

Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

Minderico: an endangered language in Portugal

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The present paper intends to present the language Minderico which is currently being documented in a DOBES documentation project. Minderico is the language spoken in Minde, a village in the centre of Portugal with a population of 3500, and not in any of the adjacent villages. It has to be regarded as highly endangered, because the number of (active) speakers of Minderico has decreased considerably to only a few hundred in the last three decades (Martins / Nogueira 2002; Gomes 2004; Endruschat / Ferreira 2006). In the recent past Minderico has become more and more restricted to the use in informal situations and Portuguese has developed into the main language of communication throughout the Minde region. There are also a few passive speakers who are able to understand Minderico but who do not use it actively anymore.

Minderico was used in the primary stage of its history as a secret code (the language of merchants of textile products). Initially, in its developing phase, the vocabulary of Minderico, presumably based on regional archaic forms and structures (maybe vestiges of a Mozarabic substrate), covered a wide range of lexemes for money and terms from the domain of textile production (Reis 1983, Martins / Nogueira 2002). This can be explained by the fact that Minderico was originally the language of a specific social-economic group. After this initial phase, Minderico began to expand its vocabulary continuously and creatively. This expansion is intimately related to the socio-cultural experiences of Minde's inhabitants. With the increase in vocabulary, Minderico also extended its scope of application. It began to be used not only for commercial reasons to conceal information but also in daily social contexts.

From a first analysis of the Minderico lexicon (Endruschat / Ferreira 2006), it becomes clear that two cognitive processes of semantic organization have crucially determined the creation and development of the lexicon, namely metaphorization and metonymization. From a total of 1062 types, 156 (14,7%) are based on metaphor and 489 (46%) on metonymy. 9,1% emerged from other semantic processes resulting in blendings, onomatopoeias, periphrases, antitheses, generalizations, etc. The predominance of metaphor and metonymy was in some way expected because of the importance of these two strategies in everyday language not only in Minderico but in languages in general (Barcelona 2002; Lakoff / Johnson 1980; Silva 2006), and because of the origins of Minderico as a secret language:

Metaphor	Meaning
<i>avião didi</i>	'grasshoper' (Lit. 'bad aeroplane')
<i>pição</i>	'language' (From <i>piar</i> 'to cheep')

Type of Metonymy	Example	Meaning
part > whole	<i>a do ferrão</i>	'wasp' (Lit. 'the one with the sting')
cause > effect	<i>o arrepia</i>	'wind' (Lit. 'the one that causes goose flesh')
function > instrument	<i>arranhadoras da gâmbia</i>	'fingernails' (Lit. 'something that scratches and belongs to the hand')
others	<i>cuco</i>	'April' (Lit. 'cuckoo')

The present paper gives an introduction to the development of Minderico from a secret language to an everyday language to an endangered language. Within this development we want to focus on the structure of the lexical inventory with a description of the word formation processes in Minderico from a cognitive perspective. Those processes are seen as central to the formation of Minderico vocabulary and reflect strategies of encoding human experiences in language in a broader sense.

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