SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE AND INTERPRETATION

Eni P. Orlandi  
DL – IEL/LABEURB  
Unicamp

In the field of human sciences, whenever we think science, the question of interpretation arises. How to think scientifically in the face of the interpretation? In these cases, we think that those in which the statute of interpretation is included as part of the analyst’s work give emphasis to the question of the form of the writing as a fundamental part of the scientificalness. To talk about this, we take the discourse analysis as a science itself, which gives a precise place to its relationship with the interpretation.

To talk of the writing of Discourse Analysis (1), thinking the field of human and social sciences, is also to practice the exercise of the interspace (E. Orlandi, 1996), now in relationship to the metalanguage: Without being in the domain of formalisms, we place ourselves in a space that is not that of common sense. In the exercise of the interspace to practice a writing that is inscribed in the order of language knowledge in the Discourse Analysis domain, it is necessary to know how to connect description and interpretation without confounding them.

I think that there already is an ambiguity in the “Writing of the Discourse Analysis” theme that is part of our reflection: On the one hand, it deals with thinking the writing in the theoretical production of Discourse Analysis, distinguishing it from formal linguistics, enunciation theories, pragmatics, psychoanalysis, sociolinguistics, etc. – and, on the other hand, the writing that formulates the analysis itself and its results, working its reader-effect, in other words, the manner in which the analysis is read and its functioning in the reader, exposing him to the textualization of the discourse (in its semantic density, its linguistic-historical materiality) that is the object of the
analyst’s observation.

In any case, be it on one side or the other, this writing cannot elide something that is fundamental: the fact that the relationship among subject, language and history (2), which is a constant of Discourse Analysis, produces an injunction in the analyst’s writing. This writing must be done in a manner that permits elaboration of the presence and the statute of what ideology is, making visible the confrontation between the symbolic and the political. These I think, are the basic requirements. And they affirm a principle of Discourse Analysis: language is not transparent.

I would say that, if these are the internal requirements for the Discourse Analysis, there is an external requirement that cannot be ignored. This writing, this formulation, should decide the “dilemma” that is placed in its field since the remotest rudiments of knowledge that we could retroactively call discursive. In the case of Discourse Analysis, does this formulation, this writing, make it a tékhnē (science) or an empeiria (practical knowledge)? If, at its origin, this was perhaps a question, today its development and practice permit us to affirm, without hesitation, that it constitutes a science that, proceeding to a passage from the notion of function to one of functioning, and by the institution of analytic procedures that permit a rupture in the relationship between practice and theory, it establishes its own object – the discourse – its unity of analysis (the texts), with theoretical prepostulates that delimit a disciplinary field and in relation to which its results make sense. The establishment of this object produces consequences on the knowledge in the domain of human sciences, presenting itself there as an instrument of discovery and also of shifting the limits of its field (E. Orlandi, 1996). On the other hand, and not less important, it produces consequences in the field of Linguistics.
From the methodological point of view, delimiting itself from Hermeneutics and Content Analysis on the one hand, and from strict Linguistic analysis on the other, the writing of Discourse Analysis faces an arduous clash with interpretation. I have explicitated this position, saying that Discourse Analysis works (on) the limits of interpretation. More fundamentally, and this is a particular gain of my reflection, separating (and articulating) what is Theoretical Disposition and what is Analytical Disposition of the interpretation, I can affirm that Discourse Analysis does not interpret the texts that it analyzes but, instead, the results of the analysis of which these texts constitute the corpus. I will come back to this point further on. At this point, I can resume this saying that the writing of the Discourse Analysis must lead the language researcher to perceive the constitution of the gesture of interpretation in its materiality in the text, at the moment in which the meaning makes sense. The analyst departs from the analysis of formulations and his writing must make visible the form of analysis in the continuous beat of his own analytical gesture between description and interpretation (M. Pêcheux, 1981), which should lead the language researcher to comprehend the gestures that portray the formulations in the text. Therefore, the analyst has the text as the object of observation and his comprehension of the discourse as the objective of the analysis. With his writing, he will then make this comprehension possible.

A shifting that accompanies this regards the notion of form itself – in the case of material form – that I have made to slip from linguistics (where the materiality is identified with the linguistic form, the norm, etc.) to discourse, in which the notion of materiality gains other meanings, resulting from the notion of concrete reality in the materialistic filiation. The manner in which I define material form (linguistic-historical) shifts the analysis of positivistic filiation to materialistic filiation.
Materialistic filiation elaborated, however, in relation to what I would call “infantile sickness” of the discourse analysis that, at the time (1980’s), received the incisive criticism of J.J. Courtine (1982). This criticism was directed to what I would designate as the illusion of the schoolmaster and the militant workman who, together, produce a political illusion in the frame of the preoccupations and objectives of discourse analysis.

I could resume this question by saying that discourse analysis appeared at the time as the practice of reading political texts supported by the establishment of linguistic dispositions with the purpose of overcoming a localized incapacity – the incapacity of readers of political discourses. It would function as a “linguistic prosthesis placed at the service of a pedagogy of the truth” (J.J. Courtine, ibid). In this sense, it is not only a theoretical apparatus but, with the intent of making a non-subjective reading, is defined as a reformist policy anchored in pedagogy. We might say that it is a pedagogical illusion that establishes a division in the reading of the truth between “educators” (the faction that sees) and students (the masses that do not yet see) and of a word of reiterated order. “It is necessary to teach how to read the real under the opaque, ambiguous and plural surface of the text” (J.J. Courtine, ibid). The objective would be “conscientization”, in other words, an “orthopedic instrument”, responsibility of the schoolmaster and the militant workman. However, already at the time, M. Pêcheux did not go along with this illusion. As we know, he does not propose transparency but, instead, opaqueness. “Expose the reading eye to the opaqueness of the text” (1981). Aside from this, the preoccupation with working the “thread of the discourse and analyzing the linearity of the chain based on the plurality of the functioning (paraphrasic reformulations, enunciative hints, manners of interlocking the text...)” (J.J. Courtine, ibid), observing the manners of reading and the place of the subject reader leads to the
discourse analysis not staying in this position, which M. Pêcheux denominates as “the imbecility of natives of politics” (1981a), and which I could also translate as “the imbecility of the militants”.

These are the “blunders” that occur in discourse analysis when put into practice in a difficult theoretical conjuncture that allies Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Linguistics and begins to be part of academic disciplines. As a discourse analyst, I have avoided these “blunders” because, in my writing, I do not favor Political Discourse, I accept contradiction and, being a linguist by origin, I did not think Linguistics as an orthopedic instrument, a setup to “apply” to social problems. From the beginning, I have thought the language in its own order (E. Orlandi, 1970), as a significant system, subject to flaws, inscribing itself in history to signify, in the necessary production of equivocality. I work the language/discourse relationship as that which exists between the basic material condition and the process. More than this, in the order of significance, the language/discourse/text relationship interests me. Nor did I favor either one of the sides (the enunciator’s or the reader’s). Instead, I work the relationship between them. And, above all, I work the fact of interpretation, observing its limits, at its limits, allying interpretation and ideology, considering the political as relations of force that symbolize themselves or, in other words, the political resides in the fact that the meanings have directions determined by the form of social organization. And, finally, I do not deny the fact that Discourse Analysis is a discipline of interpretation (and not a natural science). Summarizing, I would say that what Courtine (ibid) correctly criticizes is the reduction of discourse analysis to a practice of reading political texts and that what he proposed is that, to go beyond this, discourse analysis should be practiced as a device that permits analysis of the political textualization, which is already an important step in the
comprehension of the relationship between symbolism and the relationships of power (and no longer the linguistic machinery and the political texts).

On my part and going beyond, I try to work not only the political textualization but the politics of the language that materializes in the body of the test, in other words, in the formulation, by gestures of interpretation that take the shape of discourse textualization. I am interested in the historical determination of the signification processes, the subjectivation processes, the identification and individualization processes of the subjects and the constitution of meanings, as well as their formulation and circulation. This changes the meaning of the political. I try to abandon the pedagogical militancy that, on the one hand, occurs in the comfort of the practice of reading political text, having, on the other hand, the practice of a reading policy. My objective is the analysis of the political practice of the meaning production in which I do not intend the passing from opaqueness to transparency in the exercise of the different possibilities to signify but, through the analysis, I try to free the reader for his history of signification. All of this is because, when I think the formulation in the discursive perspective, the idea of functioning makes me see the language dynamically, as basic material condition (subject to flaws) of discursive processes producing (itself in the) equivocality. This means that: I seek the signification by understanding it as ideological practice (interpretive).

However, and it is necessary that this be said, although I am taking this stance on discourse analysis, I am not relinquishing my political position. In other words, when I choose discourse analysis but neither hermeneutics nor content analysis, I commit myself to a position marked in the history of science and in relation to how I work with the language. What I refuse is the arrogance of the position that thinks that it better comprehends the language and can change the world at will, by the omnipotence of its
“conscience”. Omnipotence present many times in the grammatical (because, by position, it is ignorant of the political) and in the assistentialistic pragmatics (because it thinks that, considering the political, it can dominate it). In the discourse analysis filiated to the work of M. Pêcheux, no adjectives are used (“linguistic” discourse analysis, “critical” discourse analysis, etc.) because its notions and procedures are its definition. The political extent of a theory is not defined by “intentions” (give consciousness to those who do not have it (?)) or by “examples” (the boy from the northeast goes hungry) or by political declarations made to the media (in chomskyan style) but exactly by the theoretical ground that it builds. Therefore, we consider the political as basic in the theory. I do not propose a production that later will be applied to correct “deficits”, “reclaim” identities, “shape” consciousness, etc.: from my point of view, the discourse analysis to which I am filiated offers the practice of knowledge that is politically referenced and sociohistorically sustained. I do not place myself in the perspective of “politically correct” in science but of politically explicit: I expound and sustain the theoretical filiation that, in its politics, identifies me in the field of the sciences and technologies. The theory is political. And the discourse analysis filiated to M. Pêcheux “knows” that. This is one of the reasons why I practice it.

With his writing, the analyst, in the order of the discourse, must make the subject aware of the fact that he is defined as a significant, historical, material subject in his relationship with the symbolic system. The analyst’s writing elaborates (formulates) the possibility of its interpretation in a disposition, creates the consistency of the analysis that projects the analyst’s position in which the constitutive alterity is recognized (the memory, which includes forgetfulness), reintroducing the contradictory material density of the language and not dissecting or eliding it.
By the writing of the discourse analysis, by understanding the meanings, we think as subjects. Not because we know more but because we ignore less in our non-transparency. Just as language, which also is not transparent. When the analyst thinks as a subject of knowledge, he does this because he actually constitutes a place where, through his writing, he puts other manners of reading at our disposal. At the same time, on the reading plane (of hearing), he must be capable of constructing a position-reader that practices this new manner of reading. The analyst does not have to fill a place of interpretation for another but, by his writing, construct the possibility of making the reader work his ideological disposition of interpretation by the effects of the relation worked by the analyst with the materiality of the text. If the interpretation is a mechanism that uses the paraphrase (the same) and the polysemy (the different), the analyst’s writing is the trait that must expose the reader to the space, to the slack opened by the interpretation, interrogating him by the process of his comprehension. This notion of writing completely fulfills the requirements of both the discourse definition (effects of meanings between speakers) and the position in terms of the materiality of the language and the history, that of a consequent praxis that restores the text to its social and historical process. Therefore, the analyst does not retain it in his hands, neither interpreting nor attributing a place of interpretation to the reader but, on the contrary, by mediation of the theory and the comprehension, assures that the reader effect is produced in its consequences. Questioning the manners of reading based on and with a theory, the analyst makes the gesture of interpretation of the subject return to himself, not outside but in the set of gestures that constitute society and history. And this is the assurance of its scientificalness.

Notes
(1) I have maintained a preference for the form “Discourse Analysis” as opposed to “Analysis of the Discourse”. Why? This question arose in French because the difference between “of” and “du” was relevant since the effect of the meaning with “of” was “a” discourse whereas “du” referred to discourses in general. From my point of view, in our case, Discourse Analysis better produces this effect of discourse taken in general, as an object and not as a discourse (of the political discourse, of the legal discourse, etc.).

(2) Theorizing on the relationship of these three elements, and constituting their object, this writing distinguishes itself from psychoanalysis because it does not have the subject as an object, from history because it does not have the facts as the object and from linguistics because it does not have the language as an object. Although all of these objects are of interest in its relationships.

Bibliography


Orlandi, 1970 Notas ao Estudo do Verbo Master’s degree dissertation, USP.

