

Structure and discourse in the decolonial teaching of the
portuguese language: a discursive approach /
*Estrutura e acontecimento no ensino decolonial da língua
portuguesa: uma abordagem discursiva*

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Received in: 20 may. 2024. **Approved** in: 22 may. 2024.

How to cite this article:

DARÓZ, Elaine Pereira. DOS SANTOS, Kauan Douglas Gama. Structure and discourse in the decolonial teaching of the portuguese language: a discursive approach. *Revista Letras Raras*, Campina Grande, v. 13, n. 2, p. e2696, mai. 2024. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11362562>.

ABSTRACT

We observed that a descriptive perspective still predominates in the teaching of the Portuguese language in Brazil, centered on the overvaluation of the standard norm. We understand that this approach enables the perpetuation of a hierarchy between the different ways of speaking in our country, producing implications for subjects' identity issues in their relationship with language and their history. The aim of this article is to highlight how literature, especially regionalist literature, can contribute to the teaching and learning of Portuguese from a decolonial perspective. To this end, we have drawn on the theoretical-analytical principles of Discourse Analysis from a materialist perspective, insofar as it provides us with greater support for a reconfiguration of language teaching practices, with historicity as the founding element. From this perspective, we present an activity carried out as part of the Literature for All project, as a possibility of working with a theory in practice, with a view to re-signifying subjects in society.

KEYWORDS: Portuguese language teaching; Decoloniality; materialist Discourse analysis.

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RESUMO

Observamos que, ainda, predomina uma perspectiva descritiva no ensino da língua portuguesa no Brasil, centrada na supervalorização da norma padrão. Comprendemos que tal abordagem possibilita a perpetuação de uma hierarquia entre os diferentes modos de falar existentes no nosso país, produzindo implicações nas questões identitárias dos sujeitos na sua relação com a língua e a sua história. O objetivo deste artigo é destacar como a literatura, em especial a literatura regionalista, pode contribuir para o ensino e aprendizado do português numa perspectiva decolonial. Para isso, filiamos-nos aos princípios teórico-analíticos da Análise do Discurso de vertente materialista, na medida em que nos fornece maiores subsídios para uma reconfiguração das práticas de ensino de língua, tendo a historicidade como sendo elemento fundante. Sob esse viés, apresentamos uma atividade realizada como parte do projeto Literatura para Todos(as), como uma possibilidade de trabalho com uma teoria em prática, com vistas a uma ressignificação dos sujeitos em sociedade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Ensino da língua portuguesa; Decolonialidade; Análise do discurso materialista.*

1 Introduction

"You have to dare to think for yourself"

Michel Pêcheux

Literature plays a fundamental role in the teaching of Portuguese, as it provides a variety of texts that exemplify the different possibilities of language expression in operation. By exploring literary works in their multiple aspects - structural, compositional, thematic - students have the opportunity to experience language in a variety of contexts, from fictional narratives to poetry and essays, broadening their understanding of how language works, in terms of its linguistic structure, as well as the different effects of meaning that are constituted in the course of communication.

Cordel literature, with its striking characteristics of rhymed and rhythmic narrative, has proved to be a valuable tool in language teaching. In addition to stimulating students' interest in reading, cordel contributes to more meaningful learning, as it starts from the subject's experience with the language, rather than from a language model imposed by the state. With its regional features, the cordel provides a bridge between the standard language and the so-called variants of the language, promoting recognition and appreciation of the country's linguistic diversity. In this way, students have the opportunity to come into contact with linguistic and discursive structures typical of different cultures, enriching their linguistic repertoire and broadening their understanding of the richness inherent in our cultural plurality.

However, the teaching of Portuguese in Brazil is still mostly based on a prescriptive approach to the standard norm, reproducing a hierarchy between the different languages present

in our country. In this article, we aim to present the contributions of regionalist literature to the teaching and learning of the Portuguese language from a decolonial perspective. To this end, we have anchored ourselves in the theoretical-analytical assumptions of materialist discourse analysis (DA), with a view to putting theory into practice.

By considering DA as a theoretical framework, we promote a shift from the dichotomous relationship between language and speech, which is often present on school benches, to think about a confluence between structure, in terms of the internal order of language, and discourse, conceived by Pêcheux (1988) as an event, insofar as an utterance is always produced from specific production conditions and is therefore unrepeatable. Thinking about the contributions of DA to the urgency of a decolonial teaching of Portuguese today, we sought to address some fundamental concepts of DA, intertwined with the pedagogical practice related to the Literature for All project¹.

In this extension activity, we sought an intrinsic relationship between cordel literature - inscribed in specific production conditions inherent to the geriatric space where the activity took place - and the participants' experience of language (inter)linked to their history. Although the activity did not take place in a formal school environment, we understand that this type of approach to teaching Portuguese is one of the possibilities for working with language from the point of view of the subject who speaks it. This is because, from a discursive perspective, the starting point is always an imbrication between subject, language and society, in which subjects and meanings are mutually constituted. In these terms, we also highlight the possibility of developing it in the socio-historical and ideological conditions inherent in the classroom setting, providing a deconstruction of the supposed superiority of standard Portuguese and the different languages typical of our history and social formation.

In order to better understand the shift proposed here towards teaching the Portuguese language from a decolonial perspective in relation to traditional language teaching, we will now briefly discuss some of the nuances of teaching Portuguese in our country.

2 Spoken language or written language: traditional Portuguese language teaching between structure and event

¹ The project was developed and guided by Professor Elaine Pereira Daróz, as an extension activity in the subject of Literary Theory I, in the 2nd period of the Letters course (Full Degree) at the Catholic University of Pernambuco, where she works as a professor and researcher in the Postgraduate Program in Language Sciences.

In the school context, we learn to (should) speak according to the rules of a language, as the only appropriate (or so-called correct) way of saying things in the so-called mother tongue. As one of the effects of this imposition of a standardized language, we often observe the strangeness, and often frustration, of the subjects learning this language that is learned as opposed to the language that is spoken (Daróz, 2018). We understand that this is an ideological effect that naturalizes and hierarchizes the official language in relation to the linguistic variety we find in our country. This brings to mind the imposition of Portuguese as the official language in the early days of our history.

During the colonial period in Brazil, the imposition of the Portuguese language played a central role in the process of domination and colonization. In *Linguistic Colonization*, Mariani (2004) shows how the Portuguese language was used as a tool of power to subjugate native cultures and languages. According to the author, the imposition of the Portuguese language not only served to facilitate colonial administration and exploitation, but also to impose a cultural hegemony over indigenous peoples, as well as Africans brought as slaves. This process not only marginalized local languages and cultures, but also perpetuated relations of inequality and oppression that still reverberate in contemporary Brazilian society. Understanding this dynamic is fundamental to denaturalizing hegemonic discourses and promoting a linguistic-discursive education that values and respects Brazil's cultural and linguistic diversity.

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Corroborating the discussion on the relationship between the subject and language in society, Guimarães (2003; 2002) states that the distribution of communication spaces leads to a hierarchization of languages and peoples, establishing a relationship of superiority in relation to others, often associated with the idea of civilization, which directly influences the language policies

adopted by each state or nation. From this perspective, in the face of linguistic diversity, the national language is the one used by the people, giving it a sense of cohesion and community identity. The official language, on the other hand, is the one used in formal and legislative procedures and is imposed by the state (Guimarães, 2007). The hierarchy between languages and subjects is therefore part of a language policy that confers prestige and power on a given language to the detriment of others.

From this point of view, the written language is seen as superior to the language spoken in different regions of our country. This understanding is echoed on school benches, with Portuguese being taught from a dichotomy of these different registers. However, when we think about and work on teaching and learning the Portuguese language in a dichotomous relationship between language and speech, we produce a silencing of the linguistic and cultural plurality by which we are constituted, reproducing a prescriptive teaching of a supposedly superior and prestigious language. Echoes of the superiority of the language of the Crown over native languages in the colonial period, which still resonates today. The strangeness of students coming into contact with the formal teaching of the so-called mother tongue, then, would be in relation to the prescription of the order of language as the only possibility of saying a supposedly homogeneous and closed language in itself.

By establishing the relationship between language (*langue*), which is social, and speech (*parole*) as an individual act, Saussure also establishes the importance of the game inherent in language, in which the movement of the elements that make up the linguistic system produces value (Saussure, 1967). In these terms, value does not lie exclusively in the (re)production of pre-established sequences. In addition to the order of language, which is constitutive of the system, there are also gaps, loopholes that function as a breath of/in language, and concern the process of signification and, therefore, inherent in the relationship between subject, language and the specific production conditions of the production of speech.

In *The Love of Language*, Milner (2006) allows us to think about the misconception of anchoring ourselves in this supposed homogeneity of language, since there is a Real in language, conceived as a point where it is impossible to grasp the whole; it is subject to flaws and it is precisely through these flaws that the subject who (speaks) appears. The real of/in language, then, is also related to history not as a given fact, but the meanings that come from it and that produce different meanings depending on the demands of their time.

Given this, we understand what Orlandi says about the relationship between history and the present in (and for) the production of meanings. For the author (Orlandi, 2003, p.25) "the study of language cannot be separated from the society that produces it [...] the processes that come into play in the constitution of language are historical-social processes". The linguistic variety is the result of historical and cultural processes inherent in the constitution of a people and is manifested in different contexts of communication, producing significant effects both for the language in action and for the subject who (is) spoken through it.

From a discursive perspective, we understand that when we produce a particular discourse, we don't do so from a prior and totally conscious selection of linguistic sequences to be used. This is because our speech is often produced based on our relationship with our history and the language in which we speak, as well as the conditions of production in which the discursive subjects are involved in the act of communication (Pêcheux, 1988).

From this perspective, French Discourse Analysis (DA), founded by Michel Pêcheux (1969; 1975), offers support for working with language, insofar as it brings to the fore the intrinsic relationship between subject, language and society, promoting a rethinking of language(gem) in its heterogeneity with a view to equivocations, failures, since they are constitutive of this relationship.

3 Contributions of DA to language teaching from a decolonial perspective

The contributions of materialist DA to contemporary society lie at the heart of its foundation in 1960s France. This was a time - designated by Le Goff (1990) as the New History - when there was a movement to reconfigure studies on the subject in society, especially in history, which moved away from focusing on great heroes and historical deeds towards listening to everyday discursive practices.

Attentive to listening to everyday discourse, Pêcheux (1969;1988) understands that meanings go beyond language and are inherent in power games. For the author, a reductionist approach that conceives of language only as a logical-formal system, used merely as an instrument of communication, tends to hide the disparities and diversities that exist in order to conceal political practices. Language(g) then becomes a powerful tool for domination and maintaining power (Pêcheux, 2004). In these terms, language thought of only from a formal perspective of the system of rules that make up the system, legitimizes a series of prejudices and exclusions of those who do not conform to the hegemonic, standardized norm of our language.

Although there is a movement to think of language in relation to the social, we see that even official documents still favor the text and its closed linguistic structures to the detriment of discourse. In this way, we can see that the understanding of a dichotomous relationship between language and speech is intertwined with the approach to text or discourse in schools, legitimized by legal documents such as the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC).

According to Daróz & Azevedo (2023), although the BNCC is commonly referred to as innovative, we can still see that the document advocates privileging the teaching of language through written texts, based on an analysis of the textual structure based on a historically constituted language based on a so-called cultured norm. We understand that the very meaning of the formal standard of the Portuguese language as a cultured language already exposes the ideological character that hierarchizes the language of the Crown to the detriment of the different languages that make up our country. In this tension between text and discourse that is established for the teaching of Portuguese, one question stands out: What is it to learn a language, anyway?

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Melman (1992, p.17) exposes the complexity inherent in learning a language, and states that "knowing a language means being spoken by it, what it speaks in you is enunciated in your mouth. Knowing a language means being able to mentally translate the language you know from the language you know"². In these terms, learning a language requires more than knowing its rules and proper order. In order to speak in the language you know, you also have to know it intimately, in a relationship of identification with that language based on its historical, cultural and social aspects.

This perspective emphasizes the importance of teaching the Portuguese language from a discursive approach, which considers not only how the language works with a view to structure, but above all, understanding the discursive process in (and through) which subjects are affected when they say (themselves) in the language in its different conditions of production.

By introducing the concept of conditions of production to discourse analysis, one of the fundamental principles of the theory, Pêcheux brings into play the issue of exteriority as a constitutive element in the relationship between subject and language. According to Pêcheux (2010), discourse, the object of analysis of materialist DA, does not function merely linguistically, nor should we conceive of it as a text whose meanings emerge from the order of language itself,

² In the referred book in Portuguese language: "saber uma língua quer dizer ser falado por ela, o que ela fala em você se enuncia em sua boca. Conhecer uma língua quer dizer ser capaz de traduzir mentalmente, a partir da língua que se sabe, a língua que se conhece".

materialized in a supposedly stable linguistic sequence. Above all, when analyzing it, we must take into account the other discourses that are interwoven within it based on certain conditions of production.

From this point of view, factors extrinsic to linguistic functioning play a significant role in the process of signification, since subjects and meanings are historical and are constituted based on socio-historical and ideological determinations specific to each time. In these terms, intrinsic to the discourse process are the power relations that constitute every utterance, as well as the power games inherent in the subject's position in the discourse.

In his book *Discourse: structure or event*, Pêcheux (1990) provides a critical analysis of traditional linguistic currents and argues that language should not be understood simply as a static system of rules or as a direct reflection of social reality, but rather as a field of ideological struggles and the production of meaning. In this sense, the author proposes a theoretical approach that aims to overcome the dichotomy between structure - conceived in linguistic superficiality - and discourse - an unrepeatable event whose meanings are always in motion, providing subsidies for a more complex and contextualized analysis of discourses and discursive practices, which takes into account the intrinsic relationship with power and ideology in order to uncover the processes by which discourses contribute to the reproduction or transformation of social relations

In an intrinsic relationship between structure and event, materialist discourse analysis (Pêcheux, 1988) makes possible contributions to language teaching in Brazil, insofar as it aims to deconstruct crystallized knowledge, in addition to re-signifying apparently fixed positions in society, promoting a re-structuring of meanings and subjects based on different conditions of production.

Within a relationship between language and culture, taking the theoretical-analytical contribution of Discourse Analysis (DA), we also observed that working with language(g) based on regionalist literature can be a possibility to go beyond the meanings that emerge on the linguistic surface and enter the meanings beyond the text, in order to understand the play of language in the relationship between structure and event in an intertwining of language and culture.

Although not focused on teaching the Portuguese language, the Literature for All project described below allowed for experiences with language and the particular history of each participant, based on specific production conditions. This gave us a better understanding of the contributions of discourse analysis to the re-signification of values, the transmission of traditions and the identification of the subject with their own language and history.

3.1 Literature for All Project: cordel literature in the intertwining of language and culture

If we think from the perspective of language being closed in on itself and totally transparent, we may not realize the intrinsic relationship between language and culture, and the effects of this intertwining on the constitution of discursive subjects.

From the DA perspective, the relationship between language and culture is fundamental to understanding how discourses are produced, disseminated and interpreted, taking into account the social, historical and cultural aspects in which subject and language are mutually constituted. In this sense, language is seen as a space of conflict and negotiation, where different discursive formations clash and intertwine. Thus, discourse analysis seeks to reveal the processes by which discourses construct and reflect cultural practices, showing how linguistic structures are mobilized to express and perpetuate values, beliefs and representations present in a given community or social group.

Cordel literature is a northeastern cultural manifestation that was introduced by the Portuguese, consisting of small books that were originally sold at fairs, hanging from strings. Cordels are written in stanzas, like poems, usually with six verses with the presence of rhymes, melody; in informal language, cordel literature addresses diverse themes, usually from everyday life, or also about Brazilian folklore, using humor and social criticism in its narratives, which are often understood at the confluence of the text and the woodcuts, making it a meeting point of the linguistic and the extralinguistic. They are generally circulated as booklets on newsstands, in places that are home to popular culture, etc.

In view of the relevance of popular culture, especially cordel literature, to Portuguese language teaching from a decolonial perspective, we present below the contributions of DA to a theory in practice, taking as our motto the extension activity inherent in the Literature for All project.

3.2 Theory into practice

The extension activity was carried out in a geriatric facility in the city of Recife/PE, and its aim was to use cordéis in order to promote, in (and through) language, the rescue and recognition of culture through cultural expressions that are constitutive of the Northeast region and that are present in the cordel in a particular way, including its melodic sequencing.

The choice of cordéis when working with the residents was made in light of the socio-historical and ideological conditions in which they lived their youth in the Northeast, in an environment that was

extremely favorable and coincident with cordéis: life stories about everyday life or anything that has been lived. In this respect, we understand that attention to the conditions of production (Orlandi, 2003), to the lives of the residents, was essential for identifying the participants in the activity.

To this end, familiarization with the place and the participants and protagonists was extremely important for understanding the expectations and demands to be worked on during the activity. Next, we have the cordel *Paezinho Baio, o lampião do agreste* (Fig. 1), by the poet José de Medeiros Lacerda (Fig. 2). The cordelist was chosen because of the regionalist themes with which the author defines his works, which are generally of an "educational, informative and historical nature"³.

Figure 1: The cordel
*Paezinho Baio, o lampião do agreste*⁴



Figure 2: The cordelista
José Medeiros Lacerda⁵



The activity took place in the form of a recital, which allowed the participants to share life experiences based on literature that was known and lived by many there. This is because the cordel (Fig. 1) tells the story of a man named *Paezinho Baio*, from Garanhuns; a clever and agile person, whose adjectives nicknamed him *Lampião do Agreste*. At this point, curiosities about this literature, cordel authors, historical and cultural aspects of the region and other exchanges were made during the course of the work.

³ Source available at <<https://memoriasdapoesiapopular.com.br/tag/jose-medeiros-de-lacerda/>> Retrieved on March 10, 2024.

⁴ Source: personal file

⁵ Source available at <

[https://img.skoob.com.br/ZcZfZPWnTkxtfF_Pe969IZxV5dM=/200x/center/top/smart/filters:format\(jpeg\)/https://skoob.s3.amazonaws.com/autores/27286/27286SK1583471981G.jpg](https://img.skoob.com.br/ZcZfZPWnTkxtfF_Pe969IZxV5dM=/200x/center/top/smart/filters:format(jpeg)/https://skoob.s3.amazonaws.com/autores/27286/27286SK1583471981G.jpg)> Retrieved on March 10, 2024.

This is because, according to Pêcheux (1988), discourses are produced by historical subjects and their constituent element is exteriority. For the author, it is in the dynamics of socio-historical and ideological conditions that every utterance is capable of becoming another, since meanings are not directly related to a term, a linguistic sign in itself, but to the conditions of production that characterize a discursive process (Pêcheux; Fuchs, 1997).

According to Pêcheux (1969), it is precisely because of this process, inherent to all discursive workings in which subjects and meanings are constituted, that what comes into play is the identification of the subject in relation to the saying. From this point of view, the choice of cordel literature for the activity made it possible for the participants to identify with the saying at stake, projecting themselves into the characters experienced in the cordel poetry from their own stories. As one of the effects of this interweaving of history, memory and the present, one participant shared her experience with cordel as her first contact with literature; in addition, another participant volunteered to recite an excerpt from the cordel. At the end, there was a round of applause from the participants for the team involved in the activity, moving everyone present in the Geriatric Space.

In establishing the discipline of Discourse Analysis, Pêcheux (1988) put forward a notion of discourse as what is in progress, whose meanings are not grasped as a whole, since they are not on the surface of the language. Therefore, the author calls on us to read beyond the letters, to go beyond the linguistic-textual materiality in order to better understand the effects of meanings that are present in the discourse. Thus, in continuation of the activity, the woodcuts were also approached in a confluence of meanings with the lyrics, the stories that intertwine and the melodic interlocking characteristic of the cordel.

Considerações finais

Based on our analysis, we reiterate that cordel literature has a transformative force, both personally and socially, insofar as the identification with different languages gives subjects a sense of social belonging, opening up space for exchanges of experiences and, consequently, the updating of memory in the relationship between historically stabilized meanings in society. From this point of view, working on the cordel with the residents of the geriatric facility promoted the recovery of this literature rich in culture, regionality, social interaction and appreciation of the life

trajectories of the residents of the facility, as well as cultural and linguistic enrichment for the students who carried out the activity.

Carrying out the activity in a context outside the classroom gave the residents a chance to re-encounter their mother tongue and culture from the perspective of their history, giving them an opportunity to understand the nuances of everyday language.

The regional music sung there by one of the participants was also an important factor in creating an even more welcoming environment for everyone, enriching the activity since it covered the theme of cordéis. The exchange of experiences, intertwined with the language and culture of the region, gave the students the perception that they had achieved the objectives of the work; a fact that helps them to think beyond their experiences, producing new possibilities for thinking and living the mother tongue in different enunciative spaces.

Although the purpose of the work was to experience language and our literature, the reception and acceptance of the work by the management of the home, as well as the participants, enabled us to expand our understanding of the teaching of the Portuguese language in its different spaces of enunciation. An experience of living with language based on the subject's relationship with their history, taking into account its different levels, namely metalinguistic, affective and social. By giving these individuals a voice, we can see that there has also been a reconfiguration of the social places of these often socially forgotten participants.

As an intangible heritage, the cordel is culture and its use, as discursive objects, provided the rescue of the cultural richness of the Northeast by sharing the trajectories and moments of life of the residents of the geriatric space, bringing them closer to their own language and history. Historically, we have experienced practices that exclude the different languages that make up the formation of our people, fostering linguistic and social prejudice against those who do not follow the standard norm of the Portuguese language. Based on the discussions presented here about a theory in practice, we understand that materialist Discourse Analysis offers significant contributions to working with language(g) from a critical perspective that allows us to understand not only linguistic aspects, but also enables a deeper analysis of the relationships between discourses and social practices, revealing how language is used to construct and transmit values, identities and traditions that aim to shape subjects in society. From this perspective, DA also provides support for thinking about a decolonial perspective on teaching Portuguese with a view to social inclusion, opening up new possibilities for being a subject in contemporary times.

CRediT
Reconhecimentos: Not applicable.
Financiamento: Not applicable
Conflitos de interesse: The authors certify that they have no commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in relation to the manuscript.
Aprovação ética: Not applicable.
Contribuições dos autores: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DARÓZ, Elaine Pereira. Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DOS SANTOS, Kauan Douglas Gama.

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