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Minderico: an endangered language in Portugal

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the first results of the DoBeS project ‘Minderico: An Endangered Language in Portugal’, which started in August 2008 and is financed by the Volkswagen Foundation. The project intends to document the language and culture of the town of Minde, in the centre of Portugal with a population of 3380. Minderico is only spoken in Minde 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 in the last three decades to only a few hundred (Martins & Nogueira 2002, Gomes 2004, Endruschat & Ferreira 2006). In the recent past Minderico has become more and more restricted to use in informal situations and Portuguese has developed into the main language of communication throughout the Minde region. There are also passive speakers who are able to understand Minderico but who do not use it actively anymore. Minderico has not yet been documented systematically. Little data has been collected and there are no recent publications on the language (Reis 1983, Martins 1993, Martins et al. 2004). The aim of the DoBeS project is therefore a thorough documentation of spoken Minderico in its social and cultural context.

With this project we intend to demonstrate that there are also unknown endangered languages in Europe and that the Iberian region is not as homogeneous as the language policy of Portugal would like us to believe. To counterbalance the amazingly rapid process of globalization, we aim to show not only that linguistic diversity exists in Western Europe as well, but also that it needs to be studied and preserved. Another motivation for making Minderico the object of our investigation is the underdevelopment of all questions related to Portugal, including linguistic and cultural studies. Furthermore, Minderico, which developed out of a secret language into an everyday means of communication, has a special and unique status, not only for linguistics but also for discussion about documentation of endangered languages in general. Therefore, this documentation will contribute to themes such as language contact and language genesis (from secret to everyday language).

The paper starts with an overview of the historical roots of Minderico, and how it developed from a secret code employed by merchants from Minde into a language used in everyday communication. Emphasis will be given to the current status of Minderico as an endangered language, and thus to the importance of the documentation project. The second part of the paper highlights several linguistic processes that are involved in the major part of the lexicon of Minderico. It will be shown that the formation of the lexicon and the syntax highly interact and that this leads to typological features of Minderico that are not found in Portuguese or other Romance languages.

2. HISTORY OF MINDERICO

2.1. Origins and development

Minderico, related to and influenced by its immediate contact language Portuguese, is spoken in Minde. Minde is a small town, approximately 900 years old. Some historians assert that the first inhabitants came in the 12th century (Martins & Nogueira 2002). However, it was not officially recognized as a town ("Vila") until 1963. Minde belongs to the municipality of Alcanena, district of Santarém, in Portugal, 115 km north of Lisbon and 240 km south of Porto.

Minde is essentially an industrial town with an almost monoindustry of textiles and wool artefacts. From the 16th century on, the blankets of Minde became famous all over the country. Due to this popularity, the wool carders and merchants of Minde began to use Minderico in order to protect and defend their products from "intruders" and to earn more profit in their commercialization. Later, the language extended to all social and professional groups in Minde and became the main means of communication in the village. The geographical isolation of Minde (it lies in a valley surrounded by two mountains - Serra de Santo António and Serra dos Candeeiros) was also an important factor for the use and preservation of this unique linguistic variety.

Minderico made it possible for the merchants of textile products of Minde to negotiate prices among each other the prices in front of strangers and/or customers at different markets. Thus, Minderico was initially used as a sociolect for price-fixing arrangements. 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).

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. For example, names and nicknames of well-known persons from Minde and the neighbouring areas were used as lexemes to express physical or psychological characteristics, as these characteristics were salient for those people. This method of lexical formation can be explained by the fact that Minde, due to its geographical isolation, is a small and close knit community, where everyone knows one another. Therefore, using names of people as a means to express the characteristics associated to them was immediately understood among members of the speech community; it was not an obstacle to effective communication.

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. Consequently, the speech community increased and Minderico came to be seen as a unifying identity element. From this period on, Minderico came to be used by all social groups and progressed to become the everyday language in Minde - it was used within the community as a means of communication in all social, economic, cultural, and political contexts.

Even though Minderico became an everyday language, it did not lose its original function as a secret language, which is the reason why Minderico is linguistically so interesting. Minderico remained confined to the community living in the town of Minde and did not expand beyond this. There was a strong motivation on the part of its speakers to maintain its secret character – culturally, a property of their own and socially, a kind of survival ‘weapon’.

This ‘restricted use’ strengthened the function of Minderico as an expression of identity. For example, Minderico speakers used Portuguese with strangers (customers or inhabitants from other cities), but when they wanted to talk about these strangers they used Minderico. Minderico was also frequently used to talk about ‘forbidden things’ (mainly political themes), e.g. before (and after) the Carnation Revolution in 1974 in Portugal Minderico served as a medium of political resistance in Minde.

2.2. *From secret language to everyday language to endangered language*

As described above, Minderico was used in the primary stage of its history as a secret code (the language of merchants of textile products). In order to understand the not so atypical evolution of Minderico from secret language to everyday language, it is important to reflect on the phenomenon of ‘secret languages’ and their characteristics.

Secret languages have been studied within dialectology, sociolinguistics, and anthropological linguistics. They are normally described as language varieties outside the conventionalized standard language and differentiate themselves from it in various ways, for instance in the lexical (vocabulary) and pragmatic (usage) domains.

A clear definition of ‘secret languages’ is difficult to find in the literature. One of the reasons for the lack of a definition is that there are a variety of different terms in the literature to designate and describe the same entity. For example, together with the term ‘secret language’, the terms slang, jargon, and cryptolect are also found, without any kind of delimitation or specification. In Germany, where the study of secret languages has developed rapidly in the last decades (Siewert 1999, 2000, 2003), the same terminological problem persists: *Geheimsprache* (‘secret language’), *Sondersprache* (‘special language’), or *Gaunersprache* (‘thieves’ language’) are found interchangeably.

From a socio-pragmatic point of view, secret languages tend to emerge as oral varieties in small, closed, and isolated, often socially demarcated, groups. The language created is used as the internal means of communication inside those groups and serves a kind of identity and integration function, strengthening the group membership (internal group consolidation) and its demarcation from other groups (external group profiling). Besides the identity and integration functions, the secret language fills a need or intention of secrecy, which is intimately related to the identity and integration functions. On the other hand, secrecy can also be interpreted externally as a kind of protection mechanism (for instance in political and economic contexts). Secrecy is achieved through several linguistic strategies, such as phonetic reduplication, sound and/or syllable metathesis, total inversion of

phonemes, borrowings, metaphors, metonymies, etc. This also explains the high degree of creativity and spontaneity found in secret languages (Siewert 1999, 2000, 2003, Geipel 1995).

Secret languages typically have a limited vocabulary and hence tend to have a limited scope of application:

- (i) secret language lexemes are inserted in the normal flow of conversation in the standard/basis language;
- (ii) the secret language is only integrally used in some specific conversational contexts.

Compared with the basis language within which they are integrated, secret languages exhibit reduced and simplified structures in the lexicon as well as in their morphosyntax. Short lifetime is another characteristic of secret languages, which gradually lose their status as such and are reduced to special vocabulary within the base language (Siewert 1999, Klepsch 1996). This is one of the evolutionary directions secret languages can take (as was the case for ‘Lachoudisch’, once spoken in Middle Franconia, see Klepsch 1996). There are two other possible directions, namely extinction (for instance the Spanish secret language Caló, see Geipel 1995), or further development into an everyday distinct language (Siewert 1999, Klepsch 1996, Geipel 1995) as is the case with Minderico.

This tendency is not new from the perspective of language history; social varieties can perfectly evolve into a geographically limited language. Moreover, the fact that Minde is geographically isolated contributed to this evolution and reinforced the development of Minderico as an independent language with its own system and particularities, unintelligible for Portuguese speakers.

Bearing in mind the description in section 2.1., it is clear that Minderico today does not show characteristics of a secret language: it very quickly ceased to be restricted to a particular social group and was used in every context of daily life; its vocabulary is not reduced to special contexts and adapts itself continuously to the new social, economic and technical realities; in contrast to secret languages, its morphosyntax is complex and different from Portuguese. Minderico is not restricted to the informal oral register but it is also used in formal oral and written registers. Finally, the fact that its speakers are engaged in presenting the language beyond its borders (e.g. through music, newspaper articles, internet, small glossaries) shows clearly that Minderico is not seen as a secret language anymore.

Although Minderico developed into an active minority language, the number of speakers has declined drastically. In its ‘golden’ times (from the 18th century up to the official dissolution of the religious orders in Portugal in 1834, as well as from 1950 up to 1970) Minde had over 7000 inhabitants. According to the 2001 census, the population of Minde decreased considerably and is now around 3,500 inhabitants. There are several reasons for this reduction: the loss of competitiveness of the textile industries caused a decrease in the economy of the town and the Mindericos had to search for work outside Minde. They went mainly

to urban centres (especially to Lisbon). These urban migrants often contract mixed marriages where the home language is no longer Minderico but Portuguese.

So, the language spoken at home shifted from Minderico to Portuguese and consequently children and youngsters do not speak it anymore. Minderico is no longer passed to children. Some young people in Minde do have some passive competence in Minderico, but it is not used as a means of communication. From a general point of view, we can say that the speakers of Minderico are no longer using it actively in everyday matters, because of the influence and pressure of Portuguese. In this sense, Minderico is nowadays highly endangered.

2.3. Current situation of Minderico

Today Minderico risks becoming extinct, more than ever before in its history. All speakers of Minderico are bilingual, speaking Portuguese along with Minderico. While Portuguese is the language of administration and the school system, Minderico remains almost restricted to the family. But even in this private sector there is a clear pressure from Portuguese on Minderico. Most likely there are no children up to 5 years who understand or use the language today, given that school education has always been in Portuguese in the region and, consequently, Portuguese has developed into the main means of communication even within families. There are two main reasons for shifting from Minderico to Portuguese as a home language: economic pressures and professional requirements.

In order to ensure success in school life, and later on, many parents decide to address their children in Portuguese at home. On the other hand, being competent in Portuguese is nowadays a requirement when looking for a good job not only in the Minde region but elsewhere in Portugal. Being the official language in the public and educational sector, Portuguese puts languages such as Minderico under threat.

Moreover, the speech of Minderico adults is characterized by a kind of Portuguese-Minderico code-switching and code-mixing. The knowledge of Minderico is not very homogeneous among the inhabitants of Minde. Only the older generation (people older than 65) has full competence in the language; younger adults understand Minderico and are able to speak it, but normally they refuse to do so, mainly because they have not fully acquired competence in Minderico.

In recent times, the inhabitants of Minde have gradually been giving up their traditional way of life which included a tradition of textile production; in the course of this process, the peculiar elements of the Minderico lexicon which refer to this traditional background are being lost. It is to be expected that the shift from Minderico to Portuguese will soon be accompanied by a loss of folkloric and other traditions as well.

3. TYPOLOGY OF MINDERICO

3.1. General remarks

Minderico belongs without doubt to the group of Ibero-Romance languages. Bearing in mind its origins, Minderico is diachronically related to Portuguese, a fact that determined its system and structures which show clear Ibero-Romance characteristics.

At this point it is important to emphasize that Minderico cannot be considered a regional or sociological dialect of Portuguese or other Ibero-Romance language. In modern sociolinguistics, dialects are clearly differentiated from languages according to the criteria of variation (a language exists in different varieties, e.g. spoken vs. written, formal vs. informal; a dialect does not) and subordination (a dialect is subordinated genetically and functionally to a specific language) (cf. Montes Giraldo 1980). Minderico has its specific syntactic, morphological and lexical structures, and is used in all formal and informal communicative situations, in written and spoken forms. Furthermore, Minderico developed a written tradition which is normally not typical for a dialect. Although words may appear to be similar to those in other Ibero-Romance languages, they are completely unintelligible to Portuguese or Spanish speakers.

As Cintra (1971) mentioned, more important than the linguistic/scientific definition of what a regional variety of a language is, is speakers' consciousness; the awareness that they speak a language different from the standard language which promotes a sense of integration in their community.

Table 1
Frequent spoken language phenomena in Minderico

Phenomena	Example
passe-partout words	<i>jordar</i> ¹
interjections	<i>Atouguia!</i> ²
diminutives	<i>negritas</i> or <i>negrinhas</i> ³
euphemisms	<i>encolher os mirantes</i> ⁴
epenthesis	<i>está</i> > <i>'tá</i>

Being used primarily as a spoken, informal language, Minderico is characterised by typical spoken phenomena also found in other Romance languages (Koch & Oesterreicher 1990) (Table 1).

¹ *Jordar* has various meanings: “give, go, bring, pay, earn, etc.”.

² *Atouguia* is an interjection of alert, attention.

³ *Negritas* or *negrinhas*, nouns formed by the diminutives *-ita* and *-inha*, meaning “olives”.

⁴ *Encolher os mirantes* can be translated literally as “shut the eyes” and means in Minderico “to die”.

More definitive statements can be made about the morphosyntax and semantics of Minderico, but they are only based on a small collection of data (see 3.2 and 3.3).

3.2. Morphosyntactic phenomena

In the morphosyntactic domain Minderico shows identical tendencies to Portuguese and Spanish. As in other Ibero-Romance languages, the unmarked word order is SVO; subject-verb and noun-adjective agreement are respected (*muitos pasmados sequeiros* ‘lots of thin bulls’). Adjectives typically follow the head noun (*planeta cópio* ‘good morning’). There seems to be a clear tendency for pro-drop structures. Verbal periphrases are frequently used in order to express aspectual information, as in other Romance languages. Word formation in Minderico is typically Ibero-Romance. For instance, the most productive word formation morpheme in Minderico is *-or/ -ora*, also present in Portuguese and Spanish. It is used to build deverbal nominal agents (e.g. *crestador* ‘heat’ from *crestar* ‘to burn’, *arranhadoras da gâmbia* ‘fingernails’ from *arranhar* ‘to scratch’).

The most notable phenomena in the morphosyntactic domain are elliptical partitive constructions for the formation of substantives, and periphrastic constructions for the formation of verbs. Both appear often simultaneously and have a substantial influence on the syntactic organization of Minderico (Table 2).

Table 2
Constructions in Minderico

Elliptical partitive constructions and periphrastic constructions	Meaning
<i>os do noé</i>	‘animals’ (lit. ‘the of Noah’)
<i>o de arraiolos</i>	‘hair’ (lit. ‘the from Arraiolos’ - a town famous for its wool)
<i>o da janela perfumada</i>	‘carnation’ (this flower is typically put on the window for flavouring the room)
<i>jordar regatinha na chaveca do terraiozinho</i>	‘baptize’ (lit. ‘throw water on the head of the child’)
<i>gambiar a do pinto lopes</i>	‘write’ (lit. ‘move the pen with the hands’)

The last example in Table 2 (*gambiar a do pinto lopes* ‘write’) shows an elliptical partitive construction (*a do pinto lopes* ‘pen’) embedded in a periphrastic construction.⁵

⁵ *Pinto Lopes* was a well-known lawyer from Torres Novas, a town about 15 km east from Minde.

These complex verbal constructions have a strong influence on the syntactic organization of Minderico. On the formal level these periphrastic structures show traits of nominal incorporation, as described, for example, by Mithun (1984, 1986). Parallel to incorporated structures in other languages, the periphrastic constructions are always realized as indivisible units and the process of incorporation has consequences for verb valence. It is not possible to add any other word between *gambiar* and *a do pinto lopes*, nor may the object be pronominalized: *gambiá-la* does not mean ‘write’, its translation would be ‘move something (feminine) with the hands’. *A do pinto lopes* is thus an intrinsic part of the verbal complex, which shows a transitive pattern in utterances like:⁶

- (1) *gambi-o a d-o pinto=lopes*
 write-1SG DART:FEM from-DART:MASC pinto=lopes

um soletra
 INDART:MASC book
 ‘I write a book.’

- (2) *jord-o a-s d-o mestre=grosso a-s*
 LV-1SG DART:FEM-PL from-DART:MASC master =grosso DART:FEM-PL

cardosa-s
 pant-PL
 ‘I put the pants on.’

Other verbal paraphrases differ in their valence. Nominal incorporation in general often leads to a reduction in transitivity, a second referential entity might then be expressed as an indirect object (Mithun & Corbett 1999). These structures can also be observed in Minderico. Speakers tend to use prepositional phrases in the following utterances:

- (3) *jord-o o neto à babosa*
 LV-1SG DART:MASC money to beer
 ‘I pay for the beer.’

- (4) *ponh-o o d-a-s caçoa-s a-o*
 put-1SG DART:MASC from-DART:FEM-PL ear-PL to-DART:MASC

galeno
 radio
 ‘I listen to the radio.’

⁶ 1SG = first person singular, DART = definite article, FEM = feminine, INDART = indefinite article, LV = Leitverb, MASC = masculine, PL = plural

We are aware that the analysis of those paraphrastic constructions as nominal incorporation is controversial. It is a first attempt to try to explain these particular syntactic structures found in Minderico, and has to be refined by further data and research. But we also think that the study of Minderico and its origins as an ‘invented’ code might shed light on the evolution of incorporated structures in other languages from a broad typological perspective.

3.3. *Lexical and semantic phenomena*

As previously mentioned, the lexical base of Minderico seems to be intimately related to Portuguese. However, many Spanish, French, English, Arabic (or more importantly Mozarabic)⁷ and Romani elements are to be found as well. These borrowings probably entered Minderico during the formation phase, through trade contacts between the textile merchants (Table 3).

Table 3
Borrowings in Minderico

Form	Meaning	Source language
naifa	‘knife’	English
père	‘father’	French
mère	‘mother’	French
alfarrábio	‘book’	Arabic
âmbria	‘hunger’	Spanish

From a first analysis of the Minderico lexicon (Endruschat & Ferreira 2006), it appears that two cognitive processes of semantic organization have crucially determined its creation and development, namely metaphorization and metonymization. Out of 1062 entries, 156 (14.7%) are based on metaphor and 489 (46%) on metonymy. A further 9.1% emerged from other semantic processes such as blending, onomatopoeia, periphrase, antithesis, generalization, etc. The predominance of metaphor and metonymy was in some way expected because of the importance of these two processes in everyday language, not only in Minderico but in language in general (Barcelona 2002, Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Silva 2006)⁸, and because of the origins of Minderico as a secret language.

⁷ The Mozarabic elements are perhaps related to the interaction between Mindericos and Mozarabs in the past and to the possible existence of refugee centres in the region during the *reconquista*. The Arabic and Mozarabic population was expelled from the north to the south, which may have led to a settlement in the region of Minde. The likely relationship between Minderico and Mozarabic must be further investigated.

⁸ According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), a metaphor implies a conceptual transfer from a source to a target domain. Contrary to metaphors, metonymies establish a semantic relation of contiguity between two elements (Barcelona 2002). Following Schulze (2001; 2003), metaphors and

Table 4
Lexemes based on metaphor

Lexeme	Gloss	Literal meaning
avião didi	‘grasshopper’	‘bad aeroplane’
carrancuda	‘cloud’	<i>carranca</i> ‘antipathical face’
treme terras	‘god’	‘the one that shakes the earth’
piação	‘language’	<i>piar</i> ‘to cheep’

Table 5
Lexemes based on metonymy

Type of Metonymy	Example	Gloss	Literal meaning
part > whole	<i>a do ferrão</i>	‘wasp’	‘the with the sting’
proper noun > quality / profession	<i>touquim</i>	‘teacher’	
place > product	<i>o de alhandra</i>	‘matchstick’	‘the from Alhandra’)
cause > effect	<i>o arrepiã</i>	‘wind’	‘the that causes goose flesh’
function > instrument	<i>arranhado ras da gâmbia</i>	‘fingernails’	‘something that scratches and belongs to the hand’
others	cuco	‘April’	‘cuckoo’

This sketch description shows that the lexicon of Minderico is a very challenging domain that must be deeply documented and analysed. For this reason, we plan to elaborate the lexicon in the DoBeS project.

4. CONCLUSION

We have clearly shown that Minderico cannot be regarded as a secret language anymore. In comparison to other secret languages like Argot or Rotwelsch, Minderico shares many common historical developments. On the other hand, Minderico is unique in the sense that the language was widely used in all contexts of everyday life in spoken and written forms (and still is, to a limited extent). Similarly to the studies of Pidgin and Creole languages, the analysis of the development and active usage of Minderico allows us to shed light on the

metonymies do not have clear boundaries; they rather build a kind of continuum as can be observed in Minderico.

development and origins of language and language structures. The importance of documenting and describing this language is evident.

These claims were further supported in the second part of the paper that described linguistic features and processes in the formation of the lexicon and morphosyntax of Minderico. Comparison with Portuguese and other Romance languages shows that Minderico cannot be regarded as a dialect or a simple variant of those languages. Its Portuguese roots are evident; but the highly creative processes of borrowing, partitive constructions, paraphrases, and metaphorical and metonymical derivations led to the formation of a unique lexicon and grammatical features not found in other Romance languages. These processes, which are still active in Minderico and used by the remaining speakers to derive new lexical material, make Minderico a ‘showcase’ of language development for linguists. The analysis of Minderico may contribute to a better understanding of grammaticalization paths and the origins of language structures. However much more work remains to be done.

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