

Research Article

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Lost in Migration – Mirandese at a Crossroads

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Abstract: The linguistic rights of Mirandese were enshrined in Portugal in 1999, though its “discovery” dates back to the very end of the 19th century at the hands of Leite de Vasconcellos. For centuries, it was the first or only language spoken by people living in the northeast of Portugal, particularly the district of Miranda do Douro. As a minority language, it has always moved among three dimensions. On the one hand, the need to assert and defend this language and have it acknowledged by the country, which proudly believe(d) in their monolingual history. Unavoidably, this has ensued the action of translation, especially active from the mid of the 20th century onwards, with an emphasis on the translation of the Bible and Portuguese canonical literature, as well as other renowned literary forms (e.g. The Adventures of Asterix). Finally, the third axis lies in migration, either within Portugal or abroad. Between the 1950s and the 1960s, Mirandese people were forced to leave Miranda do Douro and villages in the outskirts in the thousands. They fled not only due to the deeply entrenched poverty, but also the almost complete absence of future prospects, enhanced by the fact that they were regarded as not speaking “good” Portuguese, but rather a “charra” language, and as ignorant backward people. This period coincided with the building of dams on the river Douro and the cultural and linguistic shock that stemmed from this forceful contact, which exacerbated their sense of not belonging and of social shame. Bearing all this in mind, we seek to approach the role that migration played not only in the assertion of Mirandese as a language in its own right, but also in the empowerment of new generations of Mirandese people, highly qualified and politically engaged in the defence of this minority language, some of whom were former migrants. Thus, we aim to depict Mirandese’s political situation before and after the endorsement of the Portuguese Law no. 7/99.

Keywords: Mirandese; translation of minority languages; migration; political sociology; politics of minority languages.

1 Introduction

Portugal has always been hailed as a monolingual country since time immemorial and this “fact” was only to a certain degree refuted when Law no. 7/99 (1999) was passed and thus the linguistic rights of Mirandese were recognised, the indigenous language spoken by a mere 10,000 people in the region of Miranda do Douro, northeast of Portugal, even though there is an estimate of only 5,000 speakers with good or very good linguistic competence (Merlan 2009: 454-464). This law came as a surprise to foreigners and Portuguese alike, who tended to describe it as a mere political move to appease the linguistic contestation and long-lasting demand of Mirandese local authorities.

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The long process for the acknowledgement of their language and culture began at the turn of the 19th century, with the notorious works of Leite de Vasconcellos, and continued for over a century, throughout which numerous events contributed to the bond being broken in many families, thus preventing them from speaking Mirandese and passing it on through generations.

Therefore, from our perspective, this minority language is found at a crossroads, moving along three intertwining dimensions: language policy, translation and migration, all having somehow contributed to the current state of the language, which we aim at eliciting throughout this paper. As such, we will organise this paper into four parts: the first will provide essential information about the history of the Mirandese language, followed by the explanation of the dimensions of language policy, translation and migration where we highlight the influence that these exerted on the development of the language and the Mirandese diglossia. In this last part, we will attempt to sum up the extent whereby migration acted as a means of empowerment for Mirandese people, ultimately leading to its wider social recognition. At last, we will present some final remarks concerning our hypothesis for a triple crossroads for the Mirandese case.

2 The Mirandese Language

Mirandese was an unknown and unwritten language up to the moment when it was *discovered* by Leite de Vasconcellos, a Portuguese philologist, at the turn of the 19th century. According to the story, Leite de Vasconcellos met a fellow student of Medicine in Coimbra who mentioned the existence of a somewhat different language spoken in the region of Miranda do Douro. This led Leite de Vasconcellos to head for the region and carry out the first systematic and scientific study of the language, which can be found on his first study of the language in 1882 and the two volumes of his work “Estudos de Philologia Mirandesa” [Studies of Mirandese Philology] (1900, 1901). Not only did he attempt to clearly establish the origin of Mirandese (a branch of Asturian Leonese and not Galician Portuguese), so as to distinguish it from Portuguese and Spanish, and thus take its rightful place as another Romance language, but also defined a first set of rules that enabled writing Mirandese down. Consequently, he stands out as one of the pioneers in writing Mirandese, with texts such as “Camoniana mirandesa” [Camões’s poetry in Mirandese] (cf. Leite de Vasconcellos 1901). However, before Leite de Vasconcellos’s studies came to light, Bernardo Fernandes Monteiro had already published the translation of three religious texts on the “Revista de Educação e Ensino” [Journal of Education and Teaching] (Rodrigues & Ferreira 2011).

For centuries, this was the only language spoken in the region of Miranda do Douro and surrounding villages, although the city of Miranda stopped speaking it when the Diocese of Miranda was established (circa 16th century). Later, at the beginning of the 20th century, with public schooling, Mirandese would continue being the only language spoken until the age of 5-6 years when the first clash with Portuguese would occur. Children would establish their first contact with the national language and experience the phenomenon of social shame (cf. Merlan 2009).

Social shame was enhanced by the unequal opportunity the Mirandese encountered in the work market, thus leading rural workers to elect school as a decisive factor in their exodus from rural spaces, which were by definition poor and illiterate, not to mention the local hurdles placed by local elites and by the education system itself that created their own filtering mechanisms. This inevitably led to a strategic process of self-devaluation of Mirandese speakers that was moulded by occasional periods of poverty and isolation, as well as the typical crises in the countryside.

As a consequence, in Bourdieu’s words, these feelings of social shame:

(...) são insensivelmente inculcadas, através de um longo e lento processo de aquisição, pelas sanções do mercado linguístico e que se encontram portanto ajustadas, fora de qualquer cálculo cínico de qualquer condicionante

conscientemente sentida, às possibilidades de lucro material e simbólico que as leis de formação de preços características de um determinado mercado prometem objectivamente aos detentores de um certo capital linguístico. (Bourdieu 1998: 33)¹

It was between the 1950s and the 1960s that the ripple effect of social shame reached its peak among Mirandese people, at the time of the construction of dams. This brought on what we call the second clash for Mirandese speakers – the realisation that they spoke a *língua charra* [rude language], while the others made use of a *língua fidalga* [elite language]. Although this epithet was imposed by outsiders, it was incorporated by the Mirandese themselves and it acted as a reflection of the permanent linguistic socialisation and contamination that occurs still to present days (Cahen 2009: 43) – a type of social and linguistic osmosis.

This whole context brought about what Ferreira (2012, 2013) names the reproduction crisis of Mirandese, that is this minority language was always the target of shame and devaluation in the national linguistic market, mainly owing to its negative branding as bad Portuguese. As a result, parents chose to hide their mother tongue from their children, directing them to pursue their studies in the national language and their lives out of the physical and symbolic space of the Mirandese villages. It was an intentional plan that embraced the dominant language and forced Mirandese people to be proudly Portuguese. As Merlan (2009) puts it, in the 20th century, the Mirandese were forced to choose in favour of Portuguese (as opposed to Spanish on the other side of the border), abandoning the precarious bilingualism and stable diglossia that they had managed to hold in previous centuries.

Regardless of Leite de Vasconcellos's utmost importance, the fact remains that his approach was very much ethnography-centred and, as such, Mirandese was still regarded as exotic and singular, though worth protecting and preserving. The language was (and, we should add, still is) nonetheless outcast by central government, especially during Salazar's regime, even if the Portuguese dictator never truly aimed at the destruction of the language and culture in more violent terms, as happened in our neighbouring Spain with Francisco Franco.

Taking into account the above, we put forth the idea that Mirandese can be understood as standing at a crossroads, moving along three dimensions: Language policy, Translation and Migration, both inside Portugal and abroad.

2.1 Language policy

As far as language policy is concerned, in line with what was stated above, the language remained unwritten until the beginning of the 20th century, when the first proposal for a spelling system was put forward by Leite de Vasconcellos, though shifting spellings still arose. Then a long hiatus occurred until the teaching of the Mirandese language started in the school year of 1986/87 as an optional subject, offered at several schools, namely in Sendim (the most populated village in Miranda do Douro), and always at the end of compulsory school, i.e. after 4 or 5 pm. This choice of timetable implicitly suggests that Mirandese was regarded as a lesser subject² and thus not given the same importance as other languages, such as the usual foreign languages English, French or Spanish; the same occurring with their teachers.

The context in which Mirandese is taught is rather out of the ordinary, since there is no official higher education degree for preparing teachers to the profession, nor any in-service training for teachers-to-be of Mirandese. For over two decades, students learnt Mirandese in an ad-hoc manner, since there were no teaching materials. It was only in 2008 that the 1st coursebook in/for Mirandese “Las mies purmeiras palabras an mirandês” [My first words in Mirandese] (by António Bárboles & Duarte Martins) was published with the sponsorship of the City Council of Miranda and EDP – Energias de Portugal [Energies of Portugal]. These coursebooks were offered for free to the students engaged in the learning of the language on the International Mother Language Day in 2008³, and they could also be purchased in local bookshops.

² A newspaper article published in “Diário de Notícias” in 2008 states that there were then 386 students (approximately 63%) enrolled in the subject of Mirandese Language and Culture (cf. <https://www.dn.pt/lusa/interior/reportagem-ensino-do-mirandes-consolidado-nas-escolas-de-miranda-do-douro--9869502.html>).

³ Cf. <http://www.jornalnordeste.com/noticia/lingua-mirandesa-ganha-manual> (accessed 19-03-2019).

Notwithstanding, apart from being offered at schools in the region of Miranda, Mirandese has also been taught in courses in Lisbon, Bragança (e.g. in 2004/2005, at the School of Education of the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, by means of its Language Centre) or Vila Real, though never in a continuous manner. At the present moment, if one wished to learn the language in a formal context, it would be considerably difficult to come across such a course.

Between 1974 and 1999, there was a restricted group of social actors that became essential for legitimising and making the law 7/99 become a reality. Within this larger period, we could speak of the smaller periods of 1979-1986 and 1990-1995, when the City Council of Miranda stood out in the defence of the language through the figure of its president (later a member of the Portuguese Parliament and decisive in the lobbying for the law), along with the support given to the teaching of Mirandese in local schools (based on ministerial permission) and to the proposal for a Spelling Convention. It is worth emphasising that, despite the law, Mirandese is not the second language of Portugal, contrary to what some people believe: Mirandese people may choose, and thus have that right, to speak their language in public contexts. But there is no obligation whatsoever for the government to publish all official documents in Mirandese, as it happens with other languages, for example with Catalan.

In terms of fundamental resources for asserting a language, we should mention the “*Convenção Ortográfica da Língua Mirandesa*” [Spelling Convention of the Mirandese Language] (Barros Ferreira & Raposo) which was published in 1999, with an amendment in 2000. The first studies on Mirandese grammar are found on Leite de Vasconcellos’s studies, on his first volume from 1900. Apart from scattered considerations on grammar, 2009 saw the publication of “*Elementos de Gramática Mirandesa*” [Elements of Mirandese Grammar] by Moisés Pires, a 150-page book containing linguistic aspects from phonetics to lexicon, including the conjugation of some irregular verbs, as well as prototypical regular ones. As for dictionaries, we should mention the paper “*Pequeno Vocabulário de Mirandês-Português*” [Small Vocabulary of Mirandese-Portuguese], by Moisés Pires (2004), as well as the Mirandese–Portuguese Dictionaries online⁴. It is also possible to access a translation platform online⁵ – Tradutor Portués > Mirandês.

In summary, despite the fact that the linguistic rights of Mirandese were recognised by law, there was never a real integration of the language in Portuguese reality, which is rather clear in the fact that there is no support for the teaching of the language in Miranda (e.g. in the form of official coursebooks), no training provided for their teachers nor even the creation of their teaching group as it happens for all other scientific subjects. According to Amadeu Ferreira’s many interviews, Law no. 7/99 is often regarded as “a poisoned present”.

2.2 Translation

As a result of a project on the Mirandese traductological capital (Ferreira & Martins 2017), we aimed to collect information on this language’s translators. The translation of Portuguese texts into Mirandese was an intentional strategy of the highest importance to assert itself as a language in its own right.

The first texts ever translated into Mirandese were by the hands of Bernardo Fernando Monteiro (1825-1906), Father Manuel Sardinha (1841-?) and José Leite de Vasconcellos (1858-1941), in the late 19th c. and the beginning of the 20th c., mainly oriented to religious texts and classical literature. These were later followed by António Garcia in the 1930s, and António Maria Mourinho (1917-1995) between the 1980s and 1990s. However, Amadeu Ferreira (1950-2015) unmistakably stands out as the mainstream translator into Mirandese, along with his pseudonyms Francisco Niebro and Marcus Miranda, having translated “*Os Lusíadas*” [The Lusiads] by Luíz de Camões, “*A Mensagem*” [The Message] by Fernando Pessoa, the Four Gospels of the Bible, and participated in several other publications, such as the translation of several books of “*The Adventures of Asterix*” (by René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo). A second generation of Mirandese were inspired by the first’s actions, thus various family members joined in in this quest of providing the

⁴ Cf. <http://www.mirandadodouro.com/dicionario/> (accessed on 19-03-2019).

⁵ Cf. <https://student.dei.uc.pt/~crpires/tradutor/Tradutor.html> (accessed on 19-03-2019).

language with traductological capital, namely Amadeu Ferreira's brother Carlos Ferreira (1961-), his son José Pedro Ferreira (1980-) and his nephew Thibault Ferreira (1994-).

Furthermore, there is a number of translators who are also teachers of Mirandese, such as António Bárbolo (1964-), Domingos Raposo (1952-) and Duarte Martins (n.a.d⁶). We can also refer to some residual translators, e.g. Ana Afonso (1977-), Anabela Almeida (n.a.d) and António Santos (n.a.d). Besides the literature directly produced in Mirandese, there are also bilingual books, as the cases of “La Bouba de la Tenerife” in Mirandese and “Tempo de Fogo” [Time of Fire] in Portuguese, by Fracisco Niebro, in 2011.

All in all, the translation choices made throughout the last century and a half were strategically focused on Portuguese canonical texts, both literary and religious, so as to provide the Mirandese language with the necessary means to assert itself as a literary language and a language in which the Christian God would be able to speak, though the step into a science language has not yet been taken. It is our strong belief that had a strong Language Academy been created, there might be a chance for Mirandese to enter academia, both as a scientific subject studied at universities and taught at schools and as a language that is liable to be translated into and from.

2.3 Migration among the Mirandese

Migration has always been a reality in the District of Bragança, where Miranda do Douro is set. The first peak of migration occurred in the first decade of the 20th century and their destinations were mainly directed to Transatlantic countries, such as Brazil, whereas the second peak happened at the time of the building of the dams in the River Douro and Mirandese opted to go to European countries (Cepeda 1995; Simões, Portela & Cepeda 1996).

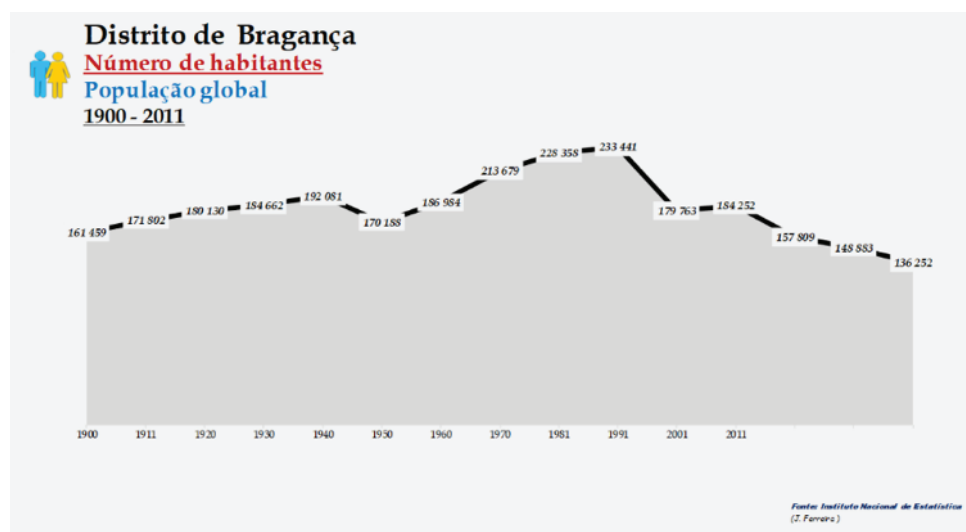


Figure 1: Evolution of the number of inhabitants in the District of Bragança between 1900 and 2011 (data from the National Institute of Statistics)

According to Figure 1, the peak of migration was indeed the 1960s, after a steady increase that started in the 1910s-20s. However, the district never stopped losing its inhabitants even after the overthrow of the dictatorship of António Salazar.

⁶ n.a.d. stands for no available data on these translators.

The 1950s stand as the decade when the Douro dams began to be built, with the economic assistance of the Marshall Plan, European Recovery Program, supported by the USA (Rollo 2007). Because of this, a phenomenon of slow emigration from Miranda and of migration into Miranda occurred, the latter due to the fact that specialised workers, namely engineers and other technical staff, had to move to Miranda so as to supervise, conduct and actually build the dams. Concomitantly, primary school generalised to the whole of the population (Candeias, Paz & Rocha 2004: 43), a tendency that had already started in the 1920s and enabled younger generations to become increasingly more literate, particularly for those living in inland Portugal. These two facts led to a growing tension between the two very distinct groups of people – the Mirandese and the outlandish Portuguese – and their two different languages, thus social shame was exerted by “barragistas” [dam workers] on the local population.

In the following decade, there was a faster emigration wave abroad. Simultaneously, other social and economic happenings concurred to this situation of social divide: the growth of the mechanisation of agriculture; the development of public schooling and the implementation of secondary school; the compulsory military service mainly due to the colonial war with the then Portuguese colonies (more than 100,000 young men were recruited); the increasing presence of the radio and TV in Miranda, emphasising the invasion and subsequent influence of standard Portuguese on Mirandese; and ultimately the drastic reduction of bilingualism with diglossia that defined most Mirandese until the 1950s (Merlan 2009).

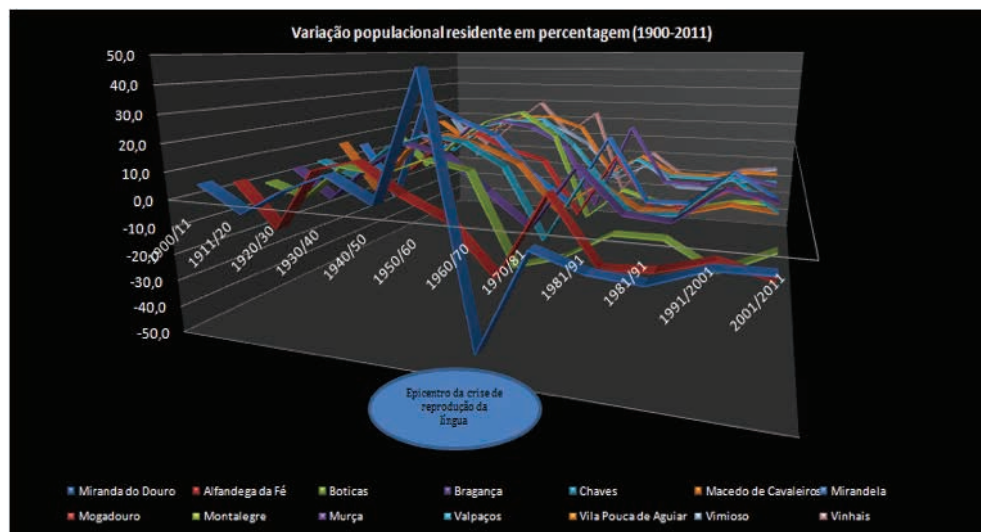


Figure 2: Variation of the resident population in percentage between 1900 and 2011 (data from various national Census, carried out by the National Institute of Statistics) (cf. Ferreira, 2012)

In accordance with Figure 2, the epicentre of the reproduction crisis of the Mirandese language unfolded between the 1960s and the late 1970s, particularly in Miranda do Douro, as a result of the events mentioned above.

As already hinted, there was also a striking internal migration to Miranda: 6,500 people (3,600 workers and their families) came from other regions of the country to work in the dams and Picote, Bemposta and Sendim were some of the villages still speaking Mirandese that received these workers. In order to fully grasp the extent of this “invasion”, this can be compared to that of the Jews in the 15th and 16th centuries with the Spanish and the Portuguese Inquisitions, when 40,000 Jewish people settled in Trás-os-Montes.

In a nutshell, migration was present at all times in the history of Miranda do Douro, not only by the Mirandese emigration first to Transatlantic destinations and then to Europe (between the 1950s and the

1970s), but also through a dual internal migration – Mirandese moving to other places in Portugal and other Portuguese into Miranda at the time of the construction of the Douro dams. All these events would have an indelible mark in the evolution and reproduction of this minority language, thus the crisis of language reproduction (cf. Ferreira 2012, 2013).

2.3.1 Mirandese Empowerment through Migration

From the abovementioned, we purported to elicit that migrating inside Portugal and to foreign countries, especially Europe, was always part of the Mirandese reality but it also enabled them to: i) confront their native language with the dominant one and resolve the internal conflict of either accepting or refusing their own language (an aspect we shall not delve into in this paper), and ii) climb the academic ladder by becoming educated, by pursuing careers that included the completion of bachelor, master and doctorate degrees⁷, thus using Portuguese as their weapon to uphold their language, culture and history.

Therefore, migration played a role in the assertion of Mirandese as a language in its own right, only acknowledged in 1999, as well as the empowerment of new generations of Mirandese people – a first generation of people highly qualified and politically engaged in the defence of this minority language and subsequent generations inspired by this movement, which is obvious from the newer translators into Mirandese, as shown in 2.2.

3 Final remarks

Our initial premise was to demonstrate that migration was an inexorable force in the acknowledgement of Mirandese as a language in its own right in the Portuguese national territory. Mirandese stands out as a minority language whose known history is not much longer than a century and finds itself at a crossroads, moving between three axes: language policy, migration and translation.

As far as language policy is concerned, the Law 7/99 is a symbolic landmark of the greatest importance for Mirandese people, their language and culture, but it remains solely declarative. The whole process of the assertion of the language was a slow one and, at first, it enabled the encouragement of Mirandese teaching with a legal framework, though it is still hampered by the fact that it is an optional subject at schools with a reduced weekly schedule (1-3 hours per week). Moreover, the teaching of the language is still restricted to Miranda do Douro and its teachers are not recognised as professionals of Mirandese, nor do they have their own teaching group.

Regarding the translation axis, Mirandese has been a language of translation since the late 19th century, enabling it to gather numerous examples of Portuguese canonical and foreign literature, such as Camões, Pessoa, Horace and Virgil. Nonetheless, it is still not a language taught at higher education, an essential requirement to become another language in the national offer of translator training, which does not yet happen. Despite these hindrances, Mirandese possesses a considerable traductological capital that has proved to be fundamental for its survival up to the present moment.

Finally, the lengthy process of legitimisation underwent by the Mirandese language was made possible because previous generations were forced to migrate either within the country or abroad. In the first wave of migration, around 1910s-20s, Mirandese chose Transatlantic destinations (e.g. Brazil), whereas, on a second moment, between the 1950s and 1960s, they decided to migrate more to European countries. After this period, when Mirandese were confronted with the arrival of Portuguese speaking the national language and deepened their feelings of social and linguistic shame, they continued migrating either to Europe or to different places in the country. These successive migrations enabled the younger generations to escape the rural reality and acquire the cultural and symbolic capital that older generations lacked, mainly in pursuing academic careers, thus fighting on an equal footing with the dominant language, Portuguese, for

⁷ According to the National Census, in 1960, out of 15,649, only 60 Mirandese (52 men vs. 8 women) held a bachelor's degree, whereas, in 2011, we had 619 Mirandese with higher education degrees in 7,482 inhabitants.

the recognition of the Mirandese cultural identity, their value and pride. It is among these generations that we find the intellectual elite that established the necessary political liaisons and lobbied with the academia (particularly in the University of Lisbon), ultimately leading to the recognition of the language.

To conclude, migration was a powerful thrust for the empowerment of pivotal generations of Mirandese, opening up the possibility of confronting diverse European realities and obtaining academic qualifications, though these have not yet been enough. In our view, the future of Mirandese lies in stepping into higher education – universities must teach the language to future teachers and translators, so as to consolidate the acknowledgment process undertaken and provide the language with all the arguments to be regarded as a full language. Based on the intellectual and cultural capital gathered by previous migrating generations of Mirandese, the solution now lies in “migrating” to higher education, a fight that must be ensued by younger generations. Since the Mirandese believe that their language can express any scientific and literary domain, which is confirmed in the literary and translation production, these generations must engage in the academic world, so as to achieve the status of a truly official language in Portugal.

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