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FUNCTIONAL SYNTAX: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIA ANGÉLICA FURTADO DA CUNHA

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REVEL – How and when did functional syntax studies start in Brazil, analyzing data from Brazilian Portuguese?

FURTADO DA CUNHA – In terms of the Brazilian scenario, functional syntax studies are basically based on three approaches: Systemic-Functional Linguistics, developed by Michael Halliday in England and, later, in Australia; Discursive-Functional Grammar, started by Simon Dik in Holland; and North American Functional Linguistics, developed on the west coast of the United States, inspired by Talmy Givón, Wallace Chafe, Sandra Thompson, Paul Hopper, Joan Bybee, among others. I will refer here to this third approach, by which I guide my studies. These studies began in the mid-1980s, at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, introduced by Sebastião Votre and Anthony Naro, both professors at UFRJ. That year, during a post-doctorate in Pennsylvania, Votre got in touch with Ellen Prince, whose work on the informational status of the NP covered the fields of pragmatics, discourse, and information structure. Later, in 1989, under Votre’s supervision, I wrote **A passiva no discurso**, the first functionalist doctoral dissertation at UFRJ. That same year, Votre and Naro published, in DELTA, the article **Mecanismos funcionais do uso da língua**, in which they state that “from the use of language originates the form of the language” (1989, p. 170), a basic principle of functionalism. Since then, many works have been produced under the theoretical framework of North American functional linguistics. It is also worth mentioning the creation of the study group

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Discurso & Gramática (D&G) by Sebastião Votre at UFRJ, in the early 1990s. Inspired by the ideas of Talmy Givón, Sandra Thompson and Wallace Chafe, this group investigates the interaction between discourse and grammar, as its name implies. Currently, in addition to UFRJ, D&G is also based at UFRN and UFF, and its researchers share both the theoretical and methodological orientation as well as the hypotheses and objectives that motivated the formation of the first nucleus.

REVEL – What differentiates a functionalist from a formalist investigation in syntax?

FURTADO DA CUNHA – Evidently, both the functionalist and the generativist approaches take, as their object of study, language. However, these models differ with regard to the goals of their studies, as well as to the assumptions and hypotheses that guide them. While generativists are interested in the mental nature of human language, in order to describe the linguistic knowledge of speakers, functionalists are concerned with language use, to study the relationship between grammatical structure and the different interactional contexts in which it is used. Functionalists consider language as a social phenomenon, an instrument of communication, whose grammar adapts to cognitive, communicative and structural pressures present in verbal interaction. In this way, grammar is seen as the result of the crystallization or regularization of recurrent discourse strategies. In this direction, researchers who follow North American functional linguistics dedicate themselves to the description, analysis and interpretation of phenomena of variation and change, paying attention to cognitive processes of general domains, such as categorization, analogy and inference, all of them present in the configuration of languages. Functional syntax is, therefore, part of the so-called usage-based models.

REVEL – Among other subjects, you research the relationship between discourse and grammar, and also grammar teaching from a functionalist point of view. Could you tell us more about these two areas of investigation?

FURTADO DA CUNHA – A fundamental premise of American Functional Linguistics is that grammar and discourse have a symbiotic relationship, so that grammar shapes

discourse and discourse shapes grammar. Along these lines, morphosyntax has the form it has due to strategies of information organization used by speakers at the time of discursive interaction. On the other hand, discourse depends on grammar to be materialized. From this perspective, the line of research on discourse and grammar turns to studies that focus on the role that linguistic forms play in the effective use of language, with special interest in the processes of linguistic variation and change. It can be said that this line of research is of a more theoretical-methodological nature, in the sense that it produces results that contribute to the refinement of the functionalist model, while providing descriptions, analyzes and interpretations of various morphosyntactic phenomena in Brazilian Portuguese and their semantic-cognitive and discursive-functional motivations.

On the other hand, the line of research on grammar teaching has a more applied nature, insofar as it aims to bring contributions to Portuguese teaching, subsidizing teachers in their pedagogical practices. This subsidy can be given both through the academic knowledge produced by the research undertaken, which can support the teaching performance, and through the practical implications emanating from them in terms of propositions and referrals to the teaching work itself.

REVEL – In addition to your original production, you have translated important titles into Portuguese, helping to strengthen the area in Brazil. Examples of this are the books *A compreensão da gramática*, by Talmy Givón (EDUFRN, 2012), *Língua, uso e cognição*, by Joan Bybee (Cortez, 2016), and *Construcionalização e mudanças construcionais*, by Elizabeth C. Traugott & Graeme Trousdale (Vozes, 2021). Tell us about the experience of translating these works. And how do you think Functional Syntax is practiced in Brazil today, considering the international scenario of research in the area?

FURTADO DA CUNHA – When I started teaching courses on Functional Syntax, we had practically no material available in Portuguese. Since the vast majority of students did not speak English, I often translated the texts I used in the classroom. Thus, the need to publicize the functionalist model and the students' difficulty in accessing the original texts led me to the translation activity. As my most intense and

extensive contact with Functional Linguistics, still during my PhD, was through the seminal book by Talmy Givón, **On understanding grammar** (1979), unanimously considered the first work on the North American Functional Linguistics, my experience as a translator started with this book. The translation project started during my first postdoctoral at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), in 1996, but the book was only published in 2011, by the UFRN Publishing House, and then by Cortez, in 2013. The translations of **Língua, uso e cognição** (2016), and **Construcionalização e mudanças construcionais** (2021), on the other hand, were simpler, since they were only started after the publishers, Cortez and Vozes, respectively, approved the translation project.

In my opinion, the North American functional (morpho)syntax is well consolidated in Brazil, whether in terms of national academic production or in terms of theoretical deepening and expansion, especially after the incorporation of some assumptions and analytical categories from Cognitive Linguistics, in particular, from Construction Grammar, which researchers from the Discourse & Grammar group currently call Use-Centered Functional Linguistics (Furtado da Cunha, Bispo & Silva, 2013). Considering the international scenario, I dare to say that the research we develop does not fall short of that produced by foreign linguists.

REVEL – Could you suggest, to our readers, some (classic and recent) books and articles that would enrich their studies in functional syntax?

FURTADO DA CUNHA – Among the classics, I could mention **On understanding grammar** (1979), which was recently updated by the author himself (2018), as well as **Grammaticalization** (2003[1993]). **Gramaticalização no português do Brasil** (1996), the first functionalist book in Portuguese and the first on Brazilian Portuguese, and also **Linguística Funcional: teoria e prática**, a book that introduces the theoretical assumptions and analytical categories of classical Functional Linguistics, originally published in 2003 by DP&A and republished by Parábola Editorial in 2015.

From the classic articles, I could mention **From discourse to syntax** (1979), by Givón, and **The origins of syntax in discourse** (1976), by Sankoff & Brown,

which laid the seeds for North American Functional Linguistics; and also **Transitivity in grammar and discourse** (1980), by Hopper & Thompson, and **Toward a taxonomy of given-new information** (1981), by Prince. Among the most recent books, I suggest the translations of Bybee (2016) and Traugott & Trousdale (2021), **Functionalism and Grammar Teaching** (2016), **Discourse and Grammar: Interlaces and Perspectives** (2022). Regarding articles, I also highlight Oliveira & Cezario (2007), Furtado da Cunha & Bispo (2013), Furtado da Cunha, Bispo & Silva (2014), Rosario & Oliveira (2016) and Furtado da Cunha & Silva (2019). The reader may find all these references below.

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