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On The Urgent Social Relevance of Linguistics: the Teaching of Portuguese and Citizenship Education in Brazil

Book review: Correa, Djane Antonucci (Ed). The Social Relevance of Linguistics: Language, Theory and Education. Sao Pablo/Ponta Grossa: Parábola / Editora UEPG

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Abstract:

Djana Antonucci Correa, linguist and professor at the State University of Ponta Grossa (Paraná), organized a provocative, disturbing, and uncomfortable book, that seeks effective answers regarding the teaching of Portuguese language and the practice of linguists. In articles originated in events that took place in this university over the past few years, permeated by questions about language policy, Carlos Alberto Faraco, Maria do Rosário Gregolin, Gilvan Muller de Oliveira, Telma Gimenez and Luiz Carlos Travaglia – each located in their own theoretical and practical experience – reveal, directly or indirectly, the "crisis of purpose" that linguistics is undergoing in Brazil (perhaps, in the world, if we could expand our perspective). In return, they suggest ways for implementing the teaching of Portuguese, and the relationship between research and society. For these and other reasons that we will try to highlight, The Social Relevance of Linguistics, has become "the book of the hour."

Djane Antonucci Correa, linguist and professor of the State University of Ponta Grossa (Paraná), has compiled a provocative, disquieting and thought-provoking book that seeks effective responses to issues related to Portuguese language teaching and linguists' practices. In articles linked to events that occurred at this un in recent years, and permeated with questions of linguistic policy, Carlos Alberto Faraco, Maria do Rosário Gregolin, Gilvan Müller de Oliveira, Telma Gimenez and Luiz Carlos Travaglia, working from their theoretical and practical experiences, directly or indirectly reveal the "crisis of purpose" facing Brazilian linguistics (and perhaps linguistics worldwide, if we were to amplify our objectives). In return, they identify paths to investigate with regard to Portuguese language teaching and the relationship between research and society. For these and other aspects that we will highlight here, *A relevância social da lingüistica (The Social Relevance of Linguistics)* has become the "book of the hour."

We also wish to illustrate (although minimally) some points of dialogue in this book with the the first edition of the *Interamerican Journal of Education for Democracy*, particularly with the article by Levinson, Schugurensky and González (2007). Our principal aim is to identify ways that linguists' work, along with Portuguese language teaching, could (or should) contribute to the "citizenship education" of Brazilian children and young people, through an Education for Democratic Citizenship (Educação para a Cidadania Democrática, or ECD), keeping in mind that "the most democratic citizens are characterized as reflexive, tolerant and engaged

in both personal and collective goals, among other characteristics" (Levinson, Schugurensky and González, 2007, p. 6).

In the article *Por uma pedagogia da variação lingüística (For a pedagogy of linguistic variation)*, Faraco recalls the first contributions of linguistics to the teaching of Portuguese in Brazil, briefly reviewing the 1965 text of Aryon Rodrigues, *Tarefas da lingüística no Brasil (Challenges in Brazilian Linguistics)*. Aryon brought attention to linguistic concepts and assumptions that had not previously been recognized and studied by linguists in Brazil; especially those related to variation and linguistic adequacy, such as the idea that speakers adapt themselves to their circumstances (an important idea for linguists, without which they would be misunderstood and face proclamations of "anything goes in language"). Implicitly, Aryon proposes that schools should give students access to educated varieties of Portuguese. In this sense, we have arrived today to an understanding of variation as a "*continuum*, which permits for a greater understanding of the social distribution of varieties (and, especially, the dynamic that rules the intense interrelation between varieties) and the points where there are stigmatizations of forms" (pp. 28-29). Faraco correlates this social distribution and this dynamic to the sociocultural practices of writing, which in turn forms a part of literacy, in which mastery of linguistic forms would represent only one "achievement."

Faraco clarifies the notions of "educated norms" and "prestige norm," which are partial causes of many confusions and misunderstandings (nearly always founded in the concept of a "homogenous language" where sense of correctness is of greater importance than sense of adequacy). The first notion regards the most monitored uses of the language by people situated in the upper half of the economic hierarchy (although many are critical of this expression) and with ample access to cultural resources, particularly formal education. It has to do with the real varieties that these people use —that which is normal and recurrent—, and for this reason, "educated norms" can also be called "real educated norms." In the other extreme would be the "prestige norm," inexistent in actual use in society and thus an idealized linguistic construction, not even slightly functional or practical, yet an instrument of symbolic violence and sociocultural exclusion inside and outside of schools. This has to do with preconceptions founded in the artificial "prestige norm," which depreciate other varieties of the Portuguese language and the speakers of these varieties; that is, these preconceptions go against the linguistic and human rights of citizens.

Faraco observes that although we have experienced reasonable advances in the pedagogy of reading and writing, for example, the incorporation of different discursive genres and the concept of literacy into teaching practices, "we must recognize that we are very behind in the construction of a pedagogy of linguistic variation" (p. 42). Here, Faraco is quite visionary in taking a self-critical position! We still have not determined how to introduce variation into teaching practices in an adequate and consistent form. Geographic variation, for example, appears in textbooks in an anecdotal form, reinforcing stereotypes and neither clarifying sociocultural differences nor combating preconceptions with respect to rural speech. Stylistic variation is treated in a superficial and insipient mode. Social variation, more complex than the others and a preoccupying and disquieting issue, is rarely considered in school and in textbooks. Faraco's criticism of textbooks extends in due proportion to two national examinations of schools and teaching, the National Exam of Secondary Teaching (Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio, or

ENEM) and the System of Evaluation of Basic Education (Sistema de Avaliação da Educação Básica). The failure of books, schools and exams can be summed up in the fact that they consider the "prestige norm," and not "real educated norms," to be fundamental to teaching.

In what ways might we be able to overcome this conundrum? The challenge is to construct "a pedagogy that sensitizes children and adolescents to variation in such a way that we can combat linguistic stigmas, symbolic violence, and cultural and social exclusions based in linguistic differences" (p. 47). It will not be easy. But, in the end Faraco encourages and stimulates us to seek solutions.

O que quer, o que pode esta língua? Teorias lingüísticas, ensino de língua e relevancia social (What are the capabilities of this language? Linguistic theories, language teaching and social relevance), contributed by Maria do Rosário Gregolin, seeks to illustrate the repercussions of linguistic advances and of transformations in the concept of language that have taken place in Portuguese language teaching in Brazil. Studying the history of conceptions of language that were fundamental to teaching from the 19th century —the moment of independence and the construction of a *Brazilian identity*— to present times, she outlines the conflicts between past conceptions, as well as their educational repercussions. Later, the author analyzes the relationship between official documents, linguistic theory and teaching, from the 1960s (a time of authoritarian, military government) to the end of the 1990s, emphasizing the vision of linguistic heterogeneity applied to teaching, the concept of textuality taken from textual linguistics, and the socio-interactionist concept of language based in the postulates of Mikhail Bakhtin. Between the lines, marked distances can be seen between official documents, theories and teaching/practices.

In the final part of the text, Gregolin seeks to illustrate the social relevance of the discursive perspective in language teaching, basing herself in the ideas of M. Pêcheux, M. Foucault and M. Bakhtin. She comments on and gives examples of the concepts of discursive genre, polyphony, plurality of meaning in texts, dialogue between texts, and repetition of voices. These concepts would help teachers and students in basic education observe how language is manifested in texts, and how different discourses (crucial of/to society) interact in dialogue and "conflict" with each other. Gregolin defends that language teaching under the discursive perspective will cause students to reflect on different orders of language and their function in society. (Hopefully, in a democratic manner!). The intent is to form, through reading and writing, citizens who truly participate in society. Hence, the concept of literacy, already recalled by Faraco, is very much en vogue in current discussions of language teaching.

Gilvan Müller de Oliveira's text, A *'virada político-lingüística' y a relevancia social da lingüística e dos lingüistas (The político-linguistic shift and the social relevance of linguists and linguistics)*, is based in a "highly self-critical linguistics." The author seeks to distance himself from linguistics and observe the field from the perspective of its sociological function. Initially, Gilvan relates linguistics to literature: contrary to the situation in linguistics, writers and literary scholars do not question the social relevance and utility of literature, except when making serious complaints, such as "Brazilians don't read." Stories continue to be produced and authors continue to take part in the harvest of new tales and

perspectives. Literature and literary studies are going quite well, thank you; they are embroiled in society, and go hand in hand with the cultural industry, which includes television and cinema. But linguistics, on the other hand, lacks the "utility" that existed only when linguistics served the state directly or indirectly, as was the case until the beginning of the 20th century, when it played a similar role to that of litearture.

The work of Ferdinand de Saussure marks the beginning of the separation of linguistics from society. Gilvan indicates that linguistics, in order to construct itself as a science, following the theory of positivism and imitating late-19th century physics, produced a sanitized language exempt from its true social, political, historical and ideological aspects, and from common doings, uses and practices. It focused on classificatory and analytical activities. Linguistic studies were separated from human beings, from society, and from the arena of political life; consequently, "they fell into a trap: they lost their relation to the things that influence men, their passions and interests, and their capacity to continually intervene, creating and recreating the conditions of their lives" (pp. 85-86).

Linguistics has also been made inferior in another area: in its relationship with grammar. It is not able to supersede grammar in importance to society and to the relationships of power. Gilvan argues that "grammar is a much greater instrument of power, and much more successful. It allows for greater control, greater classification and greater exclusion [in a way that is exactly anti-civic and anti-democratic!]. It can be centrally administered by the state, which in grammar finds the necessary instruments to control written language, and as a result indirectly control the spoken language of the population" (pp. 88-89). This criticism (or finding!) can be related to the text of Faraco, especially with respect to the importance attributed to the "prestige norm."

In contrast to the situation of linguistics, that of linguists themselves is much better, thanks to their role (without exclusively arming themselves with theoretical artifacts) in the extension of fundamental education, in practical applications of teacher training, and in linguistic minority communities. Acting alongside governments and social groups, many linguists (re)discovered life in society! This attitude signals that we are on the verge of experiencing a "politico-linguistic shift:" Gilvan emphasizes that the intellectual efforts of linguists must result in "society's construction of linguistic rights, plurilingualism, respect for diversity, and the democratic gestation of knowledge historically generated by all the languages of the world" (p. 90). In sum, when linguists retake their sociological and political importance, they once again have "utility!"

To a large degree, the focus here is on an area of study and research that remains relatively undeveloped in Brazil, that of linguistic policy, which, from linguists' perspective, considers speakers' linguistic sentiments and thus has much to say with respect to the state. In this sense, "the creation of education policy should in and of itself adapt to democracy and create a greater degree of dialogue with the diverse community of beneficiaries for whom democracy is being constructed" (Onetto, *apud* Levinson, Schugurensky and González, 2007, p. 7).

In *A relevancia socialdos estudos da linguagem (The Social Relevance of Language Studies)*, Telma Gimenez carries out an interesting historical study of applied linguistics in Brazil, presenting, in relation with the works

of various authors, her "attempt" to separate herself from linguistics. Her reflection is based in the approach to applied linguistics that currently "appears to be the most synchronized with theoretical contributions that keep in mind the contexts of language use and its relationships with wider social aspects" (p. 103): an applied linguistics that values above all the concrete usage of language and its complex social relationships. That is, applied linguistics presents itself "with greater credentials than traditional linguistics to form a dialogue with the population in general, and therefore convince the population of the relevance of its findings" (p. 103). Moreover, this dialogue is closely related to the urgent need for linguistics to relate their work to human motivations, including their passions and interests. Gilvan's contribution to the book also represents an effort in this regard.

There are reasons why this status achieved by applied linguistics has been related in a positive and productive manner —seeking to incorporate contemporary social demands relative to "citizen training"— to other areas of the humanities, such as anthropology, sociology, history and psychology. This "interdisciplinary encounter" is explored, from different viewpoints, in the texts organized by Moita Lopes (2006).

Gimenez recalls the repercussions (and great number of reactions!) caused by the proposed bill regarding foreignisms written by federal deputy Aldo Rebelo (dating to 1999). She especially explores the repercussions in the national media stemming from the *Political Correctness Handbook (Cartilha do politicamente correto)* (Special Secretariat of Human Rights of the President of the Republic, 2005), which was seen as an imposition of a linguistic education, although government representatives argued that it was not. For example, the Handbook was rejected by the principal printed periodicals of Brazil and quickly pulled from circulation because it was a symbol, in the least, of an antidemocratic world. Guided in part by the empirical observation that, in both the case of foreignisms and that of the Handbook, linguists and the media established a sustainable partnership, Gimenez argues that the media should echo the preoccupations of the populace, and contribute to the definition of applied linguistics' objective, and of the questions regarding language that are truly socially relevant. It would be, without a doubt, a partnership of great value for linguistic planning and policy, which would truly come to occur in consonance with the linguistic sentiments of speakers themselves. In this sense, we must recall Calvet (2007), for whom linguistic policies would be most successful when in agreement with the linguistic sentiments of the populations of many different communities.

In *A relevancia social dos estudos lingüísticos e o ensino de língua (The social relevance of linguistic studies and language teaching)* Luiz Carlos Travaglia argues that a science —whether human or exact, pure or applied— becomes socially relevant through its utility to individuals and social groups, or rather, through the utility of scientific discoveries and the permanence of these discoveries in society. From this perspective he questions, increasing the damage done to our beliefs: "What have we, linguists, done to give social relevance to our science?" (p. 115). With respect to applied linguistics—partially composed of pure theory—, its utility appears evident: its contributions are to teaching (as reflected to greater and lesser degrees in the other articles commented upon here), translation, informatics, the treatment of speech pathologies, terminology, and the interpretation of text, among other "sectors." In the case of pure theory, it is significantly more difficult to find its utility.

In his work, Travaglia outlines two proposals of activities founded in argumentative semantics (taken as pure theory), as examples of the theoretical applications of linguistics in Portuguese language teaching: one activity is related to the teaching of grammar, and the other to reading. In this process, it is the professor's responsibility to study the theory then create activities for the student according to the student's intellectual ability. Such activities would cause people to "perceive the facts, resources, processes and strategies involved in argumentation, as well as learn about them, although not in terms of theoretical knowledge" (p. 125). They would have the objective of "amplifying speakers' mastery of the language and their communicative competence, using their own resources and, whenever possible, understanding and producing texts adequate to the concrete situation of communicative interaction (p. 133).

His proposal remits us to two works of Rodolfo Ilari (2001, 2002) —*Introdução à semântica e Introdução ao estudo do léxico (Introduction to Semantics and Introduction to Lexical Study)*— in which the Humanities student and the basic education teacher can find many activities for use with their students. For example, there are analyses of advertisements and journalistic texts, comic books, cartoons and comic strips, jokes, proverbs and musical lyrics, all of which explore the various concepts of semantics and pragmatics in a light manner. Also, and importantly, these activities can contribute to a critical interpretation of the world —a social practice— on the part of students. Certainly, these analyses may also contribute to the development of writing skills as a part of literacy, although that is not the central focus of Ilari's two books.

Travaglia, causing us to recall the "utility" desired by Gilvan, defends the idea that linguistic discoveries should be utilized in teaching, therefore becoming socially significant and pertinent. In this sense, he invites us to demonstrate to others, people who use language in a very natural manner, "that a greater mastery of language is necessary in order to, in situations of interaction, be an active member of the team in the eternal semiotization of the world, and thus maintain presence and relevance in the societal and cultural life" (p. 134). His words are relatable to the commitment to citizenship education and democratic education emphasized by Levinson, Schugurensky and González (2007).

Teaching guided by normative and exclusionary grammar continues to be the standard in a large portion of Brazilian schools, because society has many different ways of easily measuring individual mastery of grammatical skills. But, considering the articles in *A relevancia social da lingüística*, we would like to highlight —in a relatively general way, it's true— activities that the Portuguese language teacher can develop to support citizenship education and rights education. These activities probably seem familiar, but they are often not effectively put into practice. With respect to Faraco's reflection, students could bring to different written texts and recordings of spoken language to the classroom. They would then read, compare, discover, and state their conclusions with regard to linguistic usages, how our Portuguese language exists in reality, and how different variations of Portuguese function in different social spheres, particularly in their small city, neighborhood or metropolis. At the same time, students would observe and live, as much as possible, the social practices connected to each (discursive) text, even identifying the adequacy of one or another linguistic variety. We could say that this activity would quite probably

place students at the sociolinguist epicenter of contemporary educated written language.

In relation to the discursive perspective proposed by Gregolin, an activity could be done with the same texts as the previous example. In this case, the professor would focus the students' attention on the conflict of voices present in the text, and also between texts; as well as the materialization of the Portuguese language in each text, the effects of meaning, and the position taken by individuals as they write or read the text. This could even be incorporated into Travaglia's proposals. This activity would be greatly enriched if students were encouraged to introduce their voices in society, writing their texts in the form of a "confrontation" with other voices and placing themselves, according to their competencies and abilities, at the same level as society's other authors.

In relation to these activities, research, the search for knowledge, and research-based education can all be considered sensible pedagogical practices in basic education (Oliveira, 2000). In these practices the teacher, despite his or her learnings and experiences, would not be the holder of knowledge nor possess absolute truths with respect to students. They involve the collaborative creation of doubts and hypotheses (especially on the part of the students), through which some new lights come on while others remain bright, as some questions are maintained and pursued. The professor would be the guide in these processes of investigation of interests, initial ideas and discoveries, without explicitly saying what to do next, how proceed, how to act, or what is true and what is not. In this way, teaching is also led by the student. Through this process, in language adequate to each group of students, the teacher guides students with respect to content that is both socially and contextually relevant.

In research-based education, the risk that is run (it is worth noting), concerns whether students will become fascinated by the Portuguese language, coming to master it as the circus juggler masters plates, rings and swords. The magic that students experience with regard to language would come from their proximity to knowledge that is pertinent to them, of everyday, realistic situations, of doings in society, and of social practices; as opposed to the maddening distance from which they view "normative and exclusionary grammar." In truth, research-based teaching allows for student encounters with the powers that be, academic competitions, and a significant part of the media. Therefore, without a doub,t we have in front of us an arduous task, but nonetheless a task that reaches the very heart of democracy! Research-based education, along with the previously-mentioned activities, would culminate in the social exercise of "citizenship education."

As Levinson, Schugurensky and González emphasize (2007, p.5), "Education for democratic citizenship (Educacion para la ciudadanía democratic, or ECD) supposes the creation of new values, dispositions, abilities, knowledge and practices. It isn't surprising, then, that terms such as values, ethics, norms, and the formation of opinions and competencies all have a recognized place in ECD programs. Such programs seek to inspire profound commitment to democracy in which fundamental knowledge and values lead to reflexive action.

Both due to the "crisis of finality" espoused by the authors, each in their own mode, and due to the investigational routes and possibilities that are presented, *A relevância social da lingüística* is certainly a worthwhile read for teachers and students of Humanities, so that basic education students (to be specific) receive our direct contribution, in the sense

that we make them more conscious of their own use of language. This consciousness will allow them to have presence and relevance in social and cultural life —which brings us back once again to Travaglia. We must all take part in the effort if in fact all of us, professors, linguists and students, wish to defend the belief that one of the duties of politicians, businessmen and liberal professionals, to name a few, is to promote a higher quality of life for individuals and diverse social groups. It is our responsibility, according to our mode and reach, to tie our intellectual and practical work —if only just our theoretical and academic views— to social questions, above all those that affect any socially disadvantaged groups… although a significant part of academia may not agree with us!

Permit us a last word, taken from second or third-hand sources: "[We must ask ourselves] rigorous questions of political, methodological and epistemological nature concerning the interests served by any and all research enterprises" (Roman, 1993, p. 78; Moita Lopes, 2006, p. 13).

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