Interview with Johannes Angermuller

Luciana Salazar Salgado*
Letícia Clares**
Translator: Gustavo Primo***

Johannes Angermuller is graduated in Sociology and Linguistics, with a Ph.D. in Discourse Analysis from a joint degree program of the University of Paris 12, France, and the University of Magdeburg, Germany. He currently teaches in the fields of Discourse, Languages and Applied Linguistics at the Open University, in Milton Keynes (UK), the Centre for Applied Linguistics of the University of Warwick, in Coventry (UK), and the Centre d'étude des mouvements sociaux da École des hautes études en sciences sociales, in Paris (France). Angermuller is also the founder president of DiscurseNet – International Association for Discourse Studies. His most remarkable works verse about the scientific and the political discourses, especially post-structuralism, and he is currently interested in Science and Technology Studies, as well as qualitative and theoretical research on discursive constructions of the subject and enunciative pragmatics.

* PPGL, PPGLit-UFSCar/IEB-USP, Ph.D. in Linguistics, researcher and university professor, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1052-0726.

* PPGL-UFSCar, Ph.D. candidate in Linguistics, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7501-1984.

* Unesp, M.A. in Literary Studies (PPGLit-UFSCar), technical assistant in the Brazilian Virtual Exchange Program - Unesp, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8431-9144.

Salgado and Clares: In your work "Discours académique et gouvernementalité entrepreneuriale. Des textes aux chiffres", published in 2013,[1] you referred to Laclau (1990),[2] Latour (2001),[3] and Luhmann (1998),[4] stating that "*A la societé s'est substitué le terrain ouvert, instable et hererogène du social, dans lequel nous devons en quelque sorte naviguer, en depit des inegalités de terrain, des chausse-trappes et des points aveugles* [...]" (p. 81).

We would like you to comment on that, considering the current global pandemic context, now in its second year (2021), in which communicational exchanges and the distribution of information have intensified, especially through digital technologies. Salgado discusses hyperdigitization in the following terms: "the currently hegemonic distribution of discourses occurs through digital devices, in which the screen serves as starting point to produce meaning. In fact, the very projection of a text on a screen results from sophisticated operations that involve data packages traveling through a digital network and combined according to previously set programming." (SALGADO, 2021).[5] With this in mind, would you say that these "*chausse-trappes*" and "*points aveugles*" you mention have acquired a new aspect nowadays?

Angermuller: I wrote that piece ten years ago with the idea in mind that there is a continuous conflict between practices of

1 ANGERMULLER, Johannes. Discours académique et gouvernementalité entrepreneuriale. Des textes aux chiffres. *In*: LEBARON, Frédéric; ANGERMULLER, Johannes; TEMMAR, Malika (ed.). **Les discours sur l'économie**. Paris: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2013. p. 71-84.

2 LACLAU, Ernesto. **New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time**. London: Verso, 1990.

3 LATOUR, Bruno. **A esperança de Pandora**: ensaios sobre a realidade dos estudos científicos. São Paulo: EDUSC, 2001.

4 LUHMANN, Niklas. **Organización y decisión**. Autopiesis, acción y entendimiento comunicativo. Barcelona: Anthropos; Universidad Iberoamericana, 1998.

5 SALGADO, Luciana Salazar. A dimensão algorítmica do rumor público e o viver na pandemia. *In*: MOTA, André (org.). **Sobre a pandemia**: experiências, tempos & reflexões. São Paulo: Hucitec, 2021. p. 77-99.

unifying and of diversifying the global social space. Deleuze and Guattari (1988), in A Thousand Plateaus[6], have theorized this in terms of territorialization and deterritorialization. Academia is a good case in point. With its many hyperspecialized fields it is an extremely heterogeneous space, and rankings, indices, and other devices of commensurabilization have brought about a certain degree of homogeneity and commensurability across fields and countries. And this tendency can be problematic if one thinks of the stifling effect of numbers on scientific creativity.

Academia is my example for theorizing the relationship of deterritorialising practices of the social *versus* the territorialized structures of global society today. Yet over the last ten years, the forces of global territorialization have become even more dominant, especially because of the triumph of social technologies. Social technologies have pervaded the global social space in so many different and quotidian ways. As a consequence, the social is losing its opacity and asperity and hitherto protected niches have become the object of mechanisms of control. Love now goes through Tinder, which has revolutionized the way people mate, while Trump's Twitter account dominated the political sphere for many years. This is a fundamental rearrangement of global power forces which go both much deeper into everyday life and reach much further across the globe than ever before.

One aspect of this development is the creation of very few hypervisible subject positions in the global digital space that capture the attention of large but voiceless masses. Such concentration of visibility can be observed in academia (ANGERMULLER; HAMANN, 2019)[7] but also in society

6 DELEUZE, Gilles; GUATTARI, Félix. **A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia**. London: The Athlone Press, 1988.

7 ANGERMULLER, Johannes; HAMANN, Julian. The Celebrity Logics of the Academic Field. The Unequal Distribution of Citation Visibility of Applied Linguistics Professors in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. **Journal for Discourse**

more generally, given a widespread fascination for celebrity (ANGERMULLER, 2018)[8].

Salgado and Clares: The issue of hyperdigital communication is part of a broader discussion about the so-called fake news, a phenomenon that is not new but has certainly been reinforced by its new means of diffusion. In your book ***¿Quién dijo posestructuralismo? La creación de una generación intelectual***, published in Spain in 2019, you say that "*Leer textos en nuevos contextos no hace que su interpretación sea menos verdadera*". We would like you to address this statement considering the present time, in which texts carrying false information are very often read as true. These reading practices seem to be functioning in a very automated way, virtually embedded in all social organizations of the current period, which the geographer Milton Santos (1996, 2000)[9] designated as the technical-scientific-informational period. In message applications such as WhatsApp, for example, discursive deixis has seen some important transformations, repositioning the guarantor, among other things. In social networks like TikTok, there is a blurring between fiction and reality. What is happening with the signs that guide the production of meaning and sustain the possibility of interpretation of these and other kinds of contents?

Angermuller: We are living through another revolution in media and communication technologies. Large social and political upheavals could be observed after the printing press was

Studies, n. 1, 2019.

8 ANGERMULLER, Johannes. Accumulating Discursive Capital, Valuating Subject Positions. From Marx to Foucault. **Critical Discourse Studies**, v. 15, p. 414-425, 2018.

9 SANTOS, Milton. **A natureza do espaço**. Técnica e tempo. Razão e emoção. 1. ed. São Paulo: Hucitec, 1996; SANTOS, Milton. **Por uma outra globalização**. 1. ed. São Paulo: Record, 2000.

invented (which led to one hundred and fifty years of religious wars in Europe) and the radio started to broadcast (would Hitler and the Second World War have been possible without it?). The big new thing today are social media. Social media have established a regime of extremely unequal visibility between the few who monopolize the attention of so many other users. Social media devices also act on our brains and senses in ways that have heightened the affective intensities of news and messages going through our phones and computers. Trump and Bolsonaro are certainly the ideological symptoms of this sociotechnological sea change. Indeed, social media technologies seem to feed ideological material into our heads much more directly than TV and radio ever did. We should therefore be critical of conceptualizing public life in terms of a rational deliberation over interests or the common good and take seriously the irrational, emotional and affective dimensions of discourse which is now connected with our biomaterial apparatus of perception, i.e. our eyes connected hooked up to a little screen. I guess it is the huge visibility rewards for few and sometimes quite reckless attention seekers as well as the affect amplifying effects of screen-based communication that has led to a deterioration of public debate and the rise of right-wing crackpot politics.

Salgado and Clares: The spreading of highly polemical claims invites us to rethink the role of the academic and academic knowledge production, the many conceptions of what is science, its social functions, etc. While in the context of a global health emergency, health sciences and even some engineering areas have responded to urgent issues (clinical and logistical procedures, development of vaccines and respirators,

etc.), while communicational issues, which are equally crucial, are often seen as less fundamental to fight the pandemic. Given this situation, what are the possible contributions of the research developed in areas like Linguistics, Applied Linguistics, and Discourse Analysis?.

Angermuller: Well, my impression is that we discourse analysts no longer need to justify what we do since Trump, Brexit and Bolsonaro. Everybody now understands the power of communication and of the discursive dynamics in large communities! Very mediocre figures keep the public busy by creating shitstorms and controversies about strategic lies. It is important we understand the mechanisms of these processes and also learn how to resist them. Language is of course key but we need a resolutely transdisciplinary mind if we want to account for the many facets of the fake news proliferating in the global digital space. We need to do more sociological work on practices and the structures in which fake news emerge. We should be aware of similar developments that can be observed in the past (Nazi Germany comes to mind). There are new semiotic resources and linguistic devices that are mobilized in online communication. And we should also study the psychological and cognitive dimensions.

Salgado and Clares: Concerning science, the scientists, and their role in policymaking, the pandemic has shown an array of challenges: there is a systemic denial of all sorts of facts, disputes on the most proper health protocols and products (vaccines, hospital equipment), discussions on the relation between the virus, the environment, and society, etc. How do you assess the role of scientific communication in the construction of this place known as science nowadays?

In Brazil, we have been formulating what can be designated as "the four fundamental issues that rule scientific communication in the present time: 1. The domination of STEM research over the humanities; 2. The pressure of quantitative evaluation imposed on scientific journals and researchers; 3. The pressure for internationalization of scientific publications; 4. Technological changes motivated by new platforms. Considering that the intertwining of these issues set up the functioning of scientific communication and the current scientific community, we arrive at a fundamental problem that leads to the following hypothesis: discursively speaking, the scientific community is a discursive institution formed by different communities, which are defined by areas, or maybe fields, or subjects… categories that are hard to define because we must consider the actual daily life in which research and writing effectively happen." (SALGADO; CLARES, 2017).[10] These constitutive aspects of scientific communication can make it complicated to disseminate information to the public, which tends to see the work of the scientists in a very stereotypical way. Is it possible to say that the injunctions and omissions that have organized scientific communication interfere in its dissemination to wider audiences?

Angermuller: Of course the reputation that scientists have is crucial for the way they are received by the public. Their reputation as public figures is one of the many aspects that are mobilized on the receiving end when messages circulate across a heterogeneous social space. When scientific claims enter the

10 SALGADO, Luciana Salazar; CLARES, Letícia Moreira. Mediação editorial em artigos científicos: um estudo de injunções e apagamentos nas humanidades. **Revista do GEL**, São Paulo, v. 14, n. 3, p. 29-58, 2017. Disponível em: https://revistas.gel.org.br/rg/article/view/1886. Acesso em: 4 nov. 2021.

political sphere they are often inscribed into political antagonisms such as between left and right, which do not necessarily make a lot of sense in the scientific realm. Surprising things can happen then to the unsuspecting scientists making such claims even though some science fields are very much connected with the general political debate (such as climatology). It is often no coincidence that claims of certain scientists see uptake in a political arena. These claim makers often have had an active interest and background in those policy areas and they have experience in how to pitch their message. But of course the vast majority of scientists meet with no resonance whatsoever outside their area of expertise and in my view the question is how to account for 1) why it is the very few who do see a demand and hear a response and 2) what counts as "the science" in public discourses given that scientists normally never reach a consensus on anything.

I certainly don't mean to say that all knowledge claims are just the same. There are certainly some knowledges that are truer than others! Yet, still, we need to recognize that something quite significant happens when claims from scientific debates enter more public debates where they are recontextualized in important ways. What we observe nowadays, for instance, is that left or center people are more likely to trust in "science" and claim its authority (the currently much higher vaccination rates among Democrats in the U.S. are a case in point), whereas the Trumpians (and their equivalents around the world) are caught up in a hypercritical attitude that makes them reject any claim that doesn't conform to their worldview (let's not forget that those reflexes can also be observed on the Left if one thinks of the controversies around genetic engineering or nuclear power). Therefore, when Democrats and Republican relate to "scientific

knowledge" in contemporary public debates an important aspect is to see how science as such is inscribed in political identity politics. Interestingly, right-wing identities seem to be increasingly incompatible with what is considered "science" by liberals and left-wing people.

Salgado and Clares: Could you please inform us about the current stage of your research?

Angermuller: I have become interested in the question of truth in discourse (ANGERMULLER, 2018)[11] and I have made a foray into Science and Technology Studies. Many linguists nowadays are interested in the social and political aspects of language use but they usually don't get further than citing some references from Critical Discourse Analysis, which has a proclivity for moralizing social matters rather than to study them. Science and Technology Studies has been an extremely productive area, not least theoretically speaking with its attempt to fuse constructivist and materialist traditions. There has been a good conversation with a small group of interactionist linguists since the 1980s but mainstream linguists and discourse analysts have only had a cursory look at these debates, if at all. I think we need to engage in a theoretical debate on these issues and we should be more self-critical about the claims we want to make about linguistic and social realities. We need to do more systematic research rather than to relay on our intuition, which is often misleading. So I have become interested in accounting for the real social and discursive behaviour of large academic populations, which has led me to try out quantifying instruments in social research.

11 ANGERMULLER, Johannes. Truth after Post-Truth: For a Strong Programme in Discourse Studies. **Palgrave Communications**, 2018.

But I continue my more qualitative and theoretical work around the discursive construction of subject positions and enunciative pragmatics.

Recebido em: 15/08/2021//Aceito em 11/09/2021.