contribution of errors" (Oswald de Andrade), a language "which does not ape Portuguese syntax" (Manuel Bandeira).

Olavo Bilac's sonnet, at the height of the Parnassian era and thus part of the classic canon, takes a quite different perspective. Though it reaffirms the Latin roots of the Portuguese language and its establishment on the periphery of the Romance lands ('Last flower of Lazio'), it also sings the praises of its role in overseas expansion ("I love your rustic vigour and your perfume/ Of virgin forests and the vast ocean"), whilst deploring its lack of influence and the isolation to which it is condemned ("You are both a glory and a tomb"). But it seems that it was precisely the unjust fate that it had suffered which had made it so beautiful and so lovable ("I love you like this, unknown and obscure [. . .] I love you, O harsh and painful idiom").⁹

Would the Portuguese language have been more powerful if it were more homogeneous? Until very recently there have been many efforts to unify the two languages. Nevertheless, Portugal and Brazil still remain, to borrow Bernard Shaw's expression concerning Great Britain and the United States, "two countries divided by a common language".¹⁰ Portuguese films are shown in Brazil with sub-titles. There are other dangers threatening the language of Camões. Experts have announced that, with the Mercosur customs union, the common language in Latin America will eventually be Spanish. The two largest African countries whose official language is Portuguese have been invaded by English (Mozambique, in particular, in consequence of its proximity to South Africa, which is attracting more and more workers – besides, Caetano hums to himself in English, "I'd like to spend some time in Mozambique"). A Cape Verde singer has taken the world by storm with her songs written entirely in Creole. And Portugal, which watched with emotion the painful process of autonomy in East Timor, has also just bidden farewell to Macao.

Never has the Portuguese language worried intellectuals and public authorities more than at the end of the twentieth century. On the initiative of the Portuguese and Brazilian governments a Commonwealth of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP) was set up in 1996, consisting of seven signatories. The idea of speaking Portuguese aroused new fervour, leading to the expenditure of a great deal of ink and discussion. Antonio Tabucchi has recently been inspired to join the argument. Whilst Portugal, the guest of honour at the Salon du Livre in Paris in March 2000, was introducing writers from very different backgrounds with a beautiful slogan ("From my language you can see the sea") by Vergílio Ferreira, Tabucchi was setting the cat amongst the pigeons by voicing suspicions that 'lusophonia' was an insidious political instrument and a 'metahistoric invention' typical of a country which had lost its empire and its colonies. And he condemned the nationalist interpretation of the quotation from the *Livro de Desassossego*.¹¹

Pessoa is certainly not suspected of nationalism when he talks about his language as a country. But what Tabucchi does not say is that the passage containing the sentence which was transformed into a banner demonstrates a restricted and rather scornful purism, another quirk often associated with passion for a language. Allow me to reproduce this rather unpleasant extract, remembering that it is attributed to one of Pessoa's heteronyms, the book-keeper Bernado Soares, and that it certainly does not reflect either the thought or the practice of the poet of the *Ode Maritime* and *Tabacaria*:

There is no trace of political or social feeling in me. On the other hand I possess, in a certain sense, a heightened patriotic feeling. My country is the Portuguese language. I would be totally unmoved if Portugal were to be beaten or invaded, so long as no one caused me, personally, any problems. But I feel hatred, real hatred (which is actually the only kind I know) not towards people who write Portuguese badly, who are unaware of the syntax or use the simplified system of spelling, but rather towards a badly written page, which I detest as though it were a real person, an error in syntax which deserves a box on the ears, and spelling which leaves out the 'y'. Just as spitting makes you feel sick, regardless of who is doing the spitting.

And let me add, in protest against the spelling reforms in his country which eliminated phonemes of Greek origin:

And why not, since spelling is itself a person. A word is complete when it has been seen and heard. And the elegant Graeco-Roman transcription reclothes that word in my eyes in its original royal mantle, thanks to which it is a lady as well as a queen.¹²

Can the love of one's mother tongue ever be completely free of nationalist feeling? Can it manage to avoid purism? The debate rumbles on. But Caetano Veloso seems to have answered these questions, which at least deserve to be asked, in the affirmative, well in advance of the theoreticians and those who oppose the imposition of the Portuguese language.

There is no crisis of identity in *Língua*, either in the name of wider use of Portuguese nor in that of championing the use of Brazilian. Caetano, who, as we have seen, adapted the quote from Pessoa twice, adds, the second time: "And I have no country, I have a motherland and I want a brotherland", thereby perhaps suggesting that attachment to the concept of a mother tongue has taken the place of patriotic feeling as far as he is concerned. And no-one is better placed than he is to express this rejection, since he was a victim of two forms of Brazilian nationalism, that of the military dictatorship which imprisoned him and then exiled him as an enemy of the country, and that of the students of the left who booed him because he introduced electric guitars and Anglo-Saxon rhythms into his music. The desire for a fraternal community ("I want a brotherland") seems to be an outright contradiction of the ironic and peremptory "let us be imperialistic" of the preceding stanza. Doubtless, one should read between the lines to understand this injunction. At least the line, "let the Portugals die gently", is surely not an indication of hostility towards Portugal, but rather puts a case for the utopian abolition of boundaries between the different Portuguese-speaking countries, or for a progressive and peaceful disintegration of the former colonial empire.

No sectarian purism, nor any etymological obsession, quite the contrary: the refined syntax of São Paulo deserves the same attention as the "relaxed pseudo-English" of the surfers, the sing-song of the rappers or the careless use of words by the presenters on Globo Television. Though he confirms his support for Latinity in the refrain – "flower of Lazio" – Caetano is quick to play around with the precious and outmoded image in Bilac's sonnet by juxtaposing an Afro-Greek neologism, *sambódromo*, the emblem of modern architecture and carnival, and ends by demolishing once and for all this Latin hybrid "Portuguese-American" ("Powdered Portuguese-American Latin").

And so Caetano Veloso suggests an open-minded and integrating vision, with the cheerful complicity of his exciting musicians and the vibrant participation of Elza Soares.

Rather than using the melancholy or harsh language employed too often by supporters and defenders of the Portuguese language, whether they are called António Ferreira, Rodrigues Lobo, Olavo Bilac or Bernardo Soares, *Língua* is a defence of a colourful and hybrid language, and a celebratory hymn, in the cheerful, anti-conformist and playful tradition of Cannibalism.

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(translated from the French by Rosemary Dear)

Notes

1. See the article by Luciana Stegagno Picchio, 'Brazilian carnivalism: myth and literature', *Diogenes* 144, October–December 1988.
2. The *New York Times* commissioned Caetano Veloso to write an article on Tropicalismo and the place of Brazilian culture in the world. In the end he wrote a book, which was published in 1997 in São Paulo by Companhia das Letras and later in the USA.
3. These lines are also Caetano's allusions to the musicians he worked with and refer, respectively, to a love affair which one of them had in the Brazilian Northeast, and to the Italian and Portuguese origins of Ricardo Crisaldi and Otávio Fialho. My thanks to José Miguel Wisnik for having explained, amongst other things, these private jokes.
4. C. Lévi Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, Paris: Plon, Collection 'Terre Humaine', 1955, p. 117. Is it because Portuguese patronymics are so similar that Brazilians give their imagination free rein when choosing forenames, culling them from all available sources: antiquity (Sócrates, Júlio César, Cyro), the Middle Ages (Hermenegildo, Abelardo, Clóvis), history and culture (Vítor Hugo, Wagner, Wellington, Napoleão) and the indigenous population (Peri, Iara, Moacyr, Moema . . .)?
5. "I will not put bebop in my samba/until Uncle Sam plays the tambourine/takes over a pandeiro and a zabumba/stops confusing the samba and the rumba./ Then I will mix Miami with Copacabana/ I will mix chewing gum with banana/ (. . .) I want samba-rock, my brother/ I want to see great confusion." *Chiclete com Banana* by Gordurinha and Almira Castilho was a great success for Jackson do Pandeiro and later for Gilberto Gil. At the same time, Caetano coins a bilingual portmanteau word (*chic-left*), probably the equivalent of 'champagne socialists'.
6. *Deixa isso pra lá* by Alberto Paz and Edson Menezes, brought the young Jair Rodrigues to prominence in 1964.
7. "Floresça, fale, cante, ouça-se e viva/ a portuguesa língua, e, lá onde for,/ senhora vá de si, soberba e altiva./ Se té qui esteve baixa e sem louvor/ culpa é dos que a mal exercitaram,/ esquecimento nosso e desamor", in 'Carta a Pero d'Andrade Caminha', *Poemas Lusitanos*, Coimbra: Atlântida, 1961, p. 97. [The translation quoted is by Georges Le Gentil, *La littérature portugaise*, Paris: Éd. Chandeigne, 1995, p. 61.]
8. "Tem de todas as línguas o melhor: a pronúncia do Latim, a origem da Grega, a familiaridade da Castilhana, a brandura da Francesa, a elegância da Italiana. [. . .] E para que diga tudo, só um mal tem: é que, pelo pouco que lhe querem seus naturais, a trazem mais remendada que capa de pedinte", F. R. Lobo, *Corte na Aldeia*, Diálogo I, Lisbonne, Ulisséa, p. 85.
9. "Última flor do Lácio, inculta e bela/ És, a um tempo, esplendor e sepultura:/ Ouro nativo, que na ganga impura/ A bruta mina entre os cascalhos vela . . . // Amo-te assim, desconhecida e obscura/ Tuba de alto clangor, lira singela,/ Que tens o trom e o silvo da procela/ E o arrollo da saudade e da ternura!// Ano o teu viço agreste e o teu aroma/ De virgens selvas e de oceano largo!/ Amo-te, ó rude e doloroso idioma, // Em que da voz materna ouvi: "Meu filho!"/, E em que Camões chorou, no exílio amargo,/ O gênio sem ventura e o amor sem brilho!" *Poesias*, 1902.
10. In Eduardo Lourenço, *Imagem e Miragem da Lusofonia*, Lisbonne: Gradiva, 1999, p. 143.
11. "Suspecte lusophonie", *Le Monde*, 18 March 2000.
12. F. Pessoa, *Le Livre de l'Intranquillité*, Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1999, p. 270.