

Guest View: Portuguese language is 'homeland' for millions

By Sílvia Oliveira

Sílvia Oliveira is assistant professor of Portuguese Studies at Rhode Island College and faculty liaison to the Institute for Portuguese and Lusophone World Studies at RIC.

June 06, 2012 12:00 AM

The renowned Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) once wrote that his homeland was the Portuguese language: *A minha pátria é a língua portuguesa*. His sentiment speaks to the powerful relationship between language and cultural identity, regardless of how many languages one speaks or where we live on this earth.

Pessoa was educated in Durban, South Africa, and was a multilingual speaker and poet who wrote, as he said, from multiple personas. In his late teens, Pessoa moved back to Lisbon and made a living as a commercial correspondent. Although his artistic form of expression was primarily in Portuguese, his creative space was infused with a cross-cultural reference of identities. Pessoa's recognition of a language's autonomy from place and politics was most likely an effect of his multilingual emigrant experience.

Geographic restlessness has been a character trait of the Portuguese people for centuries and the Portuguese language is now imbued with a world of influence and appeal. When a Brazilian, an East-Timorese, a Portuguese or Mozambican cross paths they will inevitably communicate in the language they share most intimately.

Approximately 240 million people in eight sovereign nations, from four different continents and diasporas, speak Portuguese as their native or official language. On the American continents, Brazil makes up the largest geographic area where Portuguese is spoken. In Europe, mainland Portugal and the archipelagos of the Azores and Madeira are home to Portuguese. Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, S. Tomé and Príncipe on the African continent all share Portuguese as their official language as well, and on the Asian continent, Portuguese has co-official status in East Timor and Macau.

According to the Observatório da Língua Portuguesa, Portuguese is the single widest spoken language in the Southern Hemisphere, consisting of 217 million native speakers. Portuguese has the fourth largest number of native speakers in the world and is the third most spoken European language, and it is the fifth most widely used language online.

Portuguese is one of the official languages of the United Nations and the European Parliament. Approximately 10 million people from eight different Portuguese-speaking nations live in countries other than their birthplace. Portuguese nationals have been immigrating to the United States since the late 1800s and settled primarily on the East and West coasts.

Following the volcanic eruption of Capelinhos in 1958, on the Azorean island of Faial, the U.S. Congress awarded special immigration quotas to Portuguese nationals. Due to the efforts of the Portuguese-American community and Sens. John O. Pastore and John F. Kennedy, and Rep. Joseph Perry Jr., the State of Rhode Island now enjoys the largest population of Portuguese heritage residents per capita of any state in the country. The 2010 U.S. Census Bureau Community Data Survey reports that slightly more than 10 percent of Rhode Islanders are of Portuguese ancestry. Approximately 31,000 people in the Ocean State speak Portuguese at home, and support over 60 Portuguese clubs and organizations and five Portuguese schools.

Although nearly a million and a half U.S. citizens have declared Portuguese ancestry, recent studies show that youngsters may be loosening their linguistic ties to their heritage. According to Dr. Dulce Soares Scott, affiliated researcher at the Institute for Portuguese and Lusophone World Studies at Rhode Island College, a 2010-11 survey of Canadian and American-Portuguese revealed that only 9 percent of the grandchildren of Portuguese emigrants spoke Portuguese fluently.

However, the Modern Languages Association record of enrollments in Portuguese language courses in US Colleges and Universities shows steady growth from 1,017 in 1960 to 11,371 in 2009, a percentage of growth higher than any other language taught in US Institutions of Higher Education. Most importantly, statistics show that students need to proceed beyond the beginner and intermediate levels of language instruction if they are to be fully equipped to meet the needs of the local and international markets, and the developing global geoculture.

The Rhode Island Language Summit, held in Providence this past December, called for the development of a workforce with advanced linguistic and cultural proficiency in Portuguese and several other languages. These business, government and education leaders are keenly aware, as are those who have attained high proficiency in a second language, that there are significant professional and personal advantages to obtaining cross-cultural knowledge and multilingual ability in today's world economy.

Many non-heritage speakers are attracted to Portuguese because the comprehensive syntax and phonetics of the Portuguese language make learning other Romance languages quite easy. No wonder the Portuguese language has global appeal and many who claim: *A minha pátria é a lingua portuguesa!*