

## *Possible paths to rethink Portuguese teaching: an interview with Leonor Werneck<sup>1</sup>*

Leonor Werneck dos Santos (UFRJ)

### **Interviewers:**

Adriene Ferreira de Mello (UERJ)

Thiago Wallace Rodrigues dos Santos Lopes (UERJ/CAPES)

Elisa da Silva Santana (UERJ)

Marcelo de Carvalho Gonçalves Júnior (UERJ)

In this issue focused on both linguistic and literary studies, *Palimpsesto* – a journal coordinated by the graduate students in language and literature from the Graduate Program at UERJ – has the honor to interview the renowned Dr. Leonor Werneck dos Santos, distinguished professor of Portuguese language at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), where she has been teaching since 1995. We believe that, with the professor's expertise and contribution, we will be able to enrich the discussions about research and teaching in the field of language in this particular issue of our journal.

Leonor Werneck did all her studies – starting at the undergrad level and going through her Master's and Doctorate in Vernacular Letters – in the same university where she is now a faculty member, UFRJ. She has worked as a teacher for both middle and high school and, since 1995, works as a professor of Portuguese at the UFRJ. These different experiences in teaching, alongside her more theoretical study, can be found in her vast production that encompasses courses and workshops for middle and high school teachers and books and journals focused on the teaching of the Portuguese language; genres, reading and children's and young adult literature.

We, for instance, highlight *Análise e produção de textos* [Textual production and analysis], which has become a foundational text in many trajectories of teachers and professors alike, while also taking note of the inception and coordination of the Grupo de Pesquisa em Linguística de Texto [Research Group in Textual Linguistics, or GPLINT), which has done a great deal in advancing research in the field. As far as her studies on children's literature, it is significant to point out that Leonor Werneck has been, since 2013, a

---

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Prof. Cláudia de Souza Teixeira (IFRJ) for reading this interview and for her suggestions.

reading voter for the prize at the Fundação Nacional do Livro Infantil e Juvenil [National Foundry of the Children's and Young Adult Book, or FNLIJ). As we can see, professor Werneck develops studies in numerous different fields, correlating them among each other with a goal of enriching the education of researchers and future professors, thus contributing significantly in growing the fields of linguistics, Portuguese and the formation of new readers.

In this interview, we first go over the interviewee's trajectory as a primary school teacher up until her work in forming new professors, which directly contributes to her research in the fields of textual linguistics and its application in the teaching of Portuguese. We also, in broader terms, discuss the more recent official documents, such as the BNCC (Brazil's Common Core National Curriculum) and the new curriculums, while also touching on the importance of investing in both forming and updating faculty when it comes to language teaching. More specifically, Leonor highlighted the importance that literature and literary texts hold in critically forming citizens – in dialogue with this issue's theme – and explicitly defended that schools and university must be united in order to fully transform language teaching.

Furthermore, we thank the professor's availability in providing us with answers which surely open up new ways of questioning and amplify the research possibilities in the field of language studies. We can surely expect her brilliant academic trajectory to continue to give us brilliant works, all of which truly make an impact in Brazilian education.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

1) During the course of your trajectory researching language, you have made significant contributions to linguistic studies in Brazil, the most notable ones being on mediatic texts and in studies on Portuguese language teaching. With that being said, could you tell us about how first came in contact with linguistic and literary studies and how you would summarize your trajectory so far?

## **LEONOR WERNECK**

I actually first entered UFRJ much more interested in foreign language and literature and never thought that I would fall in love with Portuguese and linguistics. During my entire undergrad studies, I oscillated between congress and monitorship in both Portuguese literature

and Portuguese language, looking to take every opportunity to learn foreign languages. I only truly decided to go to the field of Portuguese language when I went back, a few years after graduating and working, to do my Master's. And even with that, during both my Master's and my PhD, I took courses in both Portuguese Literature and Literary Theory.

Later, already as a Portuguese language professor at UFRJ, I was invited by Luci Ruas and Rosa Gens, colleagues in my department that had also been professors of mine during my undergraduate studies, to teach a course on teaching reading at school for the Specialization program in Children's and Young Adult Literature. This approach to the teaching of reading came from my Master's dissertation, in which I analyzed two Young Adult works and proposed activities for students in the final years of Middle School. The theme of my Master's dissertation came from my experience as a primary school teacher in both private and public institutions in Rio de Janeiro. In other words, my experience as a middle and high school teacher greatly articulated my trajectory in language and literature – which I broaden over the years, now as a professor at UFRJ, forming new generations of teachers.

The contact with Rosa Cuba Riche (CAP-UERJ) was also determining, as, through her, I was able to become a voter for the prize at the Fundação Nacional do Livro Infantil e Juvenil [National Foundry of the Children's and Young Adult Book, or FNLIJ). Rosa and another friend, Claudia de Souza Teixeira (IFRJ), coauthored with the book *Análise e produção de textos* [Textual production and analysis], in which the three of us proposed important debates on the place of language and literature in school. I think that, with that, it is possible to notice how my teaching experienced associated with the contacts I was able to make, over my 30 years of experience, have shaped my trajectory in literary and linguistic studies.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

2) We realize that a significant part of your researched is focused on forming new literary readers, including your experience at the Specialization course in Children's and Young Adult Literature at UFRJ. You have also previously discussed, in papers and book chapters, about your time as a primary school teacher. How did these experiences impact the work that you have been developing up until this point?

## **LEONOR WERNECK**

I certainly would not be the professional that I am today if I had not taught in both private and public schools in middle and high school classes. I studied in public school my whole life and I did my teaching internship in one of them (Visconde de Cairu State School, in Méier, in the North zone of Rio de Janeiro). So, when I started to teach Portuguese in schools in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, I immediately identified myself with the students. Just like many of them, when I was a child and a teenager, I hated Portuguese classes. There were no books in my home, and I not always enjoyed reading the books assigned in class for the exams (even though I loved reading). I had a few experiences throughout my life that changed the way I connect with art, music, literature, and which have made me enjoy Portuguese language to the point of becoming a teacher of it. Because of that, I proposed myself to be a different teacher, one that would motivate the reading of more various texts, making the students realize that Portuguese classes could be interesting and help develop a critical eye in these teenagers, who are more often than not neglected by school, by the government or even by their own families.

Being able to have had about one hundred books, both Children's and Young Adult (not always of the highest quality, but still books, nonetheless...) circulate among my classes, most of the times without a context of a formal evaluation or exam, was the best experience I have had in my life, no doubt! For a few of these students, the book they read in my classroom was the first one they ever came in contact with. This strategy of motivating reading, of debating the books that were read – even if sometimes the comments were something like “I hated this book!”, proved how it was possible to form new readers even when the school infrastructure might be lacking.

Besides that, teaching a class most students hate – specially because they wonder “Why do I need to know what the adnominal adjunct is?”–, was a challenge that I believe I was able to face. I have made many mistakes and learned from them, but in a time before the implementation of national curriculums (PCN), when there were no official documents to at the very least suggest what we were supposed to do in class, I was able to discuss linguistic variation, cohesion, coherence; I fulfilled the pragmatic grammatical material and had enough time to work with reading and textual production, including times of rewriting. All this experience as a primary school teacher is crucial to understand some of the research I have been developing, since 1995, as a professor at UFRJ.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

In your latest research, we have noticed a strong tendency in analyzing official documents as a way to support practical applications and methodological indications. Can you describe to us the positives and a few shortcomings already observed in more recent documents, as the BNCC and the new curriculums, when it comes to the teaching of Portuguese?

## **LEONOR WERNECK**

When I used to teach in schools, I always heard that there was no incentive for us to work differently. Then, the curriculums came (PCN, OCN, BNCC), documents in which, although we must read critically, present some interesting and up-to-date suggestions – but the teaching practice have not always accompanied ideas that suggest change. At least for the last 40 or 50 years, Portuguese teaching has been discussed in academia; the textbooks have been getting better (although there are still a lot of problems), but the classroom seems to slow when it comes to altering didactical-pedagogical practices when it comes to teaching Portuguese. Of course, we know of the numerous problems that involve education, such as the low salaries, the terrible infrastructure, etc., but the fact is that the documents came and were not necessarily well seen, receiving a lot of criticism – much of it, certainly, well deserved.

So, as I have been pointing out for years, the official documents (on a federal, state or municipal level), present as positives the amalgamate of various theories, commonplace in academia, but not all well known. We find, in these guidelines, Sociolinguistics, Textual Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, Semiotics, Reception Theory and other very interesting perspectives to work as theoretical foundation for teachers. There is a huge emphasis in forming a more critical reader, one who knows how to use language to comprehend and produce effects of meaning, while respecting appropriate linguistic variations. In other words, it is predominant a way of teaching the native language that combines terminology with normativity, highlighting how to analyze and produce texts of different genres and intentions. When it comes to PCN and BNCC curriculums, the goal is to help in forming a critical citizen.

As far as shortcomings go, these documents are not always that well-written, sometimes lacking clarity for a less accustomed reader, while also presenting a questionable view of education as a whole. There is also a hiatus between the guideless presented and the

teaching formation, which should be constant and continued. Because of that, it is common for teachers to think that they must, for example, do everything as proposed by the BNCC – which is absolutely impossible, due to time restraints, infrastructure difficulties (lack of internet, computer access, textbooks, etc.), gaps in the teacher's training, among other reasons. Therefore, it is essential that universities incorporate thematic approaches associated to the BNCC and other similar documents during the years focused on teaching training, not only by the professors in the pedagogical field, but also by the colleges in the Letters course, articulating their courses to these documents and to teaching. There is also a general lack of knowledge of the need to analyze the BNCC in addition to state and municipal guidelines and with the schools' political-pedagogical projects, in order to better understand which dynamic of applying the guidelines must be implemented where the teacher is working.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

4) A frequent statement found in research is that literary education still has been relegated in official documents and textbooks, which restrict the reading axis and the memorization of characterizes of literary periods in class. However, in many of your works touching on teaching language and literature, you utilize as theoretical foundation researchers in the field of linguistics, such as Ingedore Koch, Hudinilson Urbano, Angela Kleiman, and others. In your thesis, for instance, you analyzed textual articulators in children's and young adult literary narratives. In your perspective, how can linguistic studies aid the teaching of literature and the formation of the literary reader and what are the most productive paths to effectively associate literary texts to the four axes of the BNCC – Reading, Textual Production, Linguistic-Semiotic Analysis and Orality?

## **LEONOR WERNECK**

I cannot visualize a teaching of Portuguese, in whatever level, that does not articulate the four axes highlighted by the BNCC, tackling on various texts of either literary nature or not. The biggest issue is that, in class, sometimes we still analyze the text as a pretext. In some activities, it seems like the proposal is creative and productive, articulating all four axes, but deep down, the literary text – I will focus on it, since it is what the question is about – appears only as a mere example of fragments to be corrected (when the text presents a register

away from standard/formal language), grammatically classified or labeled in regards to styles of their particular time. Even though many textbooks propose more updated activities, pertinent and well-thought-out, there are still books and materials with exercises focusing on copying fragments from texts, on substituting words, of classification. More recently, in a textbook used in various municipalities, I saw absurd exercises: a Manuel Bandeira's poem was transcribed in its entirety, but the multiple-choice question asked for the syntactic function of a particular term used in the title – that is, one did not even have to read the poem to answer the question; fragments of novels and short stories appear in questions that asked for a broader knowledge of the author's work, which made answering correctly impossible if the student was not familiar with the author's other texts, thus turning the answer into a guessing game.

In part, maybe this disarray in the linguistic-literary approach is due to the common separation, at universities, of language/linguistic and literature/literary theory, making it seems almost a heresy that a linguistics professor might want to analyze a poem, for instance. I was lucky to have met some professors who did not shy away from that, like José Carlos Azeredo, who, still in undergrad, showed us poems by Drummond and João Cabral de Mello Neto to guide us through linguistic questions, without, of course, devaluing the literary perspective. Antônio Carlos Secchin, on the other hand, is a colleague in literature who always presents the linguistic dimensions when analyzing poems in his lectures – just like he used to do in his classes. We also cannot forget about linguistics such as Ingedore Koch, Diana Luz Pessoa de Barros and José Luiz Fiorin, all of whom always made a point of looking at literary texts, merging linguistic reflections to aesthetic aspects. In other words, it is perfectly possible to articulate aspects of orality, linguistic/semiotics analyses, reading and textual production through artistic-literary texts – which is, in fact, what is suggested by the BNCC.

The paths – plural – go through the reading formation of the teacher, the theoretical and analytical knowledge of various texts, the perception of the need to articulate linguistic and artistic-literary aspects. And, and always, they always pass through the constant updating of faculty, including those who teach at universities and form new colleagues.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

5) The preposition of your book *Análise e produção de textos* [Analysis and textual production] (Editora Contexto, 2012) is to raise theoretical discussions, but also offer practical options in terms of activities to be applied in classroom. Considering the huge difficulty of teachers to make do with the orientations for language teaching in all axes, what is the relevant of this sort of research for the continuing formation of the teacher?

## **LEONOR WERNECK**

This book was published in 2012, and even though it does not concern itself with the BNCC, which was yet to be published, it has been receiving a lot of praise and it has been used by many teachers all across Brazil. It is currently out of print, and we consider releasing an updated new edition. In my view, even though at university we are able to do research work that is purely theoretical, or develop textual analysis without a didactical-pedagogical concern, it is extremely important to discuss activity proposals and reflections on teaching. We cannot assume that all teachers have had an academic formation that considers the relationship between theory and practice, since we know that this is not always the case. Going online to search for material is also not often productive, as there are interesting activities, but also a lot of misconceptions and errors in theoretical texts and activities which, if read carelessly, hinder the work of the teacher. Besides that, a lot of colleagues in primary education cannot find the time to update their formation, do not know that they can participate in conferences as attenders, cannot buy books often – that is, the continued formation, which we know to be essential, in actuality does not happen. With that being said, it is essential that we try to turn at least part of our research to applications in the classroom.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

6) In your more recent articles, we have noticed that you employ as your analysis corpus a multitude of multimodal texts, taken from an online context. Can you tell us a bit about how these new forms of discourse have been impacting the teaching of language from the point of view of general texts?



## **LEONOR WERNECK**

We are more and more in touch with multisemiotic texts, especially in a digital context, but it is quite hard to work with them. It is not always that the teacher formation deals with these sorts of texts – not always universities have even internet access or professors who know how to analyze digital texts. Beyond that, even the names attributed to these texts are not always consensual: some of them are in fact digital (memes, Instagram posts, etc.), while others are digitalized, that is, they have an existence independent from the internet. Another difficulty is the fact that we must conduct our analysis based on multisemiotic questions, which depends on a theoretical conception that is able to accommodate it. Therefore, when we engage in analyzing the texts in a multisemiotic way, we must broaden our theoretical-methodological perspective. Perhaps it is for this reason that it is no hard to implement these texts in the classroom; however, it is inevitable that we learn how to analyze these texts, which circulate daily in our lives and even are often an interest of the students.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

7) Even though the importance of articulating the different teaching axes has been discussed for a while, it is still not possible to verify a true expressive change in the primary school results when it comes to linguistic learning. In your opinion, what are some of the biggest factors that lead to this stagnation in the teaching of Portuguese?

## **LEONOR WERNECK**

As I have previously mentioned, the difficulty in changing the way we teach depends on a lot of factors, but I always highlighted the importance of the university in forming teachers. There are budget cuts at universities, which impacts in the hiring of new faculty and in an improvement in infrastructure. This is also a recurring problem in schools throughout Brazil, with the aggravating factor of low salaries and the terrible work conditions in schools. Even beyond that, it is still necessary to emphasize the need of a continuous formation for teachers, the need for updating, why not, the political attitude of all of us, Portuguese teachers, to understand that we need to change primary education. Sometimes, we hear from colleagues discussing that theory x or y is the better one to bring to the classroom when, in

actuality, theories must come dialogue in a teacher's formation, so that the professional take to their classroom an approach that is contextualized and adapted to the reality of their classes.

While primary school teachers wait for the university to pay any attention to them and universities blame the colleagues to work at schools and everyone complain about the few initiatives that might have an effect in the classroom – like the PCN and BNCC curriculums, which even with all their problematics, are guidelines aimed to orientate the work of teachers –, teaching will not get better. It is a matter of sharing the responsibility, not assigning blame, when it comes to education.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

8) In the works you have been developing, texts, from a plethora of different discursive domains, appear as protagonists in Portuguese classes. The article *Referenciação e Humor no Ensino de Língua Portuguesa* [Referencing and Humor in the teaching of Portuguese language], cowritten with Professor Fernanda Andrade, touches on humoristic elements as teaching tools, looking at the ways referencing strategies are used in making up said humor. Can you comment on how humor, satire and irony, for instance, can contribute to a more efficient way of teaching reading and textual production?

## **LEONOR WERNECK**

There are a lot of interesting themes to bring to students, and humor usually is one of the most effective. To understand the irony in a *crônica* or a meme, for example, it is necessary to access a number of previous knowledges (linguistics, of the world, intertextual, contextual, etc.), all articulated to multisemiotic aspects. In other words, it is a highly complex activity and, precisely due to this level of complexity, important in forming students who are attentive in reading and writing. Beyond that, thriller and horror stories are also very interesting and teenagers tend to enjoy them a lot.

In the case of the article you have mentioned, we demonstrated how the referential chains associated to the main characters produce humor in the *crônica*, but there are other resources, such as referencing strategies (including abstract nouns that act as encapsulating agents), punctuation, subject ellipsis, presence of gradation, ambiguity in the use of pronouns, varied resources in how the words are formed, etc. Therefore, as you can see, all pragmatic

content in the course can be combined, through various activities, in reading and text production. There are a number of suggestions when it comes to textual approaches in articles written either by me or by orientees, all of which you can access on my website at <https://leonorwerneck.wixsite.com> or at my research group's, GPLINT, website at <https://gplint.wixsite.com/gplint>.

## REFERENCES

SANTOS, Leonor Werneck dos; ANDRADE, Fernanda. Referenciação e Humor no Ensino de Língua Portuguesa. *Interdisciplinar*, v. 31, p. 11-24, 2019. Disponível em: <https://periodicos.ufs.br/interdisciplinar/issue/view/803>. Acesso em: 28 ago. 2023.

SANTOS, Leonor Werneck dos; RICHE, Rosa Cuba; TEIXEIRA, Cláudia Souza. *Análise e produção de textos*. 4 ed. São Paulo: Contexto, 2020.

**Leonor Werneck dos Santos:** Titular Professor of Portuguese at UFRJ, where she has been working since 1995. Undergraduate degree in Portuguese/Literature (UFRJ-1989), Master's (UFRJ-1994) and PhD (UFRJ-2001) in Vernacular Letters (Língua Portuguesa). Post-Doctorate: in Linguistics, under the supervision of Professor Isabel Roboredo Seara/Universiity of Aberta-Portugal (january-december/2018); in Linguistics, under the supervision of Professor Mônica Cavalcante,/UFC (april/2013-january/2014), with a Post-Doctorate Senior Grant from CNPq. Former teacher of Middle and High School (Colégio Pedro II, public and private schools in Rio de Janeiro). Works at the undergrad in Letters, Master's and PhD in Vernacular Letters and worked as a teacher for ProfLetras, giving the course "Texto e Ensino". Experienced in the field of Letters, Textual Linguistics, textual genres, referencing, textual articulation, children's and young adult literature and teaching of reading. President of Assel-Rio in the 2008-2009 biennium. Member of the jury at Fundação Nacional do Livro Infantil e Juvenil (FNLIJ), since 2012. Member of the research group do Linguística de Texto e Análise da Conversação da ANPOLL. Coordinator of the research group Grupo de Pesquisa em Linguística de Texto (GPLINT – Instagram: @gplint.ufrj). E-mail: [leonorwerneck@letras.ufrj.br](mailto:leonorwerneck@letras.ufrj.br) | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8415-3535>.

**Adriene Ferreira de Mello:** PhD candidate and Master in Portuguese Language at UERJ. Undergrad in Letters at the Centro Universitário São José de Itaperuna (UniFSJ). Teacher of Portuguese Language for the Municipal Secretary of Education at Pirapetinga-MG. E-mail: [adriene.mello@hotmail.com](mailto:adriene.mello@hotmail.com) | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9373-7009>.

**Thiago Wallace Rodrigues dos Santos Lopes:** PhD candidate in Letters/Portuguese Language (UERJ), with CAPES grant; Master's in Letters-Portuguese Language (UERJ); Undergrad in Letters: Portuguese/Literatures (UFRRJ); member of the research groups Estudos Linguísticos, Multiletramentos e Ensino de Língua Portuguesa (ELMEP/CNPq), Descrição e Ensino de Língua: pressupostos e práticas (CNPq) e Laboratório de Pesquisa em Língua e Discurso (LINDIS/CNPq) and, since May 2023, works as one of the editors for the *Palimpsesto* journal. E-mail: [thiagodossantos16@gmail.com](mailto:thiagodossantos16@gmail.com) | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7921-4631>.

**Elisa da Silva Santana:** Master student of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature. Teoria Literária e Literatura Comparada. Researches the literary circulation of children's literature authors in Brazil. Undergrad in Letters e specialist in Children's Literature (both UFRJ), while also holding an specialization in Editing and Editorial Management. (NESPE). A member of the research groups Mulheres na Formação de Leitores (UFRJ) e EnLIJ (UERJ). E-mail: [elisasanoli@gmail.com](mailto:elisasanoli@gmail.com) | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7396-6846>.

**Marcelo de Carvalho Gonçalves Júnior:** PhD candidate in English-Language Literatures at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). Master in English-Language Literatures and e undergrad in Letters (English/Literatures) at UERJ. Develops research mainly on twentieth-century English-language poetry, with a focus on the works of Elizabeth Bishop. Besides a researcher, is also a translator and a poet. E-mail: [marcelodecarvalho@live.com](mailto:marcelodecarvalho@live.com) | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5320-4727>.