

REVIEW

Language and society: approaches and distances in times of pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The live discusses the social changes resulting from the pandemic, analyzing the way some terms are being use, such as social detachment, and the meaning of these uses, which point to individualistic behavior in the face of the pandemic and a return to Rousseau's idea of the good savage, where society is identify as a problem. Rajagopalan suggests adopting new terms, such as replacing social distance with awareness. The author calls attention to the return of the magic of the “breathed word” during the pandemic, in which the voice takes on a previously forgotten importance. In addition, questioning certain common views in linguistics, he defends a study of language that considers society as an essential and constitutive component of its object, but that leaves space for the action of the agent subject, safe-guarding the possibility of ethical decisions.

RESUMO

A conferência aborda as mudanças sociais decorrente da pandemia, analisando a forma como alguns termos vêm sendo utilizados, como distanciamento social, e o significado desses usos, que apontam para um comportamento individualista frente à pandemia e um retorno à ideia de bom selvagem de Rousseau, em que a sociedade é identificada como um problema. Rajagopalan sugere a adoção novos termos, como a substituição de distanciamento social por conscientização. O linguista chama atenção para o retorno da magia da “palavra soprada” durante a pandemia, em que a voz assume uma importância antes esquecida. Além disso, questionando

certas visões comuns na linguística, defende um estudo da linguagem que considere a sociedade como componente essencial e constitutivo de seu objeto, mas que deixe espaço para a ação do sujeito agente, resguardando a possibilidade de decisões éticas.

KEYWORDS

Language. Society. Pandemic.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Linguagem. Sociedade. Pandemia.

The live here reviewed has as its theme the presentation and discussion of some reflections on language and social behavior in the context of the pandemic. The live is part of the virtual event Abralin ao Vivo, which organized by Abralin – Associação Brasileira de Linguística, in cooperation with CIPL – International Permanent Committee of Linguists, ALFAL – Association of Linguistics and Philology of Latin America, SAEL – Sociedad Argentina de Estudios Lingüístico and the LSA – Linguistic Society of America. The guest linguist for this live was Kanavillil Rajagopalan, who is a full professor in the area of Semantics and Pragmatics of Natural Languages at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP), with his curriculum: 6 books, more than 600 texts and the Academic Recognition Award "Zeferino Vaz" in 2016.

Rajagopalan begins his speech with a critique of current Brazilian context, which is going through not only a pandemic (viral) but also a pandemonium (political), and talks on the neglect of important government figures with real severity and coronavirus diseases (COVID - 19). At that moment, Rajagopalan enters in the subject of social isolation and show how this phenomenon establishes a bad effect on society. That said, it corroborates this position that brings the concept of "good savage", elaborated by the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was convinced that man is good by nature, being or living in society because of his moral degradation. Rousseau's concept is retake, because in times of pandemic, it seems that an idea of "good savage" shows yet another gift, revealing a kind of hatred in society and using sounds in general, which are a problem.

Moreover, Rajagopalan alludes to the concept of "umbilicus", a neologism used to characterize a current society, which is sick and blind, permeated by narcissism and self-centeredness. In this way, it is possible that society undergoes changes in its way of being and, consequently, a language as well. An example of this is the fact that there is a (re) meaning of some words, such as distance and social awareness. Thus, it is in the process of prohibiting agglomeration/crowds of people, however, the meaning that was given to the term social distance is wrong; the term society does not mean crowd or agglomeration, it is something completely different, more complex, and it cannot be

reduced to an agglomeration. In this sense, when it comes to choose, employment and meaning in Mexico is a rich and worrying discussion at the same time.

In addition to, he considers the term social distance is wrong; the term society does not mean crowd or agglomeration, it is something completely different, more complex, and therefore cannot be reduced to an agglomeration. In this sense, the question of choice, employment and lexical sense is a rich and worrying discussion at the same time.

This (re)meaning changes the way individuals look and interact with society and the world. For this reason, one of Rajagopalan's suggestions is to replace the use of the term distancing with social awareness, in order to put the well-being of the self in the background, giving priority to the well-being of the whole. Freire (2008, p. 29-30) quoted here:

awareness is a reality test, as the human being unveil it, taking distance from the world; takes a distance to admire him, discovering his capacity to "act consciously on the objectified reality", an act that founds human praxis, "the indissoluble unity between my action and my reflection on the world.

On top of that, is also necessary to think about the importance of speech or the "breathed word", according to the author, because during the quarantine period, more use of calls or voice messages to maintain social relationships. Rajagopalan points out that there is a rescue of the "magic" and importance of the word blown, which had been forgot. Based on this observation, the author states: "we are" playing "with words, but this is serious: it creates a way of looking at life and the world". After all, as he discusses in his text *Social aspects of Pragmatics*, translated into Portuguese in the book *Nova Pragmatics*, it is only possible to speak of Pragmatics considering the social aspects.

Rajagopalan argues that society is an essential and constitutive component of language: subtracting society from the notion of language, what remains is just a simulated language. The linguist is opposed to theoretical perspectives that place society as, at most, a background, focusing on the individual speaker (thesis of autonomism). Rajagopalan shows that if historically linguists have been divide between those who take the individual or society as the starting point (inside-out or outside-in), this choice is not merely a matter of personal taste or preference, but a decision that it is based on ideological views about the human being.

In addition, Rajagopalan also tackles the following question: if there is always at least one man talking to another man for language, then it is necessary to include society and culture in the definition of language. Some authors support this point, such as the philosopher Christopher Belshaw cited: "language is a social art". Another perspective, that is not mentioned by the linguist but which cover this issues is Émile Benveniste's *Enunciation Linguistics*, which sustains that "[...] it is in and through language that man constitutes himself as 'subject'; because language alone establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality" (Benveniste, 1958-2005, p. 286).

Also, during the live, Rajagopalan discusses in the live the question of the transitivity and uniqueness of human beings: according to anthropologist Robin Dunbar, quoted by the linguist, the difference between human beings and other gregarious beings is that, in addition to creating social bonds, we keep. To understand society, then, we need to understand social ties, as it is through which we

create and reflect a common culture. However, Rajagopalan warns the inclusion of society and culture in the reflection on language cannot end the individual. There must be space for the agent subject, the conscious subject, who is not trap in a web with no choice: on the contrary, there must be room for decisions equipped with ethics and criticality. That said, we believe that there is space from this discussion, to think about some issues inherent to the subject, such as possible spoils resulting from the pandemic in its identity, subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

Rajagopalan invites everyone to rethink the human condition and the individualism that prevails in our culture since the pandemic. The author calls on linguists and teachers to “take a deep breath and think about what we are doing”: the canonical visions that dominated thinking about language for a long time need be rethinking. Thus, understanding that our starting points based on ideological views, we are invited to rethink the constitution of our object and its approach, with a view to an uncertain future for two living organisms: language and human beings.

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