

# Rui Barbosa's *Réplica* and the Emergence of a Brazilian Grammar

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## 1. Introduction\*

One of the fiercest debates in Brazil in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century revolved around Rui Barbosa's famous *Réplica* (Barbosa 1902). Throughout *Réplica*, Barbosa exhibits an impressive knowledge of linguistic studies being developed at the time. However, his detailed knowledge of the linguistic changes Portuguese had undergone did not prevent him from failing to recognize that what he perceived as vexing "defects" of the language of his time was in fact the reflex of a completely new grammar that was taking shape by then in Brazil:

"Não sou dos que precisam de ser cathechizados á verdade scientifica da evolução dos idiomas. Meu trato dos antigos escriptores não me levou ao fetichismo da antiguidade vernacula, (...) não me divorciou dos estudos hodiernos sobre as leis da vida organica nas linguas. (...) Usado a buscar nas fontes antigas os veios preciosos do oiro fino, que ellas escondem ao modernismo pretencioso e ignaro, amo e uso tambem a linguagem de meu tempo, esforçando-me, entretanto, por lhe evitar os defeitos." (*Repl*, 38)

*I do not need to be proselytized regarding the scientific truth that languages evolve. My familiarity with the old writers did not lead me to the fetishism of a vernacular antiquity or separate me from the current studies on the laws of the organic life in languages. (...) Accustomed to searching for the precious lodes of fine gold that old sources hide from the pretentious and ignorant modernism, I love and also use the language of my time. However, I do my best to avoid its defects.*

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With *Réplica*, Barbosa consolidated his reputation as very knowledgeable on language and grammar matters and became an icon of linguistic purism. This paper discusses Barbosa's view on language expressed in *Réplica* by examining his positions with respect to some illustrative syntactic properties of Brazilian Portuguese.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly describes the general historical context in which *Réplica* was written so that the reader can better understand the reasons underlying the intensity and harshness of Barbosa's remarks. Section 3 presents Barbosa's treatment of three syntactic properties of Brazilian Portuguese: subject-verb order, the use of *o que* 'what' as an interrogative pronoun, and the placement of clitics (unstressed object pronouns). Finally, section 4 concludes the paper.

## 2. Rui Barbosa's Views on Brazilian Portuguese Expressed in *Réplica*

In 1889, the minister Epitácio Pessoa asked law expert Clóvis Bevilacqua to write the first draft of the *Projecto de Codigo Civil Brasileiro* (*Brazilian Civil Code Project*). The draft was modified by a committee of congressmen and published in January 1902. In February, it was sent for grammatical revisions to Carneiro Ribeiro, an eminent grammarian who had been Rui Barbosa's teacher. In April, Barbosa circulated a review of Carneiro Ribeiro's corrections, which was published in July. Two reactions to Barbosa's review then followed: a reply by Carneiro Ribeiro entitled "Ligeiras Observações sobre as Emendas do Sr. Rui Barbosa" (*Brief Observations on Mr. Rui Barbosa's Amendments*) published in October, and "Resposta ao Parecer do Senador Rui Barbosa" (*Reply to Senator Rui Barbosa's Review*), by congressman Anísio de Abreu, published in November. In December, Barbosa publishes his monumental (599 pages!) *Replica do Senador Ruy Barbosa ás Defesas da Redacção do Projecto da Camara dos Deputados* (*Senator Rui Barbosa's Reply in Defense of the Writings of the Project by the Chamber of Deputies*), where he exercised all his rhetorical talents to abrasively defend his points of view (see e.g. Moura 1997 for further details).

Modern readers are amazed by the fact that such heated and intense debate was triggered by a "mere" question of grammatical correction. However, that was a really loaded issue at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to its intimate association with the new concepts of nation brought to the fore with the establishment of a republican political system. A recurrent theme that animated the intellectual circles of the time was the question of whether or not the new nation also had its own language, namely, a Brazilian language (see Pimentel Pinto 1978 for a very illuminating discussion). Barbosa's position on this issue was made transparently clear in *Réplica*, as illustrated

by the following excerpts:

“Na ‘vergonhosa metamorphose por que está hoje passando o português’ (...) entre nós, ‘homens aliás mui instruidos, verdadeiros sabios em outras materias, commetem crassos erros de linguagem’. (...) Depois então que se inventou, apadrinhado com o nome insigne de **ALENCAR** e outros menores, ‘**o dialecto brasileiro**’, todas as mazellas e corruptelas do idioma que nossos paes nos herdaram, cabem na indulgencia plenaria (...) do desprezo da grammatica e do gosto.” (Repl, 297)

*Given the shameful metamorphosis that Portuguese is going through nowadays, people who are very well educated and truly wise in other matters make primitive language errors. After one has – with the support of Alencar’s famous name and other minor ones – invented ‘the Brazilian dialect’, all the problems and corruption of the idiom that our forefathers passed on to us came to find refuge in the plenary indulgence for the disdain for grammar and good taste.*

“Aquelles que (...) habituaram o ouvido a essa lingua bastarda, a esse dialecto promiscuo (...) acabam por suppor seriamente mais clara essa miscellanea amorpha (...) e rude, esse português mistiço de entre lobo e cão” (Repl, 297)

*Those who had their ears accustomed to this bastard language, to this promiscuous dialect end up **seriously** believing this amorphous and rude mixture, this Portuguese between wolf and dog to be clearer.*

Specifically on the Civil Code Project after the interventions by Carneiro Ribeiro, Barbosa does not hide his contempt:

“Havia-lhe na physionomia muito mais do tal **dialecto** que da lingua portuguesa. Tentei approximal-o da lingua. Conto que m’o não perdoem os apaixonados do dialecto.” (Repl., 39)

*Its appearance was much more like the so-called dialect than the Portuguese language. I tried to make it closer to the language. I trust that the ones fond of the dialect do not forgive me for that.*

In the next section, I examine whether and how these strong views are reflected in his specific analyses of three linguistic phenomena, which are illustrative of the passionate tone permeating the whole debate.

### 3. Scholarly Work as a Rhetorical Weapon

In several parts of *Réplica*, Barbosa resorts to what he calls *vernaculidade*, the inherent properties of the language, to argue for the specific points he is making. A clear example involves his discussion of the subject-verb or verb-subject order in relative clauses. (1) below presents the original text in the Project and (2) presents Carneiro Ribeiro's correction:

- (1) “logar onde ella estabelece de modo definitivo a sua residencia”  
place where she establishes of way definite the her residence  
'place where she definitely establishes her residence'
- (2) “logar em que estabelece ella de modo definitivo a sua residencia”  
place in which establishes she of way definite the her residence

Barbosa's criticism of the changes in (2) is based on the vernacular property of euphony, namely, the fact that some sequences sound well formed in the language, while some others do not:

“Qual a vantagem do **em que** sobre o **onde**? A vantagem do **estabelece ella** sobre o **ella estabelece**? (*Repl.*, 89) (...) “No ‘**em que ella estabelece**’ a euphonia é perfeita. Mas o ‘**em que estabelece ella**’ sensivelmente a offende.” (*Repl.*, 90)

*What is the advantage of em que over onde or estabelece ella over ella estabelece? (...) Que ella estabelece is perfectly euphonic, clearly contrasting with em que estabelece ella.*

Barbosa's remarks are consistent with linguistic studies on the history of Brazilian Portuguese. Andrade Berlinck (2000), for instance, documents a significant drop in the frequency of the order verb-subject in Brazilian Portuguese in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, no speaker of Brazilian Portuguese today would disagree with Barbosa in taking the original order in (1) to be much more acceptable than the one in (2).

However, most of Barbosa's arguments actually neglected how well sentences sounded to native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese at the time. Take the choice between *o que* and *que* used as interrogative pronouns for 'what', for example. Linguistic studies have shown that *o que* started replacing *que* in Brazilian Portuguese in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see e.g. Lopes-Rossi 1993), which leads us to conjecture that the form *o que* should be judged more euphonic by speakers of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Barbosa instead takes the decisive criterion for the choice between these two forms to be their use in archaic Portuguese:

“Não ha justificação vernacula, que se enxergue, para a anteposição desse **o** ao **que** nas interrogações. Quasi nenhum exemplo della se encontra nas mais antigas fontes” (*Repl.*, 113) “Concluo eu, portanto, (...) que a expressão **o que**, interrogativamente usada, é **incorrecta**.” (*Repl.*,153)

*There is no vernacular justification that one can see for the addition of this o before que in interrogatives. Almost no examples of this are found in the oldest sources. (...) I therefore conclude that the expression o que, when used as an interrogative, is incorrect.*

This option does not seem to be innocent, though. It relates to a specific philological dispute with Carneiro Ribeiro, who had favored using *o que*. As an argument for his option, Carneiro Ribeiro had cited the sentence in (3), which he attributed to the baroque writer Vieira.

(3) “O que dirão a isso os todo poderosos do mundo?”

*the what they-will-say to this the all powerful of-the world*  
*‘What will the all powerful of the world say?’*

Through a very careful philological research the use of *o que* and *que*, Barbosa shows in his reply that Carneiro Ribeiro had in fact misquoted Vieira:

“Esse exemplo é falso. Vieira escreveu exactamente **do modo contrario, exactamente como eu sustento que sempre se deve escrever.**” (*Repl.*112)

*This example is false. Vieira wrote exactly the opposite, exactly as I maintain that one must always write.*

“Que dirão agora a isto os **todo** poderosos do mundo?”

*what they-will-say now to this the all powerful of-the world*

“Essa a verdadeira phrase de Vieira (...) Tral-a a edição antiga, no vol. VI (sexta parte), **Sermão da Terceira dominga Post Epiphaniam**, p. 309, n.278. Reproduz-a a segunda edição, a moderna, de 1855, no vol. IV, p. 279.”(*Repl.*,112)

*This is Vieira’s actual sentence. It is in the old edition, in vol. VI (sixth part), Sermão da Terceira dominga Post Epiphaniam p. 309, n.278. It is reproduced in the second edition, the modern one, from 1855, in vol. IV, p. 279.*

Much to Carneiro Ribeiro’s embarrassment, Barbosa then uses the error in this citation to question his academic credibility in general:

“Que fé nos podem merecer de ora avante as citações do professor **Carneiro**?”

(...) Como nos certificarmos da fidelidade das outras?”(Rep.,113)

*What credibility can Prof. Carneiro’s citations have from now on? How can we be sure about the accuracy of his previous citations?*

Let us finally consider the topic that has always given rise to endless discussions since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and received special attention in *Réplica*: the position of clitics (unstressed object pronouns) in Brazilian Portuguese. Clitics have different phonological **and syntactic** properties in European and Brazilian Portuguese. In European Portuguese, clitics are phonologically dependent on elements on their left (see e.g. Brandão de Carvalho 1989), whereas in Brazilian Portuguese, they are phonologically dependent on elements on their right (see e.g. Nunes 1993). This explains, for instance, why European Portuguese does not allow clitics to be preceded by a pause or be the first element in a clause, as opposed to Brazilian Portuguese, which permits both **possibilities, as respectively** shown in (4) and (5), where \* annotates unacceptability.

(4) *European Portuguese:*

- a. \*João tinha, se não me falha a memória, me dado um livro  
João had if not me lacks the memory me given a book
- b. João tinha-me, se não me falha a memória, dado um livro  
João had me if not me lacks the memory given a book  
'João had, if I'm not mistaken, given me a book.'
- c. \*Te telefone amanhã  
you I-call tomorrow
- d. Telefone-te amanhã  
I-call you tomorrow  
'I'll call you tomorrow.'

(5) *Brazilian Portuguese:*

- a. João tinha, se não me falha a memória, me dado um livro  
João had if not me lacks the memory me given a book
- b. \*João tinha-me, se não me falha a memória, dado um livro  
João had me if not me lacks the memory given a book  
'João had, if I'm not mistaken, given me a book.'
- c. Te telefone amanhã  
you I-call tomorrow
- d. \*Telefone-te amanhã

I-call you tomorrow  
'I'll call you tomorrow.'

As one would expect given his views on Brazilian Portuguese cited in section 2, Barbosa also takes a conservative stand on the subject of clitic placement, with numerous pages of examples extracted from classic authors. And again, his notion of euphony does not take the language of his time into consideration. For instance, he censures Carneiro Ribeiro for not accepting constructions that had long disappeared from Portuguese (see e.g. Williams 1938):

[Carneiro Ribeiro chega] “ao extremo de rejeitar como antiquada a intercalação euphonica do **n** em locuções como estas: Quem **no** diria? Quem **no** creria?”  
(*Repl.*, 342)

*Carneiro Ribeiro gets to the extreme of rejecting as old-fashioned the euphonic insertion of n in expressions like Quem no diria? Quem no creria?*

**And** similar to what we saw earlier with respect to the choice between *o que* and *que*, Barbosa's scholarly research on clitic placement leaves his opponents in an almost hilarious position. First, he uses Carneiro Ribeiro's own lessons on clitic placement to object to the sentence in (6) below, from the original project, in which the clitic *se* is used clause initially and was not corrected by Carneiro Ribeiro in his revision:

- (6) “Se a simulação for absoluta (...) e for assim provado a requerimento de algum dos contrahentes, se julgará o acto inexistente”

*If the simulation is absolute and gets proved upon request by one of the parties, the act will be judged in-existent.*

“A essa construcção oppuz eu esta lição categorica do professor **CARNEIRO: NÃO SE COMEÇA PHRASE ALGUMA** em portuguez pelas variações pronominaes obliquas **me, te, se, lhe, lhes, nos, vos, o, a, os, as.**” (*Repl.*, 55)

*To this construction I opposed this categorical lesson by Professor Carneiro: One must not start a sentence in Portuguese with the oblique pronouns me, te, se, lhe, lhes, nos, vos, o, a, os, as.*

Second, Barbosa disqualifies Anísio de Abreu's criticism by pointing out cases of hypercorrection involving clitic placement in Abreu's own *Resposta* such as (7) (which should have the clitic *se* preceding the verb).

- (7) “na historia do trabalho **a que** a comissão **dedicou-se**” (*Repl.*, 31)  
in-the history of-the work to which the committee dedicated-itself  
‘throughout the work the committed was dedicated to’

“(…) bastariam para nos dar mostra as suas bellezas de arte, ao collocar dos pronomes” (*Repl.*, 31)

*It would suffice for us to see the beauty of his art in his placement of pronouns.*

But Barbosa’s main target is still his old teacher, Carneiro Ribeiro. Barbosa carefully examined Carneiro Ribeiro’s grammar and documented every single inconsistency as far as clitic placement was concerned, presenting the following as his conclusion:

“Mas ninguem, ninguem errou jamais em tanta maneira, copiosamente, espalmadamente, como o dr. **CARNEIRO** na collocação dos pronomes.” (*Repl.*, 182) “Cincoenta vezes, quando menos, errou, portanto, o dr. **CARNEIRO**, na sua **Grammatica Philosophica**, a collocação dos pronomes.” (*Repl.*, 183)

*But nobody, nobody has ever made mistakes as plentifully as Dr. Carneiro with respect to pronominal placement. At least fifty times Dr. Carneiro made mistakes in his Grammatica Philosophica regarding pronoun placement.*

By reading the excerpts above, one cannot help but be mesmerized by both Barbosa’s philological erudition and his ability in turning the results of his research into a demolishing rhetorical weapon.

#### 4. Final Remarks

Tacit in the whole grammatical discussion in *Réplica* is a conflict involving Rui Barbosa’s enthusiastic love for the classics, his amazing technical knowledge of grammatical studies, his acknowledgment that languages change, and his conservative view regarding the results of such changes in the case of Brazilian Portuguese. Given that he was clearly not fond of many of these results, he strongly objected to describing them as Brazilian, as is synthesized in the following passage of *Réplica*:

“O projecto (...) estaria escripto nisso a que chamam de **brasileiro**: em português, não está. Direi que o estaria em **brasileiro**, a querermos enxovalhar, contra a minha opinião, este adjectivo, associando-o ao abandono dos bons



modelos da linguagem, cuja historia, cujos monumentos e cujos destinos se entrelaçam com os da nossa raça e os da nossa nacionalidade.” (*Repl.*, 298)

*The project may be written in what they call Brazilian – but not in Portuguese. I would say that it was written in Brazilian if we were, against my opinion, to stain this adjective, associating it to the abandonment of the good models of the language whose history, monuments and destinies are interwoven with the good models of our race and our nationality.*

In other words, it is ultimately based on his nationalist perspective that Rui Barbosa fiercely fought what he saw as “defects” of the language of his days. It is perhaps ironic that one century later, many of what he called “defects” have become the hallmarks of a distinctive Brazilian grammar, which are currently the object of intensive linguistic research.

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