

"MYTHS", "TRUTHS" AND THE ROLE OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

"MITOS", "VERDADES" E O PAPEL DA LINGUÍSTICA APLICADA NA CONTEMPORANEIDADE

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a critical look at what the phenomenon of so-called "post-truth" discourse means for the epistemological foundations of research in Applied Linguistics, particularly studies grounded in what has been termed a "postmodern" view of social life. Based on a perspective of narrative as performance, I propose that research dissemination may be viewed as metanarrative practice and that the validity and robustness of knowledge are thus built during narrative events, junctures at which these metanarratives are interrogated by peers, research participants, editors and so forth. Moreover, I argue that resonant narratives (both those told by research participants and the meta-narratives subsequently woven together by scholars) may be pivotal in bridging the gap between the alleged poles of emotion and reason in order to advance the social issues at the heart of Applied Linguistics – issues which may be side-lined or discredited by what has been deemed post-truth discourse. In line with the Latourian concept of networks – as fundamental in shaping the construction of knowledge – I further suggest that the relations of power with which these are intertwined still require considerable interrogation in order for such narratives to reach a wider audience and potentially engender social transformation.

Keywords: postmodern; post-truth; narrative analysis; epistemology; meta-narratives.

RESUMO

Esse artigo lança um olhar crítico sobre o que o fenômeno do chamado discurso da "pós-verdade" significa para os fundamentos epistemológicos da pesquisa em Linguística Aplicada, especialmente estudos embasados no que tem sido chamado a visão "pós-moderna" da vida social. A partir de uma perspectiva de narrativa enquanto performance, proponho que a disseminação da pesquisa pode ser vista como uma prática metanarrativa e que a validade e a solidez do conhecimento são, portanto, construídas durante eventos narrativos – encruzilhadas nas quais estas metanarrativas são interrogadas por pares, participantes, editores e assim por diante. Sobretudo, argumento que a narrativa comovente (tanto aquelas contadas por participantes da pesquisa, quanto as metanarrativas costuradas pelo pesquisador) podem ser catalisadoras na identificação de pontos de articulação entre os alegados polos de emoção e razão a fim de avançar as questões sociais no cerne da Linguística Aplicada – questões que podem ser marginalizadas ou deslegitimadas por aquilo denominado discurso da "pós-verdade". Alinhado com o conceito latouriano de redes – as quais fundamentalmente moldam a construção de conhecimento – sugiro ainda que as relações de poder com as quais se encontram entrelaçadas precisam ser interrogadas mais a fundo para que tais narrativas alcancem um público mais abrangente e, potencialmente, acarretem a transformação social.

Palavras-chave: pós-moderno; pós-verdade; análise de narrativa; epistemologia; metanarrativa.

CREATING COHERENCE

As Linde's (1993) work on life stories has taught us, coherence is achieved by establishing causality between otherwise isolated events, as narrators seek to make sense of an at best confusing world. This essay is no different. Its structure derives from my own view of the issues I have chosen to raise here, as well as the ways in which I perceive potential relationships between these. With this caveat laid bare, this paper aims to further explore issues tentatively addressed in Biar, Orton & Bastos (2021) and is organised as follows: I will begin by outlining some of the assumptions which govern contemporary studies in Applied Linguistics, as well as my understanding of what drives so-called "microanalytical" research. Following this, I will briefly discuss what these assumptions mean for research practices in Applied Linguistics, as well as some of the criticisms which have been levelled at those who subscribe to an allegedly "postmodern" approach. Having sketched out this backdrop, I will zoom in on Narrative Analysis, laying out the contemporary view of storytelling practice as a situated and dialogical performance¹ in which the narrated world is constructed from a retrospective standpoint, as well as the ramifications of this for research dissemination in the field. Thereafter I will address the issue at the heart of this essay: so-called "post-truth" discourse, its potential

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1. In the sense put forward by Austin (1962) and later developed by Butler (1990), rather than the theatrical notion to be found in Bauman's (1977, 1986) work.

meaning, as well the ways in which it finds itself enmeshed with what I consider the social construction of scientific knowledge. To follow, I will examine the backstage processes which precede the publication of research texts, underscoring the importance of greater transparency with respect to these processes, should such texts wish to make claims to validity. The penultimate section considers the role of social research in contemporary society and I conclude by attempting to pinpoint the part played by narratives in bridging the gap between the so-called polar opposites of emotion and reason in order to champion the issues raised by such research, as well as alluding to some of the relations of power² which continue to stifle this task.

1. "POSTMODERNISM" AND THE UNDERMINING OF TRUST IN "REALITY"

Contemporary studies in the field of Applied Linguistics tend to take the view that social reality is discursively constructed, or in the words of Foucault (1972, p. 49), that discourse "forms the objects of which it speaks". Discursive practices are therefore worthy of analytical attention since embedded social arrangements, such as racialised categories and their perceived associations, or binary notions of gender and the expectations they give rise to, are not only discursively created but can be similarly challenged and reshaped in interaction. Stemming from such a belief, numerous research centres in the field of Applied Linguistics, both in Brazil and more globally speaking, have therefore increasingly directed their attention to so-called "micro" contexts of situated interaction with a view to comprehending their relationship with what have been deemed "social orders" (GOFFMAN, 1983), "Discourses with a capital D" (GEE, 1999), "coherence systems" (LINDE, 1993), or "master narratives" (LYOTARD, 1979).

This is based on the understanding that hegemonic "macro" discourses, i.e., ideas about social life which have become entrenched through repeated association, circulate amongst us and that social actors engaged in concrete situations of communication interact with these structures and may reaffirm, contest or reformulate these prior utterances (BAKHTIN, 1979). It's worth highlighting that by "hegemonic", I am not referring here to discourse in the traditional sense of that necessarily produced by politicians, mass media and so forth for subsequent consumption in the "public sphere". As Blommaert (2020) has illustrated, post-digital societies are characterised by polycentric fields of communication in which a multitude of social actors (both human and non-human) produce, circulate and receive such discourse. The fragmented arena in which this takes place perhaps makes microanalysis the only possible means of empirical observation: of not just the content of said discourse, but of the conditions which mould its emergence and uptake. As analysts we thus aim to garner more nuanced understandings of the processes by which meanings are negotiated, as well as ways in which new meanings may take shape during a given interaction. This type of endeavour is frequently motivated by a belief in the need to recognise and listen to the multiple voices which populate contemporary society, particularly those of groups whose stories have been historically marginalised by dominant narratives.

Having said that, while such micro-analytical research frequently interrogates "macro structures" – what Blommaert (2020, p. 391) refers to as the "deep, generic and often invisible drivers behind actual social conduct" – in the interest of affording greater visibility to the ways in which certain discourses are legitimised or authenticated, whilst others are not, those dedicated to this type of investigation similarly tend to hold the view that social research is not itself immune to such processes. Scientific knowledge is therefore a product of the investigations we consider worthy endeavours, intimately linked to studies both prior and forthcoming, as well as being discursively constructed through the publication of articles and dissertations, or the presentation of results at conferences, rather than being a neatly bounded entity simply waiting to be unearthed.³ Latour (1989), for example, draws particular attention to these processes when he speaks of the *reseaux* or networks which render the perception of certain phenomena possible. In other words, investigators require a network of allies (both human, such as supervisors, colleagues, evaluators, editors etc., and non-human, such as equipment available and so forth) in order for their findings to be attributed "truth status", rather than this being a direct result of their inherent reason or *raison*. Put differently, "truth" *does not hold together* because of its inherent reason but *is held together* by a network of heterogeneous allies that contribute to its robustness. Moreover, the possibility of creating such a network of allies is undeniably bound up with power

2. In the sense laid out by Bucholtz & Hall (2004, 2005), amongst others.

3. Latour (1989) outlines an important distinction between the sublunar and supralunar world. For the author, the supralunar world of things is patiently awaiting discovery. This essay, however, is more concerned with the sublunar world of human beliefs and opinions, on which research in Applied Linguistics tends to focus and which can be understood as being in a state of flux.

relations, such as the institution at which a given scholar works, where said institution finds itself in relation to the infamous North/South divide, the language(s) spoken in this region and thus the opportunities for dissemination across the international community and so forth.

I will further elaborate on the power structures which shape the academic community and their implications for the issues raised here in the final section of this paper. What I would like to underscore for the time being is that the view of reality I have been outlining thus far (both that which is subject to scrutiny in our investigations and that which results from these) – as at once malleable and ephemeral – is frequently categorised as belonging to a "postmodern" school of thought, a term increasingly employed with pejorative connotations (See, for example, MCINTYRE, 2018, SCRUTON, 2015). Since the advent of what is considered postmodern thought in the latter part of the 20th century, bitter disputes have raged between its proponents and those incensed by what is/was regarded as an unprecedented attack on the value of "scientific truth". Such was the case of the physicist Alan Sokal who famously invited his postmodernist contemporaries to jump from the window of his 21st storey apartment, should they wish to test whether the laws of physics were mere social conventions.⁴ More recently, so-called postmodernism has yet again come under fire for ostensibly opening a type of Pandora's box: not only undermining the value of scientific research in the public eye, but allegedly providing ample ammunition for purveyors of "post-truth" discourse.

Prior to contemplating such criticisms at greater length, I'd like to consider more specifically what adopting a so-called postmodernist view means for studies in Applied Linguistics and particularly Narrative Analysis, the latter being the field in which my own research interests lie.

2. ALL THE WORLD'S A STORY?

Inauguration of the field of Narrative Analysis tends to be attributed to the sociolinguist William Labov (see LABOV, 1972; LABOV, WALETSKY, 1967). In his seminal work, Labov conceived of narrative as a way of *recapitulating prior experience*: a means by which narrators sought to convey a sense of their stance on the world, particularly through evaluative practice. Though Labov argued that the point of a given story needed to be accepted by those present at the moment of storytelling – what the author termed the story's "reportability" factor – later studies gave further emphasis to its interactional features. As part of what has been termed the "second narrative turn" (GEORGAKOPOULOU, 2006), narrative practice came to be viewed as a *situated and dialogical way of recounting past events* (see, for example BRUNER, 1990; LINDE, 1993). According to Schriffin (1984), storytelling thus functions as a way of imposing order, coherence and meaning on otherwise nebulous experience, which tends to defy such constraints, constituting the foremost means by which narrators not only articulate worldviews, but invite others to ratify these. For authors associated with this period, the temporal organisation of experience is therefore regarded as an interpretive practice, which occurs from a retrospective standpoint, rather than being pre-discursive – what Mishler (2006) dubbed the "double arrow of time". Yet further scholars in Narrative Analysis have suggested that narrated worlds in and of themselves may not be pre-discursive, rather storytelling is a way of bringing these to life (see, for example LANGELLIER, 2001; JÄRVINEN, 2003; YOUNG, 1987).

Such a perception helped pave the way for the contemporary view of *narrative as very much performative action*⁵ (e.g., GEORGAKOPOULOU, 2006; DE FINA; GEORGAKOPOULOU, 2008; DE FINA, 2021), which Georgakopoulou (2006, p.128) has deemed the "third narrative turn". According to the author, this shift is marked by three identifiable traits: the adoption of (i) practice-based theories of genre that link ways of speaking with the production of social life; (ii) a view of identities as "locally accomplished categories, jointly drafted, contested/contestable, performed⁶ (as opposed to 'real' [...]), open to revision and refashioning" and (iii) a focus on micro, fragmented and/or non-hegemonic social practices as crucial sites of subjectivity in which to observe such phenomena. Contemporary scholars associated with the third turn thus ask: "how do we do self (and other) in narrative genres in

4. See: https://physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/lingua_franca_v4/lingua_franca_v4.html.

5. Narrative is seen as performative in the sense that social life is not merely performed in narrative practice but produced in the performance itself.

6. It's worth highlighting that the view of performance outlined here is not limited to identity, narratives have come to be viewed as discursive action (see GERGEN; GERGEN, 2006). This means that "tellers perform numerous social actions while telling a story and do rhetorical work through stories: they put forth arguments, challenge their interlocutors' views and generally attune their stories to various local, interpersonal purposes" (DE FINA; GEORGAKOPOULOU, 2008, p.381-382).

a variety of sites of engagement?" (GEORGAKOPOULOU, 2006, p. 128). This marks a significant break from the prior focus on frequently dyadic, autobiographical research interviews as a site in which to elicit "life stories", from which a rehearsed "coherent" self might emerge (e.g. LINDE, 1993).

In line with such a school of thought, authors such as Schoofs & Van de Mierop (2019) have investigated the relativity of what is presented as "truth" in storytelling, by closely observing the way narratives subjected to multiple retellings may be reoriented to fit in with shifts in "master narratives" in order to convey identities and values which are spatially and temporally relevant. My most recent research project (ORTON; BIAR, 2020), which investigated gendered performances foregrounded by members of a social movement, serves to further illustrate this point. Though gender did not feature in my research questions at the outset, once such performances had been identified in the data (audio recordings of assemblies held by bicycle advocates in Rio de Janeiro), the relevance of gender in other aspects of social life became increasingly apparent to me, not only in the data itself, but as I re-evaluated stories I had told myself and others: of interactions with the group studied, as well as experiences far beyond the loosely defined bounds of the research field. That is to say, I began to reinterpret everyday situations and past experiences from a newly acquired standpoint, further questioning internalised notions of gendered expectations. To a certain degree, I began to rewrite my life story in a way that was both cathartic and transformative, freeing myself from the "mind-forg'd manacles"⁷ of more subtly normative ideas about gender. Such reassessment of experience is an inherently human prerogative (given circumstances conducive to this) and is imperative for historical injustices to be reframed as such, enabling a "radical temporal reorientation of knowledge" (MIYAZAKI, 2004, p. 5) to gain momentum and social change to become tangible. However, it can also be taken to the extreme, such as the historical revisionism in which Winston – Orwell's protagonist in the unsettlingly prophetic, dystopian novel *1984* – takes part at the "Ministry of Truth". Or perhaps even more disturbingly, Trump's apparent penchant for the shredding of presidential records and official documents related to his time at the White House⁸.

As I have emphasised elsewhere (BIAR; ORTON; BASTOS, 2021), the field of Anthropology has long argued that research texts should be understood as literary genres, highlighting the fact that the story they tell is simply one of an exponential number of possible versions (see CLIFFORD; MARCUS, 1986). Once we accept these texts as one of the many discursive practices which constitute social reality, we can begin to examine their similarities with storytelling practices in particular: as subjectively pieced together from otherwise stray events and observations until they form a coherent whole. Should we adopt this view, narrative research dissemination can be viewed as a type of metanarrative. Moreover, in our efforts to make sense of the stories we analyse, the stories we produce are frequently interwoven with our own experiences and impressions as participant observers and, in a sense, could be regarded as narratives of vicarious experience, a genre termed "cross-fictional" by Hatavara and Mildorf (2017). Though research texts do not typically include the features of mind representation associated with fictionality, the literary processes necessarily involved (metaphor, figuration, narrative, see CLIFFORD, 1986, p. 4 for further elaboration) in their production may enable our stories to "travel across the factual or fictional divide" (BROWSE & HATAVARA, 2019, p. 336).

So, what does this mean for the "truth-value" of our research? With respect to the stories we analyse, in this type of investigation it is not this which interests us i.e., just how closely they represent events which may or may not have taken place in the past (RIESSMAN, 1993). What interests us is what they tell us about competing worldviews and the way in which social norms and values are interactionally negotiated at the moment of storytelling, what Bauman (1986) refers to as the "narrative event". Research narratives themselves are similarly negotiated, edited and subsequently rearticulated during narrative events such as these – fundamental junctures at which their own "truth-value" or perhaps more aptly "validity", is subject to deliberation, as we shall see in due course.

3. "LEGITIMACY" IN "POST-TRUTH" TIMES

Thus far I have been outlining some of the assumptions which underpin contemporary studies in Applied Linguistics and more specifically, Narrative Analysis. As previously mentioned, the perspective of social reality which guides much research in this field has been subject to criticism for allegedly opening the floodgates to the "post-

7. Term borrowed from William Blake's "London", part of the collection "Songs of Experience".

8. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/17/historians-having-to-tape-together-records-that-trump-tore-up>.

truth" times in which we live. Or as Kraatila (2019, p. 419) suggests, the idea of a "humanly accessible world [which consists] entirely of converging and conflicting narratives" is "at the core of [...] post truth sentiment". But what is meant here by "post-truth" and what are its implications for social research?

In *Post-truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back*, D'Ancona (2017, p. 8) defines "post-truth" as "the infectious spread of pernicious relativism disguised as legitimate scepticism". Post-truth discourse can perhaps then be regarded as that which challenges established (scientific) knowledge legitimised by instances of power, albeit whilst failing to engage in the debate which is crucial to the production of such knowledge.⁹ Though the term has been around for some time, it has gained increasing notoriety since being declared international word of the year by Oxford dictionaries in 2016.¹⁰ Frequently, the politically charged events of said year, such as the Brexit referendum (see ROBERTS, 2020, for reflections on both its origin and aftermath), Trump's election in the United States, or the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil (regarded by many as a coup d'état), are viewed as having ushered in the post-truth era.

We associate these events with utterances such as the now infamous Kellyanne Conway's "alternative facts" regarding the number of attendees at Trump's inauguration, the "Leave" campaign's claim (largely associated with Boris Johnson) that exiting the EU would save millions to be instead invested in the UK's National Health Service, or the cries that Dilma Rousseff's impeachment would draw a curtain on corruption in Brazil. Though the first two examples may quickly be attributed to specific politicians, the discourse of corruption as a unique trait of isolated politicians/parties in Brazil, rather than something more endemic, is more slippery and its source more difficult to pin down, so widely disseminated has it become. In many ways, this speaks volumes about Blommaert's (2020) notion of polycentric communication and the multiple actors who produce political discourse in a post-digital society, as discussed earlier. With respect to this, it's worth underscoring, as Nurminen (2019, p. 318) does, that the onset of social media as a storytelling platform has considerably expanded the "narrative affordances available to individuals, corporations and political movements alike". Such actors thus explore ways to harness the power of narrative practice to produce wide-ranging effects¹¹.

The events of 2016 therefore represent consequences rather than causes of post-truth discourse, as D'Ancona (2017) is quick to point out.¹² Sadly, what this also means is that the election of alternative leaders (such as Biden's 2020 victory in the United States) will not be sufficient to change the current state of play. The circulation of "post-truth" discourse works to strengthen pre-existing prejudices – such as the xenophobia which fuelled the UK's Leave campaign and Trump's 2016 victory, or the homophobia and misogyny which contributed to Jair Bolsonaro's rise in Brazil – rather than sowing the seeds of such beliefs. After all, as Bakhtin (1979) has taught us, no utterance exists in a vacuum. This means that when, in his 2020 presidential campaign, Trump argued that Biden "would follow the science¹³", as incredible as it may seem, this amounted to criticism, since the value attributed to "science" by the "micro-audiences" (BLOMMAERT, 2020, p. 393) the one-time president intended to address is somewhat distant from the value attributed to science by scholars of Applied Linguistics, or any other scientific field for that matter.

What has then led us down this troubling path and what can we, as scholars of Applied Linguistics, offer in terms of finding a way out? Unfortunately, I do not intend to proffer any definitive answers in this paper. I would rather like to suggest that post-truth discourse, its multiple ramifications and the potential ways in which scholars may respond to it are all phenomena we are still in the process of trying to grasp. What I would like to share at this point is an example of how such discourse may capitalise on pre-existing insecurities – which I believe may

9. Though this essay focuses largely on post-truth discourse in its retrograde sense, it is worth highlighting that such discourse is not the exclusive product of one set of political or ideological beliefs.

10. See: <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>.

11. These may include stories which either confirm or challenge the mythical end of corruption in Brazil, such as Bolsonaro's affirmation that Operation Car Wash (Lava Jato) had been terminated since corruption had been eradicated from the government. See, for example: <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/10/07/bolsonaro-diz-que-acabou-com-a-operacao-lava-jato-porque-governo-nao-tem-mais-corrupcao.ghtml>.

12. Mooney (2011) suggests that the groundwork for post-truth discourse was laid long before postmodern thought became common currency, pointing out that, as early as the 1970s, conservatives "created an armada of think tanks – including many think tanks that now dispute climate change – precisely so as to create their own echo chamber of "expertise" outside of academia". For a current example of this, one may look to Rio de Janeiro's current mayor Cláudio Castro's formation of a "scientific committee" to combat the covid-19 pandemic, by choosing a group of "specialists" who largely promote unproven treatments. See: <https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2021/04/13/claudio-castro-cria-comite-cientifico-para-enfrentamento-da-covid.ghtml>

13. See, for example: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-biden-will-listen-to-scientists_n_5f8d04dac5b67da85d1f86c2.

serve as an appropriate departure point for further reflection on the studies we conduct and their epistemological foundations. It is a story which may already be familiar to some readers.

It begins in 1998, when the now discredited British doctor Andrew Wakefield and his colleagues published what would later become an infamously retracted paper in "The Lancet". In said paper, Wakefield purported to have found a connection between increased prevalence of autism and the MMR vaccine, used against measles, mumps and rubella. Though a great deal of scientific knowledge fails to venture beyond the gates of the ivory tower, Wakefield's assertions rapidly seeped into popular culture where they gained resounding appeal, propelling and exacerbating public anxiety regarding vaccination. When methodological flaws and conflicts of interest were laid bare in 2010, Wakefield was struck off the UK medical register for misconduct by the country's General Medical Council, theoretically sounding the death knell for his career. Nevertheless, this belated process of verification failed to exert the same impact (at least beyond the scientific community) as the discourse of fear he had already unleashed, and which holds a captive audience in its sway until this day. More than a decade later, opinion polls on public confidence in vaccines developed to combat covid-19 give significant cause for alarm (see LAZARUS et al, 2020, amongst others). This is only compounded by heads of state, such as Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro,¹⁴ who claim they themselves will not be vaccinated. Such discursive practices "stoke an atmosphere of scepticism [in science, in the traditional media, in democratic institutions, but also in epistemic certainty more broadly]" (SILVA, 2020, p. 532),¹⁵ amplifying the effect of prior utterances such as Wakefield's, while disregarding all those who have since contributed to the discussion with counterarguments.

What this example does, therefore, is shed light on the fundamental nature of not only methodological transparency, but the checks and balances (such as peer review and open debate) in place to monitor the production and verification of scientific knowledge – processes which too often become hidden from view after the publication of papers, dissertations and so forth. As Latour (2018) stresses, it is only now that the networks involved in the construction of knowledge are under assault that we are more keenly aware of their significance. Post-truth discourse ought not therefore to be regarded as a consequence of postmodern thought but rather, as a validation. After all, postmodernism is not to deny the existence of gravity or other scientifically proven phenomenon. Rather it is to draw new much-needed attention to the aforementioned networks in order to redescribe the conditions by which scientific knowledge comes to be known. Once we, as a society, are better able to comprehend these behind-the-scenes procedures,¹⁶ we may find ourselves better equipped to deal with "post-truth" discourse. With this in mind, I would thus like to consider what this means, epistemologically speaking, for research in Applied Linguistics, particularly in the field of Narrative Analysis.

4. NARRATIVE WORLDS AS CHAINS OF AUTHENTICATION

As I have been suggesting, if we think of research texts as narratives, be these papers, textbooks, dissertations, and so forth, we can begin to think of the moments in which they are held up to scrutiny by others, such as in discussions with other members of a given research group, with conference participants, or at public outreach initiatives as "narrative events". In other words, we engage in narrative practice when we present our work to such interlocutors, with whom we must negotiate meaning within this narrative world. In a Labovian sense, the "point" of the story, or dissertation etc., must therefore be accepted by these participants who may question its coherence. Such moments of interrogation theoretically contribute to polyvocal texts, in which the multiple voices of colleagues, supervisors, reviewers, conference attendees, research participants and so forth become contemplated, enabling the phenomenon studied to be considered from more nuanced angles and a more comprehensive understanding to be

14. In addition to contradicting the advice of the WHO by promoting treatments such as hydroxychloroquine to combat the effects of covid-19, Bolsonaro has cancelled the purchase of vaccines, criticised measures to penalize those who refuse vaccination, as well as speculating that side effects of the Pfizer vaccine could include "turning into an alligator". See, for example: <https://g1.globo.com/ba/bahia/noticia/2020/12/17/bolsonaro-diz-que-nao-tomara-vacina-e-chama-de-idiota-quem-o-ve-como-mau-exemplo-por-nao-se-imunizar-eu-jativo-o-virus.gh.html>.

15. According to the author (2020, p. 509, p. 526), such incendiary utterances (or patterns of framing) work to divert attention from more pressing issues (such as the alarming Brazilian death toll from covid-19) by enacting what is deemed a "pragmatics of chaos".

16. This is not to suggest that the lay person needs to grapple with complex scientific data, rather it is to suggest that when scholars produce research narratives, they do not fail to describe the narrative events (e.g., peer reviews, vivas etc.) which contributed to their construction. The following section lays this out in further detail.

reached. Research practice is therefore a dialogical activity, whose "truths" are probed at these various junctures. Or as Mishler (1990, p. 422) puts it: "knowledge is validated within a community of scientists as they come to share nonproblematic and useful ways of thinking about and solving problems". This means that rather than seeking to ascertain the "truth-value" of our research, what is at stake is the trustworthiness of our interpretations, thereby moving the process into the social world. For Riessman (1993, p. 64-8), validity may be assessed by examining the degree to which alternative interpretations are considered and research participants actively involved in the production of knowledge, as well as the texts' interpretative coherence and pragmatic use i.e., to what extent a study is future oriented and may become the basis for others' work. This may involve, for example, transparency regarding the journey to interpretation, as well as enabling others' access to primary data.

By contrast, post-truth discourse, in the sense I have been outlining here, would be that which conceives its own interpretations as the limit of reality, what Nurminen (2019) refers to as "careless speech" or "careless interpretations" which both disregard and fail to engage with opposing views. Mason's (2019) work on conspiracy theories (regarded here as a type of post-truth discourse) highlights some fundamental distinctions between research practice in the sense I have been outlining here and post-truth practices. For the author, conspiracy theories may be understood as a narrative genre themselves, woven together from fictive and non-fictive elements. Yet the determination to reduce ambiguity, by editing and tweaking all that which is incongruent means that these "cogent" versions of an otherwise unsettling world simultaneously ignore, in a monomaniacal way, core elements of scientific debate. In other words, instead of taking part in a discussion – as is expected in any scholarly endeavour – accompanied by the examination of a repertoire of competing voices and experiences, what we have is the creation of an alternative system of much more limited interaction, fed exclusively by those who subscribe to the same beliefs. As Dunker (2018) points out, to equate such "narratives" with the postmodernist call to contemplate multiple interpretations of experience in order to further understanding of the human condition, suggests a degree of cynicism. Having said that, there is still much work to be done should we wish our own texts to engage more fully with a range of differing perspectives. Frequently our opinions and interpretations may still appear disguised as facts and certainties, excluding alternative explanations by means of rhetorical devices which silence dissent. The construction of coherence requires editing and the choices underlying this produce both ethical and epistemological repercussions, as Bauman and Briggs (1990) have warned.

The importance of contemplating what goes on behind the scenes has long been illustrated by Goffman (1956) whose theatrical metaphors to describe social life suggest that while all the world may appear to be a stage (or a wedding, in Goffman's words), this performance serves to mask the many layers of preparation which precede it. Whether or not the sociologist was a pre-cursor to so-called postmodern theory is perhaps a moot point, yet his theories have much to teach us about the "concealment" of backstage activity. Should we think of narrative as performance, as authors associated with the third narrative turn have suggested (GEORGAKOPOULOU, 2006), then the presentation of our research texts may be considered one such performance. For Goffman (1956, p. 27), social actors "conceal or underplay those activities that are incompatible with an idealised version of [themselves] and [their] products." According to the notion put forward, errors and mistakes are therefore corrected prior to performance¹⁷ in order to produce an impression of "infallibility", burying any notions of self-doubt, amongst other things. The author (1956, p. 28) further elaborates that,

in those interactions where the individual presents a product to others, he will tend to show them only the end product, and they will be led into judging him on the basis of something that has been finished, polished, and packaged. In some cases, if very little effort was actually required to complete the object, this fact will be concealed. In other cases, it will be the long, tedious hours of lonely labour that will be hidden.

Though we may think of the construction of knowledge as a more collaborative enterprise, there are also moments of "lonely labour" which punctuate the production of a research text. Rather than progressing towards illumination in an orderly fashion, investigators invariably question, edit, erase and rewrite their own reports and findings, which will later be subject to further interrogation at various junctures. Instead of "black-boxing" (LATOIR,

17. Goffman's notion of performance (1977, 1979), or "display" in the author's terms, precedes that of Butler (1990), though its scope is slightly more limited. According to Goffman (1979, p. 1), one can "assume all of an individual's behaviour and appearance informs those who witness him [sic], minimally telling them something about his social identity, about his mood, intent, and expectations, and about the state of his relation to them [...] this indicative behaviour and appearance becomes so specialized so as to more routinely and perhaps more effectively perform this informing function, the informing coming to be the controlling role of the performance, although often not avowedly so. One can call these indicative events displays".

1999) this human process behind the production of “truth”, greater transparency regarding the networks involved, represents a necessary epistemological shift should we wish to advocate for the legitimacy of the knowledge produced (RIESSMAN, 1993). This may mean, for example, incorporating details of the roughshod road ridden in the quest for consensus into the research text or story.

For Latour (1989, p. 102), “reality” may thus be defined as that which stands up to the “attempts to bend or break it” – these attempts are what I have been referring to here as narrative events and may be viewed as indispensable “turning points” (MISHLER, 2006) in the building of unforced consensus on a given subject. For Latour (1989) the polished end product is deemed rational *because it is does not break*, rather than not breaking because it is rational *a priori*. Moreover, though research texts may frequently be viewed as “end products”, such dialogue does not draw to a close with their publication – the accounts we provide may subsequently be bent or broken by future readers, leading to the creation and publication of counter narratives in the inexhaustible activity which is the production of knowledge.

REWRITING DOMINANT NARRATIVES: A DIALOGICAL APPROACH

In this final section I’d like to tentatively consider some of the epistemological shifts that have been taking place in the field of Applied Linguistics in the face of post-truth discourse, with a view to reflecting on their potential to build consensus and contribute to social transformation. The role of stories again seems paramount here, given their potential to “lever human change” (GERGEN; GERGEN, 2006, p. 119). Some might argue that peddlars of post-truth have sought to exploit this, leading the term to gain new semantic currency. D’Ancona (2017, p. 90), for one, suggests that the notion of narrative has been “contaminated” by its excessive use in the political sphere to refer to strategies or plans. According to the accusations, persuasive, resonant stories have usurped the place of “empirical facts” when it comes to democratic decision-making. Trump’s MAGA¹⁸ campaign, for example, capitalised on the power and emotional appeal of a one-sided story of immigration as nothing more than a “problem”, fuelling fear and resentment of the perceived “other”, by failing to adequately address the complexity of this multi-faceted phenomenon.

So how can we “trump” these overwhelmingly monological narratives, as D’Ancona (2017) puts it, as well as post-truth discourse more broadly speaking? Thus far I have argued for greater transparency regarding the networks through which knowledge is established,¹⁹ as well as in relation to our own implication in the stories we create about that which we study. These stories are not only key to understanding and grappling with the post-truth era we live in, but frequently politically charged in their own right; yet in contrast to post-truth narratives, their collective epistemic gains are subject to scrutiny at several turns. If the “facts” no longer speak for themselves, could it then be that narrative research has a new role to play beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries? In the context of global warming for instance, scholars have observed that the presentation of ever more data in its support may only lead denialists to cling more firmly onto what is perceived as an objective truth: the lack of a crisis (D’ANCONA, 2017; LATOUR, 1989). Recent investigations into the way in which stories told by the inhabitants of environments threatened by climate change may inform both public perceptions and policy, reshaping international relations, highlight the potential for narrative analysis to stretch disciplinary boundaries in post-truth times.²⁰

Such possibilities for narrative research invite us to further reflect on the alleged battle between emotions and reason – with which the rise of post-truth discourse is frequently associated. Though emotion and reason have traditionally been seen as polar opposites, an increasing number of scholars have begun to examine the ways in which they may be intertwined. By way of illustration, Anthropology of the Emotions – a subfield of Anthropology – explores the interplay between reason and emotion by considering the very role of emotion in the production of knowledge (COELHO, 2019). In a similar vein, linguists such as Araújo (see ARAÚJO in press, ARAÚJO ET AL, 2021), have highlighted how emotions may be bound up with decisions about research itself. The study in question examines narratives told by Black mothers who have lost their sons to police violence in Rio de Janeiro and began life after the principal investigator was moved by these very narratives at a protest held in the victims’ memory. Borges

18. Popular acronym for the much-parodied campaign slogan “Make America Great Again”.

19. Having said that, 2009’s “Climategate”, in which e-mails from the University of East Anglia were hacked exposing the messy debates typical of any scientific endeavour, led climate sceptics to cite this as proof that climate scientists were manipulating data.

20. Examples include work being carried out by the Arctic Institute: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/projects/narratives/>.

(2017, p. 9) further reflects on this process by appealing to what is deemed "critical feeling". The author describes this as "an emotional amalgamation in which criticality is born of critical awareness not only by thinking rationally about issues which involve human relations but mainly by allowing ourselves to feel others' anguish,"²¹ underscoring the way in which researchers' engagement with affect may serve as an ethical compass to guide academic investigations.

How though to convey the urgency of struggles such as those investigated by Araújo et al (2021) beyond the confines of academia? Placing these counter narratives – articulated at the micro level of interaction – at the centre of our research seems to be a productive point of departure. Yet practices of research dissemination additionally have a crucial role to play. According to D'Ancona (2017), knowledge requires an emotional system of distribution, which speaks to experience, memory and hope. The type of research narrative I have been discussing in this paper may be well placed to do just do this, particularly if scholars are prepared to explore new mediums which enable them to reach wider audiences. As Gergen & Gergen (2006, p. 117) have pointed out, "there is something about listening to others' narratives that crosses boundaries of meaning and brings people into a state of mutuality". Narratives inspire empathy and trust in a way that arguments rarely do, fostering receptivity.

The need for stories to bridge the divide in times of polarisation has been further emphasised by Evans (2017), who advocates for "new myths", which speak of who we are and the world we inhabit. The author is referring here to myths not in the sense of falsehoods, but in the sense of stories or legends. Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro is frequently referred to as "the myth" (*o mito*) by his supporters to express adulation, who tend to see him as the poster child for uncensored tirades against those who dare to challenge the retrograde ideals he embodies. However, the argument for new myths put forward by Evans (2017) should not be interpreted as a simple need to substitute Brazil's current president elect either; the author speaks not of individual "heroes", but rather collective stories, which draw together the plurality of human experience in order to make sense of past and present, as well as envisage a shared future, a point similarly made by Dunker (2018). The co-construction of such stories, guided by "ethical values and judgements, taking into account not universal values, but values which have been democratically defined in the public sphere or in open dialogue" (FABRÍCIO, 2006, p. 62) may be capable of contesting the post-truth narratives which have fuelled the growth in popularity of such figures.

As Fabrício (2006) highlights, research in Applied Linguistics is justified not by its "epistemological superiority", but by an ethical commitment to a politically engaged agenda of social transformation which aims to reduce social exclusion and human suffering. We thus need stories which account for the diversity of our globalised world, stories told by oft-silenced tellers, stories which will stir populations into action, and which will resist efforts to bend or break them. We need to ask ourselves how we can guarantee that such stories reach those who most urgently need to hear them, beyond our own more limited circles of interaction. We need to ask ourselves what can be done to ensure that the narratives of Araújo et al's (2021) research participants provide the impetus necessary for mass protests against racism yet to be seen in Brazil.

These questions lead me to finally consider the aforementioned relations of power which shape the much-discussed Latourian networks. Despite long being an object of academic critique, linguistic imperialism (PHILLIPSON, 1992), for one, still plays an often-definitive role in deciding which voices are heard, ensuring that traditionally esteemed institutions in the Global North remain bastions of colonial power and privilege. The implications of this are wide-ranging, including who participates in international conferences (who must strive to do more than pay lip service to the inclusion of the so-called "voices of the south" [MOITA LOPES, 2001]), who publishes in international journals, who is awarded prestigious research grants and who is given credit for their ideas. One possible means of resistance is to avoid what Sousa Santos (2007) has labelled "epistemicide", that is, the citation of a few select scholars, largely middle aged, heterosexual, white men based in the Global North, in detriment to those on the margins of this traditional "inner circle", to borrow Kachru's (1982) words. Actions such as these may contribute to the redistribution of symbolic capital (BOURDIEU, 1984) across the networks of the international academic community which enable knowledge to be validated. However, as I have highlighted elsewhere, should we wish "the stories of our research participants to be heard, we must [...] continue to challenge not only the power structures which perpetuate the North/South divide, but also those which characterise our own research proceedings" (BIAR; ORTON; BASTOS, 2021, p. 141). After all, North/South relations of power may be

21. All translations are the author's responsibility.

encountered within the Global South itself; much of the validity of research in Applied Linguistics lies in unsettling these.

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