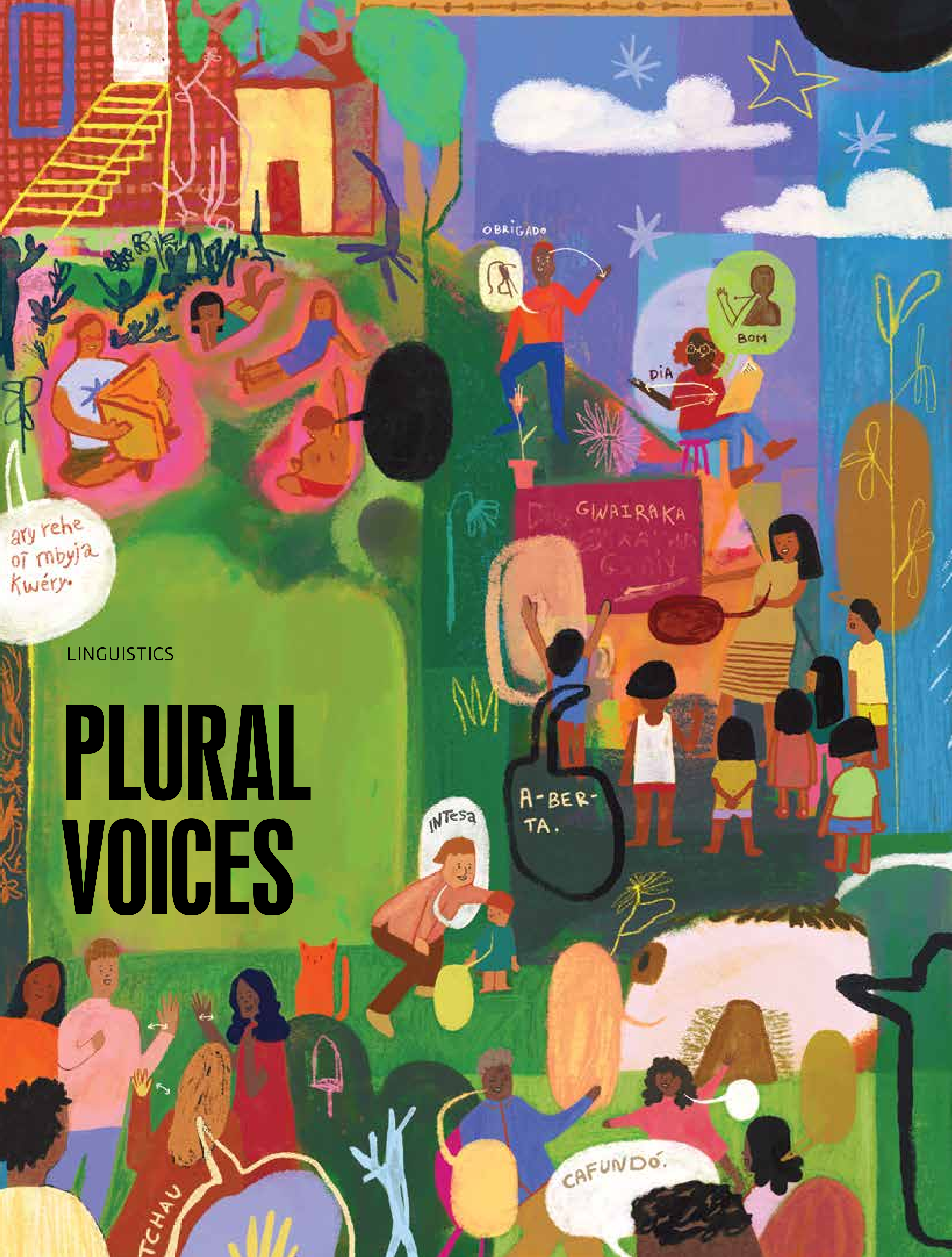
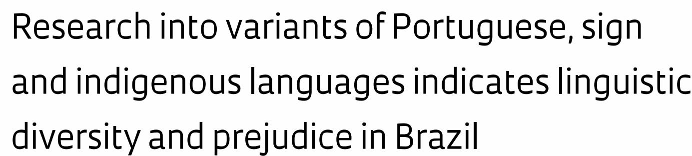


LINGUISTICS

PLURAL VOICES



Research into variants of Portuguese, sign and indigenous languages indicates linguistic diversity and prejudice in Brazil

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A case identified during research by a federal appeal court judge 15 years ago illustrates the importance of the debate around linguistic diversity in the country. While the sole official language of Brazil is Portuguese, there are speakers of more than 200 languages among the population. In the abovementioned case, the Federal Supreme Court (STF) denied a motion for habeas corpus filed by a Paraguayan detainee with the justification that although comprehensible, the application had been made in "Portunhol" (a mixture of Portuguese and Spanish). According to the STF interpretation, the applicant should have communicated to the judicial branch in Portuguese. To understand and confer visibility upon the plurality of languages and Portuguese variants used in Brazil, research conducted by linguists, phonoaudiologists, and educators has moved toward deconstructing the idea that the country is monolingual. These studies, which were published prior to 2023, are exemplified by the dictionaries produced in Kaiowá, the language spoken by the Kaiowá people in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, and the Cena sign language used by a deaf community in the interior of Piauí state.

The National Inventory of Linguistic Diversity (INDL), which is an official instrument for the identification, documentation, and recognition of languages used by groups in Brazilian society, was created in 2010 by the National Institute for Historical and Artistic Heritage (IPHAN) by Decree no. 7.387. According to the INDL, 180 Indigenous and 30 immigration, sign, and Afro-Brazilian languages are spoken in the country. "They all vary greatly in terms of sounds, morphology, and syntax," explains linguist Gladis Massini-Cagliari of the São Paulo State University (UNESP) Araraquara campus.

According to Massini-Cagliari, the first languages incorporated into the inventory were Tucano, Baniwa, and Nheengatu, all of which are of Tupi origin, with the latter considered the general language of Amazonia. The INDL also includes Talian, which is a language created from dialects spoken by Italian immigrants in the southern Brazilian states of Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina, and three other indigenous languages. In August 2022, IPHAN drafted a proposal for the inclusion—which is not yet regulated—of six new languages in the inventory, one of which is Yoruba, which is spoken in Afroreligious houses of worship of Nago or Yoruba origin, whereas Hunsrückisch was developed from a Germanic dialect base by German immigrants.

"Even when recognized by an official instrument, in practical terms, they do not offer all the communication possibilities available to Portuguese," says Massini-Cagliari. This means, for example, that few agencies in the health care, education, and justice systems are prepared to interact with people in languages other than Portuguese. This may also occur in cities such as São Gabriel da Cachoeira (Amazonas state) and Monsenhor Tabosa (Ceará), which, through municipal legislation, have coofficialized indigenous languages. In the Amazonian municipality, with Brazil's second-largest population of indigenous peoples, the languages of Baniwa, Nheengatu, Tukano, and Yanomami are coofficial. Massini-Cagliari wrote the book *Understanding Linguistic Prejudice: Critical Approaches to Language Diversity in Brazil* (Springer and Editora UNESP) with fellow linguists Angélica Rodrigues and Rosane de Andrade Berlinck, who are also with UNESP. Released in 2023, the book compiles

the results of studies undertaken by a network of researchers from UNESP and the universities of Sheffield (England), Ottawa (Canada), and Amsterdam (Holland).

According to Massini-Cagliari, minority languages that survive in specific geographical areas, along with variants of Portuguese, carry a stigma that contrasts with Brazil's official language. "During our research, we sought to evidence existing relationships between linguistic prejudice and social discrimination," she observes. "Studies demonstrate that the 'standard' or 'cultured' Portuguese is, in fact, an idealized abstraction, in many ways distanced from the spoken and written varieties of Portuguese used in Brazil," she comments. Massini-Cagliari explains that, from a linguistic standpoint, phrases such as "*os menino trabalha*" ("the [plural] boy work": colloquialism, meaning "the boys work"), which is common in popular Portuguese, are not erroneous but instead demonstrate aspects of the language's grammar that determine verb conjugation to be a variable rule. "In that respect only an agrammatical structure, not naturally reproduced by any native speaker, such as "*o menino trabalham*," meaning "the boy work" (verb pluralized), would be considered wrong.

To understand Brazilian linguistic diversity, linguist Antonio Carlos Santana de Souza, of Mato Grosso do Sul State University (UEMS), has been studying the Portuguese spoken by Quilombolas (slave-descendant maroons) since the 1990s, in locations such as the Cafundó quilombo (settlement), Salto de Pirapora, the Sorocaba region (São Paulo), and Caçandoca within the city of Ubatuba (São Paulo). He also studies Black Afrodescendant rural and urban communities in the states of Mato Grosso do Sul and Rio Grande do Sul. In communities of slave descendants and white settlers who lived on nearby farms, Souza reports that residents did not practice gender agreement in significantly high percentages compared with the Portuguese spoken in other communities, i.e., saying "*o menina*" ("the [masculine article] girl") or "*a menino*" ("the [feminine article] boy").

"Reference studies on the theme conducted by American linguist William Labov maintain that among rural Afrodescendant communities, the men normally innovate in their way of speaking, while the women are more conservative," says Souza. However, during work in Caçandoca, he found that women have changed their way of speaking, conforming to gender agreement more frequently than men do. "I discovered that the women have become more involved in the economic life of the community, selling bananas and receiving tourists. This contact has brought about changes in the way they communicate," says the UEMS researcher.

Discussions on the relationships between language and society are nothing new to the world of linguistic studies. The concept of linguistic prejudice, although not yet known, appeared in studies by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913); however, it was only in the 1960s that sociolinguistics, i.e., the science of language society relationships, emerged. In that decade, the concept of linguistic prejudice was coined primarily from the research of William Labov, who studied variants of English spoken by Afro-American communities. "He demonstrated the complexity of the language used by these people, helping to deconstruct the

GUARANI–KAIOWÁ INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, FOR EXAMPLE, HAVE DIFFERENT VERBS TO DESCRIBE THE ACT OF FISHING

idea that the spoken use of anything other than standard English was inferior or incorrect," says Berlinck of UNESP.

Adopting Portuguese as the sole official language confers a certain linguistic unity, providing practical benefits to a country with the continental dimensions of Brazil. Nevertheless, researchers defend the notion that science can help bring other languages that are spoken across the country into the light. "There is little awareness in society about the losses that the Portuguese language monopoly cause for the country," says indigenous history professor Graciela Chamorro of the Federal University of Grande Dourados (UFGD) in Mato Grosso do Sul. She considers that when a language is lost, the cultural memory and repertoire of the community in question disappears. For more than 30 years, the Kaiowá indigenous people have used different verbs to describe the act of fishing, which vary according to the size of the fish caught and the techniques used. "These different words, for example, provide information on the size of the fish and the instruments to be used and can reveal technical knowhow which could not be accessed without a mastery of the language," Chamorro argues.

All the languages spoken by fewer than 100,000 people around the globe are endangered, according to an atlas published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2010. This is the case for all indigenous languages in Brazil. "In Mato Grosso do Sul, Kaiowá and Guarani, very closely related sister languages, have 26,500 speakers," she says. The mother tongue of this researcher born in Paraguay is Guarani, which is practiced in that country. In 1983, when she began researching Kaiowá in Mato Grosso do Sul, she was unable to understand what was being said. This challenge led her to study Kaiowá and create glossaries, which, in 2017, gave rise to a dictionary project; in 2023, Chamorro published a Kaiowá-Portuguese dictionary with more than 6,000 translated words, along with cultural and linguistic notes, demonstrating the Kaiowá people's world view. The book, released by publisher Javali, is based on collaboration between indigenous and nonindigenous people.

Chamorro cites historical indigenous language dictionaries, such as the vocabulary developed by Jesuit Antonio Ruiz de Montoya (1585–1652), which have served as the basis for the study of Guarani-group languages, of which Kaiowá is one. Additionally, in 2014, during her master's research at the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS), Eliane Berendina Loman de Barros, of the Missionary Evangelical Linguistic Association, created a bilingual Kaiowá-Portuguese dictionary, which has not yet been published in print. "Kaiowá has been studied for over 60 years by linguists of the association, with the aim of translating the Bible, hymns, Christian teachings and concepts outside the ethnic culture. In my case, I took the reverse path," explains Chamorro. In other words, according to the researcher, studies conducted by these religious scholars were ultimately prepared to spread their messages among indigenous peoples, using Kaiowá to translate concepts and ideas from the Portuguese. Unlike their work, Chamorro's dictionary presents Kaiowá words "adorned with the Kaiowá culture." Translated into Portuguese, these words seek to approximate two linguistic and cultural experiences, which often reveal profound philosophical aspects of the Kaiowá people. One of the challenges in the process was translating words such as *avy'a*, which is an ambivalent Kaiowá verb equivalent to "*eu felizo*" ("I happy" as a verb with masculine agreement) or "*eu feliza*" ("I happy" as a verb with feminine agreement). As this verb does not exist in Portuguese, for the dictionary, it was translated as "eu estou feliz" ("I am happy").

"Indigenous language dictionaries contribute to obviating the risk of their extinction, encouraging their revitalization in the written form," she says. However, she adds that the vitality of these languages depends, above all, on their use in spoken form. "In this respect, my work is a warning to the Kaiowá people about the need to use Kaiowá not just in the family environment but also in public spaces," states the researcher (*see* Pesquisa FAPESP *issue no. 273*).

Linguist and educator Ronice Müller de Quadros, of the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), says that Brazilian Sign Language (LIBRAS), which is used by the Brazilian deaf community—particularly in urban areas—is in the process of being preserved as heritage by IPHAN. To facilitate this preservation, the language must be described, documented, and inventoried

by researchers. Specialists from across Brazil have been working with LIBRAS, including a 35-person-strong research group coordinated by Quadros, since 2014. One of the outcomes of the studies conducted by this network, which partners with deaf researchers around the country, was the publication of an online LIBRAS grammar by Arara Azul in 2021, which is also available on the UFSC website. This work was reedited in 2023 by the Brazilian Institute for the Education of Deaf People in two extended and updated volumes totaling more than a thousand pages. "The editing of this grammar is a significant milestone in the process of recognizing the language. However, there is much to progress," Quadros says. The scholar explains that LIBRAS makes more use of visual and spatial resources than other languages do; it is possible, for example, to use both hands to produce multiple, simultaneous meanings. "We need to carry out studies to investigate these complex meanings," she proposes.

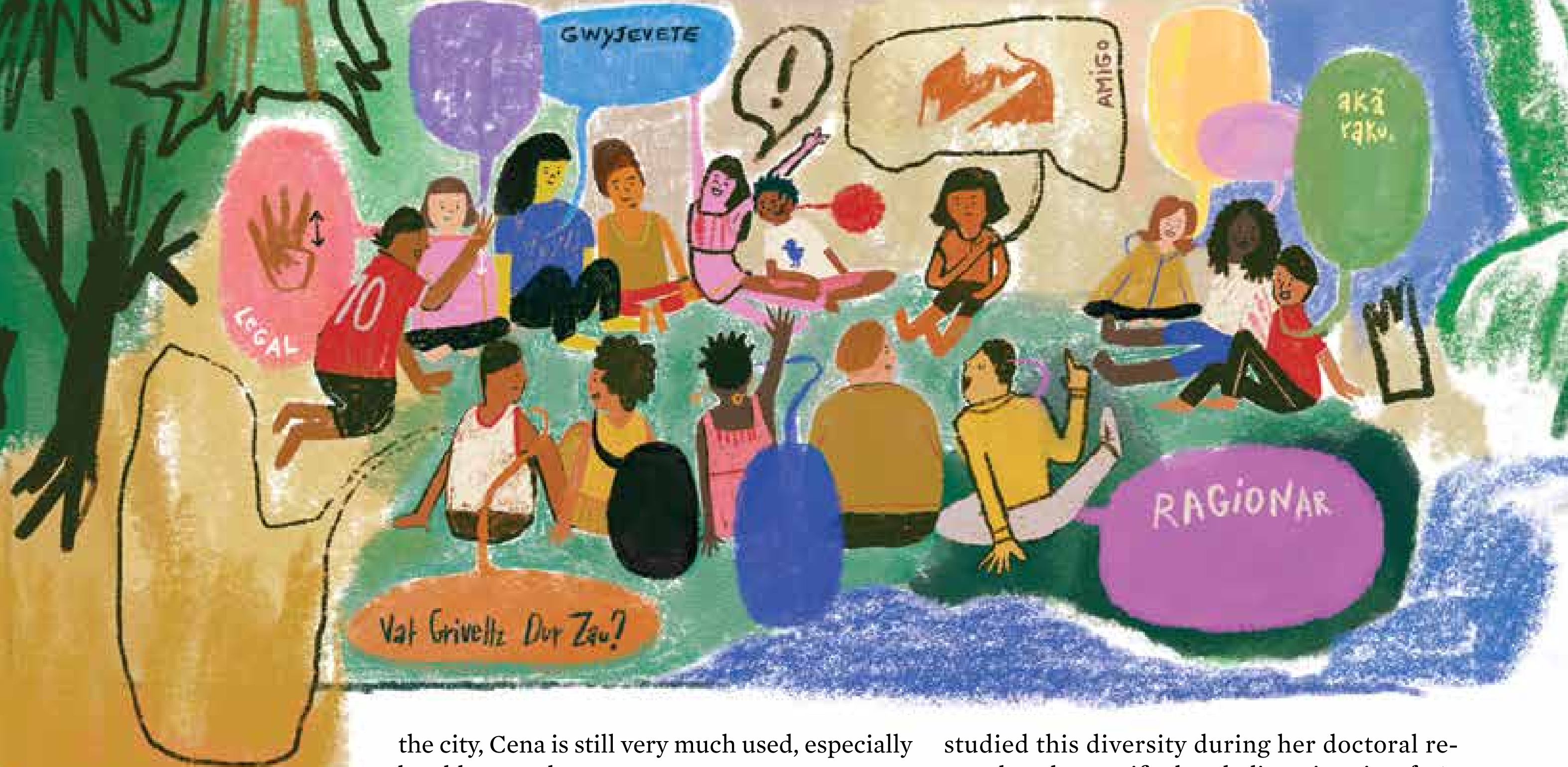
Acknowledged as a legal means of communication and expression for deaf people through Law No. 10.436 of 2002, LIBRAS was consolidated as part of an academic research project starting in 2006, when early degree courses in the language were devised. Since then, the UFSC and nine other institutions, including the University of São Paulo (USP), have begun to offer this learning pathway; currently, some 40 LIBRAS courses are offered, particularly across public universities, which cover all Brazilian states. Another relevant legal landmark was the 2021 amendment of the Law of Directives and Bases (LDB), which included the bilingual education of deaf people with a separate modality in the same manner as that of indigenous education. As a consequence, all education networks are obligated to offer learning support services in line with the linguistic specificities of deaf students, including faculty members who are bilingual in LIBRAS and Portuguese and instructional materials being made available in sign language.

"This measure is now being implemented by education networks," reports on the phonoaudiologist Cristina Broglia Feitosa de Lacerda, a professor in the Special Education postgraduate program at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar). According to the researcher, students can be enrolled in both regular schools and specific institutions for deaf people. The municipal education network of São Paulo has six exclusive units for such people.

Lacerda says that despite advances being made in the offer of courses to qualify professors to work with bilingual education in LIBRAS, Brazil currently faces the challenge of creating instruments to measure the development of related children in the classroom. The phonoaudiologist explains that professors currently observe student evolution on the basis of subjective criteria and that institutions do not have clear parameters with which to devise specific actions and provide impetus to their learning. Consistent with this gap, Lacerda created an instrument to evaluate the progress of deaf children in the use of LIBRAS on the basis of research funded by FAPESP, which was conducted in partnership with researchers from the University of Barcelona and concluded in 2023. To this end, she analyzed the development of narratives by 100 deaf students in São Paulo schools, creating a method to set common criteria to be applied in assessing other such learners.

In addition to LIBRAS, there are at least 22 sign languages utilized among deaf communities in Brazil, as identified in doctoral research defended in 2023 by linguist Diná Souza da Silva, under the guidance of Quadros, from UFSC. "The languages were developed by isolated communities that do not have contact with LIBRAS; they created their own forms to enable communication," expounds Quadros. One of these forms is Cena, which is used by a community of deaf people in the town of Várzea Queimada, which is located in the inland portion of Piauí state. "It is considered autochthonous, i.e., created without influence from any other languages, and has been in use for some 90 years," recounts Anderson Almeida da Silva, of the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE), who has been undertaking studies within the community since 2017. With a population close to a thousand, the town is currently home to 33 deaf individuals. According to Almeida-Silva, this number is the result of several marriages between blood relations in the past. "Cena runs the risk of disappearing, as the last person born deaf in the town is now 17," he says. Although there is a LIBRAS school in

IN ADDITION TO LIBRAS, OTHER FORMS OF SIGN LANGUAGE IN BRAZIL, SUCH AS CENA, ARE USED IN THE INTERIOR PORTION OF PIAUÍ STATE



the city, Cena is still very much used, especially by older people.

In December 2023, as an outcome of studies by Almeida-Silva and a team of specialists, including the Várzea Queimada deaf community, the first ever Cena dictionary was launched, with equivalents in LIBRAS and Portuguese for 250 words. Sponsored by the Piauí state government, 500 copies were printed, and an e-book version is set to be made available this year. "The dictionary enables the memory of the language to be safeguarded and the community identity enhanced," he emphasizes.

To expand the comprehension of the sign languages used in small deaf Brazilian communities, in 2023, Rodrigues of UNESP embarked upon research funded by FAPESP into emerging sign languages used in the cities of Boa Vista (Roraima), Buriti dos Lopes (Piauí), Tiros (Minas Gerais), Umuarama (Paraná), Várzea Queimada (Piauí), Vila de Fortalezinha (Pará), Centro Novo do Maranhão, and Centro do Guilherme (both in Maranhão state). "We are looking to compare the age of these languages, the number of generations that use them, and the way they are linguistically set up and structured. The end goal is to compile a virtual database open for public consultation," informs Rodrigues. "We want to expand comprehension and disseminate knowledge about Brazil's linguistic diversity, contributing to the formulation of public policies that consider populational singularities," he highlights.

Recent advances in these efforts have been achieved with the judicial branch in terms of recognizing Brazilian linguistic plurality. Federal appeal court judge Inês Virgínia Prado Soares studied this diversity during her doctoral research at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), which she defended in 2007. In a 2009 book on Brazilian cultural heritage, she analyzed the legal mechanisms for protecting spoken words in Brazil. Soares explains that an article in the Federal Constitution defines Portuguese as Brazil's official language. At the same time, another constitutional provision states that indigenous peoples, migrants, and other citizens have the right to speak in their mother tongues in their private spaces and relationships and, in certain situations, in the case of spoken words in Brazil, when dealing with the public branch. "I have written texts to analyze Brazilian standards on the theme, to understand how the constitutional edict of monolingualism coexists with the right to linguistic diversity," she says. During her research, the judge came across the habeas corpus application filed by the Paraguayan detained in Brazil—referred to at the beginning of this article—which was rejected by the STF. An initial step to preventing such applications from being dismissed simply for not having been formulated in the official language was taken in 2023, when the Federal Justice Council published assertions approved in the First Cultural and Natural Heritage Law Round, which was held at the beginning of that year. One such assertion maintains that people should be able to express themselves to the judiciary in other languages or variants of Portuguese, i.e., through Brazilian speech. "The assertions are not enshrined in law but serve as guidelines for judges, so they contribute to extending the right of access to justice in the country," concludes Soares. ■

The projects, articles, and books consulted for this report are listed in the online version.