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## **Description, Comparison and Typology of Languages: An Interview with Giulia Bossaglia**

**Giulia Bossaglia<sup>1</sup>**

**ReVEL - In your academic training, carried out in Italy, there seems to have been a certain emphasis on classical languages and synchronic and diachronic linguistics. Furthermore, you are renowned for your interest in synchronic and diachronic comparative studies, typology, and language contact. Can you tell us a little about your journey with comparative linguistics and typology?**

**GIULIA BOSSAGLIA -** I recognize that my linguistic interest emerged very early: at the end of primary school, grammar was one of my favorite subjects (also thanks to great teachers), and at the age of 12 I began to teach Portuguese, a language with which I felt a strong connection from an early age, as an autodidact.

My education in classical languages also happened before college, because in high school (which corresponds to the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades plus the 3 years of high school in Brazil) I studied the Greek and Latin languages. For me, studying these languages and literatures in college was almost a natural continuation, but I remember also considering studying Mandarin and Japanese (I was in love with classic Japanese literature at the time).

I ended up choosing to study classical languages and literatures at the University of Pisa, home to one of the most prestigious, oldest departments of classical literatures and historical linguistics in Italy. There, I not only discovered that there was another great classical Indo-European language, Sanskrit (which seemed very “exotic” due to its name, alphabet and being from India, but which was actually very, very similar to ancient Greek) , but I also had contact with many other Indo-European languages

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<sup>1</sup> Professor at the Federal University of the state of Minas Gerais (UFMG).

(Celtic, Germanic, Slavic, Baltic, Iranian) and non-Indo-European languages (Afro-Asiatic and Dravidian). I believe that my very “traditional” academic training in historical linguistics and the contact with so much linguistic diversity during the years I was an undergraduate and master’s student were the aspects that most boosted my interest in comparative studies, both diachronic and synchronic.

I feel that throughout my training as a linguist I have had the luxury of exploring very different topics and languages: I wrote a monograph on the diachronic evolution of the “Greek” accusative from Homer to Hellenistic Greek; I studied non-canonical accusative forms in contemporary Tamil (Dravidian language) in my master’s dissertation; in my doctorate, I was devoted to European Portuguese, a language that until then I had only cultivated informally, analyzing the diachrony and synchrony of the inflected infinitive.

With my arrival in Brazil, I have focused mainly on Portuguese. After a few years working with Brazilian Portuguese, I have been studying other varieties that were formed by and coexist in contact with other typologically and/or phylogenetically distinct languages, in Africa and Asia. Thus, I believe that I will be able to combine the study of Portuguese with my interest in linguistic diversity and, in general, in the comparative perspective, both synchronically and diachronically.

**ReVEL - It seems to us that, in Language and Literature courses in Brazil, when historical linguistics and/or comparative grammar are taught, they are generally restricted to the 19th and 20th centuries. How do you perceive studies on comparative linguistics and typology in the country? Could you provide us with an overview of these studies in Brazil today? What place do these studies currently have in the national context and what is the future of the field?**

**GIULIA BOSSAGLIA** - I do not see this restriction to the 19th and 20th centuries as something totally negative, because it is a fact that ideas and methods that led to the establishment of the main comparative disciplines (I will limit myself here to historical linguistics and typology) emerged and developed during these two centuries, so I believe that knowing the history of the disciplines and the contexts in which they were formed is an important starting point, in any event to understand the limits they had and/or have.

That said, Brazil itself is characterized by a linguistic richness (both living and extinct languages), which makes it an ideal place for comparative studies: it has indigenous languages, contact languages (the “general languages”), immigration languages that sometimes became heritage languages, sign languages, there are vernacular varieties of Portuguese with features that would seem to indicate contact with African languages in their development (the fact that there are divergent positions on the influence of linguistic contact in the characterization of Brazilian Portuguese only reinforces how challenging and interesting the topic is), there are languages from the *quilombos*, and even Pajubá, which gained prominence in the writing portion of a recent ENEM [Brazil’s National High School Exam] test... Brazilian linguistic diversity is articulated both on the phylogenetic axis, with a wealth of linguistic families and branches, as in typology, housing languages that are structurally very different in its territory. And Brazilian linguists are certainly not wasting this linguistic wealth – on the contrary, I believe it has been drawing more and more attention in national research and more and more visibility on the international scene.

With Joaquim Mattoso Câmara, Brazil had a perfect example of the tension between “tradition” (mainly European structuralist studies) and the renewal of research in Brazil, with his pioneering work in valuing the autochthonous linguistic heritage. After almost a century, I believe that comparative studies in Brazil have not only greatly developed, but also the country's linguistic richness and the increasing interest, at an international level, in languages from less studied families, continues to fuel such development.

I will provide a couple of examples. Important institutions such as Funai [Brazil’s National Indigenous People Foundation], the National Museum of Indigenous Peoples and the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro, Museum Emilio Goeldi in Belém, in the state of Pará, ABRALIN [Brazilian Linguistics Association] itself, as well as many athenaeums (the universities UNICAMP, USP, UFRJ, UNB, UFPA, UFPE, UFAL, UFBA, UFG, UFSC, among others I could mention), coordinate initiatives and/or have important postgraduate programs and research projects aimed not only at analysis, but also at the extremely important task of linguistic documentation of Brazilian indigenous languages, without which neither historical nor typological research could fully develop.

Due to Brazil's own history, African languages (especially from the Niger-Congolese family) have also received and continue to receive attention in research,

mainly focusing on the history of the development of the Brazilian variety and its peculiarities in opposition to European variety, but also in studies about African varieties of Portuguese and about Portuguese-based creoles in Africa. It is important to remember the enormous contribution of the pioneering research of Yeda Pessoa de Castro and of *GEEALC - Grupo de Estudos Africanos e Afro-brasileiros de Línguas e Culturas* [Group for African and Afro-Brazilian Studies of Languages and Cultures] at UNEB, which she founded, and it is interesting to see that several other research groups focusing on these languages have emerged and remain active: in 2013, *GELA - Grupo de Estudos em Línguas Africanas* [Group of African Languages Studies] was established at USP, devoted to the study of Kimbundu spoken in the Kwanza region of Angola (<https://linguistica.fflch.usp.br/pesquisa/grupos/gela>) and most recently complemented by the project Libolo, a result of the collaboration between *GELIC - Grupo de Estudo de Línguas em Contato* [Group for the Study of Languages in Contact], at USP (<https://gelic.fflch.usp.br/>) and *Macau University* (<https://kalulo.com/index.php/projectolibolo>); *Laboratório de Línguas Africanas* [Laboratory of African Languages] at UFMG (<http://www.letas.ufmg.br/laliafro/index.html>), aimed at documenting the African languages of Mozambique; *Núcleo de Estudos Luso-Africanos e Afro-Brasileiros* [Center for Luso-African and Afro-Brazilian Studies] (<https://unilab.edu.br/neaab/>) and *Grupo de Estudos em Línguas em Contato e Línguas Africanas* [Group for the Study of Contact and African Languages] (<https://ppglic.ufba.br/pt-br/grupo-de-estudos-de-linguas-em-contato-e-linguas-africanas-gelcla-unilab>) of Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira (UNILAB) [University for International Integration of the Afro-Brazilian Lusophony] are some examples of the expansion of these topics in Brazil.

Furthermore, among the studies on diatopic varieties of Portuguese, in addition to the Brazilian and African ones, Asian languages have been recently drawing attention, although, for now, less attention (mainly due to the less standardized status of these varieties and the lack of documentation): besides the Portuguese from Macau, more recently, studies on the variety still emerging in Timor-Leste – which assumed a more relevant role in and after the process of independence of this country from Indonesia (in 2002) – stand out. I myself have supervised some pieces of research (at undergraduate level only, for now) on the Portuguese spoken in Goa, Macau and Timor-Leste, based on a few, yet interesting, items of oral data taken from the corpus

of *Português falado – variedades geográficas e sociais* [Spoken Portuguese – geographic and social varieties] from the Linguistics Center of the University of Lisbon.

Studies on diatopic varieties of Portuguese are an expanding field that has already led to important contributions to Brazilian linguistics, largely because the tradition of studies on linguistic contact in the development of varieties of Brazilian Portuguese, or comparative descriptions between African, Brazilian and/or European varieties is already quite broad and established – which does not mean, be careful!, that it is over and done with.

The growing expansion of linguistic documentation of indigenous languages (with the fundamental, and growing, training and inclusion of indigenous researchers and linguists), and the development of studies of African linguistics, contact linguistics, description and analysis of diatopic varieties of Portuguese, are proof of how, thanks to the richness and linguistic diversity of Brazil, research in the country is growing “outwards”, inserting itself into the international, Portuguese-speaking and otherwise, panorama, with increasing visibility and authority – a fact that, in my opinion, is entirely positive and promising.

### **ReVEL - How do studies on languages and the relationships between them contribute to linguistics in general?**

**GIULIA BOSSAGLIA** - The disciplines which we can include within the umbrella term “comparative linguistics” (historical-comparative linguistics, typology, contact linguistics are among the main ones) are all aimed at describing and comparing languages considering their similarities and differences – based on this, the linguist can reconstruct the history and composition of linguistic families to which languages belong, or identify structural trends of natural languages, formulate explanatory hypotheses about them, reconstruct the mechanisms that govern linguistic changes over time, to understand how grammars of natural languages evolve... that is, the general objective of all these disciplines is the identification, based on the observation and comparison of the particularities of natural languages, of general principles of human language, both from a historical/evolutionary and synchronic and descriptive perspective. Therefore, I like to highlight that the (qualitative and quantitative) expansion of linguistic documentation is a crucial assumption for comparative studies: the more natural languages we can document, and therefore study, the more elements

we will have to construct hypotheses, reconstructions and linguistic theories in a more solid and reliable way.

**ReVEL - What are the main differences between comparative studies that have been carried out abroad in relation to the studies that have been carried out in Brazil? What could or should improve in this area in Brazil?**

**GIULIA BOSSAGLIA** - The main difference, in my opinion, is the age of these studies in Brazil and abroad – I only consider Europe and the United States here, so my answer has this limitation. Comparative disciplines (among others) were born and developed as such in Europe, and later in the USA, so they have a longer tradition in these places, which in fact were the cradles of very prestigious, important research centers in the international domain. The Brazilian tradition is more recent, and, above all, like many other countries in the global South, Brazil lacked international visibility for a long time. I also feel that Brazil suffers from a certain lack of resources so that research in the country may advance in a truly satisfactory way (this is a more general problem, naturally, but the humanities always suffer more than others) – and yet it has managed to reach productions and projects that hold up against research in the global North.

Conversely, the linguistic tradition of the global North has increasingly shown a strong Indo-Eurocentric bias, with the languages of the Indo-European family not only receiving much more attention than languages from other families, but also long shaping categories of linguistic analysis that are increasingly inadequate to account for the great global linguistic diversity, and, therefore, for the formulation of truly “general” principles of human language (and not only specific to certain families).

That is why I believe it is worth inverting the perspective of the second part of the question: Brazil, strong in its linguistic richness, has the opportunity to contribute greatly to the international panorama of comparative studies, whether through the documentation or description of indigenous and African languages, varieties of Portuguese in contact situations, whether through studies of a historical or typological nature. Brazil’s contribution plays an important role so that the bias the tradition has had and still often has in the global North can be increasingly overcome. Furthermore, Brazil already has greater visibility in the panorama of international comparative studies, and there are already many partnerships with research centers all over the world – including many partnerships with other emerging countries in the global

South as well, something that is extremely promising in this task of providing due emphasis and attention to other languages and linguistic traditions.

There is great potential; it remains to be seen how much economic support can be achieved, in my opinion.

**ReVEL - We usually end our interviews at ReVEL by asking our interviewees for bibliographical suggestions. Could you recommend some pioneering and current texts on comparative linguistics and typology to our readers?**

**GIULIA BOSSAGLIA** - Here I provide some suggestions for readers new to linguistic studies and for more advanced readers (or beginners, but with knowledge of the English language), both on historical-comparative linguistics and typology, as well as on indigenous languages, African languages and language contact, complementing the observations I made throughout the interview about the panorama of comparative studies in Brazil and its possible expansions.

Bossaglia, G. *Linguística comparada e tipologia*. São Paulo: Parábola Editorial. 2019. [an introductory handbook for beginners]

Bossaglia, G. *Linguística comparada*. In: Othero, G. A.; Flores, V. N. (Eds.). *A linguística hoje: historicidade e generalidade*. São Paulo: Contexto, 2024. [an introductory chapter on comparative studies in general, its history, subjects, methods]

Campbell, L. *Historical linguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2013. [a historical linguistics handbook, with exercises and activities]

Cardoso, H. (2016). 3. O português em contacto na Ásia e no Pacífico. In Martins, A. M.; Carrilho, E. (Eds.), *Manual de linguística portuguesa*, 68-97. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter [an introductory chapter on the history of contacts between Portuguese and different languages in Asia, features of Portuguese-based contact languages and Asian varieties of Portuguese]

Couto, H. H. *Introdução ao estudo das línguas crioulas e pidgins*. Brasília: Editora UNB. 1996. [an introductory guide to language contact and contact languages]

Cyrino, J. P. L. (2019). Tipologia linguística: métodos, generalizações e diacronia. *Macabéa. Revista Eletrônica do Netlli*, 8(2), (jul.-dez.), 306-322. [an article that illustrates linguistic typology in detail and shows its contributions to diachronic studies]

Franchetto, B.; Balykova, K. (Eds.). *Índio não fala só tupi: Uma viagem pelas línguas dos povos originários no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: 7Letras. 2021. [a compilation with 17 chapters that each present a Brazilian indigenous language, from a linguistic (phylogenetic and/or typological), but also historical and cultural, point of view]

Greenberg, J. H. (1963). Some universals of grammar with particular reference to the order of meaningful elements. In: Greenberg, J. (Ed.) *Universals of language*, 2, 73-113. Cambridge: MIT Press. [a formative essay of modern linguistic typology; advanced reading, but which could not be missing from this list]

Hagemeijer, T. (2016). 2. O português em contacto em África. In Martins, A. M.; Carrilho, E. (Eds.), *Manual de linguística portuguesa*, 43-67). Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter. [an introductory chapter on the history of linguistic contact between Portuguese and African languages, features of Portuguese-based contact languages and African varieties of Portuguese]

Janson, T. *História das línguas*. [translated by: Marcos Bagno] São Paulo: Parábola Editorial. 2015. [a handbook that introduces several aspects of language evolution]

Othero, G. A.; Flores, V. N. (Eds.) *O que sabemos sobre a linguagem. 51 perguntas e respostas sobre a linguagem humana*. São Paulo: Parábola. 2022. [a compilation with chapters that answer several questions about language, aimed at beginning readers. Regarding comparative studies specifically, I recommend: *Por que as línguas mudam?* (Carlos Alberto Faraco); *Por que as línguas são diferentes?* (Giulia Bossaglia); *É possível classificar as línguas?* (Thomas Finbow); *Quantas línguas são faladas hoje no mundo?* (Cléo Altenhofen); *Quantas línguas são faladas hoje no Brasil?* (Margarida Petter); *O português brasileiro é uma língua diferente do português europeu?* (Maria Eugenia Lammoglia Duarte)]

Petter, M. M. T. *Introdução à linguística africana*. São Paulo: Contexto. 2015. [a reference text for studies on African languages in Brazil]



Petter, M. M. T. (2018). Por que estudar línguas africanas no Brasil? *Revista Extraprensa*, 11(2), 197-210. [an article that contextualizes studies on African languages in Brazil]

Velupillai, V. (2012). *An introduction to linguistic typology*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. [a linguistic typology handbook, basic and intermediate levels, with exercises and activities]

Velupillai, V. (2015). *Pidgins, Creoles and Mixed Languages. An introduction*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. [an introduction handbook on contact languages, basic and intermediate levels, with exercises and activities]

### **The editors**

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