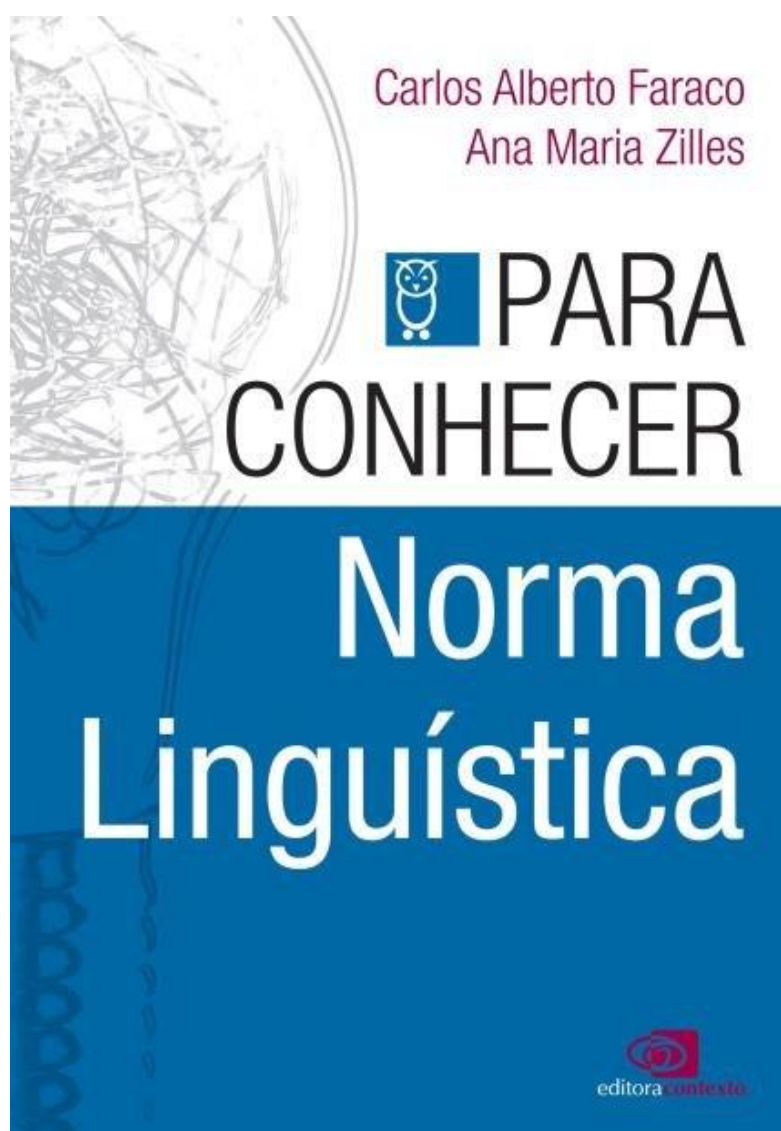


<http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2176-457337791>

**FARACO, C.; ZILLES, A. (Org.). *Para conhecer norma linguística [To Know Linguistic Rules]*. São Paulo: Contexto, 2017. 224 p.**

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The authors of this book, which is part of the collection *Para conhecer [To Know]*, published by Contexto, are linguists with a long history of thinking about issues relating to standardised norms and linguistic variation, as well as their implications for teaching Portuguese. They have published individual works and contributed to multi-authored volumes. They also coedited *Pedagogia da variação [Pedagogy of Variation]* (2015), presenting important reflections on how to incorporate linguistic heterogeneity into the teaching and learning process from the perspective of language teaching committed to equality and diversity.

In some degree, this co-authored book on the written linguistic norm, with its clear didactic intent, is a necessary complement to such reflection on variation and teaching. It is our opinion that a teaching strategy for variation that introduces valorising linguistic diversity in Portuguese language classes can only be effective if it is coupled with a more detailed treatment of the historical process that constructed the Standard Norm and the place that that linguistic model occupies within our linguistic practices. This is also the best antidote against a teaching model that aims only to transmit a reduced, popularized version of the normative tradition that identifies totally with arbitrary models of language and concentrates on the transmission of decontextualized and often highly problematic “tips for avoiding mistakes” in spoken and written Portuguese. In an earlier book, *A norma culta. Desatando alguns nós [The Educated Norm: Disentangling Some Knots]*, Carlos Alberto Faraco (2008) called this tradition, which manifests itself not only in the education system but also through the media in grammar surgeries and “linguistic self-help” books, as the *norma curta* (“short norm”), playing on the term *norma culta* (“educated norm”) and the phenomenon of *l-rotacism*, which receives severe social criticism from the perspective of the standard. These normative agents constitute what Marcos Bagno (2000), another author critical of the normative tradition that is (still) active in Brazil, calls “paragrammatical groups.”

From our point of view, a work such as this one, published by Contexto in a promotional collection, is first and foremost an “work of intervention,” inasmuch as it casts an enlightened eye over an aspect of society as confusing and easily subject to ideological manipulation as the standard language. It is also an essay that contributes to

the growth of knowledge about normative processes and about the place that such a language model can/should occupy in society.

The book comprises four chapters: each begins with a presentation of its general goals and ends with recommended additional reading about the topic discussed and exercises inviting reflecting on the concepts that were presented in the chapter in question. The first chapter, *Norma: tecendo conceitos* [The Standard Norm: Weaving Concepts], gives a first approximation to the idea of a standardised norm, inserting it into the complex issue of linguistic variation. The chapter starts by making a distinction precisely between the social norm that really exists and which makes the concept equivalent to that of a variety, and the prescribed standardised norm, which is actually a collection of rules for “correct usage,” for passing from *how one speaks* to *how one should speak*. Incorporating different recent theoretical approaches for defining the standard, such as the concept of “sociolinguistic standard” from Dante Lucchesi (2015), this chapter explains the principles used by modern linguistics to affirm the structural equivalence between all existing linguistic varieties. The explanation concentrates on two fundamental concepts: that of *formal wholeness*, considering the structural regularity of any linguistic practice, and that of *semiotic potentiality*, that consists of the capacity of any linguistic variety to adapt to any social condition, developing resources that allow it to manage the most diverse communicative functions. This is the context into which the book introduces the debate about the social value of the standardised norm, as a construct identified with written expression and with specific types of social activity. The authors confront the apparent “paradox” of not denying “the elitist roots of normative linguistic culture” (p.55)<sup>1</sup> while, at the same time, recognising the sociocultural worth of prestige varieties, linked to the important cultural heritage that is expressed in writing, with two proposals: denouncing the naturalisation of the standard and normative linguistic culture, arguing for the need to expose its historicity, and proposing the democratisation of that language model and of access to its cultural products.

The discussion about the social worth of the standard and the democratisation of language relations clearly introduces the political dimension of the issue with a proposal in which the knowledge acquired by Linguistics finds its place. So it is that the second

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<sup>1</sup> In Portuguese: “paradoxo”; “as raízes elitistas da cultura linguística normativa.”

chapter, *Norma: descrição e prescrição* [Standard Norm: Description and Prescription] discusses this distinction that is central to linguistic study. To that end, the role of different cultural agents (philologists, grammarians, linguists) is investigated and the distinction is defined in terms of “attitude” towards linguistic facts, distinguishing the scientific attitude of language description, on the one hand, from the “political and sociocultural” attitude (p.83)<sup>2</sup> of prescriptivism, on the other.

In our opinion, this classic distinction is productive for thinking about the various approaches to language that exist but ends up leaving out the social effects produced by the description of a linguistic norm and the complex circularity between description and prescription. In the end, the “objective standard” described by linguists exists in a social environment in which the pressure from the standard is active and which, in its turn, establishes a tense relationship with prestige usage which tries to balance tradition and innovation with greater or lesser success, depending on historical conditions. The authors introduce an interesting historical reference to the relation of scientific linguistics and prescriptivism, reviewing the notable contributions of Roman Jakobson and Otto Jespersen. They also recognise that all prescription must base itself on some kind of description of usage, although they do not indicate the political dimension of linguistic description, which makes practical usage norms explicit and has the power to promote amongst speakers a certain representation of their own language. We may claim, as Faraco and Zilles do, that there is no (good) prescription without description but it is also possible to affirm that all language description has prescriptive social effects, even without wishing for them, independently of the researcher’s attitude.

The third chapter, *Breve histórico da normatização do português* [Brief History of the Standardisation of Portuguese] presents a brief history of the standardisation process in Portuguese, linked to the Kingdom and, later, to the State of Portugal, together with the development of that historical process in Brazil and in post-colonial Portuguese-speaking societies. Many aspects of this story were developed by Faraco in his book *História sociopolítica da língua portuguesa* [Socio-political History of the Portuguese Language] (2016). For us, this historical explanation, as mentioned above, is much-needed, in order to denaturalise the standard norm of Portuguese, presenting it as the result of a polemical and complex social process that developed over centuries. It

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<sup>2</sup> In Portuguese: “política e sociocultural.”

is also worth highlighting in this chapter the reflexion on purist ideologies and on the normative problem in Brazil. The majority position in the field of linguistics: the defence of the approximating the standard to the educated norm of Brazilian Portuguese (or at least relativizing the standardising tradition) is presented here with very clear arguments, after the detailed discussion in the foregoing chapters of the concepts used in this debate.

The final chapter, *Norma e ensino* [The Standard Norm and Teaching ] dealing with the standard and teaching, is also very important for in it the authors make detailed proposals about how to manage in pedagogical terms with the issue of the standard, from an ethical and political position that respects diversity. The focus of the proposal is promoting reflexion in the classroom on the variation in the Brazilian educated standard and to overcome the culture of right and wrong in a productive teaching strategy in which students may use the language to say what they actually want to. The “exercises” that close each chapter pose questions and challenges that make for superb ideas for teacher-training activities. The two exercises that finish off the final chapter and the book, for example, propose reflection on the following claim: “it is not the standard that is a problem for teaching but rather the way that teaching it is carried out,”(p.209)<sup>3</sup> and also invites the reader to describe potential classroom activities that contemplate the linguistic variation in society and each speaker’s usage.

The arguments in favour of school as an environment of freedom and equality, in a moment when so many attacks on teachers’ activities are occurring in Brazil from small antidemocratic groups, is a much-needed political attitude and also an example of the importance that thinking about language issues can have in a society as unequal as ours.

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<sup>3</sup> In Portuguese: “não é a norma-padrão que é um problema no ensino, e sim a forma como esse ensino é feito.” (p.209)

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*Received June 13, 2018*

*Accepted November 02, 2018*