LINGUISTICS APPLIED TO BUSINESS CONTEXTS –
AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIA DO CARMO LEITE DE OLIVEIRA[1]

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ReVEL – Is the field Linguistics applied to business contexts already an established area of action?

Maria do Carmo Leite de Oliveira – Linguistics applied to business contexts, more descriptive in nature, as the studies on genre, is as an established research area. One tradition in these studies is the research developed for decades by LAEL, from PUC-SP. But, out of this paradigm, there is, in Brazilian terms, still emerging areas. It is the case, for example, of talk-in-interaction interpretive studies held in the business context. A pioneer project worth the mention is related to Pedro de Moraes Garcez, from UFRGS, in the 1990's, about business negotiation. Another example is the case of problem-centered studies that might, or might not, be defined by the company, but that are going to be investigated by means of analytic tooling of the language expert, without despising the practical knowledge of the involved professionals. Some graduation programs in Brazil already offer research lines which deal with this paradigm, such as Unisinos, Federal University of Juiz de Fora and PUC-Rio. By the way, these programs already count on an expressive production of papers that analyze interactional events related to the business world. Now, if we think of the potential for this area, if we compare it to what is internationally produced, we have to admit that there is a lot be done in Brazilian terms.

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[1] Translated by João Gabriel Rodrigues Marques Padilha (UNISINOS).

I usually say that nobody is a doctor, a teacher, a military, or a priest without a reason. In a similar way, our choices concerning the object, the objectives of the research are strongly related to our identity, and, consequently, to our motivation towards researching. We are different and our choices reflect our differences. That is why I believe one condition for working in this area is to have what Sarangi (2005) denominates an *applied mentality*. In the expression of Celia Roberts (2003) it means doing "applied linguistics applied". In other terms, it is doing an applicable Applied Linguistics, that is, it means assuming a commitment to producing social-relevant knowledge. In respect to the social-relevant problems located in the company context, I take this as using our theoretical tooling about interaction in order to produce knowledge that adds value to the management area, still being practically relevant. This is different from walking to the companies to cannibalize the field. But we do have some challenges. Humbleness is needed in order not to impose our vision about the object nor our language, so we can negotiate understandings with interlocutors to whom we still need to persuade when it comes to the value of our specialized knowledge. Another challenge is entering into the field. The truth is that we are still invisible. The organizations recognize the relevance of the knowledge of psychologists, educators, Social Communication professionals, but they still have not discovered the knowledge of the applied linguists. Thus, there is not such a demand. In my case, I got in through the Administration Department´s help, that is, as a partner, whether in teaching, in researching or in consultancy. The results generated by our studies have to go back to the companies as something that answers their necessities. This can be done by means of presentations in congresses of management, in co-authorship publications with researchers in Administration, participating in MBA courses of Administration, in courses inside the company, in consultancies, or, simply, in a report that offers the managers a new perspective about the studied reality. The important is *delivering* what we produce, and delivering packed into the other´s language.

ReVEL – What kind of demands are there in companies for linguists?

Maria do Carmo Leite de Oliveira – I worked more with public companies than with private ones, but I can ensure that the problems are similar and so is the unfamiliarity with our expertise to solve them. There are many necessities, but there

is still a huge difficulty to formulate such demands. Nowadays these issues need a multidisciplinary approach, although they are language-centered. Today, the interactivity is a prerequisite for working, and the tasks are much more textualized. The necessities have grown to the proportion of the complexity related to the transformations of a globalized world. The diversity of the labor force, for example, aggravated the difficulties of interpersonal/cultural communication in the professional environment. Similarly, the growing usage of technological tools, like the e-mail, the call-center, has favored the proliferation of communicative thrombosis. A contemporary example is the usage of the corporative Twitter. The companies established a partnership with Twitter that allowed the possibility of new ways of association. But the companies still do not know the meaning of this usage to the customer and, generally, they cannot approach their customer as they wish to. Another demand becomes clear when we examine the selection processes. Today the importance of the interpersonal competence is emphasized when it comes to the desired profile for the professional. But does the company know how this is manifested linguistically and discursively? At last, we do not lack demands. What is lacking is our attitude to come to the foreground, to claim our space in the development of organizational studies. More than that: we need to create channels with the management professionals and their trainers in higher education institutions. In my case, for example, apart from the partnership with the administration, I also developed a partnership with the PUC-Rio´s superintendence of Human Resources. This has allowed me the access to professional courses and lectures in different areas, contributing to explain problems and to make the formulation of demands easier.

ReVEL – How can the linguist work to construct/amplify this new area in language studies? In other words, how can the linguist find a company and formulate a research problem that attracts the private enterprise?

Maria do Carmo Leite de Oliveira – As I have already said, I believe that the first step is establishing visibility. At first, internally. In graduation terms, we need to invest in research lines that make it possible to qualify human resources within the area. If we orient dissertations and thesis that allow our students to walk into companies, we are opening a door to demands and also to opportunities of

employment. An example of this are Ana Cristina Ostermann´s studies focusing on *Disque Saúde* and *Emergência 190*[2]. To an applied linguist, an attractive problem is the one that makes one think about practice, helping us to understand *how* is being constructed not only in and through the company, but also the country, the society. And this has an impact on our lives.

In terms of graduation in Letras, we need to invest in the qualification of formation related to text and translation professionals by including in the curriculum contents that approximate the students to the business reality, to the use of the language in this context. Some of these actions have been contemplated by the PUC-Rio´s new curriculum of Letras[3], whether in bachelor, or teacher education. I had the opportunity to incorporate in many workshops on didactic material to the teacher education course the research I have developed, counting on CNPq´s support. One example was the creation of material that contemplate the labor´s world. If we think of an expressive quantity of students that graduate from high-school and go straight into their first job, we conclude that we have a debt concerning the formation of these boys and girls.

The second step may be establishing visibility amongst the walls of the university. Look for researchers on Administration that follow different research lines concerned with matters that allow collaborative action and with straightening relations, whether by means of spaces like congresses or publications in the management area. In the past years, organizational studies have been influenced by discourse investigations. The moment, thus, is the most favorable as possible.

ReVEL – Does the entrance of the linguist in business contexts demand a new posture at some point diverse from the one which is traditionally expected in the academy?

Maria do Carmo Leite de Oliveira – Livia Barbosa, an anthropologist that successfully crossed from the exotic tribes to the big companies, offers us, in chapter four of her book *Equality and meritocracy*, a beautiful and rich discussion about this issue. Considering that the book was written in 1999, I would say that at this point

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[2] Two public services offered by the Brazilian government to provide consultancy on health matters and access to police emergency through telefone calls. (Translator´s note)
[3] In Brazil, the language studies constitute an area called *Letras,* apart from the Arts area.

some of the aspects she has dealt with do not demand any change of posture. The relationship between the universities and companies has never been so close. And, whether we want it or not, the academic culture has been influenced by the culture of business. As well as in the companies, we are assessed by our production, by the quality of our work, by our results. The academic time, referred to by the author as a time which, in Brazil, tends to be infinite, has gained, to a certain extent, a speeded up pace. It does not mean that, on the other hand, the entrance is easy. There is a continuous effort performed by us to make ourselves clear, to negotiate logics, values and expectations. But there is nothing that a specialist in context studies cannot handle.

ReVEL – Could you tell us how your professional insertion in enterprise contexts happened?

Maria do Carmo Leite de Oliveira – This is an old story. I´m used to say that I did not choose the company: it was the company that chose me. It all began in the 1970' s and by the most traditional way. I was invited by IAG – the PUC-Rio´s business school – to teach business writing, in a course for executives of private and public companies. From a Letras professional, it is expected that he or she be a text professional. At this point I discovered, still without any theories on interaction, that the most interesting was not in the text lines, but between the lines. That was the moment in which I thought of the possibility of building bridges between the areas of Administration and Letras. The milestone of my applicable research to organizations took place some years later. I was teaching a course – on writing, again – at Eletrobrás, and an executive brought, unsatisfied, a complaining letter draft that he wrote to a partner company, for my appreciation. The rewriting of this same letter was done by the manager, and it fascinated me. The manager said everything the technician said, but in another way, establishing a different relation with the partner. That was the occasion in which I decided to do my Ph.D. thesis on politeness in business letters (OLIVEIRA, 1992). And, going against the model of politeness then – following Brown and Levinson – I discovered that, in the business contexts, he who has more power is not necessarily the less polite. In fact, it is just the opposite, despite the power, one is even more polite. Remembering an old cookie advertisement ("does it sell more because it is fresh, or is it fresh because it sells

more?"), I also asked myself: is one polite because he/she has power or does he/she have power because he/she is polite? From this point on, I started being invited to teach courses on Interpersonal Communication. And here I am, seeking new challenges.

ReVEL – Could you please suggest our readers some essential readings about Linguistics applied to business contexts?

Maria do Carmo Leite de Oliveira – For sure, and I thank the opportunity to present the area.

Complete references of the texts referred to in the interview:

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3. DEL CORONA, M.; OSTERMANN, A. C. "Eu não aguento mais!": a produção de *accounts* narrativos nas ligações para o serviço de emergência da Brigada Militar (190). *Calidoscópio*, v. 11, n.2. São Leopoldo: UNISINOS, (no prelo).
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9. ROBERTS, C. Applied linguistics applied. In: SARANGI, S.; LEEUWEN, T. van. (Eds.). *Applied Linguistics and communities of practice*. London: Continuum, 2003. pp. 132-149.

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Canonical texts and some more recent ones that locate the business discourse field and/or represent the research paradigm here approached:

1. BARGIELA-CHIPIANI, F.; NICKERSON, C.; PLANKEN, B. (Eds.). *Business Discourse*. New York: Palgrave Macmilan, 2007.

2. BORGES, Maria de Lourdes; OSTERMANN, Ana C. As divergências na orientação dos participantes no processo de construção de intersubjetividade e suas consequências no processo decisório. *Veredas*, v. 16. Juiz de Fora: UFJF, 2012. pp. 185-196.

3. CANDLIN, C. N.; SARANGI, S. (Eds.). *Handbook of communication in organizations and professions*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2011.

4. DREW, P.; HERITAGE, J. (Eds.). *Talk at work*. Interaction on institutional settings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

5. GARCEZ, P. M. Arguing sequences in cross-cultural business negotiation talk. In: GOUVEIA, Carlos A. M.; SILVESTRE, C.; AZUAGA, L. (Orgs.). *Discourse, communication and the enterprise*: linguistic perspectives. Lisboa: Centro de Estudos Anglísticos da Universidade de Lisboa, 2004. pp. 137-146.

6. GARCEZ, P. M. Point-making styles in cross-cultural business negotiation: A microethnographic study [Estilos de elaboração de posições em uma negociação comercial intercultural: um estudo microetnográfico]. *English for Specific Purposes,* v. 12, n. 2. 1993. pp. 103-120.

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13. SILVEIRA, S. B; MAGALHÃES, T. G. (Eds.). A fala-em-interação em situações de conflito: recursos linguísticos e práticas comunicativas. São Carlos: Claraluz, 2008.

14. SILVEIRA, S. B.; GAGO, P. Identidades-em-contexto: um estudo situado da construção de identidades em audiência de conciliação no PROCON. In: BASTOS, Liliana Cabral; MOITA LOPES, Luiz Paulo da. (Orgs.). *Estudos de identidade*: entre saberes e práticas. Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2011. pp. 359-388.