

REVIEW

Language and Society in times of isolation

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DATES

Received: 13/05/2020

Accepted: 25/05/2020

Published: 27/06/2020

HOW TO CITE

Noble, D. M.; Lafin, G. C.; Teixeira, M. T. (2020). Language and Society in times of isolation. *Revista da Abralín*, v. 19, n. 2, p. 1-5, 2020.

ABSTRACT

This text is a critical review about Prof. Rajagopalan's conference that took place on May 6, 2020, in the series of online conferences organized by Abralín during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main question of the lecturer is: what are we talking about when we are concerned with rethinking language in its social context in these times? In view of this questioning, Rajagopalan develops a series of considerations about the resignification of the meanings of terms in times of isolation. The considerations are made upon the assumption that language and society are mutually constitutive. In this perspective, the human condition would need to be placed prior to any aspect of language, in order to understand language as interwoven with society.

RESUMO

O presente texto é uma resenha crítica acerca da conferência do Prof. Rajagopalan que ocorreu em 6 de maio de 2020, na série de conferências online organizada pela Abralín durante a pandemia de COVID-19. O principal questionamento a que o conferencista se dedica é: de que estamos falando quando nos ocupamos de repensar a linguagem em seu contexto social nesses tempos? Diante deste questionamento, Rajagopalan desenvolve reflexões acerca da resignificação dos sentidos dos termos em tempos de isolamento, ancorando-as no pressuposto de que linguagem e sociedade são mutuamente constitutivas. Nesta perspectiva, a condição humana

precisaria ser colocada como anterior a qualquer aspecto, de forma a compreender a linguagem como entremeada à sociedade.

RESUMEN

Este texto es una reseña crítica acerca de la conferencia del Prof. Rajagopalan que ocurrió el 6 de mayo de 2020, en la serie de conferencias online organizadas por la Abralín durante la pandemia de COVID-19. El principal cuestionamiento al que el conferencista se dedica es el siguiente: ¿de qué estamos hablando cuando nos ocupamos de repensar el lenguaje en su contexto social en estos tiempos? Ante este cuestionamiento, Rajagopalan desarrolla reflexiones acerca de la resignificación de los sentidos de los términos en tiempos de aislamiento, basándose en la premisa de que lenguaje y sociedad son mutuamente constitutivas. En esa perspectiva, la condición humana debería estar frente a cualquier aspecto, para que se pueda comprender el lenguaje como parte de la sociedad.

KEYWORDS

Language. Society. Isolation.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Linguagem. Sociedade. Isolamento.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Lenguaje. Sociedad. Aislamiento.

Professor Rajagopalan's lecture took place on May 6, 2020, at the online series of conferences organized by Abralín during the COVID-19 pandemic. Professor Rajagopalan has a PhD degree in Applied Linguistics (PUC-SP). His research focuses on semantics and pragmatics.

Professor Kanavillil Rajagopalan's lecture begins with a thought on the specificity of the moment we are living in, which is precisely the reason for the theme of his speech, entitled "Language and society in times of isolation". The linguist always prioritized the analysis of language in its social context, but how can we think of language and society if we are deprived of social contact? Therefore, professor Rajagopalan adds the question: what are we talking about when we are concerned with rethinking language in its social context in these times?

To answer the question, Rajagopalan presents the present moment as a return to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of the good savage: the innocence and purity of the individual versus the society, which would only serve to corrupt him. Rousseau concept is also debated by John Dryden, an English

poet and playwright, who used this term to present the men in his essentially pure state, before being corrupted by society. It is a hard criticism to civilization.

To support his argument, Professor Rajagopalan brings the statement of Petra Costa, director of the Oscar-nominated documentary “The Edge of Democracy”, “the pandemic works to reveal the hatred for the humanity”. In times of pandemic individualism becomes more evident. The Professor brings as an example the use of masks by the individual as a virus prevention, since the mask would not only serve to protect who is wearing it, but also to protect the society as a whole. When the individual refuses to wear it for the commonweal, it makes explicit the hatred of the society that Petra Costa speaks of in her statement.

Another issue presented by the Professor is related to the impact that the pandemic as a historical event has on language. In the lecture, Rajagopalan comments on an interesting report by Folha de São Paulo about the impact of COVID-19 on language. In the report, there is an anecdote from Pasquale Cipro Netro with the current reframing of language terms: nobody wants to be considered “positive” anymore, since it refers to the results of the exams; “Distance”, on the other hand, now has a good connotation, since now it is important to be distant from people who don’t live with you. Professor Rajagopalan also comments on the transformation of the term “go viral”, joking that it is possible that the former users of this verb would abandon it for a while.

All the references used by the Professor lead to the understanding of language as a live organism. Language is a social entity and, therefore, moves according to the events of society, is not unaware of them. For this reason, it is important to think about the word terms adopted during the pandemic. Rajagopalan brought the reflection about the expression “social distance”, whose adoption was seriously debated in England. The use of the term “social distance” for the prohibition of agglomerations leads to a central issue: a language misinterpretation. This term leads to the association between society and crowd, although the term society has a much more complex meaning. In this sense, it would be more useful to encourage the adoption of the term “social awareness”, since it considers that awareness is the best way to educate people. In the term “social awareness”, the individual’s well-being is questioned and the well-being of the society in which this individual is inserted is considered. It goes through the notion of collective responsibility, bringing a vision of society that we should be thinking about in these pandemic times.

The use of the terms “social distance” and “social isolation” are a serious problem. According to Rajagopalan it is subject to a deep analysis. As we keep the distance from the others and do what really needs to be done at this moment, we are, in an apparent paradox, closer to the social. We are acting as individuals in a society. Rajagopalan, endowed with a sense of humor despite the difficult times, presents us with the concept of “umbigofilia”, a term he uses to name the selfishness of individuals.

This individualism is evident in these pandemic times, which is completely averse to the idea of society. Rajagopalan quotes the English anthropologist Robin Dunbar, author of the classic work “Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language”, which brings important points to the debate here. In this book, the author asks why socialization is so important for human beings, and he understands that, despite being gregarious beings, like monkeys, what sets us apart is that we are the

only ones capable of maintaining social bonds. Hence, it is possible to affirm that the gregarious instinct makes us come together, but it is the human in us that manages to nurture and maintain these social bonds.

In this sense, to understand society, it is necessary to understand the different social bonds that are created in it. At this point, it is necessary to emphasize the role of society in language. For Rajagopalan, society is an essential component, it is constitutive of language, it does not come after language. According to the researcher, studies of language that were from a social view of language bring a completely different point of view from those that think the individual a priori, the individual without the society.

Linguists, for Rajagopalan, would be divided between those who think that the concept of language comes from the individual towards the society and those who evaluate that language comes from the society to the individual. The professor questions whether, in fact, it does matter. A perspective that treats language as an attribute of man leaves ineligible the idea of language as an attribute of men, plural. A definition of language that does not include an element of society, according to Rajagopalan, is not a definition of language. It is a mere simulacrum of language, because to have language you need at least two people communicating as in the classic image of the Saussure's General Linguistics Course.

For Professor Rajagopalan, when we think about language, we think about who we are. What makes us a human being and not just a living being? Is it intelligence only? For Rajagopalan, no. It is necessary to think about the bonds that we manage to establish as human beings, and we establish them through language, a language that is based on a culture. It would not be a matter of taste or convenience: the starting point determines the result, because the starting point is based on an ideological position on the nature of the human being, the nature of society.

In his text "Social aspects of pragmatics", Rajagopalan brings the concept of pragmatics as the intersection between language and the social, which makes the title of the text redundant, as the author himself says. In his text, Rajagopalan argues his conceptualization with the example of AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome). According to the author, if we removed society from AIDS, the disease would not exist. For Rajagopalan, the relationship between language and society would be analogous of the relation exemplified above. Therefore, for the author, it is impossible to think one without the other, that is, language without society, and vice versa.

In this sense, what does the coronavirus have to teach us? It makes us think about language and society. For the Professor, this moment is already affecting our way of acting, of thinking, it is causing us to reevaluate our place in the world and the importance of our language. Just as we can only get out of this suffering by thinking collectively, we need to find a common language, thinking of language as something that brings men together, rethink it as intertwined with society. The human condition, therefore, must come before anything when discussing language. This is an enormous challenge and, at the same time, a possibility: somehow, as teachers, our role is to help students to come out of the "umbigofilia" ('the selfishness').

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