

Moisés de Lemos Martins (2002) *A Linguagem, a Verdade e o Poder: Ensaio de Semiótica Social* [Language, Truth and Power: An Essay in Social Semiotics], Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.

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In this essay in social semiotics, *A Linguagem, a Verdade e o Poder* [Language, Truth and Power], Moisés de Lemos Martins guides us through the entanglements of discourse, making use of his own, and other authors', theories to question the nature of this concept, how it functions socially, and the way it relates to rationality. Throughout two hundred and eighteen pages organized into eight chapters, Martins – a semiotician and a Full Professor at the University of Minho, Portugal – unearths discursive issues in a way that is both successfully didactic and questioning.

In order to introduce and contextualize the subject, Martins begins by unveiling what he will analyse throughout the book via the question of the general theory of signification, which he relates to the possibility of restoration of meaning. Martins is mostly interested in the place of the subjects of communication in their interactional experience, and strives to build a sound argument, starting with the study of basic theories and methodologies that go well beyond the theory of signification. Martins's aim is, in fact, to look for meaning and to question signification by having recourse to diverse disciplines:

The direction followed in these pages is fundamentally dependent upon the way I understand the reality of discourse and critical activity. Means of production, broadcasting and reception of knowledge are both the materials and the dynamics of this study (p.12).

In the first chapter, “O Regime do Signo e o Regime do Discurso” [“The Regime of the Sign and the Regime of Speech”], Martins addresses the historic idea of semiotics centred on the sign, whose meaning originated in the theory of information and the logic of communication. According to Martins, this idea of semiotics, which is present in the work of several authors, inevitably ends up as a theory of messages in which language exhausts itself in an instrumental and representational perspective. For Martins, this is not an understanding of the concept that is critical, but rather descriptive, productivist and conformist. Accordingly, he privileges the idea of critical semiotics, for meaning is in the discourse, and it is there that interaction between individuals takes place. With constant and careful reference to historical context and to other critics who have dealt with these questions before him, throughout this chapter Martins unravels questions related to signification, discourse, language and sign. The chapter closes with an endorsement of the idea of a social semiotics, in the sense that a social system is a group of semiotic systems, and language is a part of the social system.

“Representar e Significar” [“To Represent and To Signify”] is the title of the second chapter, where, informed by Umberto Eco’s conceptualization of the relationship between sign and reality, Martins problematizes the concepts of sign, world and production of meaning, always with reference to important authors in these fields. Here, the focus shifts towards questions of structural logic (Saussure) and existential logic (Peirce). The central question of the “linguistic turn”, as a turning point in philosophy and in social theory, is used as an avenue into another concept of change maintained by José Augusto Mourão – a supporter of a morphodynamic and morphogenetic turn in semiotics – that Martins emphasises. This section finishes with a presentation and questioning of António Fidalgo’s idea of philosophic semiotics.

In “O Sentido Produzido” [“Produced Meaning”], the third chapter of this study, Martins mentions the logic of the functioning of discourse and of its elements. Here, Roland Barthes comes into focus, for Barthes thought of discourse as the sole object of semiology, and that text and sentence were not on the same level. By using this idea, Martins discusses other relevant authors and introduces new topics for discussion. Towards the end of this section, the debate centres around the principles to which speech is subjected. Martins compares and contrasts Gilbert Durand’s phenomenological point of view with Michel Foucault’s structuralism.

In the fourth chapter, “A Racionalidade da Linguagem Humana” [“The Rationality of Human Language”], Martins begins with a description of the main characteristics of the Greimasian perspective – faithful to structuralism – and then sets the semiotics of utterance against the semiotics of enunciation, paving the way to making reference to a variety of authors in order to explain his own point of view. Further on, Martins makes a historical contextualization of rhetoric and moves into an analysis of the theory of argumentation in language, touching upon the notions of “pragmatic consciousness”, “practical consciousness” and “practical sense” (p.93). At this stage, Martins compares the idea of argumentative rationality with the idea of sociological rationality. As he mentions authors such as Ducrot, Habermas, Bourdieu, Joly and Giddens, Martins insists on the idea of a sociological pragmatics and maintains that the authority / power of words is of a social nature.

The discursive regime of belief is the central theme of the fifth chapter, “A Fixação da Crença” [“The Fixation of Belief”]. The pertinence of this analysis lies, according to Martins, in the fact that this concept is handed down to us as something that challenges us to see. It conjures up a type of knowledge and provokes speech, and Martins wishes to clarify certain points in relation to this theme. Basing his arguments on the Christian faith, Martins suggests that belief is not in the same realm as seeing or knowing; it is in the domain of saying, as a believer is someone who hears something and trusts it, follows it and obeys it. Martins demonstrates, through four examples, the necessary interconnection, in belief, between saying and doing, thus contradicting the assumption that our modernity has led us to the isolation of saying.

In “O Abraço de Urso da Razão Liberal” [“A Bear Hug to Liberal Reason”], the sixth chapter of the book, Martins discusses questions of culture and participation in institutions. He makes reference to the model of national culture on the one hand, and on the

other, to the model of communication, inspired by authors such as Lasswell, Shannon, Weaver and Jakobson, and he sets them against models of communicative rationality and the argumentative function of language. Martins considers sender-receiver models and national cultures to be insufficient organizing rationalities, and favours a new communicative rationality that cannot be dissociated from a questioning that suggests a theory of signification, and in which the use of language is seen as a triadic process of the interpretation of signs. In the last few pages of this chapter, Martins attempts to elucidate the consensual base of rhetoric present in contemporary concepts of culture and participation in institutions, with recourse to authors such as Bourdieu, Lévi-Strauss, Descartes, Searle, Austin, Peirce and Oriol.

In the penultimate chapter, “O Envenenamento do Olhar nas Ciências Humanas” [“The Poisoning of the Gaze in the Human Sciences”], the author introduces the idea of the truth of writing – where social and political convenience are played out – as opposed to inner knowledge, and relates these with the notions of text and discursive practice, where there is “a preoccupation with form” (p.126) in the production of meaning. Martins also introduces the themes of structuralism and pragmatics, in the sense that language does not describe truth, it only signifies it. In this domain there is also a concern with form, a topic that Martins discusses at length, alongside the (structuralist and pragmatic) question of the “linguistic turn”. In his assessment of structuralism and pragmatics, Martins affirms that both presuppose different criteria of truth and of rational dialogue. In this chapter, he also comments on the reception of his book *O Olho de Deus no Discurso Salazarista* [The Eye of God in Salazar’s Discourse], and finishes by alluding to the replacement of the modern paradigm with the postmodern paradigm, although he believes it makes more sense to talk about modernity and its re-writing.

The study finishes with the chapter “A Insustentável Leveza da Retórica Pós-moderna” [“The Unbearable Lightness of Postmodern Rhetoric”], where Martins claims that the last few years have been defined by the return of the individual, of narcissism, of consumption, and with them, the return of meaning and hermeneutics. Martins uses the ideas put forward by Boaventura Sousa Santos, Pierre Bourdieu, Ricoeur and Foucault, as far as rhetoric is concerned, although he is hesitant about the excessive confidence attributed to rhetoric and argumentation, and believes that the power and authority of speech come from outside. Martins then highlights the fact that pragmatics is centred on the users of the language and in the use of signs, by using a number of authors and stories/myths as examples, and discussing the old and the new rationality. He concludes with the question of sociological pragmatics, and cites studies that help understand disputed concepts, of which *doxa*, discursive practice and truth are some examples.

The approach chosen by Moisés Martins to finish this book relates to contemporary everyday experience: the importance of information technologies, and more specifically, of digital technology, a world full of new communication and information media, cultural industries and the civilization of the image which provide the contours of a new reality and open out to multiple interpretations. In this book one is confronted with coherent and informed thinking which, in a few pages, lays out the most relevant questions

in semiotics, at the same time as it introduces important authors in this area. And for those who doubt the interest and the practicability of semiotics during their university degrees, this book may serve as a certain relief for their uncertainties, given that, according to Martins, the university must insist on spaces for reading, for writing, for poetry, for dreaming, for art, for study, for experimentation and for thought (p.191). ✍

Translated by João Paulo Silva