

REVIEW

Society and language: a pernicious relationship? A reflection on Social Isolation

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ABSTRACT

In this conference, the professed Rajagopalan, through a current event: the Covid-19 pandemic and social isolation, reflects on the individual/society relationship. This reflection begins with the thinking of Rousseau's good savage - man, initially, is pure, the society that corrupts him, in other words, society would be a pernicious organism that affects/infects human beings; pure by nature and healthy. This reflection serves as a bridge to the concept of umbigofilia - too much self-concern and indifference, or even repudiation, to the collective / social. In addition, the teacher questions the role of society in language studies: should research on language go from outside (society) to inside (individual) or should the movement be the opposite? Finally, the teacher reminds us that "there is no subject without society and he cannot live trapped in a web".



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RESUMO

Nesta conferência, o professor Rajagopalan, por meio de um acontecimento atual: a pandemia do Covid-19 e o isolamento social, reflete sobre a relação indivíduo/ sociedade. Essa reflexão perpassa o pensamento do bom selvagem de Rousseau - o homem, inicialmente, é puro, a sociedade que o corrompe, em outras palavras, a sociedade seria um organismo pernicioso que afeta/ infecta o ser humano; puro por natureza, saudável e são. Essa reflexão serve de ponte para o conceito de umbigofilia - preocupação demasiada do eu e a indiferença, ou até mesmo repúdio, ao coletivo/ social. Além disso, o professor questiona o papel da sociedade nos estudos da linguagem: as pesquisas sobre linguagem devem partir do exterior

(sociedade) para o interior (indivíduo) ou o movimento deve ser o oposto?
Por fim, o professor nos lembra que “não existe sujeito sem sociedade e ele não pode viver preso numa teia”.

KEYWORDS

Society. Individual. Social isolation.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Sociedade. Indivíduo. Isolamento social.

The professor Rajagopalan starts his speech with reference to the thought of Rousseau's good savage - man, initially is pure, the society that corrupts him. He uses this thinking to reflect on the vision of society and the individual. The first would be a pernicious organism that affects, or currently infects, the human being - pure by nature and healthy. In another moment, Rajagopalan (1998) also refers to the thought of the good savage, but applying it in relation to the linguist's interference, during the height of American structural linguistics, on the native not yet corrupted by Western civilization; also uses the same thinking to clarify Chomsky's view of the speaker - an ideal individual unable to make mistakes in his own language, a kind of “the good savage” of linguistics¹ (RAJAGOPALAN, 1998: p.28)². This thought serves as a bridge to think of society as the agent responsible for the current pandemic. But what should be avoided: society or agglomerations? The term social isolation can be misleading, it can lead us to believe in the harmfulness of the social organism.

The disease that spreads throughout the world brings up the concern for well-being only individual: the important thing is that I am well - at most, the concern extends to the family -, if I am well, the well-being of others is of little interest to me. Professor Rajagopalan coined a term that sums up too much self-concern and indifference, or even repudiation, to the collective/social: *navelphilia*³.

The reflections on the indifference to the social body and the excessive interest in the self is ratified with examples of classic literature: Don Quixote; Don Juan and Faust. What do these three have in common? The heroes of the novels suffer from navelphilia, all of them are interested only in themselves and suffer consequences for that. There is, however, a turning point in thinking: 19th century literature is marked by the creation and exaltation of the individual hero. This thought is also present, in other words, in Rajagopalan (1998, p. 30):

¹ The translations are by the author of the review.

² In this article, Rajagopalan seeks to outline with more precise features what language is and, mainly, who is the individual that linguistics needs to be concerned with. To this end, it analyzes the views of different theorists on the subject.

³ There is no precise translation for the term since it was thought of in/into portuguese. The author uses: umbigofilia.

Behind the concept of the native speaker in linguistics is the 18th century invention called "individual". [...] The individual was, from that moment on, a self built in a unique way, the supreme realization of which – in Kant's view, in the end would pave the way for the emancipation of that individual – was Cartesian self-awareness. . Taylor (1992: 25 ff.) Observes how the emergence of this new individual happened in marked contrast to the previous concept, typical of feudalism and the medieval period, which saw / the individual as being defined by a socially assigned status.

Then, Rajagopalan provokes: what ideological posture are we (re)building when thinking about the term social isolation? Conservative thinking encourages indifference to society, what in the role of the subject within the social body?

We could, in an innocent way, believe that the teacher's words distance themselves from thinking about language and linguistics itself. Rajagopalan concludes his thought by raising the question of the role of society in language and how linguistics itself can profit from approaches "that consider native speakers not as isolated "monads", but as participants in a socially defined network of relationships, which are real because the social bonds that hold them together are concrete" (RAJAGOPALAN, 1998: p.34). His speech is circular: initially, he reflects on the possible consequences of the term social isolation – is it society or the crowds that should be avoided? –, this resumes the conception of the individual as a central element, navelphilia – the individual's exaggerated interest only in himself. And Rajagopalan questions, finally, taking into account what was reflected on the individual and society, should studies on language go from the outside to the inside or should the movement be the opposite? The stance on where language studies should start, whether from society or from the individual, according to Rajagopalan, are not interchangeable, but they mark an ideological stance.

"There is no subject without society and he cannot live trapped in a web", even for there to be interaction, at least two subjects are needed – and here the teacher makes a reference to the classic figure of Saussure –, in other words, the interaction itself and language can only happen with the individual, as an agent, but in society. It is therefore essential that there are both elements: individual and society.

The teacher's speech, in addition to meeting a current need: critically rethinking the term social isolation, also reflects on the role of society in language and causes a deeper reflection on the role of the individual in the (re)construction of society as a set of beings that only coexist or individuals that live together; share purposes and interact. Regardless of the ideological stance adopted, Rajagopalan recalls: "each monkey on its branch and there will be no monkey to tell the story"⁴.

⁴ The popular Brazilian expression "each monkey on its branch" means that each one must be concerned with what concerns him. The teacher plays with the expression in order to lead us to think about the need we have of the other as individuals who make up a collective.

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