

REVIEW

To read beyond the word: instruments for the analysis of political discourses

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ABSTRACT

This review critically discusses the conference *Linguistic Instruments for the analysis of political discourse* given by professor Uli Reich during the event *Abralin ao Vivo*, in which the author presents linguistic concepts from the field of formal pragmatics that may be used to unveil the ideology behind texts and utterances. More specifically, Reich presents the concepts of common ground (STALNAKER, 2002), Questions under discussion (ROBERTS, 2012), conventional implicatures (POTTS, 2005) and “table” (FARKAS; BRUCE, 2010), and then analyzes excerpts from the interministerial meeting held by Jair Bolsonaro’s government on April 22nd, 2020.

Through the analysis, the linguist demonstrates which common grounds are projected by the discourses of the interlocutors present in the meeting. Reich’s talk, besides being a class about the role of Linguistics in the understanding of contemporaneity, provides us with tools for the development of a critical reading of the world.



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RESUMO

Esta resenha discute criticamente a conferência *Instrumentos Linguísticos para análise do discurso político* proferida pelo professor Uli Reich no evento *Abralin ao Vivo*, em que o autor apresenta conceitos linguísticos do campo da pragmática formal que podem ser utilizados para compreender a configuração ideológica de textos ou enunciados. Mais especificamente, Reich apresenta os conceitos de fundo comum ou *common ground* (STALNAKER, 2002), *Questions under discussion* (ROBERTS, 2012), implicaturas convencionais (POTTS, 2005) e “mesa” (FARKAS; BRUCE, 2010), para então analisar trechos da reunião interministerial realizada em 22 de Abril de 2020 pelo governo de Jair Bolsonaro. Por meio da análise, o professor

demonstra quais fundos comuns são projetados pelos discursos proferidos pelos interlocutores presentes. A fala de Reich, além de ser uma aula sobre o papel da Linguística na compreensão da atualidade, fornece subsídios para o desenvolvimento de uma leitura crítica do mundo.

KEYWORDS

Political discourse. Common ground. Questions under discussion. Conventional implicatures. Table. Formal pragmatics.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Discurso político. *Common ground*. *Questions under discussion*. Implicaturas convencionais. Mesa. Pragmática formal.

How can Linguistics help us understand the world we live in? In the conference entitled *Linguistic Instruments for the analysis of political discourse*, the linguist Uli Reich (Freie Universität Berlin) presents possibilities for the understanding of the ideology behind language. In this sense, the researcher and professor, whose studies focus mainly on Linguistic Theory and Analysis, provides us with instruments and tools from the field of formal pragmatics to unveil what is behind or even implicit in discourses. By focusing on political discourses in the context of the pandemic in Brazil, we can observe how utterances not only reveal but also reinforce particular world views.

To start with, Reich presents the concepts which will be used in his analysis, and makes it clear that it is the role of Linguistics to scrutinize discourses so as to “clarify” them without recommending a specific political position. His main objective is to identify which common grounds (STALNAKER, 2002) are projected by political discourses. Thus, he explains the concept of common ground by showing how certain utterances carry presuppositions which, in turn, reveal world views. When someone says, for instance, that “Even the coconut king stopped eating coconut cake¹”, the word “even” implies that such an attitude was not expected from the coconut king. Common ground has to do, thus, with presuppositions, beliefs or “truths” that are taken for granted and are thus implicit in a certain utterance. In the communication process, we project a common ground to our interlocutors, that is, we establish a common ground from which we speak, which is a kind of world view that we project for those who are listening to us. It is important to highlight, thus, that the common ground is not the thematic topic of the conversation, since it refers to what is in the background and to assumptions that are implicitly shared by interlocutors.

1 All the excerpts are presented in Portuguese in the talk. Here, I have decided to present them in English – trying to remain as faithful as possible to the pragmatic meaning of the original – to facilitate comprehension.

Therefore, in order to get to the common ground, Reich highlights the importance of first identifying the Questions under discussion (ROBERTS, 2012). This analytic tool shows that every utterance refers to (or responds to) one or more questions, which are often implicit in discourse. Thus, identifying the implicit questions in discourse helps in the process of understanding what is actually being discussed. The author also presents the concept of conventional implicatures (POTTS, 2005), which has to do with the implications that can be inferred from an utterance. The sentence “The coconut king is fat but happy”, for example, suggests that those who are fat in general are not happy. In this case, that is done through the use of the conjunction “but”. At last, Reich presents the concept of “table” (FARKAS; BRUCE, 2010), which refers to what is at issue in discourse, that is, what is set for discussion so as to build a common ground in a communicative interaction. For him, the “table” would be the difference between individual and common convictions, that is, it can be understood as the conclusions or visions that are shared among the interlocutors based on the interaction.

In order to demonstrate how to identify the ideological configuration of political discourse, Reich presents an analysis of excerpts from the interministerial meeting organized in Brasília on April 22nd, 2020, in the context of the pandemic in Brazil. This meeting, which was later presented by the media in the form of a video, aimed at (at least supposedly) discussing and identifying governmental actions to combat Covid-19. Reich’s analysis demonstrates, however, that the common ground projected by the discourses in that meeting are an evidence of a world view that actually denies the intention of fighting the pandemic. By analyzing excerpts uttered by Walter Souza Braga Netto, Paulo Guedes, Jair Bolsonaro, Ricardo Salles, Gustavo Montezano, Tarcísio Gomes de Freitas and Campos Neto, Reich presents us with the political perspectives of Bolsonaro’s government, highlighting which world views are shared by those interlocutors.

In order to conduct such analysis, Uli Reich identifies, in different utterances taken from the interministerial meeting, the Questions under discussion (which define the topic of the interaction), the assertions and their possible conventional implicatures (which correspond to what is said or to what is not said about the subject), the common ground that the speakers project for their interlocutors (that is, their world view) and, finally, the common ground projected by the utterance (which would be the modified world view that is a result of the interaction). The linguist shows, thus, how the process of identifying presuppositions, projected common grounds and conventional implicatures helps us to better understand the ideological configuration of specific discourses.

By analyzing utterances by Paulo Guedes, for example, who affirms that China *should* finance a Marshall plan in the context of the pandemic, Reich shows that the politician assumes that China is responsible for the problems brought by the new coronavirus. In the utterance “China should finance a Marshall Plan to help everyone who was affected (by coronavirus)”, the Question under discussion is “Who should finance a Marshall Plan?”, the conventional implicature is that China is guilty, the common ground is that “those responsible for the pandemic should pay for its negative impacts” and that “someone should finance a Marshall Plan” and, at last, the projected common ground is that China, since it is responsible for the crisis, should pay for the Marshall plan (and that the plan is a necessary measure in this context).

Reich also discusses other utterances using the same linguistic analytic tools. He demonstrates that when Guedes says that it is not possible to fight inequality but that the government should “make use of the discourse of inequality”, the politician projects a common ground that it is necessary to forge a discourse about inequality so as to reelect the president. Bolsonaro, while criticizing the press, says that “we cannot talk to the press at all, that is the best outcome”, which implies an understanding that politicians should avoid the press. Campos reinforces this view of the press as a threat saying that “the more information you have, the more afraid you are, because the press creates fear”, which opposes the common ground that information from the press is important in a democracy and projects the view that it is necessary to avoid what comes from the media since information may negatively affect business. Bolsonaro also affirms that means of communication in general “invent racism”, which leads us to understand that his discourse presupposes that he is not racist and that racism is an invention from the media (and that the press lies).

Reich makes it clear, then, that the projection of a non-democratic common ground is reinforced by the discourse of other politicians, such as when Salles affirms that the moment when the press focuses on the issue of Covid is an opportunity to “move the cattle”² and change. In other words, he sees the pandemic as useful for the accomplishment of the government’s objectives and even says that the congress “is not necessary”. Montezano follows the same line of thought by saying that “It’s an appropriate moment for us to take advantage of this”, projecting a common ground that it is indeed possible to act outside the democratic domain to achieve their objectives. There are also some excerpts which project an understanding that Bolsonaro is a great leader by comparing him to Roosevelt and Churchill.

By applying linguistic instruments from formal pragmatics, Uli Reich demonstrates what is at issue, or what is on the “table” during the interministerial meeting. His analysis points out that the analyzed utterances are evidence of specific world views shared by these politicians: the discourse on inequality must be used aiming at the reelection, it is necessary to avoid the information from the press, the pandemic might be useful for the government, the government can act outside the democratic realm, and Bolsonaro is not racist but a great leader.

Reich makes it clear that his conclusions may be nothing new for his audience. However, the importance of his work lies in exemplifying how Linguistics can provide us with instruments for the analysis of discourses so as to demonstrate scientifically what is behind one’s utterances. Although we know that both French and Critical Discourse Analysis present several tools for the investigation of the ideological nature of language, I claim that Reich’s talk provides us with tools from formal pragmatics that, when used to analyze political discourse, exemplify a type of exercise that a reader (and a citizen) can (and should) adopt while trying to understand discourses surrounding us. In this sense, his talk is not only relevant for its demonstration of Linguistics’ relevance for the understanding of language and society, but also for the possibilities it presents in terms of developing a critical

2 The expression in Portuguese is “ir passando a boiada”, which means moving forward with one’s actions or plans (in spite of everything else).

stance. I believe his talk may actually work as a source of inspiration for educators interested in promoting among students, as Paulo Freire (2011) would say, the capacity to read not only the word but also the world.

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