

MOBILITY AND DISCOURSE CIRCULATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD: THE TURN OF THE REFERENTIAL SCREW

MOBILIDADE E CIRCULAÇÃO DE DISCURSOS NA CONTEMPORANEIDADE: A TORÇÃO DO PARAFUSO REFERENCIAL

Branca Falabella Fabrício¹

ABSTRACT: In this paper I call into question the referential paradigm, drawing on the conceptual framework developed by contemporary Anthropology, Linguistic Anthropology, Sociolinguistics and Applied Linguistics. I call for the urgent problematization of the so-called referential metaphysics while arguing that constructs such as entextualization and indexicality can shake the strong representational tradition in the field of language studies – a tradition sustained by an infectious modernist linguistic ideology and authoritarian and monist models of reality. The latter have been losing ground, as an explanatory apparatus, amidst the intense mobility and complexity of globalization processes which require new theoretical-analytical tools.

KEYWORDS: Mobility. Referential metaphysics. Entextualization. Indexicality.

RESUMO: Neste ensaio interrogo o paradigma referencial a partir das discussões encaminhadas no âmbito da Escola de Altos Estudos, realizada na Unicamp e na UFRJ ao longo de 2015. Minha indagação se desenvolve à luz de aparato conceitual advindo da Antropologia, Antropologia Linguística, Sociolinguística e Linguística Aplicada contemporâneas. Argumentando em favor da problematização urgente da metafísica referencial, localizo em construtos como entextualização e indexicalidade a possibilidade de abalo da forte tradição representacional no campo dos estudos da linguagem, que estaria na base de uma ideologia linguística modernista infecciosa e de um modelo de realidade monista e autoritário. Tais construções teóricas

¹Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. I am grateful to the Brazilian National Research Council (CNPq) for a research grant (307157/2013-0) which has made the study reported on here possible.

vêm perdendo sua potência explicativa em face da intensa mobilidade e complexidade dos processos de globalização.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Mobilidade. Metafísica referencial. Entextualização. Indexicalidade.

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For it is not the question here (...) of advocating the dissolution of the borderline binding-separating “language” and the “world”, “people” and “objects”, “us” and “them”, “humans” and “non-humans” - reductionist shortcuts and monist formulas which are as outdated as fusional fantasies -; but rather of “unreducing” and “imprecising” this border, weaving the borderline (its successive parallel borderlines) into a curve that is infinitely complex. It is not a question of effacing the contours, but of folding and thickening them, tilting them, making them iridescent, fractalizing them.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*

1 A FOUR-STAGE COURSE OF ACTION

The inadequacy of the so-called modernist linguistic framework for the task of meaning making within social interactions in times of mobility and globalization was a recurring theme in the theorizations drawn out of the seminars of the School for Advanced Studies. The recurrence of such questioning during the event, and the acknowledgment of its relevance in present-day debates within a variety of fields of study, pushed me towards the considerations in this essay. Its reasoning takes its cue from the epigraph above, developing a conversation which I break down into four stages. The first, in broad terms, has to do with how we tackle transdisciplinary approaches and the implications of such confrontations. The second one revisits referential metaphysics, which is all around. The third identifies some of the theoretical-metaphorical-conceptual pillars in the field of language studies that help us reposition and turn around the reference game. And finally, the fourth raises a few considerations regarding possible meaning-making effects of such questioning with regards to

scientific research and knowledge production. The correlation between this course of action and a modernist linguistic ideology is the nexus I propose to establish.

2 IN SUPPORT OF ALTERNATIVE KNOWLEDGE REGIMES

The epigraph framing my considerations summarizes Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's (2009/2015) critique of the colonialist heritage which is at the very cornerstone of Anthropology, a field of study that, in his view, would be ready to "take on its true mission, i.e., to be the theory-praxis of an ongoing decolonization of thought processes" (p.20). His wager on the fulfillment of that perspective implies breaking down barriers of politically stifling conservatism which manage to keep apart territories of knowledge in the move towards an active transdisciplinary approach in which auspicious exchanges and the reinvention of so-called western metaphysics might prosper. Moreover, at the core of this creative endeavor one would find the deconstruction of two epistemic games which, according to the author, hinder the imaginative effort proposed: "the hellish dichotomies of modernity" (p. 33) and the "world of reference" (p.39).

Such practices, both the dualist and the referential one, are strongly woven into meaning-making systems tied to objectivism, essentialism and causality binds between events – a legacy that has been the object of much critical assessment in the fields of Humanities and the Social Sciences in general². This perspective makes itself felt in the shifts occurring in the colonial episteme and in the criteria of confinement, homogeneity and uniformity subjacent to the symbolic borders which keep apart languages, cultures, social subjects, bodies, fields of knowledge and disciplines. Decentering processes such as these echo Viveiros de Castro's transgressive proposition in two aspects. On the one hand, they recognize the indebtedness of a territorializing approach to well-known colonialist practices of territorial mapping. On the other hand, they indicate as the main hindrance to the decolonization process the binary logic that subsumes the social world into all-encompassing categories. The wealth of polarized concepts we have at hand – competence / performance, man / woman, nature / culture, objective / subjective, epistemology / ontology, among countless others! – and the immediateness with which they're constantly evoked have to do with a conceptual heritage that is both dichotomous and colonizing. Unwilling to accept blends and exchanges, it crushes any form of cutting across, resonance or weaving together of different ways of being, thinking, acting, valuing, communicating, knowing. Therefore, it becomes impossible to challenge it without folding it, thickening it, tilting it, making it iridescent, fractalizing it. For the insidious dualism will not be opposed by hybrid practices without paying homage to tradition. The price? The twisting and turning of the referential matrix of language – the ideological cornerstone of modernist linguistics.

3 THE REFERENTIAL ANCHORAGE

There is a certain urgency in calling into question the dogma of referential metaphysics according to which language is a tool used to represent the facts of the social and natural worlds, presumed to be entities – either internal (such as thoughts and emotional

²In the field of language studies, a segment of the research stemming from Applied Linguistics, Linguistic Anthropology and Sociolinguistics approaches colonized thinking in critical light, adding to the development of post-colonialist perspectives. In this aspect, see, for instance, the issues formulated in Signorini and Cavalcanti (1998); Bauman and Briggs (2003); Moita Lopes (2006); Briggs (2007a, 2007b); Pennycook (2007); and Blommaert (2013).

states) or external (such as objects and entities of nature) which both affect and address us. According to referential metaphysics, meaning-making would be a question of translating the existing correspondence between states and objects and their perception by the observer, implying, therefore, the “re-presentation” of such events in the form of a substitute (a word or proposition) which might designate the accurate correlation between the word/concept and that which it designates “out there”, in the world – that is, its denotational value. A triadic link is thus established between “reality” (A), the “idea” (B) and the designation (C) – the latter being the screw that binds together the other two, establishing the nexus between them. According to this logic, the first and foremost operation of language would be one of simple mediation, and transmission of information, along a linear circuit established between the sender and the receiver, the efficacy of which relies on the individual’s linguistic competence in mastering a code structured according to a universal set of rules (C), which should be able to translate the individual’s private experience (B) with reality (A). In other words, through the use of language, we “screw” meanings onto (internal or external) entities with the words employed to name them. Underlying such proposition is the belief that language is a tool kit used in specific contexts (reality) – a statement characterized by notions of language, subject (the speaker, writer, etc.) and context as markedly preconfigured realms. The tools are kept in a separate container and, when employed in a particular situation (the context), refer to it, describing it in more or less accurate fashion. This rather limited understanding of linguistic praxis, reducing it to mediational, descriptive and referential functions, finds its counterpart in a view of communication characterized as encoding, transmission, and decoding – processes understood as mental procedures disconnected from bodies and their geographical, community, identity and social-political memberships.

Such referential legacy - abstract, disincarnate, and immaterial as it is -, would ideally be able to overcome the contingency, unpredictability, strain and complications of the external world and, sheltered and protected from possible “contaminations” or “noise”, would presumably be able to guarantee the accurate apprehension and conveyance of the substance of reality. Whence derives the idea of autonomous, self-sufficient identity (of objects and subjects), equipped with essential properties that one can both observe and represent; knowing them would be a question of identifying their constitutive features and organizational patterns. Another development of this legacy are identity labeling and stereotyping which “capture” the life substance of things, and, much like screws, define immovable territories of meaning – each object occupying its “natural” place –, and engender value systems which include human beings and their bodies. The delimitation of meanings is the rationale fomenting generalizations, dualist clichés, hierarchical taxonomies, patterns of norm and deviation. And, consequently, producing certainties, a great number of certainties. According to Wittgenstein (1957/1999, §27), these are fabricated from very early on through intense learning processes. We are trained to ask and give answers to “What is this” or “What is this called”; we are encouraged to establish correlations between objects/people and names, and to establish a link between experiences of perception and reality; we are, in this way, taught to construct, through a lens of confinement and immobility, a secure semantic anchorage (the referent) on a terrain regarded as stable (reality). The metaphysics resides precisely in a triple operation linked together through a powerful logical sequence: the radical opposition and separation of epistemology and ontology; the bounding of meanings; and the parallels established between knowledge production and the quest for essence, intrinsic structures and truth. That is the very reason why being able to refer with exactitude (to objects, phenomena, oneself and others), and circumscribe with precision the object of study are privileged parameters for correct representation and for the scientific method of study.

Such practices are at the root of colonial modernity and the Herderian³ ontology “one nation, one people, one language” – labels that have become iconic and that, through a relationship of similarity, would presumably mirror an established reality. Deep-seated assumptions regarding monolingualism, linguistic purity, community cohesiveness, essentialized subjects and racial, and cultural, superiority help constitute a linguistic ideology whose core rests on an intact representational approach to language. Bauman and Briggs (2003) detected it when they reviewed three hundred years of philosophy and described the founding myth that explains the relationship between human beings and the world they inhabit. In it, pervasive visions of purity and of clearly defined meanings structure Western linguistic thinking. Such visions need to undergo urgent critical review.

The non-representational argument, however, is nothing new; the denotational fallacy has been debated at length by philosophers such as Wittgenstein (1957/1999), Austin (1962/1990), and Derrida (1967/2013). The considerations of the first two concerning the operation that equates language with a descriptive and representative tool of a “pre-configured” reality, along with Derrida’s deconstruction of logocentric metaphysics are widely known. Concurring, other influential frameworks, such as that of language understood as praxis, social action, and game, are equally widespread. How, then, could we justify such urge? The point is that the mimetic correlation equating meaning with designated entity(ies) is constantly being updated, over the centuries, in infectious manner, acquiring, through mere repetition, such an aspect of consistency and durability, that caused Briggs (2007b, p.321) to question (based on BRUNO LATOUR⁴): How can it be that these 'immutable mobiles' “are seemingly able to travel anywhere, crossing scales, social fields, genres, institutions, countries and racial boundaries without shifting, presumably, meaning?” This persistence is dealt with in some contemporary researches.

Jan Bommaert (2005; 2010) and Marco Jacquemet (2010, 2014, 2015), for instance, tackle the denotational fallacy in their research on the multilingual interactional contexts of asylum hearings involving immigrants, interpreters, and government officials. The authors point to the fact that the latter, acting as gatekeepers of national borders, and assessing the foreign “others” through parameters of transparency, precision, objectivity and truth, select as the main criterion of credibility the iconic link between statement-utterances of interviewees and referential accuracy. Researches document dramatic instances of interactional asymmetry, meaning-making disputes and mutual misunderstandings resulting from the “failure” of interviewees to live up to iconic-referential expectations on the part of the interviewers (regarding genre, style, register, and content conventions).

Charles Briggs (2007a; 2007b), in turn, attacks the representational tradition within the context of anthropological research on the indigenous peoples of Venezuela. Questioning the ethnographic praxis, the documental proceedings involved, and their conservative approach to “alterity”, Briggs moves to the forefront the centrality of face-to-face interview among Anthropology’s epistemic procedures. As Briggs demonstrates, interview procedures, as well as its focus on “native” narratives, far from being neutral methodological tools, are informed by modern ideological constructs in reference to language, communication, subjectivity and meaning making. Therefore, they reify communicative ideologies that shape

³The German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder is frequently associated with the development of the notion of nation at the end of the XIX century and beginning of the XX century. Placing great relevance on notions of nationalism and patriotism, Herder understood the triad one nation-one people-one language to be the central point to strategies of national unification and purity.

⁴At different stages in his work, such as, for instance, on “Reassembling the Social: an introduction to actor-network theory” (2005), Bruno Latour makes use of the expression ‘immutable mobiles’ to refer to the intricate dialogue between innovation and repetition. According to the author, as they travel, signs and objects maintain their formal aspects at the same time that they are transformed and undergo metamorphic processes.

understanding about interactional enactment according to expectations of transparency, linearity, precision, objectivity, and isomorphism between the event and its representation. Ignoring the asymmetries, tensions, and struggles over meaning that take place when in contact with "others", ethnographic interviews and narratives end up being violent acts that, constituted by intimidating techniques of authority, suppress counter-discourses, and reproduce colonial inequalities (racial and sexual, among others).

It is precisely these expectations of iconic correspondence between object and designation that forge, in the author's view, the contagious ideology described above; as it spreads over different spatiotemporal frames it both comes across and constitutes captive audiences which apprehend, experience and assess the social world sheltered in confinement and in the inertia of unique and transparent meanings. In Literature, the arrest of polysemy is a recurring topic of debate. Many are the narratives, such as "The Turn of the Screw", by Henry James (1898), in which notions of truth and accuracy are challenged and twisted. The story, which also translates to Portuguese as "A Torção do Parafuso", or "A Outra Volta do Parafuso", constructs a narrative marked by an atmosphere of suspense and mystery that leads the reader through a plot of doubt and uncertainty regarding the actions and motivations of its characters. The ambiguities generated make way for varying interpretations which, though mutually excluding, spiral continuously, making it impossible to determine the "truth" concerning facts and events, an operation so dear to the reference game. This operation, however, begins to lose its explanatory virtue in face of the intense fluidity of globalization processes which, forcing it to operate continuous turns, makes way for new theorizations on the linguistic praxis.

4 THE TURN OF THE REFERENTIAL SCREW

The increasing mobility of people, cultural artifacts, languages, semiotic apparatuses and texts nowadays, made possible by the development of technologies of (territorial, informational, interactional, etc.) mobility, brings the question of the relationship between discourse circulation and knowledge production to the forefront of the contemporary debate on language and language in use. Communicative practices in general have been affected by knowledge flows which are ever more dynamic and by a flooding with signs and texts, characterized by hybridity, unpredictability, transformative instability and, if I might add, frictional contact, derived from "the asymmetrical power relations and penetrations engendered by such flows"(JACQUEMET, 2005, p.261).

Therefore, granted the exponential speed at which (linguistic and non-linguistic) signs, concepts and discourses have been traveling the four corners of the world, to approach areas of meaning considering movement, temporariness, and semantic clashes seems to be an inescapable proposal to those who intend to face the challenge of generating understanding concerning semiosis in times of heightened motility. The task involves, however, a radical shift in the insidious view of language examined above, and the inception of different ways of thinking, ways of knowing, metaphors and a conceptual lexicon which might enable us to forge a sensibility to continuing variations and recombining – features so systematically neglected by the so-called Western episteme, stiffened by its focus on immobility. Such creative gesture is already in process, and can be observed in constructs such as *entextualization*, and *indexicality*. Combined, they help us to turn around the referential paradigm.

The concept of entextualization⁵ stems from the idea that texts (a category which includes semiotic-corporeal signs and performances) have a mobile nature, existing only in circulation and being successively embedded into new semiotic contexts. The concept, then, refers to continuing processes of decentering and recentering of texts and to what happens to them once they are lifted from one semantic context and anchored in another. The focus on this mobility calls attention both to the textual trajectories and their spatiotemporal frames as to the singularity involved in momentary textual actions within specific communicative events; in other words it highlights intertextuality-in-interaction. Bringing the idea of transit to the fore lends classic notions of context, language and referent a tremendous amount of plasticity, emphasizing the active dialogue established between texts and co-texts in the perpetual motion of entextualization-decontextualization - recontextualization. Through successive shifts, something is replicated (the text), but simultaneously something is renewed, characterizing a state of permanent malleability. From this point of view, contexts and referents are conceived as in-progress environments, and meaning-making as a nomadic event, paradoxically lingering-moving, in which the chance to determine meaning is referenced not to perennial, or authentic, referents, but to texts that point to texts, signs that point to signs, and narratives that point to narratives – an everlasting game. In it there are no essential social meanings, identities, or categories, but rather, perpetual processes of entextualization which, through repetition, generate a sense of stability.

This textual and erratic view of existence upsets the myth of origin, the world of referents ("reality"), and the perception of an "ontological monism" – thesis defended by Viveiros de Castro (2009/2015) and Briggs (2007b) in studies which depict the clash of rival ontologies in the "encounters" between modernist and indigenous epistemological frameworks. The former analyzes the conflict between a form of "uncivilized thinking" and the ethnocentric perspective of the European settler; the latter focuses on the interaction between journalistic reports in the Venezuelan media on a case involving an infanticide attributed to an indigenous woman. The confrontation between these voices abounds with disputes and semantic conflicts, as within them different realisms and metaphysical fictions struggle for power with one another. Seen through the entextualization perspective, the dialogue with the unknown "others" comprehends disputes between (de)territorialized texts, which don't always point to the same place. It is precisely the nature of this process that the concept of indexicality may be able to clarify, "clearing the haze" of meaning. Since we are impelled to ask: in the praxis of language use, what do we point to exactly? And how do we do it?

The pointing to is multidirectional and emerges from intense reflexivity processes linked to the potential of language to talk about itself (metalanguage) and about how it operates (metapragmatics). Associated to it is the human capacity to, while establishing socio-semiotic correspondences, engage both pragmatically and metapragmatically in communicative events. For as speakers deploy all kinds of signs - linguistic, imagistic, corporeal, etc. -, they also conceive how they are to be interpreted. On the one hand, they generate clusters of signs: they (re)entextualize performances entwined with ways of speaking, acting, moving, dressing, looking and gesturing; and coordinate their actions with the actions of other people, objects, times, places, beliefs and social voices. On the other hand, they invest these resources with values that, while establishing a broad sociocultural repertoire, point to norms, rules, social types and standards. These indices must be both recognizable and recognized for some form of understanding to take place. Indexicality, therefore, more than a simple denotational 'pointing to' within specific interactional events,

⁵Uninterrupted processes of entextualization are analyzed in Bauman and Briggs (1990/2009) and in Silverstein and Urban (1996).

carries with it a non-referential dimension which indicates expectations, sociocultural rituals, and subject positions that are racialized, genderized, sexualized, nationalized, etc. These actions do not "refer to", but frame interpretation, interfering in processes of perception and meaning-making. They are not referential in the conventional sense, but rather, performative.

According to Silverstein (2004), three are the implications of such an approach. First, that at a micro-contextual scale, an encompassing macro-sociological repertoire is discernable, since texts (as well as the signs of which they are made) are synchronically and diachronically linked. At the synchronic level, i.e., at the scale of emerging (en)(dis)(con)textualization, texts are organized and horizontally distributed along amalgamations of signs and performances. Then, at the diachronic level, socio-historic voices are projected by textual arrangements forged in interaction, in a game that articulates and ranks different times, spaces, and subjectivities. Otherwise said, textual configurations index meanings socially stratified in the multi-scalar link of situational and non-situational spheres. The second implication is that the characterization of reflexive activity as invocation, in the communicative 'here and now', of collective socio-cultural practices adds as much to the discursive positioning of interlocutors in interactional enactment as to the inter-subjective performance of stances and alignments which create, maintain or transform social interactions. These two points generate a third effect. Despite the ephemeral character of the contingent interactional order, the actions and positions it generates are oriented, structured and modulated reflexively in conformity with centers of semiotic authority which regulate different institutional spaces such as, for example, family, school, the workplace, etc. Circulating through them, value systems and rules are put to use thus acquiring an aspect of "normality". This is to say that rules, structures, and systemic patterns are established subsequently to usage; they are validations and propositions established *a posteriori* and not revelations of the essential meanings of cultural practices. If indeed the boundaries of these rules and values are projected, rather than being etched in stone, if they are not clear-cut, or even necessary, possibilities of resistance may be fully envisaged.

The indexical operation described above involves, so to speak, "referential" activity that is much more complex than simply pointing to objects, individuals, notions and "world facts" in ostensive, direct and precise fashion. As semantic-textual activity indexicality points to a variety of discourses, narratives, voices and social conventions – in sum, to language games we engage in and the rules of which we learn to operate pragmatically and to account for metapragmatically along processes involving social interaction. We could say that the indexical games we are initiated into play a fundamental part in the ideas (metapragmatics) of who we are, of who the others are, of what cultural space-times we inhabit and how we inhabit them, which games we take part in, and which conventions we must learn to follow. That is the reason why they have such performative relevance. They modulate without determining, and with different degrees of immobility and dynamism, our forms of life and our experience of reality within ever-moving spatiotemporal frames.

It is by observing the daily, commonplace uses of language, and the causal fictions they promote, which may grant visibility to the intricate dialogue between pragmatics and metapragmatics, characterized by Briggs (2011, p.218) as a tense tango dance “co-constitutive and clearly intertwined without ever achieving aspirations to transparency (such that metapragmatics would directly reflect pragmatics) and regulation (such that pragmatics would be determined by normative metapragmatic frameworks)”. Interpreting this dance would be a question of projecting the indexical nexus between different systems of beliefs and values (historic agency) and local recontextualizations (emerging agency). However, these dance steps are not assembled without undermining a linguistic ideology that, captive to representational and referential beliefs, sidelines indexical traces and textual itineraries, describing epistemic hypotheses as natural phenomena; and separating language and the

world, knowledge and praxis, epistemology and ontology. A review of the dualist tango, choreographed in such binary oppositions, is needed, integrating into the *pasodoble* (double-step) the *gingado* (swaying), dance rhythms and hybrid steps of kizomba⁶.

5 IN SUPPORT OF AN ALTERNATIVE LINGUISTIC IDEOLOGY

The screw in the novella by Henry James turns and fractalizes in inconclusive games of meaning that make it impossible to know the truth about the characters or the boundaries separating imagination and reality. The referential screw, in turn, takes an unexpected turn when studied through the lens of entextualization and indexicality. These render the referential perspective unsustainable, for they shift it to unstable territory inhabited by spaces-times-subjects that are textualized in rhizomic structures, lacking a particular orientational center.

The authors here referenced show that the dance of semiosis is rehearsed in midst of a variety of indexical and interactional ramifications which formulate methodological challenges to those who are willing to explore their intricate choreography, full of chance events and improvisations. It is consensual among them that ethnographic observation and the procedures it puts in place to generate and analyze data may potentially produce "chronicles of complexity" (BLOMMAERT, 2013) which reconstruct the rich indexical history of cultural texts and the world views they foster. Nevertheless, classical ethnography must also undergo critical self-review for fear of falling prey to the referential allure. Formulating a diversity of representations about the "same", ontologically delimited, world is highly tempting. It updates a multicultural rhetoric that is prevalent nowadays, but leaves out the anchorage in modernist linguistic ideology – by keeping in place a territorializing epistemology, simply juxtaposing self-contained monoculturalisms. The challenge, then, would be that ethnographically inclined studies might capture the multiple metapragmatic projections in dispute (including those of the ethnographer) and the plurality of forms of existence they foment, consisting of semiotic activity developed all throughout different (mis)encounters. Incorporating multiplicity, mobility and temporariness as forms of life demands delving into alternative linguistic ideologies, whose careful observation of entextualization chains, indexical flows and metapragmatic regimes might not only undermine the confinement effects of reference but also render life with "others", different from ourselves, viable and solidary; a life in which "boundaries cease to be givens and instead become [creative] choices" (BECK, 2001, p.266).

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⁶Angolan dance considered to be a miscellaneous hybrid of African dance styles and musical rhythms.

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Recebido em: 14 de fevereiro de 2016.

Aceito em: 28 de março de 2016.