

**E. PEN International Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee
Statement on the Proposed International Standardization
of the Portuguese Language**

The PEN International Translation and Linguistic Rights has been asked to comment on the agreement among most Portuguese speaking states to engage in a program of orthographic standardization (*Orthographic Agreement from 1990 [Acordo ortográfico/AO 90]*). This request to examine the proposed changes was initiated by Portuguese PEN, whose members oppose the proposed international standardization. The T&LRC meeting in Barcelona (4-6 June, 2012) expressed great sympathy for the Portuguese PEN position and asked that the international agreement be examined. It should be said that many other writers, public figures and linguists, also question whether attempts to move towards a standardized universal Portuguese is a good idea.

The history of such attempts in the lusophone world has shown just how difficult the question is. An annex of earlier initiatives of this sort is attached. As can be seen, more often than not, they have led to failure.

When compared with the recent history of other international languages, it can also be seen that the idea of standardization across borders has more often than not been rejected.

It would appear that the two driving forces behind the Portuguese standardization plan are administrative and commercial. If so, these are weak points of departure that may be seriously damaging to the Portuguese language. A language is not primarily an administrative or a commercial tool. These are superficial and utilitarian activities which require what might be called simplified dialects tangential to living language. A living language favours creativity, imagination, scientific initiative; it adapts to a real world in which people live with their many differences and particularities.

To attempt to centre a language in administrative and/or commercial priorities is to weaken it by attacking its complexity and innate creativity in order to promote bureaucratic methods of the public and private sort.

As to historic precedent, it is not clear that this initiative results from a clear thinking through of experiences elsewhere. For example, it is widely accepted that the centralized attempt over several centuries to create and maintain a universal French, as laid out in Paris, had the long term effect of alienating populations from that language when offered a choice of other languages more open to local creativity. One practical negative result was a chilling effect on the natural creation of vocabulary, followed by a shrinking of vocabulary. The driving force in the French language today, originating in all of its bases around the world, is to move towards an embracing of the differences within the language. The result is the growing possibility of a new and very positive atmosphere surrounding French, for example in Africa.

As for English there were equivalent attempts at a universal approach in the time of the British Empire. However, the strength of the Anglophone regions (a situation similar to that of Portuguese) meant that these rules were both internationally and naturally broken. The strength of English today is widely attributed to its openness to differences – to different grammars, spellings, words and indeed meanings. One of the most positive characteristics of any international language is that words, spellings, grammar, phrases, and accents take on quite different meanings as the result of local or regional experiences. These differences often work their way across borders and are absorbed by other English speaking regions. It is the competitive, independent, differing nature of the English regions that has become the hall mark of its strength – its creativity whether in science, literature, business or, indeed, ideas. There are constant attempts to ‘normalize’ or ‘centralize’, such as the Chicago style system. However, these attempts, more than anything else, get in the way of the languages real strengths.

Exactly the same argument could be made to explain the growing strength of Spanish as an international language. It is precisely the local, national and hemispheric differences within the Spanish language which give it increasing strength. The differences feed off each other. The creation of the Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy with the cooperation of Spanish language Academies around the world had the aim of including all of these differences. In this way, the approach towards the celebration of differences within the Spanish language paralleled the same approach taken by major dictionaries of the English language.

As far as we can see, there is nothing in the Portuguese initiative which will do anything except limit the natural strength of the language by attempting to limit its creativity through an essentially bureaucratic straight jacket of rules. For example, by proposing this standardization as a requirement for school manuals, authorities will in effect be limiting the creativity of writers in many parts of the Portuguese speaking world. There is also no indication that such standardization will lead to an increase in the trade of books between the various parts of the Portuguese speaking world.

Finally, it should be pointed out that numerous exceptions were made in the standardization proposal, thereby creating a maze of bureaucratic linguistic contradictions which interfere with the real, grassroots, creative shaping of differences.

We are disappointed that the authorities who, whatever their power, have no real expertise in how languages live and grow, should attempt to limit the strength of Portuguese by imposing artificial rules designed to undermine the strength of all languages – that is, their ability to constantly reinvent themselves. For this, a simple acceptance of a diversity of approaches, usually emerging from different regions, is essential. We doubt very much that this proposed standardization will have any other effect than to bureaucratize the texts used in schools, thereby, cutting students off from the real creativity of the Portuguese language at its regional and international level.

Notes to editors:

PEN International celebrates literature and promotes freedom of expression. Founded in 1921, our global community of writers now comprises 144 Centres spanning more than 100 countries. Our

programmes, campaigns, events and publications connect writers and readers for global solidarity and cooperation. PEN International is a non-political organization and holds consultative status at the United Nations and UNESCO.

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ANNEX

- **1911:** First orthographic reform in Portugal.
- **1931:** Orthographic agreement between Portugal and Brazil. Not implemented
- **1943:** First orthographic reform of Brazil is delineated in the *Vocabulário Ortográfico da Língua Portuguesa*, by the Academy of Letters in Lisbon in the *Formulario Ortografico*, by the Academia Brasileira de Letras
- **1943** Orthographic Agreement between both countries.
- **1945.** Accord of 1943 ratified in Portugal but rejected by Brazilian Congress. Brazil continues with *Formulario Ortografico*.
- **1971:** Sweeping spelling reform in Brazil.
- **1973:** Portugal follows Brazil in abolishing accent marks in secondary stressed syllables.
- **1975:** Beginnings of new planned accord but halted because of political situation in Portugal.
- **1986:** Brazil invites the other six Portuguese language countries, Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal and Sao Tome and Principe, to a meeting in Rio de Janeiro to address the remaining problems. A radical reform is planned by all parties, titled *Bases Analiticas da Ortografia Simplificada da Lingua Portuguesa de 1945; renogociadas em 1975 e consolidadas em 1986*. Ill-received by both the Brazilian and the Portuguese media and public, and subsequently abandoned.
- **1990:** A new Orthographic Accord is reached between Brazil, Portugal and the other Portuguese-speaking countries. This accord privileges phonetical over etymological criteria. Supposed to take effect January 1, 1994 but is not ratified by all involved parties and therefore does not go into effect.
- **1998** Date of projected 1990 accord is redacted.
- **2004:** A meeting in Sao Tome e Principe forms new protocol called *Protocolo Modificativo* that states that only 3 signatories are needed for an Accord to be reached. Brazil ratifies 1990 diploma. East Timor, newly independent (2002) signs onto accord.
- **2006** Brazil, Cape Verde, São Tome e Principe all ratify 2004 *Protocolo Modificativo*.
- **2008.** Portugal ratifies *Protocolo Modificativo*.
- **2009:** The 1990 spelling reform goes into effect in Brazil. Portugal ratifies the accord.
- **2010** All Portuguese-Speaking countries have ratified accord except for Angola and Mozambique. A transition period set in Portugal, ending in 2015. Schools begin implementing accord in 2011/2012 academic year.
- **2012** While the Mozambique government has approved the accord, the Mozambique Parliament has not ratified it. Such ratification would be necessary for it to take effect. Angola is still debating the accord and has not ratified it.