The imminent death of the São Miguel dialect?
Hardly…

Anybody who has had the opportunity to visit the island of São Miguel and converse with the locals can’t help be struck by some extremely remarkable speech patterns.

There’s the French-sounding “u” in words such as fruta, lula, tudo and uma, as well as the German-like ö pronunciation in forms such as couve, pouco, oito, and noite.

Then there’s there are English-esque vowels in words such as sete or festa (often pronounced with a short-a sound, as in “sat” and “fasht-uh”).

And even when the vowels are, in themselves, Portuguese-sounding-enough, it often seems as they have been somehow misaligned, such that one’s vavó seems to sound as if she were one’s vavô and one’s vavô winds up with his own curious phonetic rendering as vavú.

Add to all this a penchant for neglecting the latter half of diphthongs (chapeu > chapê) and lopping off any final unstressed vowel that doesn’t happen to be “a” and, well…

It can all become mighty confusing. For those whose Portuguese is more tightly aligned with the standard language as spoken in places such as Lisbon, Coimbra, or – well, any of the other Azorean islands (except, perhaps, for Santa Maria) – the speech patterns of many micaelenses seem to cross a line into something that stretches the limit of what some would call “Portuguese.”

It would appear to be something other than “real Portuguese,” a bedeviled linguistic cacophony spoken exclusively by folks who might refer to themselves as the world’s sole source of coriscos.

As a result of their linguistically distinctive behaviors, the people of São Miguel have quite often found themselves ridiculed and scorned by those who have found the dialect somehow deficient or substandard.

In attempt to be funny, somebody once asked me how it was to be the offspring of a mixed marriage, given that my mother was Portuguese, from the island of Faial, and my father was Japanese, from the island of São Miguel. (Once I figured out the “joke,” I didn’t think it was so funny.)

I also know of folks who have blamed my parents’ disastrous dialect mismatch for my own lack of native-like fluency in the Portuguese language; according to their logic, how could o rapaz have possibly managed to learn nossa língua in the presence of such confusão linguística, coitadinho? (The fact that I’ve chosen to write this essay in English and not in Portuguese would, in fact, serve as convincing evidence of such an argument – an “argument” that I, as a scholar of linguistics and language, gleefully surround by quotation marks and declare officially ludicrous. Enough said.)
Such negative attitudes towards the island’s dialect have, alas, made their way into the psyche of many micaelenses who, when asked to reflect and comment upon their own speech, retreat into positions of embarrassment.

I can report that in the context of multiple sociolinguistic interviews with native speakers of the dialect, I’ve had my professional judgment questioned: “Why do you want to interview me? My Portuguese is so bad. You should talk to somebody from X,” where “X” might be any number of places other than São Miguel.

So it is among many of those who speak a dialect that is not only non-standard but socially stigmatized. Their albatross is none other than um albatroz in which the stressed “o” isn’t as open as it ought to be.

None of these observations about the speech patterns unique to São Miguel are recent. As far back as we can locate commentary on Azorean dialects, one finds occasional reference to the linguistic peculiarities of the São Miguel dialect, with specific mention of its unique vowel qualities.

What’s important to note here is that any such mentions were passing (and sometimes pejorative), indicative of an attitude that was either uncaring or dismissive. Such variances of the language were, at most, merely curiosities, unworthy any serious intellectual or academic consideration.

It wasn’t until the 1940’s that the dialect was given serious attention by a (then) young Portuguese-American student of language, Francis M. Rogers, who sought to bring clarity and honor to the linguistic facts, as well as to understand how they stood in the context of a larger lusophone universe.

What Rogers revealed was that the speech patterns indigenous to São Miguel were part of a rather complex but highly systematic shift in the pronunciation of the stressed vowels. Moreover, this sort of “chain shift” was not unique to the island’s dialect, but was similar to vowel shifts attested to in other languages, including an erstwhile movement of the back vowels (a, ó, ô, u) in the Algarve which (as it turns out) may have been the original source of the vocalic arrangement widespread in São Miguel during the middle part of the 20th century and – to the point of this essay – potentially on the wane as we enter the 21st.

I say "potentially on the wane" as I’ve come to observe that the uniquely micaelense vowel patterns described by Rogers in the 1940’s and captured by some of my own fieldwork in the 1980’s have become less noticeable in the past 20 or so years. Indeed, if one ventures to a Ilha Verde these days and converse with the locals, one is less likely to hear the traditional timbres of the vernacular and more likely to hear a version of Portuguese akin to that of the standard language. In short, o falar micaelense as has been described in the past seems to be on its way out.

For those who subscribe to the notion that a language is at its best when all of its speakers conform to the rules and regulations of the prescriptive norm, the apparent demise of the
uniquely *micaelense* modes of speech is most certainly good news. For those of us who are less enslaved by the linguistically parochial notions of our prescriptively-minded colleagues and, in contrast, espouse a belief that linguistic diversity ought to be embraced as a reflection of the human condition, then the seeming erosion of the curiously wonderful São Miguel dialect would surely be cause for dismay.

To those on both sides of the linguistic divide, I find myself channeling the spirit of that great American author, Mark Twain, to report that any reports of the dialect’s death have been greatly exaggerated. Rather, I have found that *o falar micaelense* is alive and well today, but is increasingly shy in the presence of outsiders. While more and more inhabitants of São Miguel have become proficient in a more standard-sounding version of the Portuguese language, they haven’t necessarily given up what is inherently theirs: the local vernacular. Rather, they’ve become linguistically more flexible and astute, acquiring control of two varieties of the language. In doing so, many *micaelenses* have developed a keen linguistic sense of how and when to employ which linguistic patterns in specific contexts (keeping the local variety increasingly to themselves, thank you very much), thereby reflecting what I’ll call “the new geography” of the 21st century Azores: they are no longer islands.

Sure, each of the nine sisters is still surrounded by water, and yes, the entire archipelago remains separated from continental Europe by a vast expanse of *o mar salgado*, but from a sociolinguistic perspective, the Azores have become increasingly less insular, especially in the past 10 years. As such, the speech communities established in the early 1500’s and reinforced by limitations of communication and geography for over 500 years have, of late, seen significant barriers to communication come tumbling down: just as improvements in air travel have allowed for increased opportunities for the movement of people to and from the Azores, so, too, have improvements in digital communication technologies allowed for increased opportunities for the expression of faces and voices to and from the islands. Fiber optics, cell technology, Skype, YouTube… Each brings about the possibility for increasingly frequent and significant contact between Azoreans and other inhabitants of the lusophone world.

As the interaction among speakers of two (or more) speech communities becomes more frequent and significant, the so-called “density of communication” increases. And as density of communication rises, so do opportunities for sharing not only linguistic behaviors, but also linguistic attitudes and norms.

One might conclude that the end result would be a grand convergence of language behaviors, one whereby speakers from many locations would ultimately shift their linguistic behaviors toward a common set of forms and practices, thereby giving rise to a “great homogenization” of the national language and the ensuing death of less dominant (and, according to the prescriptivists, less valuable) local dialects.

If only that were the case.

As it turns out, such an argument falls flat as it fails to acknowledge two fundamental truths about human beings.

First, every person has the capacity to acquire and deploy multiple linguistic systems, be they
distinct languages (as is the case for those who are bilingual to some degree or another) or
discernibly different varieties of a single language (as is the case for those who might be labeled
“bidialectal”).

Thanks to this linguistic multipotentiality, an individual learning a new language (or dialect)
need not do so at the expense of a language (or dialect) already in place. Much like an
expansively gracious host on the day of a great holiday feast, the human brain is hugely
accommodating, typically allowing room for one more at the linguistic table.

Second, human beings have an innate grasp of the power that comes with “belonging,” especially
when it comes to membership in multiple constituencies. With such an appreciation comes a
tendency to permit (if not actively foster) multiple identities, identities that are outwardly
expressed in terms of desire for variety in wardrobe, in pastimes, and in behavior – including
language.

Just as don’t deliver academic lectures to my students as if they were my friends, I don’t
converse with my friends as if I were lecturing my students (at least not in most cases).

People know how to adapt their behaviors as their social circumstances shift, and so it’s no
surprise that as the Azores become less insular, so do the Azoreans – at least in the eyes (and
ears) of those from outside the local community. In the comfort of their home communities and
among those with whom they share the most in terms of history and heritage, members of each
linguistic corner of the archipelago will surely express themselves in ways that reflect their local
identity. Even the most technologically-savvy, linguistically accommodating 21st century
micaelense is still, at heart, a corisco.

Gróças a Des.
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