

REVIEW

Body and grammar: approaches to the study of embodied expressions

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ABSTRACT

This review aims to present and comment on three studies gathered at the round table entitled “The body on grammar: gestures in the construction of senses”. These studies have a common interest in the role of body language as a means of producing meanings. The researchers presented three approaches: (1) a sociolinguistic approach, (2) a cognitive-interactionist and intercultural perspective and (3) an intracultural approach, focused on variation of emblematic gestures. The use of technologies to solve problems so far marginally addressed in the scope of linguistic science is also an intersection point between the investigations exposed here. The purpose of this review is to motivate other researchers to seek more information about the topics presented here.



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

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DATES

Received: 04/06/2020

Accepted: 14/06/2020

Published: 08/07/2020

HOW TO CITE

Bopp da Silva, T. (2020). Body and grammar: approaches to the study of embodied expressions. *Revista da Abralín*, v. 19, n. 2, p. 1-5, 2020.

RESUMO

Esta resenha visa a apresentar e comentar três pesquisas reunidas na mesa-redonda intitulada “O corpo na gramática: gestos na construção dos sentidos”. Os referidos estudos possuem como interesse comum a dimensão corporal da linguagem como meio de produção de sentidos. São três as abordagens trazidas pelos pesquisadores: (1) uma de cunho sociolinguístico, (2) outra de feição cognitivo-interacionista e intercultural e, por fim, (3) uma terceira, relacionada à variação intracultural de gestos emblemáticos. A utilização de tecnologias para sanar problemas até então tratados marginalmente no âmbito da ciência linguística também constitui ponto de intersecção entre os trabalhos aqui expostos. Espera-se que a presente resenha possa motivar o leitor a buscar maiores informações sobre as pesquisas analisadas neste espaço.

KEYWORDS

Facial expressions. Embodied resources. Emblematic gestures.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Expressões faciais. Recursos corporificados. Gestos emblemáticos.

Linguistic epiphenomena, historically, have not been prioritized on the common agenda of Linguistics or even of other disciplines concerned with language, such as Psychology and Philosophy. Not that linguists - from whom pioneering in this field of research would be expected - did not recognize the relevance of providing treatment for phenomena linked to “supraverbal” signals - such as facial expressions and body gestures, which convey messages silently. Then, in order to include new problems on the linguistic agenda it is necessary that those problems are recognized in their magnitude and in their effects on the resolution of other problems. It is also necessary that methodological conditions to solve them are met.

Raquel Freitag (UFS/CNPq), Thiago Nascimento (UFMG-ICMI), and Regina Cruz (UFPA/CNPq) presented three studies which represent important steps in order to make progress towards understanding the role of the body on communication. These presentations integrated the roundtable entitled “The body on grammar: gestures in the construction of senses” which was broadcasted by “ABRALIN ao vivo. Linguists online”, an international series of conferences hosted by Brazilian Linguistics Association (ABRALIN). The three researches which will be discussed in this review constitute very innovative works. They are extremely relevant in the linguistic area and they open opportunities for many collaborations, since their topics remain not explored in Brazil.

The first speaker, Raquel Freitag, presented some proposals for the methodological treatment of ambiguity in pragmatic-discursive approaches. Unlike in grammar studies, in which the investigator solves ambiguity by means of linguistic processing methods, in contextual studies - in which clues of disambiguation are provided by paralinguistic elements and embodied resources - the treatment of ambiguity presents more difficulties. Freitag characterizes the production of meaning as a linguistic epiphenomenon, that is, as a package within which linguistic clues and body clues (gestures and facial expressions) are integrated. The separation of these elements and the prioritisation in favor of one over another is only consequence of analytical options and methodological restrictions. Doubtless, methodological limitations seem to represent the main barrier to the production of meaning analysis.

Regarding to this problem, Raquel Freitag presented her ongoing study “The face of prejudice: processing linguistic variation”. This project seeks to develop a database of facial expressions which will be available to those researchers who aim to relate emotional reactions to linguistic clues. Since there is no database of this type in Brazil yet, scholars who want to investigate expressions of emotions among Brazilian speakers have to depart from an European database. For that matter, Freitag

contributes to the Brazilian scientific community by producing a database of linguistic epiphenomena appropriate to the Brazilian socio-cultural reality. Although facial expressions of emotions are known as being culturally universal, there is no evidence to support such a statement. Freitag's research, in this sense, represents an important contribution to the investigation of emotions and their cultural and universal aspects. The composition of Freitag's database, however, does not consist of mere catalog of facial expressions: Freitag, by means of this enterprise, seeks to understand the role of the body on grammar. She departs from the idea that embodied resources and facial expressions can also be systematized and, therefore, their use is governed by rules, as well as grammar is. Her objective, therefore, is to discuss how to integrate verbal and body language in a methodologically feasible way.

In accord with Cognitive-Interactional Linguistics and Cognitive Linguistics, Thiago Nascimento presented the study "The body in interaction: a cognitive-interactional analysis", which addresses the synchronism between communicative acts - expressed at the cognitive level, that is, at the language level - and embodied resources, which are active at the metacommunicative level. Nascimento's leading question is: how do people in interaction make use of embodied resources to carry out metacommunicative acts? Embodied resources can be understood as means of expression used by participants - such as gestures, gaze, body posture, movements and prosody - in order to articulate their actions in the interaction. They comprise a range of devices responsible for disambiguate and negotiate meanings produced in the verbal interaction. Besides this, they are used as resources for interpersonal maintenance, by monitoring the acceptability of other communicative acts. The employment of embodied resources as operational concepts allows the researcher to carry out more holistic analyzes than those ones restricted to linguistic surface data. By adopting this theoretical arsenal and new audiovisual technologies, Nascimento brings invaluable contributions to the studies of language in interaction. From these advances, this research field, which has relied basically on sound material and intuitive visual cues so far, has now possibilities to address other communicative cues in a proper way.

Regina Cruz presented the third study: the partial results of the ongoing research "When the body speaks: mapping symbolic gestures in communities of practices in Pernambuco and Alagoas", which is being carried out within her research group. The communities under study are those of bilingual Libras¹/Portuguese deaf citizens, quilombolas and indigenous, all of them composed of Portuguese speakers and residents of Brazilian territory. The study seeks to verify the variation of emblematic gestures in an intracultural context. Lascarides and Stone (2009) consider two types of gestures: speech illustrator gestures, which co-occur with speech, and emblematic gestures. The latter does not depend on speech to produce meaning, which is stable and socially shared such as the linguistic sign. According to Matsumoto and Hwang (2013), interculturally, the same emblematic gesture can carry different meanings, the same meaning can be expressed by different gestures, or, even, there may be gestures applied to particular cultures. The question raised by Cruz, however,

¹ Brazilian Sign Language

concerns to the possibility of variation of emblematic gestures within the same culture. Regina Cruz, by seeking an answer to this problem, presents an important innovation in the field of the Brazilian linguistics, since the studies of variation in Brazil are studies of verbal structures. In addition, her efforts will result in an important and innovative database of emblematic gestures used among Brazilian Portuguese speakers. Although the study is still not concluded, preliminar results already detected some variable forms of emblematic gestures within Brazilian culture.

The three studies described above represent relevant scientific contributions with promising social impacts. It is noteworthy, first, that the three surveys contribute to consolidate the body as a level of linguistic analysis. This is possible because the technological apparatus used by the researchers, such as digital video recording camera, softwares and scanners, allows scholars to operationalize phenomena hitherto treated with imprecision, such as facial expressions. This important step in linguistic science allows to introduce a range of studies in the fields of language in interaction, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, among other disciplines. In addition, some areas of psychology can benefit from this progress, such as the field of emotions and social cognition.

Another aspect to be highlighted in the three works is their concern to map the Brazilian linguistic-cultural reality. It is known that the adoption of theoretical-analytical models idealized in a given socio-cultural context can result in distortions when transposed to the analysis of facts from other realities. Using the appropriate tools in order to understand a particular sociocultural reality is a trend that has been spreading among the humanities - and with which linguistics needs to be in tune. Decolonizing knowledge is necessary. This new paradigm is exemplary demonstrated in the studies examined here.

By winning science, society wins. Since language - by means of verbal and non-verbal devices - constitutes a social and cultural tool used for humans to communicate, build identities and perform acts, it is crucial to unravel how those devices interact. Taking into account the importance of language non-verbal dimension may be a helpful way to recognize speaker's needs, intentions and desires which are not always addressed by verbal devices. And this can be a step towards a world of social welfare. It is noteworthy that certain hostile messages which circulate in society are not always explicit in verbal language. Often, a seemingly innocent joke takes on an outrageous meaning depending on the speaker's body configuration. In several cases, it is difficult to detect these clues and, thus, to denounce those ones who make use of embodied resources in the way to produce messages which spread intolerant ideas. In this sense, including embodied resources in the field of Linguistics is consequential in order to understand the hidden meanings that embodied messages may convey. Knowing the strength of body language, therefore, represents not only an advance for Linguistics, but a stride in the direction of a society more committed to respect and dignity.

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