Politics of Pragmatics: Language and Social Change

Jair Antonio de Oliveira[*]

Índice

In Brazil, the linguistic academic work is submitted to a double exclusion. On the one hand, such activity is either unknown or indifferent to lay people. On the other hand, there is the academic prejudice imposed by the so-called "noble" or "strategic" areas, which are supposed to contribute with the country development. It is time to assume the "*mea culpa*" and acknowledge that scholars have been capable of describing and explaining linguistic facts, but have not been successful in transforming concepts into deeds. Obviously, one might find exceptions, and such exceptions grant survival to both linguists and those scholars who have chosen Pragmatics as a reference. In order to unwind such situation, one should address the contingency of the social order as a whole, and therefore the political work of institutions; hence, the political status of language. Rancière (1996, p. 42) argues

*Professor na Universidade Federal do Paraná. Líder de Grupo de Pesquisa "Mídia, Linguagem e Educação-MEDUC" registrado no CNPQ.

that "the political activity consists in making visible the invisible, and creating speech out of noise". In such task, we use the reflections by Freire (1997), Mey (1985, 1993) and Rajagopalan (2001, 2003). Our methodology is based on the analysis of journalistic texts, so as to confirm the hypothesis, and the objective is to understand the "Politics of Pragmatics", that is: the performative character of language and its use in the shift of excluding social practices. The results do not consist in a sequence of recommendations to be mechanically adopted in this or that occasion. It is, though, a proposal for engaging in a perspective in which Subject, Language and Reality can no longer be considered separately; and, in such dialectic relation, a praxis for intervening in the world of language users is brought about. After all, Pragmatics does not saturate itself in the repetition of the sentence "The cat is on the mat".

Keywords: Pragmatics, Politics, Language.

1 Introduction

For a long time it has been evident the difficulty that Linguistics faces so as to settle itself as a research area and to have its activities acknowledged as a profession (RA-

JAGOPALAN, 2003). In Brazil, for instance, such science is associated with teaching, and ironically, liberal arts undergraduate students consider linguistics a "boring" discipline. One may undoubtedly correlate such judgment with the wide dissemination, within Brazilian academia, of theories in which language is a theoretical abstraction, unfolded on a terrain where only ideal speakers dwell, with no relation to the world's concrete reality. The books "Course in General Linguistics", by Ferdinand de Saussure, and "Aspects of the theory of syntax", by Noam Chomsky, occupy a privileged spot on the school curriculums, and are generally pointed out as examples of what linguistics is. Meanwhile, outside the academia, it is striking the lack of knowledge that the lay person has on what linguistics is like, on what linguistics does for a living, on what the following sentence means: *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*!

Such isolationism has an unquestionably political dimension, since linguists are rarely invited either to give their opinion when decisions concerning the "language" are at stake, or to elaborate political/educational proposals focusing on the national linguistic diversity. By reading Faraco (2001) and Rajagopalan (2003, 2004), we can understand how a bill prohibiting the use of foreign words in messages aimed at the public – authored by the deputy Aldo Rebelo (Brazilian Communist Party) – was approved by the Brazilian Congress and made into law. Obviously, the ostracism of linguists is not the Communist Party's fault. The party has also been banished for decades in this country.

It turns out that linguists themselves undertook the task of making a bubble around their activities and "forgot" to bridge the gap with the community outside the realm of academia. The isolation prevented them from reflecting on what was happening elsewhere, for instance, in the area of Public Relations, where Ivy Lee (1919) transformed the phrase "the public be damned" into "the public deserve to know". The rift between linguistics and the ordinary users of language ended up establishing a strange and artificial object to the eyes of the lay person. Although such theoretical construct permits one to reasonably explain the structure and functions of language, it is nonetheless incapable of pointing out ways on "how to do". In other words, linguists have been supreme experts when it comes to describe and theorize language, but have been helpless when what is at stake is transforming concepts into action!

It is possible to dwell forever on this question. Borges (2004, p.32), after all, stated that "both the conception of science itself and the conception of the specific object and methods of each particular science are continuously in historical change." However, the social and economical conditions of Brazil require linguists to be more than neutral, if neutrality has ever been possible. Such conditions presuppose reflections acknowledging the forms of intervention in the language-object, and specially that linguists bind their investigations to the other human activities, so as to intervene in the course of political acts. It is not a matter of altruism, but of strategic requisites!

Brazil has continental dimensions, a population of 180 million citizens, and invaluable resources. However, surrounding the "Garden of Eden" there are 50 million citizens living in conditions of poverty. According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geo-

graphy and Statistics (IBGE/2007), 11.1% of Brazilians are illiterate! Another striking datum is the result of the exam applied by the Project for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2007. In this year, 57 countries were assessed, and in the item "reading and interpretation" Brazil held the 53th position, together with Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Azerbaijan. The situation is critical if we regard that Brazil is amidst the group of nations in which more than 50% of students find it difficult to deploy reading as a tool to obtain knowledge in other areas.

Historically, the basic education in Brazil relies on teachers who lack specific formation and earn low salaries. The National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs), one of the few attempts of the government to build up common national references for the education process across the regions of Brazil, is read and discussed in schools; however, when it comes to applying the contents, one can perceive the difficulty the teacher faces in transforming theory into practice.

That is why, in the permanent formation of teachers, the fundamental moment is the moment of critical reflection upon practice. By critically thinking of today's or yesterday's practice one can improve one's own practice. The theoretical discourse itself, necessary to the critical reflection, must be concrete in such a way that it mingles with practice (PAULO FREIRE, 1996, p. 39).

In other words, to assume a critical posture in language is to enter a tradition committed to change (Freire, 1974, 1990; MEY,1979,1985; FAIRCLOUGH,1989,1992; RAJAGOPALAN,

2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, among others). It is, therefore, an option for a Pragmatics of Social Transformation, bound to the political dimension of the linguistic use (*Why has this utterance been produced?* Mey, 2002). On the one hand, it is a matter of valuing the critical approaches in Linguistics; on the other hand, still more importantly, one should comprehend that language is a form of socio-historical cognition, whose eminently interactive character enables one to "assume an strategic position in the context of the circulation and the war of social voices" (FARACO, 2003, p. 83)

2 Politics of Pragmatics

It is somewhat contradictory to think of politics of Pragmatics. When we stipulate and rule the uses of the body and language, we enter, necessarily, into the police order!

The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocations of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and the other as noise (RANCIÈRE, 1999, p. 29).

In this sense, how can we think of politics for Pragmatics without restraining language use, that is, without being tempted to confine that which cannot and should not be entirely ruled by deterministic rules? Such is the danger that many libertarian theories face. In their attempt to fight against social exclusion, these theories inverted hierarchies,

only shifting the locus of power. Or rather, they focused the actions on the material dimension of social practices alone, thus demeaning the symbolic dimension. These are biased theories, rich in metaphors and supposedly in affirmative actions; in fact, they rather broaden the rift between both groups. Maybe Pragmatics does not require politics. However, we cannot forget that history is made by human beings. This is particularly exemplary in the following excerpt, where Humpty Dumpty is talking to Alice (CARROLL, 2003, 186):

- "When I use a word", Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean: neither more nor less".
- "The question is", said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things".
- "The question is", said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all".

The excerpt is in line with the question raised by Mey (1985): "Whose language is being spoken?" Such a question is only made within the rift between the apparent neutrality of language and the game of legitimacy and beliefs. It will only be from the openings that may be seen in a rift that the politics for pragmatics can be performed. Politics here should be understood as "social and corporeal practices that respond to the objective and psychological mediations of cultural forms". In other words, politics correlates with strategic uses within the realm of the very performative character of language, aimed at changing mental states of the Subject or the state of things of the reality. To

formulate politics for Pragmatics means ultimately rendering intelligible the agent, the act, and the context. And, within such dialectics, it means also to initiate a praxis that is able to situate both the material dimension and the symbolic dimension of the world. When we say that people are conscious, it doesn't mean that they are basing their ideas upon its historical use, upon its practical insertion within the movement of society, "the consciousness could never be different from the conscious being" (MARX *apud* KONDER, 2002, p. 40).

3   Around Politics

When Mcluhan (1971) raised the idea of communication media as an extension of man, his main argument was that "the medium is the message". We are frequently in life seeing, listening, touching and feeling things; but, when it comes to communicate such experiences, there are distortions and simplifications, for the chosen medium can hinder, quantitatively and qualitatively, any of the human senses. It is not possible to agree with all of Mcluhan's hypotheses, especially the idea that television or internet reproduces the plural simultaneity of human thought, thus permitting the instantaneous apprehension of the whole. It is necessary, though, to consider that the media imposes its own presuppositions to the users.

What the medium does essentially is to disembody the message sent by one human to the other; it extracts the informational component and disregards the means by which the information is conducted in and by the corporeal *hexis* (. . .). It is particularly important here to point out

that the practice, as human activity, cannot be totally detached from the human (MEY, 2001, p. 59).

The communicative action is initiated in the socio-corporeal context. However, the aesthetics of the mediatic gesture, instead of revealing or approximating the subjects in their environment and history, ended up detaching them from the real world. It sanctified, through complex mediations, a culture that has in its ethos the simulacrum and the marketing of permanent cooperation. Obviously, the feelings and actions of language users are differentiated, which avoids reducing everything to the "garbage" of the mediation of communication media. One can vindicate or appropriate the performances of the media and resignify them in the everyday experience; it is not a matter of reinforcing what is being broadcasted, but of rejecting, critiquing and transforming such contents.

The very existence of individuals would be psychologically unbearable if they were not permitted to sit down in front of a TV and watch a soap opera displaying stereotypical characters or a soccer game. We don't necessarily run to a store to purchase a product right after seeing an advertisement. However, we can sometimes feel extremely satisfied by wishing this or that advertised product, and it does not mean that one has been brainwashed by the media. The cost-benefit relation has been triumphant in the polyphony of culture. Such logics, however, did not sweep everybody into the same category, and not everything is subjected to the utilitarian Manichaeism by which "each thing either serves or not to another one".

In terms of the effects caused by the media, Macluhan (1971) observed that every technology imposes cognitive changes upon the individual. It is then important to pursue "how" the individual **can** or **must** shape his or her world, his or her identity, his or her actions by contrasting them to the moral values put forth by the media. If the result is isolationism, indifference or hatred, then such values are not sufficient for an emancipated identity. Every conflict around the media must enable both the communication with a diversity of positions, and the overcome of still existing modes of exclusion and omission. What is at stake here is one of the necessary politics for Pragmatics, that is, the fostering of individuals in such a way that there would be, in a reasonably wide sense, the inclusion of practices and representations of the voices of the groups not integrated to the dominant culture, namely, the ones that are intellectually, economically, politically, ideologically, or ethnically marginalized.

In this sense, I undertook an ethnographic research (participant observation) by following up the activities performed by inhabitants of the city of Quitandinha in their Community Radio Station. This was for me a privileged site for reflecting upon the politics of/within Pragmatics. The question that guided the observation was: "How does the access of individuals to the production, circulation and reception of journalistic texts within a community radio station helps stimulating people to invent – in a Rortyan sense, other descriptions of the world with other purposes? For the analysis, the behavioral features of the involved subjects were intentionally homogenized. In other words, their personal features were defined according less to their differences and internal nuances than to common aspects of their lifestyle and ethos (KUSCHNIR, 1999, p.96).

The broader context of investigation comprises the municipality of Quitandinha, located 60 km far from Curitiba, the State's capital. Some family names such as Kochinski, Piontkiewicz, and Lipinski display the Polish origin of the 15,000 inhabitants of the city that was founded in 1961, on St. Anthony's Day. Most of the population works in subsistence agriculture. The only local radio broadcast station is a community one, and was founded in 2001 by the president of the Rural Workers Union, Urbano Piontkievicz. It transmits 25-watt signals by Frequency-Modulation, and both the topography of the region and antenna location permit waves to propagate within the reach of 35 km. The radio works on a daily basis, from 7 am to 7 pm, and the community is in charge of the entire programming. Yet, the radio has two permanent employees in charge of the locution, musical programming, technical support and communication with the listeners by telephone.

The specific context of observation is the program "Os Ponteiros Apontam para o Infinito" (The Watch Hands Point to the Infinite). It is a 30 minutes daily show that starts at noon with the reading of an excerpt from the Gospels. In the summary to be developed every day, there are local news, recommendations to the farmers, messages to the families living in the districts, information on people who were either interned at the hospital or who were discharged from it, parish messages and regional music. The style of the texts is aimed mainly at third age groups, retired rural workers, intending to foster their self-esteem and to incite them to participate in games and community festivities, handicraft and education practices, trips organized by the Rural Union, assistance and philanthropic activities.

The radiophonic text is a piece of communication at distance (*action in distans*), thus lacking corporeal coordinates. Nonetheless, the analysis of journalistic texts verified the presence of a Pragmatic principle, the Karlfeldt Principle: "*To speak like a peasant with the peasant population, but in Latin with people of higher education*" (MEY, 1987, p. 281). Such principle, associated with the conditions shared by the interlocutors of the Community Radio, seems to situate at first both the symbolic and material dimensions of the particular culture form in which the persons are situated. The "voices" establish a relation with a minimum of fragmentation, rupture and dislocation, once the connections made do not depersonalize the individuals from their existential symbology. Obviously, the inequalities and social contradictions are not erased only by the Karlfeldt Principle, by the idea of Cooperation or by the use of communication technologies, but in a continuous political activity.

> Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise. (RANCIÈRE, 1996, p. 30)

In short, we could verify in the show's dynamics the ways by which the laughter, the popular culture spontaneity, and the carnavalization of life create momentarily a situation that overcomes the fear and permits the individuals to fell a more complete happiness,

albeit limited in time and space (BAKHTIN, 1997, 1993). It is for a moment an invitation for the retired farmers to celebrate a party; in another moment, it is an emergency warning, a death or a birth. It is the interlocutor making a phone call during the show, and being answered "in the air", so that he or she can display any agreement or disapproval of the subjects at stake. It is not a monologic attitude that prevails, insensitive to the responses of the other, but the polyphonic character of the world in which the subject, within the scope and time of the show, has the right to be a citizen, and is stimulated to redescribe continuously his/her life so as to improve it and to keep faith in it.

Nothing is as political in Pragmatics as this objective: to re-educate using the discipline's own terms but with no devotion to particular words; if anything, the devotion is to the individuals' capacity of learning the function of many different set of words. Nothing should be more important to linguists than the continuous fight against every form of exclusion!

4   References

BENTHAM, Jeremy. *O Panóptico*. BH: Autêntica, 2000.

BELTRÃO, Luiz. *Folkcomunicação: Teoria e Metodologia*. SP: Universidade Metodista de São Paulo, 2000.

BORGES, Neto, José. *Ensaios de Filosofia da Lingüística*. SP: Parábola, 2004.

BOURDIEAU, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1977.

CARROLL, Lewis. *Alice no País das Maravilhas e Alice Através do Espelho*. SP: Zahar, 2000.

FARACO, Carlos Alberto (Org.). *Estrangeirismos: guerra em torno da língua*. SP: Parábola, 2001.

FARACO, Carlos Alberto. *Linguagem & Diálogo*. Curitiba: Criar Edições, 2003.

FOUCAULT, Michel. *Vigiar e Punir*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1974.

FREIRE, Paulo. *Pedagogia da Autonomia*. SP: Paz e Terra, 1996.

FREIRE, Paulo; MACEDO, Donaldo. *Leitura do Mundo-Leitura da Palavra*. SP: Paz e Terra, 1990.

KONDER, L. *A Questão da Ideologia*. SP: Cia das Letras, 2002.

KUSCHNIR, Karina. Política, Cultura e Espaço Urbano. In: *Antropologia urbana*. Rio: Zahar, 1999.

LE BRETON, David. *A Sociologia do Corpo*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2006.

LOBATO, Lúcia M. Pinheiro. *Sintaxe Gerativa do Português: da teoria padrão à teoria da regência e ligação*. BH: Vigília, 1986.

McLUHAn, Marshall. *Os Meios de Comunicação como Extensão do Homem*. SP: Cultrix, 1971.

MEY, Jacob. *Pragmalinguistics: Theory and Practice*. Haia: Mounton, 1979.

MEY, Jacob. *Whose Language?* Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1985.

MEY, Jacob. Poet and Peasant. In: *Journal of pragmatics 11*, 1987, p.281-297.

MEY, Jacob. *Pragmatics: an introduction*. London: Blackwell, 1983.

MEY, Jacob. *Vozes da sociedade*. Campinas: Mercado de Letras, 2001.

MEY, Jacob. Linguistics and pragmatics, 25 years after. Editorial. *Journal of Pragmatics 34*, 2002, p.1671-1682.

OLIVEIRA, Jair Antonio. A Ética e a Estética na Comunicação Pública Brasileira. In: *Revista Líbero nº 17*, p. 31-41, 2006.

OLIVEIRA, Jair Antonio. *Polidez e Identidade: a virtude do simulacro*, 2005. Disponível no site: www.bocc.ubi.pt

ORWEL, george. *1984*. SP: Record, 1976.

RAJAGOPALAN, Kanavillil. *Por uma pragmática voltada à prática lingüística*. Porto Alegre: Sagra Luzatto, 2002.

RAJAGOPALAN, Kanavillil. *Por uma lingüística crítica*. SP: Parábola, 2003.

RAJAGOPALAN, Kanavillil. *A Lingüística que nos faz falhar*. SP: Parábola, 2004.

RAJAGOPALAN, Kanavillil. *Social Aspectos of Pragmatics*. Campinas: texto mimeo. (inédito), 2005.

RANCIÈRE, Jacques. *O Desentendimento: política e filosofia*. SP: Editora 34, 1996.

RORTY, Richard. *Contingência, ironia e Solidariedade*. Lisboa: Editorial Presença, 1994.