

(IM)POSSIBLE DIALOGS BETWEEN LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY STUDIES: INTERVIEW WITH BETH BRAIT

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PALIMPSESTO

1) How do you see intersection studies that approximate linguistics and literature?

BETH BRAIT

I am, as you might know, graduated in Language and Literature at the University of São Paulo, with a doctorate degree in linguistics in the same institution. I had an excellent formation in both linguistic and literary studies. My professors, to whom I am deeply grateful and to whom I owe the broadening of my world vision regarding the relation language-life. They were, mostly, very specialized in certain areas, but at the same time, the literacy ones knew and explored language in their text analyses, as the language ones knew and mobilized literature in their teaching practice about the linguistic materiality that compose the literary texts. I chose this course because I liked languages (verbal, visual, verb-visual), and the graduation course in both broad and deep perspectives, in which literary theory professors taught me to analyze phonic, rhythmic, syntactic and semantic structures of verses, for example, and the linguistic professors compared verbal structures with musical, pictorial or cinematographic sequences, was so decisive to my academic and professional career (actually, to my life!) that I couldn't know if I wanted to specialize in language or literary studies. I believe, people who study Language and Literature specialize in a certain branch of knowledge part of language studies mandatorily by vocation, by their likes or by their greater or lesser identity. There's no way out: our personal preferences and capabilities are associated to social, cultural, academic and institutional needs. In my case, I think I found a third margin, in other words, the discourse studies, that can accept artistic and non-artistic with no problem,

assuming text as either oral or written expression, constituted by verbal other materiality: visual and/or verb-visual. Precisely, because of it, texts allow comprehension, by discourses mobilized in them, the subjects within them implicated, values in tension, societies and cultures that build and are revealed by them. In this process, different language studies and other human sciences branches are called to an analysis that seeks to account meaning production. It can be revealed, for example, in my theses, within which this intersection you mention is concretized. In both the two works, the study objects, or more precisely the *corpus*, is constituted by literary works: *A festa* [The party], by Ivan Ângelo, and *Madame Pommery*, by Hilário Tácito [José Maria de Toledo Malta]. The last one, is now a book named: *Ironia em perspectiva polifônica* [Irony in a polyphonic perspective]. And, as these were the chosen objects in those researches, the issues pursued should necessarily involve a discursive perspective. Thus, a language work facing the expression plan specificities of the discursive objects selected (verbal, visual and/or verb-visual), implicates social, historical and culturally situated subjects, and the way they position in the world, facing it, building and interfering in the universe that involves them.

If the achievements of the various current trends of discourse analyses are undeniable, we must notice that discourse is not one more level of language (as brilliantly explained Émile Benveniste, naming only one pioneer of linguistic enunciative studies), but an instance that involves its specificities, of situated subjects, in communication, expression, production and reception of meanings situations. Therefore, discourse analyzing (or the genre and text teaching, for example) cannot do without the intercrossed areas: language, literature, linguistics, literary theory, according to the *textual object* chosen.

PALIMPSESTO

2) Does the curriculum organization of our courses contemplate this approximation? Why? Considering it, what are the alternatives our graduate students have?

BETH BRAIT

I think, due to a number of circumstances and coercions of our times, both in the positive sense (current stage of language studies, for example) as in the negative sense (specialization to the detriment of a broad view, graduation), curriculum organization tends to reinforce the separation of language and literary studies, considering the just approved ones and the ones we are going to experiment from now on. And I am not talking about market reserves and institutional delimitations. I am talking about the consequences to the formation of the teacher who is going to function in other teaching levels, which have the requirement of functioning “interdisciplinarily”, included curricular guidelines and teaching materials. Graduation, highly divided and declaredly separatist, conforms to the idea of a necessary choice and specialization of each graduate student. And it could not be different. However, due to these specializations, divisions are already going to happen in graduation, and still, within language and literary studies. I am going to give you some extreme but common examples, that we can find in graduation day by day, and in some debates about how it must/should be. In linguistics studies there is a clear separation between studies known as hard (phonetics, phonology, morphology, morphosyntactic, lexicography and lexicology, etc.) and the ones which deal with text and discourse. But it also happens in literature, specially if we focus on the barrier that is

established the ones who deal with language teaching (mother or foreigner) and the ones who deal with literary studies in any language. Obviously, there are exceptions, but they are only exceptions. And talking about it, I know is to incite a huge and constant debate. But it is necessary to say it with all the letters (pardon me the pun!): most of people in one group see others as aliens, as opponents, and not as supporting in the knowledge building process. And many are surprised by the small part of people who try to work indisciplinarily as our official documents demand, between areas, research lines, in the possibilities of making language, literature and other human sciences dialogue.

It's important to notice that, in any of its levels, school needs the knowledges of phonologists and phoneticians as much as the knowledges of text and discourse analysts, literature theorist, language specialists, being the objects aimed by studies artistic or not. And, the graduate student, before specializing in something, must have an unprejudiced contact with these fundamental studies pathways of language, so that they can work, then, in all school levels. For example, there's no way to *literate* without mobilizing phonetics and phonology achievements, nether the sociolinguistic ones, nor the marvelous verbal-visual creativity of children's literature and its current studies, as much as the theoretical studies about literacies, text and discourse. Prevent this articulation, by virtue of a separatist, and many times excluding, graduation curriculum (that by including determined knowledges deletes others) is to reinforce the very low levels of real reading and writing ability, as statistics show. And it's not worth to blame teachers or to offer continuum education on weekends, those, generally, just reinforce graduation problems. The new graduated student leaves the university and goes in the *specialized* world, having incorporated the dissidence between literary and language studies. In my opinion, problems are in the formation philosophy that supports graduation courses.

PALIMPSESTO

3) What alternatives does the basic education teacher have to approximate and inter-relate language and literature?

BETH BRAIT

Considering the current outlook of graduation courses in Language and Literature, as its perverse consequences to teaching, there are not many alternatives. We have a structural and systemic problem. There is an artificial break in inseparable branches of knowledges, and it happens in a stage of graduation that should contribute as an open range to knowledge. Therefore, as teachers realized they have to deal with language and literature, at the same time, not based in the separatist specialization, they see themselves alone with their own efforts, or, in the best hypotheses, in efforts of the school they work in. And it happens, as they all, when working in teaching, realize structural lacks in their graduation courses and in its curriculum. I am here referring myself to some impassable barriers stablished between language and literature, part of huge universities and private colleges. I can say I am putting them all under the same perspective, in the same impasse.

PALIMPSESTO

4) As some kind of “guides” to teachers, official documents are important production to the education scenery. You have already worked in these documents

elaboration, for example. Which are the advances we can notice in them about this issue, and what paths can still be taken?

BETH BRAIT

Actually, I haven't worked in official documents elaboration. What I do is limited to discuss them, sometimes write about them, evaluating the way some contents, as well as the way they are conceived or publicized, can make teachers lives much more difficult, rather than helping. It happened, in my opinion, in discourse genre conception and teaching. In the moment language students said "we think by means of genre, not sentences", it seems teachers (as textbooks' writers) is obligated to "teacher genre". Doing it independently from the many different conceptions there are about this concept, and, the most serious point, wasting those genres that students already came with, that are part of student's acting as language subjects. Or yet, without considering genre historicity and its relation/orientation to reality, to culture and to society. The consequence, is a teaching practice that does not result in authorship, in an ability to enunciate and self-enunciating in a genre e by a genre. Students end up repeating and reproducing formulas for some kind of communicative school situation in which they are subscribed, they are not, necessarily, seizing knowledge to properly mobilize/produce genre in other situations, in authors' role, as speech subjects. Put it together with the existing separation between teaching genre in language studies and literary ones. And again, we are in the starting point. On the other hand, I have been orienting many theses and dissertations in which researchers, most teachers from different teaching levels dealing with the official documents, finding in graduation programs space to analyze and

discuss these guidelines' philosophy, historicity, variation, viability and consequences to teaching-learning, as to textbook elaboration. By this way, I came to be really near these documents, that discussed by their main users, not only evidence different voices in tension that induce their production, circulation and reception, but also allow to share the critical and analytical view these teachers/researchers have, as their contributions coming from these official proposals realization in different schools and classrooms. I see public politics, documents, textbooks that help teachers out as very important things, as they represent an effort in direction of better reflection about language and teacher roles, aiming better, productive and with real results teaching.

There are, actually, many problems in these documents and in the way they have been written, rewritten, completed, partly or totally denied, that behoove not only to politic, economic, social and cultural issues that engender them, but also, theoretical and methodological disputes related to teaching-learning process. Thinking about this specific case, Language and literary studies, as language conceptions and their teaching-learning process, enroll theoretical and methodological disputes that should to be accepted and explicated. One theory is not better or worse than another. The concern is how to really mobilize them to teaching-learning and not to an experimentalism that, many times, lead teachers to confusion.

PALIMPSESTO

5) Some tests, as ENEM¹ in Brazil, propose to articulate different languages for a more effective approach of language uses and manifestations. Is this exam proposal, for

instance, model to follow or does it fail to integrate different forms of language manifestation?

BETH BRAIT

I don't know much about the ENEM, but I think people who participate in its elaboration pursue mobilizing several languages from the current world: verbal, visual, verbal-visual, in different supports and human action fields. It means to approximate this evaluative event from the reality of those who take it, like some passage ritual, they seek to testify possibilities to get a passport to get in another scholar/ social level, to be part of a different stage. This authorization to get there takes place by way candidates show (or not) their reading, interpretation, evaluation, critical and interfering capabilities, in languages they are surrounded by, involved by and of which they are also subjects. Thereby, authorship is charged facing expressive, informative and argumentative necessities (and I am not sure these three things can be separated) proposed in this test. Evidently, as I've read in many places, there are a lot of criticisms to yearly repeated schemes, to expectations related to students, to the manner language, literature, art and other manifestations from different social spheres could be explored, etc. However, I think that this is not an essential issue, this is, how the test is made or could/should be made, as far as we can recognize that ENEM represents an advance related to other evaluation forms. Anyway, it is an evaluation, an event to measure knowledge, in broad sense, of an individual that is in school and intends to continue his/her formation to professional life, or not. The better an exam or a test could be, as some kind of formulation, it could never set the tone of the teaching-learning process that precedes it.

And so, as the entrance exam does, ENEM ends up setting this tone. Not only students get prepared to ENEM, facing it as one of the many things school should offer them, but they expect teachers to prepare them for this moment, and, because of the time, restricting the process to what is required in this near future. As they have taken this as a fundamental moment in their lives, they expect school to focus on it. Students hope, as many times their parents do, that even before it is time to take this exam, they have been trained to answer what ENEM expects them to answer. And so, the scholar world starts to work around this exam: readings, language and literary studies, everything in it. It causes kind of a process deformation, not in ENEM, an exam that is made considering what is expected school to do, and which operates based on official documents, on curriculum, on textbooks and teachers, especially, working on the connection with realities and languages that involve students, so, the institution offered, along scholar life, formation to individuals that, ultimately, know how to *read and write*, in the broadness these two activities have in a society with multiple and complex *written*. However, a perverse system, ends up changing what is evaluation moment into the center, not the target where built knowledges converge to and materialize, but a border, that in fact imposes limits, dictate rules, apart from the tests' and its idealizers' pretensions.

Then, the question is: could it be different? I think so, working on the utilitarian function of the test and not facing it as mandatory teaching-learning template.

PALIMPSESTO

6) Both society and our lives are permeated, all the time, by new medias, technology and communication mechanisms – the so-called ICT's. Can these technological

options somehow contribute to the articulation of language and/or literary manifestations? How?

BETH BRAIT

The fact that I have talked about an institutionalized separation of language and literary studies doesn't mean that, some schools, some teachers, some textbooks or some courses don't dispose themselves, for years, to call upon a variate expression plan and different supports to teach languages in an articulate form. As I said before, I've had language professors that worked on novels' adapted movies to teach literary, non-literary and cinematographic language. Then, it's not about something that depends on new medias, perforce, although they help a lot. There also needs to be, in this universe, a language-literary perspective. Yet, I confess, that I've seen nothing that articulates, in an innovative way, literary and language studies. I have already seen some excellent literary programs, book reviews, language classes and teacher training, distance learning, etc. but nothing that could really mean, by the force of technology, an innovative articulation. What happens is that, some field opens itself to think literary production and new technologies, for instance. And it encourages many scholars, both language and literature ones, to turn to these expressions, to new supports, to new forms of interaction between men and between men/new technologies and world vision. Studying these technologies, understanding them, participating of their complexity and contradictions, means to (re)think our own culture (cyberculture?), its different manifestations and teachers' and human sciences researchers' role in this universe. No doubt it's a revolutionary

movement, but still difficult to relate with our topic of discussion in this interview, that is the language-literary intersection.

PALIMPSESTO

7) Bakhtinian studies, which are your theoretical basis favor an approximation with literary texts also to language reflection. What other theoretical perspectives could be used aiming at breaking the false language-literature dichotomy?

BETH BRAIT

Indeed, my researches have been specially based, but not exclusively, in Bakhtinian studies. That is a dialogic perspective, which comes from the work of several thinkers, not only from Mikhail Bakhtin, all of them with solid philosophical, literary and linguistic formation, what allowed them to go through language and literary studies, besides suggesting the reach of their works to other fields. The archives of Volochínov and Bakhtin, studied nowadays, allow us to know about activities and professional lives of each of them, demonstrating their transit in language and literary studies, not only theoretically but in many levels of teaching. And maybe that is one of the reasons, effectively not the only, that confers to my career, to my work, the possibility of occupying a space that can be set as a border, a threshold, some in-between language-literary place.

This is not, however, the only perspective that allows the intersection we've been discussing and other possible interdisciplinary articulations. Sociolinguistic studies, conversation analysis, semiotics, the different aspects of text and discourse analysis

enable, sometimes obligate, to look at the two interspersed dimensions. I would say that in great studies it happens. In *Literatura e outras linguagens* [Literature and other languages], one of my works in which I study this articulation on different cultural manifestation, I searched, with an objective of building each part of it on faces of the dialog language-literature, opening up some space for language and literary scholars. But I cannot talk about their specialties. On the contrary, I wanted to know how linguists related to literature, and how literature theorists and writers relate to language. The results are really interesting and sometimes exciting. Choosing one specialty or another, does not prevent readers to know the strong intellectual and affective relation that the set of testimonials unfolds. To talk about only one of the names, to whom I pay my homage in this moment, I cut a stretch of the words of brilliant Ingedore Villaça Koch, (that sadly left us last may 15th) which are registered in *Literatura e outras linguagens*, pages 160 to 165, and are titled *Eu e a literatura* [Me and literature]:

Minha relação com a literatura começou bem cedo. Aos 10 anos de idade, quando frequentava a quarta série do ensino fundamental no Grupo Escolar Rodrigues Alves, na Avenida Paulista em São Paulo, e o diretor da escola resolveu criar uma biblioteca para a meninada e convidou-me para ser a bibliotecária. [...]

Mas esse caso de amor era até mais antigo.

[...]

Alguns anos depois, já madura, pude fazer a Graduação em Letras.

Obtida a licenciatura em Letras, uma dúvida: fazer o mestrado em Letras (clássicas ou neolatinas) ou em Linguística [...] Cursos de Mestrado da PUC-SP: Linguística e Língua Portuguesa. Novo dilema: qual deles? Acabei optando por um meio termo: matriculei-me no programa de língua portuguesa e fiz todas as minhas optativas na linguística.

[...]

Depois, já no doutorado, vim conhecer a pragmática... E – claro – só podia acabar entrando em contato com a Linguística do Texto, que vinha se desenvolvendo na Alemanha [...] Que maravilha: poder aliar a Linguística, que então tanto me fascinava, com a pesquisa sobre o texto – todo e qualquer tipo de texto, inclusive, é claro, os literários!

Não era mesmo que Harald Weinrich, um dos pioneiros da Linguística Textual na Alemanha, pregava que não deveria haver separação entre os estudos de língua e os textos literários, visto que, da mesma forma que os primeiros traziam subsídios importantes para melhor compreender os segundos, estes, por sua vez, muito poderiam nos ensinar sobre os primeiros?

Na minha (longa) prática docente, bem como nos livros que tenho escrito, tive sempre por hábito recorrer a crônicas, contos, trechos de romances, poemas [...] Assim, a literatura foi para mim uma companheira constante [...] volto, sempre que possível, à minha paixão de infância. [...] Desse modo, vou levando a minha vida de leitora apaixonada.ⁱⁱ

PALIMPSESTO

8) In your opinion, what research perspectives are still necessary, important or close to this theme in Brazilian scenery?

BETH BRAIT

I think that the great professor and researcher Ingedore Villaça Koch's words, her original and pioneer performance, as well as her confessed passion for literature, that she found out really early but lasted for life, suggest that we need some kind of education that provides all the right to live together, with languages, literatures, arts in general, from the most different origins and strains. The rest comes with life. And if, by any chance, the professional choice is on Language and Literature, certainly, the specialization is going to be a non-exclusionary and non-prejudiced need.

ⁱ High School National Exam – Kind of an entrance exam.

ⁱⁱ Translation:

My relation to literature began really early. When I was 10 and studied the fourth grade of elementary school in the Scholar Group Rodrigues Alves, on Paulista Avenue in São Paulo, the school principal decided to create a library for the kids and invited me to be the librarian. [...]

But this love affair was even older.

[...]

Some days later, already a mature person, I could take my graduation in Language and Literature.

As I had a degree in Language and Literature, one doubt: would I take a Master's degree course in Language and Literature (classic or neolatin) or in Linguistics [...] Master's degree courses in PUC-SP: Linguistics and Portuguese Language. New dilemma: Which one? I ended up choosing a midterm: I enrolled in the Portuguese Language Program and attended the optional disciplines in Linguistics.

[...]

Then, already studying doctorate, I came across Pragmatics... And – for sure – I got in touch with the Text Linguistics, that had been developing in German [...] How wonderful: I could line up linguistics, that fascinated me so much, with the research with text – any type of text, including, of course, literary texts.

And wasn't it that Harald Weinrich, a Textual Linguistics pioneer in German, preached that there should not be separation between language studies and literary texts, since, similarly the first ones bring important subsidies to better comprehend the second ones, these, in their turn, much could say about the first ones?

In my (long) teaching practice experience, as well as in the books I have written, I have always had the habit of resort to chronicles, tales, excerpts from novels, poems [...]

Therefore, literature was always constant companion to me [...], and I come back to my childhood passion, always it's possible. [...] Thereby, I am living my life of an "in love" reader.