

An Interview with Cristina Martins

ROBERT PATRICK NEWCOMB
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

The Mirandese language (Mirandese: *língua mirandesa*; Portuguese: *língua mirandesa*) is a Romance language and form of Astur-Leonese that is spoken in a border region of rural northeastern Portugal. Mirandese owes its existence to the southward expansion of the medieval kingdoms of Asturias and Leon into territory later incorporated into the Portuguese kingdom. For most of its history, Mirandese has been an essentially oral language. However, in recent decades, this has changed, and in 1999, a *Convenção Ortográfica da Língua Mirandesa* (Orthographic Convention for the Mirandese Language) was published. That same year, the Portuguese parliament recognized Mirandese's existence and the Mirandese community's linguistic rights. Despite these advances, spoken Mirandese is in decline, and it currently has an estimated 3,500 active speakers. This decline is due to language stigmatization, particularly during the latter half of the twentieth century, improved transportation links between the northeast and the rest of Portugal, and rural-to-urban migration. Mirandese may go extinct as a spoken language by the mid-twenty-first century.

On September 8, 2023, Cristina Martins (Associate Professor, Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, Faculty of Letters, Arts and Humanities, University of Coimbra) gave a keynote address, “Mirandese, *quo vadis?*” at the 44th Annual Conference of the Association for Contemporary Iberian Studies, at the University of Porto. Professor Martins provided an overview of Mirandese's history, present, and possible futures. She also described her linguistic research on and personal relationship with the language. I invited her to participate in this interview to introduce Mirandese to a primarily North American academic audience and to expand on the themes of her address.

Professor Martins received her PhD in applied linguistics in 1994 from the University of Coimbra. Her research interests include bilingualism and language contact, Portuguese as a non-native language, and metalinguistic development, psycholinguistic processing, and neuropsychological evaluation. At Coimbra she is a member of CELGA-ILTEC (Center for the Study of General and Applied Linguistics). Professor Martins has worked on Mirandese throughout her career. Her dissertation, *Línguas em contacto: “saber sobre” o que as distingue. Análise de competências metalinguísticas de crianças mirandesas em idade escolar* (Languages in Contact: “Knowing about” what distinguishes them. An analysis of the metalinguistic competencies of Mirandese school children) was published by Coimbra University Press in 2008. She has authored and co-authored several articles on Mirandese, and has years of fieldwork experience. In 1999, she co-authored the *Convenção Ortográfica da Língua Mirandesa*, coordinated by Manuela Barros Ferreira and Domingos Raposo.¹

This interview was conducted by email in the Fall of 2023.

To begin, I would like you to characterize the present state of Mirandese. In your keynote address, you implied this is a crucial period for language development.

According to the most recent sociolinguistic survey of the Mirandese community (coordinated by Xosé Henrique Costas of the University of Vigo, and published in 2022), currently, only about 3,500 individuals are active speakers of Mirandese. This is the lowest number of speakers on record and tells us that *oral* Mirandese is clearly declining. I would add that not all of these 3,500 individuals are native speakers of the language, who acquired it in childhood, both in the home and in the community. Most likely, only the older informants in the study are native speakers of Mirandese.

The declining vitality of Mirandese is a product of a number of concurrent factors, the most relevant of which are demographic, intergenerational transmission patterns, and, associated with these, linguistic attitudes.

First of all, the Miranda do Douro municipality has been losing population consistently since the mid-twentieth century, and thus large numbers of Mirandese speakers have been uprooted to other parts of Portugal or have immigrated to other countries, where they have ceased to have opportunities to use Mirandese outside the home. The extent to which Mirandese has been preserved by migrants is not at all clear, since linguistic vitality in immigrant settings has never been systematically studied. So, this is certainly something to look into, also considering the linguistic manifestations of the contact between Mirandese and the languages of the host communities of these immigrants, and the effects of language attrition in these contexts.

But besides demography, it is important to note that many of those who have remained in the Miranda do Douro municipality have themselves contributed actively to the decline in the vitality of the language by interrupting its intergenerational transmission. In short, the vast majority of younger Mirandese-speaking parents have stopped using it with their children in the last five decades, even when continuing to speak it with their own parents and grandparents. This has been documented by different studies in the last three decades (Martins, 1994, 1997, 2008; Merlan, 2009; Costas, 2022), and it is a direct reflection of negative linguistic attitudes toward Mirandese.

However, after 1999, the year the Portuguese parliament passed a law that recognized the linguistic rights of the Mirandese community (Law 7/99) and also the year in which the *Orthographic Convention for the Mirandese Language* (*Convenção Ortográfica da Língua Mirandesa*) was published, attitudes towards Mirandese have changed dramatically in the community, and are now overwhelmingly positive, as documented in the Vigo study. There has also been an expansion of Mirandese in the school system (with extended coverage from pre-school to twelfth grade) and an explosion of writing in Mirandese, in all genres (from academic writing to graffiti). Mirandese is also now attracting heritage speakers, who are descendants of Mirandese migrants, who want to reclaim their families' linguistic and cultural identity, and most of whom are learning the language from scratch.

So, the current agents of the vitality of Mirandese are extremely diverse: older native speakers, children who are not systematically exposed to Mirandese in their homes, but who learn it at school, heritage speakers, and even other types of non-native speakers (such as myself and many others) who have become interested in learning the language. This variety of speaker types is unprecedented in the very long history of the language, since its survival for centuries has relied exclusively on native speakers. My reasoning is that these new non-native elements will certainly impact the way the structure of Mirandese evolves over time, and this is why the present moment for me, as a linguist, is so fascinating.

How did you become interested in Mirandese? Did the personal history you mentioned in your keynote – i.e., the years you spent as a young person living in Canada – inform this interest?

I came into contact with Mirandese in my early twenties, at the University of Coimbra, when Professor Clarinda Maia suggested that I conduct a sociolinguistic study of the Mirandese language contact situation for my master's thesis, instead of the research I had in mind on language contact between Portuguese and English in immigrant communities in Canada. This was my original interest, also for personal reasons, since I myself had belonged, in my childhood and early adolescence, to one such community. I ended up doing the Mirandese project, but only because it also overlapped, to some degree, with my original interest. In fact, in both cases of languages in contact, Portuguese and English, and Mirandese and Portuguese, the central issues, from a sociolinguistic point of view, were very similar, consisting of the outcomes of the contact between a minority language and a majority language. An added interest for me was the radically different status of Portuguese in these two situations: Portuguese was the majority language in the Mirandese-Portuguese contact situation, invested with higher social prestige, used in education and administration, but it was the minority language, the low prestige language, in the Portuguese-English contact situation. This just goes to show that there is nothing intrinsic about a language besides its structure. The importance a language may have at any given time and in any given location, its socio-symbolic status, and its functional value are all matters of pure chance, the direct results, in fact, of the circumstances of those who speak these languages. For me, as a child in Canada, Portuguese was a minority language, and its vitality was threatened in the immigrant community to which I belonged since its use was being replaced by English, even in my own extended family, by aunts and uncles who had stopped speaking Portuguese to their own children and grandchildren, thus stigmatizing their own native language. This is something my parents never did, as they militantly spoke Portuguese to me at home, granting me the privilege of becoming bilingual and, later on, biliterate, as my mother also enrolled me in Portuguese school at the age of 7, where I learned to read and write in Portuguese, and learned Portuguese history and geography, every day after regular school hours. So, in my case, as an immigrant child, maintaining my Portuguese heritage was hard work and required conscious action because Portuguese, the native language of my parents, my heritage language, was a minority language in our community.

Given my own personal linguistic biography, I was able to relate to what was going on in the Mirandese community at the time, and to understand, at a deeper and emotional level, the relevance of my own work there.

As you began researching Mirandese, you also had to learn to speak it. How did you do this, given what I assume was a lack of available materials?

Before heading out to the Miranda do Douro municipality to do my fieldwork, I had studied as much as I could of what Leite de Vasconcelos had written about the language, especially in his *Estudos de Filologia Mirandesa* (1900, 1901), which is still today the bible of Mirandese studies. As I said in my talk, when I got to the Mirandese village of Paradela, in September of 1991, and even though I couldn't speak Mirandese, I knew quite a bit *about* the language. What I mean by this is that I had a fair amount of *metalinguistic knowledge* regarding Mirandese and its historical and structural ties to the neighboring languages. This, of course, is not the same as having knowledge *of* the language, this is to say, *linguistic knowledge*, necessary for communicative uses, but it did help me to kick start the learning process and to guide me in making educated guesses as to what Mirandese words might look like. I knew, for

instance, a number of phonological equivalence rules between Portuguese and Mirandese, based on the historical evolution of Latin phonological segments, and I would apply these rules to produce Mirandese words, getting them right more times than not, but getting them wrong enough times to get laughed at by my informants who were wildly amused by my awkward attempts to speak Mirandese! So, I asked my informants to help me learn their language, transforming them into my language teachers, requesting explanations, translations and corrective feedback. And this actually worked out very nicely as a fieldwork technique, since I was able to negotiate with my Mirandese informants an alternative identity to the one they initially and automatically attributed to me. My new renegotiated identity would put them at ease in my presence and allow them to speak freely in Mirandese when I was around. I was no longer the Portuguese university student from Coimbra, to whom or around whom they would never speak Mirandese. Rather, I became a student of the Mirandese language and culture, interested in everything about Paradelá, willing and eager to be educated by my informants. I granted my informants an unexpected new status that represented a social promotion for them, and they responded with great generosity and a willingness to help me in all my efforts.

Mirandese is an Astur-Leonese language and Portuguese is closely related to Galician. How mutually intelligible are they? Do Mirandese speakers tend to code switch between them?

Mirandese, as a descendant of Astur-Leonese, is a piece in the Iberian Romance continuum, sharing features with both Portuguese and Galician (vs. Spanish), on one hand, and with Spanish (vs. Portuguese and Galician), on the other. As such, a certain degree of mutual intelligibility between all of these languages is to be expected.

Currently, there are no monolingual speakers of Mirandese, which means that all speakers of the language also speak Portuguese, and many speak Spanish as well. These bi- or trilingual speakers naturally code switch when speaking with each other, as is very common in bilingual verbal interactions anywhere. In fact, my master's dissertation was precisely on code-switching and language choice patterns in the speech of trilinguals in Paradelá.

You mentioned in your keynote that during your early fieldwork your Mirandese-speaking informants were confused by your interest in their language. What did they think about Mirandese at the time? Have attitudes changed since then? How important are these attitudes in terms of preserving a language?

At the end of the twentieth century, when I started doing fieldwork in the community, it was clear that the members of the Mirandese community had very mixed feelings towards the language. While Mirandese undoubtedly had, at the symbolic level, some positive attributes for them, such as local in-group solidarity, honesty and integrity, it was also associated with a number of important negative traits, of which ignorance and lack of cultural sophistication are examples. The negative attributes derived from the fact that Mirandese has traditionally been spoken by a population of largely uneducated peasants, who experienced little to no social mobility. Thus, Mirandese was perceived as a language that had never really provided its speakers with highly attractive social payoffs, contrasting, in this regard, with Portuguese, which has consistently functioned as a one-way ticket to move up the social ladder and to eventually move out of the community.

Attitudes towards Mirandese have changed dramatically since 1999, the year the language was awarded, for the first time in history, legal recognition by the Portuguese parliament, an extraordinarily important landmark representing external institutional and political validation.

A question that is particularly decisive for the future is whether the unequivocally more positive attitudes among young Mirandese towards the language will give way to a process of true revitalisation, i.e. whether the positive attitudes fostered by the recent symbolic requalification of Mirandese will translate into a willingness to admit oral Mirandese back into the home, into a willingness to use it actively and to pass it on, in oral form, to their own children. This is absolutely decisive, and for this to happen, these potential speakers have to feel that Mirandese is a true asset for the future.

In 1999, you co-authored a set of orthographic norms for Mirandese. You stated in your keynote that in recent decades, there has been an explosion of Mirandese-language media and internet content. What role do you think that the Convenção Ortográfica played in moving Mirandese from a primarily oral language to one that is written as well?

The *Mirandese Language Orthographic Norms* gave vital support to already-existing teaching efforts, but it also enabled each and every Mirandese speaker to start writing in what had always been an essentially oral language. And did the Mirandese start to write! Writing in Mirandese has absolutely exploded since 1999, and we now have, for the first time ever, a significant written corpus in the language.

So, at the same time as Mirandese is losing native speakers and is declining in its oral form, it is flourishing in its written form, and this is also a crucial factor for language preservation.

Also in 1999, the Portuguese parliament granted Mirandese official recognition. Has this led to concrete measures to promote its use in Miranda do Douro? I'm thinking, for example, of things like local governments publishing documents in both languages, promoting Mirandese in schools, and so on.

Law 7/99 states that its purpose is to recognize and promote the Mirandese language as cultural heritage, as an instrument of communication and as a means of strengthening the Mirandese identity. It also recognizes children's right to learn Mirandese at school, and this has enabled the expansion of Mirandese in the school system. Mirandese had been an extracurricular, optional school subject since the 1986-87 academic year, taught by Domingos Raposo (the first ever teacher of Mirandese), and offered to students in the fifth and sixth grades. With the passing of Law 7/99, Mirandese extended its coverage from pre-school to the twelfth grade, though it is still an extracurricular, optional subject taught only one hour per week. Though now it attracts nearly 80% of the students enrolled in school in Miranda do Douro. The right to academic and educational support is also recognized by this law, with the aim of training teachers of Mirandese language and culture, but, to my knowledge, the first ever Mirandese Linguistics and Didactics training course has only now been promoted by the University of Coimbra in partnership with the Miranda do Douro municipality.

Finally, Law 7/99 also allows public institutions located or headquartered in the municipality of Miranda do Douro to issue documents accompanied by a version in Mirandese, but I am unaware if this has ever occurred.

One of the aspects of your keynote that interested me most was the fact that your research on Mirandese seems to have made you something of a public figure or perhaps even an activist. Do you see yourself in this dual role? How do you feel knowing that your research has had

tangible impacts not only on the study of Mirandese, but on the development of the language as well?

I don't believe I qualify as a public figure (!), and I wouldn't label myself as an activist either, as I do not attempt to define the Mirandese agenda. This, I think, is a job for the Mirandese themselves. I see myself as more of a friend of the Mirandese community, someone who lends a helping hand when requested to do so by its members. This is what happened, for instance, when parliament member Júlio Meirinhos, a native speaker of Mirandese and a former mayor of Miranda do Douro, asked me to write a technical report to frame and sustain the legislative initiative that ultimately led to Law 7/99.

I have never promoted policies that have not sprung from within the community and I value this principle of conduct deeply because I feel it allows me to be supportive of the Mirandese in a respectful and non-condescending fashion. I don't think it's my place to tell the Mirandese what they should or should not do with their language, how they should or should not behave or think. Although I appreciate that my work has somehow contributed to the revalorization of the language in the eyes of its own speakers and also in the eyes of others, and I am very happy this is the case, I view this as a fortunate side effect of my academic efforts. I wish to remain a linguist, observing how all that is now happening in the community impacts the language itself and its vitality, and also someone who, based on research findings, can give informed feedback to those who are truly invested with the legitimacy to set the Mirandese agenda.

How likely do you think it is that Mirandese will go extinct this century? What will be lost if it disappears?

I do think oral Mirandese is at great risk, although, as I said, at the same time, written Mirandese is flourishing and expanding incredibly. Besides this, Mirandese as an optional extracurricular subject has been extremely successful in the school system and is a lifeline that still links Mirandese children with the language, even if it does not grant them the conditions to develop native-like proficiency, something only exposure to the language in the home could accomplish. On the other hand, growing numbers of non-native speakers of different backgrounds, including descendants of Mirandese in the diaspora, are now taking language courses organized online by the Mirandese Language and Culture Association (*Associação de la Lhéngua i Cultura Mirandesa*). So, there are a few seeds that have been planted in the last decades that may flourish and contribute to some level of maintenance of the language, and, perhaps, even to its future revival.

As for what will be lost if Mirandese disappears, besides the resulting impoverished cultural heritage for humanity, what I wrote in a book chapter on identities in 2017 sums up my thoughts on what else may be at stake with the loss of languages (in general). These thoughts are speculative, for sure, but still worth considering, at least I think so! They were very much inspired by an article, *Linguistic Variation and the New World Order*, by the linguist Juan Uriagereka (2000). This is what I wrote: "Uriagereka (2000: 25) argues that 'if we do not keep [linguistic] variation alive, we may be in deep trouble', and does so by summoning linguistic properties that illustrate the necessary interplay between nature and nurture in determining linguistic variability as we know it. Linguistic diversity is thus, arguably, not only shaped by social interaction and culture (a commonly accepted fact), but it is also grounded in the biology of the human language faculty. If one is willing to accept this premise, then it is perhaps also admissible to sustain that the language faculty, as we know it, thrives on linguistic variation. If one is furthermore willing to concede that human minds, as we know them, have been shaped by the language faculty, then the next logical step in this line of reasoning would be that human

minds, as we know them, actually depend on the very existence of linguistic diversity. *Ergo*, ‘if we do not keep [linguistic] variation alive, we may be in deep trouble’ (Uriagereka, 2000: 25).” (Martins, 2017: 86-87).

What will it take to keep Mirandese vital and vibrant throughout this century? Are there concrete measures that the Portuguese government or local governments can undertake to facilitate this? What is the role of academic researchers and universities?

Now that attitudes toward the language have greatly improved, I think the next step would be to add functional value to Mirandese. As I suggested before, potential speakers of Mirandese have to feel that knowledge of the language represents a true asset for them, and Mirandese parents, in particular, have to feel that transmitting the language to their own children in the home is somehow useful for their future. Just to give an example of what this can mean, in the Vigo study, 82% of informants think knowledge of Mirandese should be considered in the recruitment of public servants in the Miranda do Douro municipality.

The prospects for the future vitality of Mirandese can be improved by further legal protection of the language, something activists in the community have been claiming for quite some time. To this effect, just recently, in 2021, Portugal signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which, once enforced, will give greater legal protection to Mirandese in different fields (education and teacher training, administration and public services, justice, the economy, media, etc.), but the Portuguese government has not yet triggered the final procedures for binding itself to this Charter. This process is still ongoing, although with very recent developments, since the Portuguese parliament just unanimously approved, on June 2nd, 2023, a draft resolution, recommending that the Government initiate the final procedure for concluding the binding of the Portuguese Republic to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. This resolution was published under nr. 87/2023 on July 19th in the *Diário da República*.

Finally, you are currently accepting applications for an online course in Mirandese language. What are the course’s objectives and what are your hopes for it over the longer term?

The course just started on October 14, [2023], and it aims at developing in students explicit linguistic knowledge of Mirandese, while also focusing on its didactics. At the end of the course, trainees are expected to be able to describe the historical formation of Mirandese, understand the recent standardization process of the language, explicitly describe its phonic, morphological and lexical structures, and understand the principles underlining its orthographic representation. They are also expected to be able to identify the variables of the current acquisition contexts of Mirandese that are most relevant to teaching efforts, and use available tools and resources to plan teaching initiatives.

Most of the students now taking the course are not Mirandese, and many are teachers (from preschool to secondary school) in different parts of Portugal. One trainee is actually Polish and lives in Poland! I’m expecting that these students will serve as agents for disseminating interest, reliable information and positive attitudes towards the language outside the Miranda do Douro municipality, by organizing initiatives to these ends in their schools and communities. As for those who are Mirandese or who are descendants of Mirandese in the diaspora, I hope that what they learn in this course contributes to a greater understanding of their own heritage and to their growing pride in the language of their ancestors, further enabling them to develop productive ideas for how to preserve and promote Mirandese.

Notes

¹ The authors are as follows: António Bárbolo Alves, António Maria Mourinho, Cristina Martins, Domingos Raposo (Coord.), Ivo Castro, José Augusto Raposo, Marcolino Fernandes, Manuela Barros Ferreira (Coord.), Moisés Pires, Rita Marquilhas, Valdemar Gonçalves.

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