Linguistic-discursive aspects for the analysis of the humorous discourse

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ABSTRACT

This review aims at describing the conference delivered by Sírio Possenti, by not only evaluating its content, but also by discussing about parts worthy to be highlighted. In his speech, Possenti analyses a set of texts made up by some genres that are part of the humoristic field (among others, jokes and cartoons) in order to show how the form, that is, the linguistic mechanisms are, in general, more important than the content itself in the production of a humorous effect. While he explains the functioning of such mechanisms in his analysis, Possenti shows the importance of humor to those interested in the studies of language, as the discourse analysts.

RESUMO

Esta resenha tem como objetivo fazer uma descrição da conferência apresentada por Sírio Possenti, não apenas avaliando seu conteúdo, como também discorrendo sobre pontos que merecem destaque. Em sua fala, Possenti analisa um conjunto de textos composto por alguns gêneros do campo humorístico (entre outros, piadas e charges) a fim de mostrar como a forma, isto é, os mecanismos linguísticos são, em geral, mais importantes do que o conteúdo em si na produção do efeito humorístico. Ao explicar o funcionamento de tais mecanismos em suas análises, Possenti explicita a importância do humor para os interessados nos estudos da língua/linguagem, como os analistas do discurso.
The virtual event Abralin Ao Vivo (Abralin ao Vivo – Linguists Online), promoted by Abralin (Associação Brasileira de Linguística) in partnership with CIPL (Comité International Permanent des Linguistes), ALFAL (Asociación de Lingüística y Filología de América Latina), SAEL (Sociedad Argentina de Estudios Lingüísticos) and LSA (Linguistic Society of America), was an initiative to promote an environment for discussions and reflections about various aspects of the linguistic studies during the quarantine caused by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. The event, with the contribution of important names of Linguistics, provided all those interested with an opportunity of free access to relevant content.

As a part of this virtual event, the conference “Why does humor interest linguists and discourse analysts”, promoted by Abralin (Brazilian Linguistics Association) and presented by Sírio Possenti, professor at the Linguistics Department of the University of Campinas (Unicamp), aimed at analyzing a set of texts mostly made up by jokes and at showing how linguistic mechanisms produce a humorous effect. Author of a vast work, which includes more than two hundred publications, as papers, book chapters and books, Possenti is one of the most important names in the Linguistics and Discourse Analysis fields in Brazil and, amongst other issues, is dedicated to the study of humor.

In this presentation, directed not only to (under)graduates in Languages and/or Linguistics, but also to those interested in language studies in general, Possenti emphasizes the analysis of the corpus rather than its underlying theoretical principals, revisiting previously published content, especially those found in Os humores da língua (POSSENTI, 1998) and in Humor, língua e discurso (POSSENTI, 2010). The presentation, in a didactic tone, is divided in three parts: in the first, which is very concise, Possenti explains two theoretical concepts to support his further analysis; during the second one, the longest of them, he analyses a set of jokes, showing how linguistic mechanisms produce a humorous effect; at the end, Possenti answers some questions raised by the viewers.

Regarding the theoretical concepts, and in order to support his analysis, Possenti briefly presents two theories. Firstly, he defends Freud’s proposition (FREUD, 2017), to whom a joke is more associated to its form than to its content. In other words, even though a joke has specific content and theme, it is its form that produces the desired effect – the laughter, sometimes. Secondly, Possenti defends that the main element in a joke is the surprise, in reference to Raskin (1984) and his theory about triggers, in which it is necessary that those who listen to/read a joke should make assumptions, inferences, or know specific issues in order to ‘fill in’ the linguistic gaps needed to its comprehension.
Besides these theoretical aspects, Possenti also mentions during his presentation, though indirectly, the concept of scripts, another notion developed by Raskin (1984), in which a joke has to be partially or totally compatible with two scripts that overlap each other and that would – theoretically – work in opposite ways. When a joke is only partially compatible with two scripts, one of them would not be acceptable as part of the interpretation.

Such notions, though briefly presented, are enough to the analysis of the corpus selected for this virtual conference. However, even though Possenti affirmed not to be his goal to deepen into theoretical aspects, he could have given, either at this point, or by the end of his speech, suggestions of bibliographical references so that the viewers could research about the subject further on.

In the following moment, which takes up the longest part of the presentation, Possenti analyses a set of jokes to show how linguistic mechanisms (be they of any type: phonetical/phonological, prosodic, lexical, semantic, syntactic,...) are used as triggers, resulting in the characteristic surprise found in this genre. In some cases, it is necessary to access a memory about the subject and/or theme, for example when he analyses a joke about Ayrton Senna e Nelson Piquet, two former Brazilian F-1 pilots. Besides jokes, Possenti talks about sentences considered as humorous, according to his essay Humor e grandes frases (POSSENTI, 2018). In general, his analysis, though relevant and enrichening, was restricted mostly to jokes and some cartoons. In his speech, Possenti could have included – had he had more time – other genres, as memes, given the importance of social networks in the current society.

In the Q&A section, Possenti discusses about important issues related to humor, such as the analysis of multimodal genres, the translation of jokes, the dissociation between laughter (according to BERGSON, 1983) and jokes, in which the laughter is not necessarily associated to jokes, but also takes places in other circumstances, for instance, as a response to exaggerated performances of clowns in a circus. His main contribution to this section happened in two moments. Firstly, regarding the politically correct, Possenti affirms to be interested in the polemics that oppose two sides: on one side, those to whom it is not correct to use words or expressions that degrade social minorities, not even in the field of humor; on the other, those who believe that humor only reveals the existence of prejudice in society and, thus, should be free. Secondly, based on Bourdieu’s theory of fields (BOURDIEU, 1989), Possenti restates his thesis that humor is a field (POSSENTI, 2010, 2018), and, to support his view, he compares similar traits between the humoristic and literary fields. It is important to highlight that other issues raised by the viewers during the conference were left aside by the moderator, for instances, the use of expressions as “black humor”. Such issues, despite being very controversial, would have enriched Possenti’s presentation.

As a whole, the conference is very productive to undergraduates in Languages/Linguistics and/or to those who would like to know the basics regarding how humor works based on linguistic aspects. On the other hand, to those who are researchers in that field, the presentation may be used to review some known concepts, without presenting new content, though.
REFERENCES


