

**Byrd, Steven.** *Calunga and the Legacy of an African Language in Brazil*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2012. 278 pp. Appendix. Notes. References. Index.

In this research monograph Steven Byrd provides a sociohistorical and a linguistic account of Calunga, an Afro-Brazilian contact language spoken in and around Patrocínio, Minas Gerais, by the descendants of slaves taken to that region during colonial time to work in mines and plantations.

The author collected the data by conducting sociolinguistic fieldwork in several Afro-Brazilian communities located near the Serra da Canastra, Triângulo Mineiro. Findings suggest that Calunga developed as an intragroup cryptolect, a language used among slaves as a secret solidarity means of communication. Byrd defines this variety as “a lexical phenomenon with some peculiar grammatical aspects” (6). In fact, Calunga grammar is for the most part the same as rural regional Brazilian Portuguese (Caipira Portuguese), while its lexicon is heavily influenced by African languages, especially Kimbundu, Umbundu, and Kikongo. This is a well-researched book that, in my view, represents a very welcomed contribution to the study of Afro-Lusophone contact linguistics in the Americas.

The study consists of six chapters and an appendix. The chapters are organized into two parts. Part one (chapters 1–3) provides an introduction as well as a historical and linguistic overview of the contact scenario that characterized the Portuguese colonial expansion and the colonization of Brazil. Part two (chapters 4–6) consists of a linguistic description of Calunga; it addresses the social, lexical and grammatical aspects of this language variety. The appendix is a collection of excerpts of transcribed recorded interviews in Calunga with their respective English translation.

The first chapter is an introduction to the book, which provides a general layout to the study and presents the main questions that the following chapters will try to answer: What is the history and historical context of Calunga? What is the linguistic context of Calunga? And what types of scholarly literature have been written on African languages spoken in Brazil and the African contribution to Brazilian Portuguese? What is the sociolinguistic profile of the Calunga speech community? What are the lexical and grammatical aspects of Calunga?

Chapter 1 also provides a description of several technical and foreign terms that are employed throughout the book. The purpose of such a terminological list is to provide the readers, who may not be completely familiar with the topic, with a brief glossary to better understand the content of the monograph.

Chapter 2 presents a historical overview of the Portuguese colonial enterprise, with particular attention devoted to the African and Brazilian campaigns and the subsequent implementation of the transatlantic slave trade between these two sides of the ocean. This chapter also addresses the living conditions of slaves in Brazil during the colonial phase, their acts of resistance and the creation of maroon communities (*quilombos*) up until the abolition of slavery, in May 1888.

Chapter 3 offers a linguistic overview of the Afro-Portuguese contact varieties that developed from the Portuguese colonization of Africa and Brazil. The

chapter describes a variety of contact languages and provides an overview of the main studies and hypotheses concerning the influence of African languages in Brazilian Portuguese. This chapter also summarizes the debate concerning the potential creolization, semi-creolization and decreolization of vernacular Brazilian Portuguese as well as the long-lasting debate concerning the origin of Afro-Hispanic contact varieties in Spanish America. In doing so, Byrd offers a list of common features that appear to be shared by several Afro-Hispanic and Afro-Portuguese contact dialects and that have been ascribed by some linguists to a potential pidgin/creole background: lack of gender and number agreement in the NP, bare nouns in subject position, lapses of subject-verb agreement, non-inverted questions, etc (but see: Sessarego, S. (2013). *Chota Valley Spanish*. Madrid/Frankfurt: Iberoamericana/Vervuert). The author also provides the definition of terms such as “anti-creole” and “mixed language” linguistic varieties whose grammar and lexicon proceed from two different sources, and which may describe the Calunga case well.

In chapter 4, Byrd analyzes Calunga from a sociolinguistic and a sociohistorical perspective. From a sociolinguistic point of view, the author points out that Calunga speakers (*calungadores*) often deny knowledge of this language due to the social stigma attached to it. *Calungadores* are for the most part working-class black men, usually cowboys, farmers, miners and construction workers, who live in or around the city of Patrocínio. The most proficient *calungadores* are over seventy, even though some good speakers may be found in their forties. On the other hand, younger generations aren't usually capable of speaking Calunga, thus indicating that this variety is gradually being lost. Byrd's interviews with *calungadores* indicate that this language probably developed as a secret code among slaves to avoid being understood by people of authority, such as plantation overseers. Nowadays Calunga has lost its original function but it is still used by its speakers as “a symbol of friendship and working-class solidarity among men” (106). Byrd highlights that this variety is not usually spoken by women. The author indicates that this may be because Calunga is used as a “masculine slang related to work, drink, sex and obscenities” so that women probably “do not want to be associated with this speech community” (107).

The historical roots of Calunga are linked to the Portuguese exploitation of Minas Gerais, which reached its peak during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and involved the introduction of thousands of black slaves into the region. Patrocínio, the town where Calunga is still spoken today, was founded in the 1770s and consisted of a few estates. Over time, Patrocínio grew as a mining and farming town, especially after 1852, when a large diamond, the southern star (*a estrela do sul*), was discovered in its vicinity.

The precise origin of Calunga is not yet completely clear. Batinga (Batinga, G. (1994). *Aspectos de presença do negro no Triângulo Mineiro/Alto Paranaíba: Kalunga*. Uberlândia, Brazil: Editora Indústria e Comércio) indicates that it might have originated in some of the main mining centers of the region: Araxá, Diamantina, Serro, Conceição do Mato Dentro, and Rio Vermelho; Vogt & Fry

(Vogt, C. & P. Fry (1996). *Cafundó: A África no Brasil: Linguagem e sociedade*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras) hypothesize that it developed within some of the *quilombos* scattered across the area, a hypothesis which is supported by historian Tarcísio José Martins but is strongly rejected by Carlos Magno Guimarães, who highlights that no clear historical data can be used to back such a claim (Byrd 118–119). Byrd suggests that Calunga might have developed as a rural African speech in local plantations, where “African slaves may have maintained some form of their native African languages beyond a few generations, combined with their eventual acquisition of the regional Portuguese” (119). In the author’s view, this may account for the fact that *calungadores* refer to it as a secret language used as an in-group code to prevent overseers from understanding them. On the other hand, in *quilombos* where overseers were not present a secret language of this kind would probably not have a reason to form.

Chapter 5 is a Calunga glossary consisting of 307 terms with their respective English translations. The author provides tentative etymologies; he also compares 66 Calunga words with lexical items reported in other Afro-Brazilian speech communities in Minas Gerais, São Paulo and Bahia. Results indicate that Bantu languages, in particular Kimbundu, Umbundu and Kikongo, provided the lexical items to a variety of Afro-Lusophone vernaculars spoken across Eastern Brazil, thus suggesting that Bantu slaves were in all likelihood the majority group in the region.

The main phonetic, phonological and morphosyntactic patterns of Calunga are analyzed in chapter six. As far as phonetics and phonology are concerned, Byrd indicates that the Calunga system is on a par with local Caipira Portuguese, even though some linguistic traces from Bantu languages are found in this language. An example of such traces is the presence in Calunga of some Portuguese-based words, which appear to have been resyllabified according to Bantu patterns (e.g., *salvar* > *saravá* ‘good-bye’) (173). As for Calunga morphosyntax, data indicate that it does not differ from the local variety of Portuguese, even though it appears to be “further reduced in some areas and distinct in others” (176). In fact, morphosyntactic differences are generally limited to reduced gender and number agreement in the NP, bare nouns, lack of subject-verb agreement, double negation, regularization of verbal paradigms, and deviant use of prepositions. The only features that appear to depart more substantially from the local dialect are the use of Portuguese-derived preverbal markers to express tense and aspect (*já* ‘already’ and *ter* ‘to have’) and the presence of subject and object pronouns based on Bantu-derived words for ‘man’ (*camano*) and ‘woman’ (*ocai*).

Since Calunga grammar is for the most part identical to vernacular Brazilian Portuguese, Byrd raises the question about whether Calunga should be seen as an anti-creole/mixed language or as a semi-creole, a variety whose grammar is significantly influenced by African languages but which is still relatively similar to Portuguese. This question is obviously rooted in the long-lasting debate concerning the status of rural vernacular Brazilian Portuguese, a topic on which scholars have repeatedly shown contrasting opinions. In the literature, in fact,

it has been proposed that vernacular Brazilian Portuguese was a creole which decreolized, thus it would have approximated overtime to the standard variety. According to this view, the reduced morphosyntactic patterns found in this language would be the direct result of substratal influence. On the other hand, Naro & Scherre (Naro, A. & M. M. Scherre. (2000). *Variable concord in Portuguese: The situation in Brazil and Portugal*. In John McWhorter (ed.), “Language change and language contact in pidgins and creoles,” 235–255. Amsterdam: John Benjamins; Naro, A. & M. M. Scherre. (2007). *Origens do português brasileiro*. São Paulo: Parábola) do not agree with this hypothesis and consider the differences between Brazilian and Peninsular Portuguese as the result of ‘normal’ internally motivated language change. Byrd does not provide an answer to this question and indicates that this is a “highly debated and controversial topic” (198), on which further research should be carried out.

The final Appendix offers several excerpts of transcribed recorded interviews in Calunga with their respective English translations. This section contributes to the overall manuscript in that it provides the reader with a better sense of Calunga speech.

Overall, this book is a welcomed study on a little-known Afro-Brazilian speech. Byrd provides a general description of Calunga grammar as well as a sociohistorical and sociolinguistic account of this speech community. In particular, the author does a good job in providing hundreds of African-based lexical items currently used in Calunga and in trying to trace their etyma to potential Bantu sources. The comparison and contrast of Calunga terms with those found in other Eastern Brazilian varieties seems to suggest that Bantu languages (in particular, Kimbundu, Umbundu and Kikongo) provided a significant contribution to the linguistic formation of these Afro-Lusophone dialects. The author does not take a definitive stand on the origin and evolution of Calunga since he admits that much sociohistorical research has to be carried out and the available information on the legacy of African languages in Brazil is still very limited. Nevertheless, this monograph may—at least—be seen as a small piece to a big Afro-Hispanic and Afro-Lusophone creole debate puzzle. It is my personal opinion that this volume, as well as some other recent books on Afro-Iberian contact varieties in the Americas, represents a great contribution to the field of creole linguistics. Nevertheless, as this study confirms, the long-lasting debate on the origin and evolution of Afro-contact varieties in the Americas is based on an ongoing investigation for which “the last word [...] has yet to be written” (Lipski, J. (2005). *A history of Afro-Hispanic language: Five centuries and five continents*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP).

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