

# Potential applications of Cognitive Linguistics to Language, Discourse and Grammar

Prof. Dr. Antônio Suárez Abreu (UNESP)

## Interviewers:

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The *locus* of Cognitive Linguistics today is at an ambiguous juncture: never so solid, yet never so unclear. In this context, “unclear” can also be understood as “full of potentials”. Moving from teaching to theory, from grammar to literature, from the digital to Classical Studies, the approach of a mentalist, relativist theory focused on dialoguing with other cognitive sciences can be seen as broad and connectionist in nature, and it is being explored in various, creative ways.

To verify such arguments, it is helpful to observe that its scholars also reflect these characteristics of Cognitive Linguistics (CL). The interviewee of this edition of *Palimpsesto*, Prof. Dr. Antônio Suárez Abreu, proceeds from Grammar to Semantics and, along these tours, proves to be a prolific thinker dedicated to better understanding the very structures that enable the meaning we extract from language. For about two decades, he has been dedicated to the topic, establishing himself as a leading figure in Brazilian CL studies.

Being part of this vanguard, however, does not seem to intimidate Professor Abreu. Continuously returning to the origins of our species, he seeks to understand not only how our language and discourse operate but also why they do so. As he discusses in this text (as well as in his books) the images we construct or access in our minds during discourse, Prof. Abreu shifts our focus to a man who is not just scientific but also *ancestral* and *embodied*. It is in the way our species has evolved into a collaborative and sociable being that we should investigate the reasons behind our way of thinking, Abreu suggests.

And even when accessing this prehistoric vision, we do not need to abandon our long-established institutions. Professor Abreu himself dedicates an extensive part of his

academic work to making grammar instruction more productive, particularly in a formal school context. As he himself emphasizes, learning normativity from general imagistic principles from a young age can provide richer and more integrated access to the knowledge of our species.

The use of mental imagery, which Abreu discusses, provides another of the most valued functions of Cognitive Linguistics: its semantic aspect. Starting from scenes based on our experience in the world, which are more powerful cognitively, we can activate morally constructed cultural and discursive values, integrating language with our minds.

These attributes make human creativity (one of the key outcomes of the areas covered in CL) a privileged field for investigating argumentation. By placing it on the level of a resource for maintaining social life, since we establish relationships through exchanges among peers, we see that argumentation and creative writing are part not just of a market-driven sector, but also of our human potential.

To connect all mentioned topics and others that were left out but are addressed in his long career, it is necessary to be an equally skilled professional capable of engaging in dialogue. In the case of Professor Antônio Suárez Abreu, this is evident in his academic background, which includes Bachelor, Master, Doctorate and Post-Doctorate Degrees in São Paulo, as well as international experiences, notably in Portugal and the United States — place where he had the opportunity to become acquainted with the embryonic field of Cognitive-Linguistic Studies and began his reflections, adding them to his existing work in Phonology, Grammar Teaching and Pragmatics. Currently, he is a member of the Research Group on Cognitive Linguistics (GEPELIC). Additionally, he is a prolific academic author, having published over 30 articles, supervised more than 80 postgraduate students and written over 10 books, notably on Cognitive Linguistics and Grammar Teaching, such as *Linguística Cognitiva: uma visão geral e aplicada* [Cognitive Linguistics: An Overview and Applied Perspective] and *Gramática mínima para o domínio da língua padrão* [Minimal Grammar for Mastering Normative Language].

Somewhat distant from the tradition of Linguistics (which he still values), aiming for the future and also influencing present practices, the esteemed Professor Dr. Antônio Suárez Abreu honors us with his acceptance of the invitation for this interview. Before proceeding to the content of the conversation, which you shall find below, we must

express our deep gratitude to Professor Abreu for his availability and the time he spent elaborating his responses.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

1) Throughout your career as a researcher in language studies, you have made various contributions to linguistics in Brazil, particularly in the areas of Cognition and Language, Grammar, Rhetoric and Language Teaching. Could you share a bit about how you first met linguistic studies? And how would you describe your academic journey up to the present moment?

## **ANTÔNIO SUÁREZ ABREU**

My studies in language began when I pursued a degree in Letters at PUC Campinas. After completing the course, I went to Portugal, where I studied for a year at the University of Lisbon, engaging in what we would now call a postgraduate course *lato sensu* style. When returning, I completed my Master's and Doctorate Degrees at USP [São Paulo University], and later, I began teaching linguistics at this University, both at the graduate and postgraduate levels. I then achieved my tenure. Years later, I started teaching Portuguese at the graduate and postgraduate levels at UNESP, Araraquara campus. I also completed my postdoctoral research at UNICAMP, focusing on language and cognition, and I obtained my professorship at UNESP. For the past 20 years, my area of teaching and research has been cognition and language within the cognitive linguistics model. I have supervised over 40 master's dissertations and 40 doctoral thesis, as well as 8 postdoctoral researchers. I have written numerous scientific articles in both Portuguese and English and published 13 books. Currently, I am writing another scholar book entitled *Lições de Gramática para o Ensino Médio e Vestibulares* [Grammar Lessons for High School and Entrance Exams].

## **PALIMPSESTO**

2) A significant part of your research focuses on language teaching, reading and textual production (in both Portuguese and English), areas closely related to argumentation and creative writing. You state that “knowing how to argue is, first of all, knowing how to integrate into the other person’s universe. It is also obtaining what we want, but in a

cooperative and constructive manner, translating our truth into the truth of the other” (Abreu, 2009, n/p). Based on these perceptions and your work, how does teaching argumentation contribute to the construction of meaning in writing — both creative and non-creative?

## ANTÔNIO SUÁREZ ABREU

Well, from the point of view of the evolution of the species, humans only managed to survive in the Rift Valley in Africa, 3 million years ago, by being able to unite in groups to defend themselves and hunt. At all times, they had to argue (through mimicry, in those days) to gain the support of a second person. An *Australopithecus afarensis* alone, throwing stones at a tiger, would become its lunch, but 15 *Australopithecus* throwing stones at the same time would make the tiger flee. From the moment we are born, we also continually try to convince our mothers to feed us and give us affection through crying, gestures and buffoonery. When we learn to speak, language already emerges, therefore, within a niche where argumentation is important. Learning argumentation as adults is merely systematizing what we have always done in phylogenetic and ontogenetic terms. And the more we study ways to convince and persuade, the more creative we become, not just in writing, but in everything we set out to do, both in our professional and personal lives.

## PALIMPSESTO

3) In a 2020 article, you and your co-author state that “pragmatic markers are of utmost importance both in written and oral discourse. Interpersonal interactions are marked in everyday life by their high frequency [...]” (Abreu; Lyrio, 2020, p. 76), reinforcing the idea that our discourses are not solely constructed by complex lexical items. From this perspective, how are pragmatic markers connected to the construction of discourse?

## ANTÔNIO SUÁREZ ABREU

The pragmatic markers we discuss in that article are what we refer to as conversational pragmatic markers, which are related to sociability. Well-known examples include politeness formulas, such as “good morning”, “please”, and “thank you”.

Connected to discourse, we have attenuation pragmatic markers, which we intersperse in our texts, such as “*fortunately*” in “*Fortunately, you managed to overcome the problem!*”.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

4) Continuing on the topic of pragmatic markers and their use in discourse and social interactions, how can their appropriate or inappropriate use contribute to or infer in the transmission of meaning in discourse?

## **ANTÔNIO SUÁREZ ABREU**

Almost everyone uses attenuation markers unconsciously. The key is to use them in the right measure for each discursive situation. Not using them, using them insufficiently, or using them excessively is inappropriate and hinders the transmission of meaning.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

5) You have worked on various fronts of linguistic studies, offering valuable contributions to both theory and practice. A significant part of your bibliographic production, however, has been in the field of Cognitive Linguistics, particularly in studies of Metaphor and Metonymy, providing a major and important reference source in this field of study in Portuguese. How did your contact with Cognitive Linguistics begin, and how did you integrate this theory into your research and work?

## **ANTÔNIO SUÁREZ ABREU**

My first contact with Cognitive Linguistics took place in the United States, during a course I took in Santa Barbara, California, back in 1973. Honestly, it was still linguistics with solid functionalist roots. A while later, I also spent time in Cleveland, Ohio, at Case Western Reserve University, on two separate occasions. There, I met researchers in the field such as Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier, from Berkeley. From these experiences I began my research in Cognitive Linguistics.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

6) In your introductory book on Cognitive Linguistics, while discussing metaphor, you state that “along with the transfer of the selected feature(s) from the source domain, *values* are also transferred” (Abreu, 2010, p. 50, emphasis added). By addressing the emotional and cultural factors present in the use of metaphors as elements beyond the discursive plane, situating them as mediators of human cognition, do you believe you are engaging with the issue of perspectivation, so relevant in Cognitive Linguistics, and do you see a dialogue with linguistic relativism or determinism?

## **ANTÔNIO SUÁREZ ABREU**

Whenever we communicate, we prefer to use images. For example, instead of saying that *The Central Bank harmed the economy by maintaining the interest rate*, we prefer to say that *The Central Bank threw an ice bucket on the economy by maintaining the interest rate*. These are the so-called conceptual metaphors. Of course, each culture and historical moment has its preferred images. In the past, for instance, a wealthy person was described as “*amoedada*” [full of coin]. What is important in using images is respecting conversational pragmatics, the sociability between people.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

7) Increasingly, in academic context, research interests in social cognition are being directed towards teaching. Specifically, regarding metaphor and metonymy, initiatives are being made to adapt teaching materials to offer students a different perspective on traditional rhetoric from their earliest encounters with this content in formal contexts. How do you view these initiatives, and how do you believe this content should be appropriately presented to school-age students, particularly those in the second cycle of Primary Education? What principles applicable to reinforcement exercises, for example, align with the Cognitive Semantics perspective on these topics?

## **ANTÔNIO SUÁREZ ABREU**

The book I am currently writing in collaboration with Beatriz Quirino Arruda Doná, who is creating the exercises, has this very goal. Traditional grammar teaching is purely analytical and decontextualized. It's as if you were to give a few lessons on horns,

ears, and udders, and the student was then expected to understand what a cow is. I try to work with general principles rather than make students memorize rules. To continue speaking in terms of images, or iconicity, we can see that many exceptions originate from this principle. For example, when I choose a subject like *Chocolate cakes* and I need to match the verb with the subject, I would say *The chocolate cakes arrive* and not *\*The chocolate cakes arrives*, because the verb agrees with the head noun of the highest phrase in the subject. But, oddly enough, if that same sentence had *thirty percent of the chocolate* as its subject, people would prefer to say *Thirty percent of the chocolate arrive* instead of *Thirty percent of the chocolate arrives*. And that sentence is also correct! Why do we do this? Because, cognitively, the core of the subject (*thirty percent*) does not form an image in my mind, but *chocolate* does. In the previous case, both *cakes* and *chocolate* form images, so I must agree with the core *cakes*, which forms an image.

## PALIMPSESTO

8) According to George Lakoff, one of the fundamental commitments of Cognitive Linguistics is precisely the cognitive commitment, that is, an interdisciplinary orientation towards the most up-to-date neuroscience. In your view, do the concepts and theories developed in the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s still correspond and interact with current advancements and discoveries in the second decade of the 21st century? What remarks should be made in this regard?

## ANTÔNIO SUÁREZ ABREU

Many of the original principles remain valid. What has been done recently is clarifying the analysis. Take metaphor, for example. Until recently, it was said that a metaphor is the result of choosing one or two properties from a source domain and projecting them onto a target domain. In other words, you create a blending between these two domains. Nowadays, we talk about symmetry. A metaphor is about finding symmetry between two asymmetrical things. For instance, I can say that *A smartphone is a digital Swiss Army knife*. What I mean is that just as a Swiss Army knife provides various utilities, such as cutting, using scissors, a bottle opener, a can opener etc., a smartphone likewise offers various utilities, such as making phone calls, sending emails, WhatsApp, managing bank accounts, using a calculator, flashlight, etc.

## PALIMPSESTO

9) The digital world and its implications have spread through various fields, from Literature to Linguistics, from Letters to Law. Considering that studies on Cognition in Linguistics essentially deal with human thought, do you see any influence from digital parameters, discourses and grammars, such as real-time (as in Lévy, 2010), the speed and quantity of stimuli, the encouragement of dynamic reading, the need for textual adaptation to other elements of discourse, the use of audiovisual resources for narrative construction, etc., on the way of thinking of 21st-century individuals?

## ANTÔNIO SUÁREZ ABREU

Not necessarily. Our brain does not work algorithmically. It operates through analogy and blending. Algorithms consist of an artificial way of creating programmed reasoning. It's like comparing classical physics (the algorithms) and quantum physics (the movement of quanta in atomic orbitals). Machines operate according to principles different from those our brain uses when we are thinking.

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