THE PRACTICE-POSITION SYSTEM AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL CATEGORY: CONTRIBUTIONS TO CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS[1]

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■ ABSTRACT: Critical discourse studies are acknowledged as an important scientific movement within the field of explanatory critique of social practices. This essay proposes epistemological considerations by means of a transdisciplinar dialogue between Critical Realism as a philosophical approach to the functioning of society proposed by Roy Bhaskar, and Critical Discourse Analysis – a theoretical approach to the social functioning of language and methodological tool to the situated analysis of texts. More specifically, the text explores the relation between social structures, practices and events, taking the position-practice system as an epistemological argument. The discussion is illustrated with two situated studies: one dealing with hybrid positions and tensions between pre-existent objective positions and their subjective occupations within a social movement; the other dealing with fluctuant positions in ELT education practices, as textured in institutional projects.

■ KEYWORDS: Critical discourse analysis. Position-practice system. Transformational model of social activity. Epistemology.

Introduction

This article undertakes epistemological reflections upon the transdisciplinary dialog between Critical Realism – a philosophical approach to the functioning of society proposed by Roy Bhaskar – and Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis – a theoretical approach to the social functioning of language and a methodological device for the situated analysis of texts. Considerations will be made concerning the ways particular concepts of the Critical Realism (CR), once taken as epistemological principle, would be optimized in the critical studies of discourse. Considering that potential readers would be more familiar with CDA, however, this text centers more specifically on the interface of the CR concepts, assuming that such reflections may shed light on still underexplored possibilities.

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Lying in the background of the text are the stratification of social reality as an ontological principle, the dialectical relations between elements of social practice as an epistemological premise, and the critical study of the mediating nature of language as a methodological tool. Bearing this in mind, the article is organized into three sections, the first two being more theoretically driven and the third illustrating our arguments based on two research studies carried out in Brazil. The research narratives will be further contextualized as part of our research agendas within the Brazilian contexts of teacher education and social movements. The analysis indicates how the occupation of hybridized positions is dependent on various contextual elements, including the ways social practices are already established, who is in what position and how power relations are distributed among participants. Idealist notions of social reality are problematized and implications of a realist take are presented.

Social critical-realist perspective: stratification as an ontological principle

Let us begin with the stratification of social reality as an ontological principle. We assume that human agency depends not only on the social actors' wishes and intentions – as idealist models would prefer – but it is also organically tied to the social and material conditions in which their actions are performed. That is, agency is carried out in the intersection of subjective interests and wishes and objective possibilities and opportunities (COLLIER, 1994). This perspective corresponds to the social critical-realist theory adopted in Fairclough's CDA model, who states that:

> The position I take is a realist one, based on a realist ontology: both concrete social events and abstract social structures, as well as the rather less abstract 'social practices' […] are part of reality. We can make a distinction between the 'potential' and the 'actual' – what is possible because of the nature (constraints and allowances) of social structures and practices, as opposed to what actually happens. Both need to be distinguished from the 'empirical', what we know about reality. (FAIRCLOUGH, 2003, p.14).

Critical Realism (BHASKAR, 1998) asserts that (i) there is a world independent of our knowledge about it and, because of that, irreducible to what we know about it; (ii) this world both preexists as a condition for the intentional act, and it is reproduced-transformed by human action, (iii) the potentially existent causal powers in open systems, brought about by any series of contextual contingencies, produce the known outcomes, which were either experienced or predicted from casual criteria. These principles relate to three domains of reality – the **Real**, the **Actual** and the **Empirical**.

By recognizing that there are things in the world that exist independent of our knowledge about them and that there are possible objects of experience that can be asserted regardless of our perception about them, one can affirm that questions about what exists cannot be reduced to questions about what we are able to know. The reduction of the potential domain to the empirical one is called **epistemic fallacy** (BHASKAR, 1978). What exists as a liability is more comprehensive than what actually happens and this, in its turn, is more comprehensive than what is empirically observed.

The **real** domain refers to the power-generating structures and to the event-generating mechanisms. That is, it refers to "[…] whatever exists, be it natural or social, regardless of whether it is an empirical object for us, and whether we happen to have an adequate understanding of its nature." (SAYER, 2000, p.11). What potentially exists and what could exist in accordance with causal powers may or may not be **actualized**. This distinction between what is possible due to constraints and allowances of social structures and practices and what is **actual** is fundamental to the understanding that there is no complete and definite analysis of societies. As it will be further discussed, social movements and practices have a set of powers and mechanisms capable of operationalizing ways of (inter)acting, ways of being and ways of organizing social movements in particular directions, even if they do not happen accordingly or if they happen without being empirically perceived. Though dependent on social actors for their realization, structures preexist in relation to them and their action.

In fact, in the open and dynamic system of social life, the activation of causal powers depends on a complex group of contextual contingencies that can both enable and hinder possibilities. **Actual** thus refers "[…] to what happens when these powers and liabilities are activated and produce change." (FAIRCLOUGH; JESSOP; SAYER, 2002, p.3). Potential powers are thus actualized when instantiated in consonant practices. But these powers can also remain as hindered potential, that is, not actual due to the contingencies present in the social world. In a relational way, changes at the practice level can change the nature of the institution, despite its durability and relative autonomy.

If the existence of what is circumscribed in the potential domain has the powers it is supposed to have, given its social structures, and if the causal powers generated in a structure co-determine events, it is possible to investigate the structures that generate the powers by means of their observable effects on events. Therefore, the **empirical** domain is defined as that of experience. In other words, it refers to what can be experimented and observed from the effects of liabilities and actualities. Although "[…] our capacity to observe social effects and actions does not exhaust what might exist or exists in fact.", argues Resende (2009a, p.21), "[…] observation can teach us about what becomes actual and what might become actual."

So far we have said that the different levels of abstraction of social reality – which is circumscribed in the **real**, **actual** and **empirical** domains – imply that not everything that might happen in the social world happens in fact and that not everything that is actualized in social events can be perceived by experience. The causal criterion, that is, the explanation of a process by means of the description of what produces it, consists in evidence of what is its condition-and-impediment. In other words, it consists in evidence of the resources that make it possible and of the constraints that limit it. In that lies causation as an epistemological argument in critical realism: the insights that an empirical analysis of the social (inter)actions enables us to gain, also allows us, at the same time, to explain the emergence of events in terms of non-observable causes. As Collier (1994, p.44) exemplifies:

> When we find the garden muddy in the morning, we assume a real rainstorm, though we slept through it; a murder-victim implies a murderer, even though one might never be identified. Rainstorms and murderers are possible objects of experience, but their existence is in these cases asserted on casual criteria only, since they are not 'experienced' in the sense of perceived.

The author also states that it is possible both to explain events stemming from previous mechanisms and causes (as in the case of the storm and murderers) and to explain a mechanism stemming from other mechanisms (for example, when economic mechanisms explain political and ideological ones). This perspective operates towards the meaning of social process, understood by CDA as "[…] the interplay between three levels of social reality: social **structures, practices** and **events**." (FAIRCLOUGH, 2009, p.164, original emphasis).

Social structures are abstract entities that define the potential, that is, the set of resources and constraints that enable the realization of events. Each structure (for example economic structure, social class, political institution, semiotic system) generates different effects on the events by means of its own mechanisms. However, as Fairclough (2003, p.23) explains, events "[…] are not in any simple or direct way the effects of abstract social structures." The relationship between abstract social structures and concrete social (inte)relations is mediated by the (networks of) social practices.

The concept of social practice is central to CDA, and it is based on the assumption that social life is made of practices defined as

> […] habitualised ways, tied to particular times and places, in which people apply resources (material or symbolic) to act together in the world. Practices are constituted throughout social life – in the specialized domains of the economy and politics, for instance, but

> also in the domain of culture, including everyday life. (CHOULIARAKI; FAIRCLOUGH, 1999, p.21).

The practices that mediate social structures and the individual's actions, therefore, are active processes in the production of events, which articulate several elements of social life, including discourse. To say that practices articulate several elements and mechanisms means to acknowledge the fact that practices are themselves articulated in networks and their internal aspects are determined by such external relationships. Thus, Chouliaraki e Fairclough (1999, p.24) argue that "[…] all social practice is embedded in networks of power relations, and potentially subordinates the social subjects that engage in it, even those with 'internal' power."

Texts, as elements of concrete social events, are determined by the causal relation with networks of social practices that define specific forms of acting, and that "[…] although actual events may more or less diverge from these definitions and expectations (because they cut across different social practices, and because of the casual powers of social agents), they are still partly shaped by them." (FAIRCLOUGH, 2003, p.25). Nevertheless, the author himself makes it clear that texts are not only the result of social constraints, but they also cause, potentially, social changes:

> Most immediately, texts can bring about changes in our knowledge (we can learn things from them), our beliefs, our attitudes, values and so forth. They also have longer-term causal effects – one might for instance argue that prolonged experience of advertising and other commercial texts contribute to shaping people's identities as 'consumers', or their gender identities. Texts can also start wars, or contribute to change in education, or to change in industrial relations, and so forth. Their effects can include changes in the material world, such as changes in urban design, or the architecture and design of particular types of building. In sum, texts have causal effects upon, and contribute to changes, in people (beliefs, attitudes, etc.), actions, social relations, and the material world. [...] these effects are mediated by meaning making. (FAIRCLOUGH, 2003, p.8).

In this aspect, texts produced as parts of social events have a privileged place in investigations that, like ours, are aligned with a dialectic-relational approach (i) between structures' mechanisms and the ways they are instantiated in specific social practices and (ii) between language and other elements of social life, within each event (FAIRCLOUGH, 2009). The analysis of specific texts as part of specific events operates towards an analytical connection between the concrete social event and the more abstract social practices. This is because "[…] texts are not

just effects of linguistic structures and orders of discourse, they are also effects of other social structures, and of social practices in all their aspects." (FAIRCLOUGH, 2003, p.25). More than that, as seen before, texts not only suffer the effects of social structures and practices, but they also cause effects on social life.

To have causality as an epistemological argument means that, in order to make sense of the relationships between structural mechanisms and specific forms of instantiation of social events, it is necessary to investigate what potentializes and what hinders the concrete action and that, as such, partially transforms and partially feeds the permanence of practices and structures. In fact, most of our experience in daily life is explained with reference to causal powers. As Sayer (2000, p.14) argues, a critical explanation depends, instead, "[…] on identifying causal mechanisms and how they work, and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions." The author also draws the attention to the fact that what explains the effects is not the regularity of frequency with which the causes are observed, but what the mechanisms are, how and in what circumstances they are activated. On the other hand, the explanation of particular mechanisms depends on the analysis of the nature of the structure which bears a certain power. As we will illustrate further, the social actors' power to act as educators depends not only on their knowledge and qualifications, but on their being accepted by others as legitimate.

The discussion about the causal relationships as an epistemological argument is related, therefore, to the assumption that discourses have real effects on practices, institutions and social order, and that these very effects constitute what needs to be analyzed, understood and critically explained. In this sense, the investigation of the ways these effects are produced requires the analysis to start with the identification of what produces the effects and what can be observed in the concrete (inter)actions followed, then, by the attribution of causal relationships in terms of underlying mechanisms (FAIRCLOUGH; JESSOP; SAYER, 2002). The concrete actions, with their effects and causes, are what allow us, ultimately, to analize, understand and explain the articulations of the social practices and, consequently, potentialize our capacity to unveil the structures, mechanisms and powers that operate in the events. What is instantiated, in a certain moment, in a certain place, by a certain group of people, depends on which causal powers are activated by the social world as an open system.

The transformational model of the social activity: the position-practice system as an epistemological category

To treat social life as an open system means to understand that the same powers present in the structure can produce different results and that different

mechanisms can produce similar results (CHOULIARAKI; FAIRCLOUGH, 1999). This implies that the discussion about causal relationships outreaches a cause-effect mechanistic perspective. If the study of the causal relationships departs, on the one hand, from the recognition that social actors are socially constrained, it restates, on the other one, that not all their actions are socially determined. As Fairclough (2003, p.22) argues, "[…] agents have their own 'casual powers' which are not reducible to the casual powers of social structures and practices."

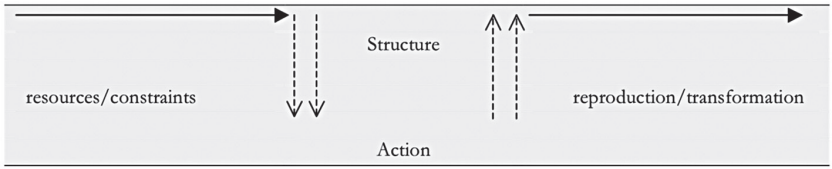
For the Marxist theory, "[…] circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstance." (MARX; ENGELS, 1998, p.165). However, in the CDA field, as a relational-dialectical approach following the social critical-realist theory, structures are not reducible to social actors, but rather, as discussed earlier, they exist before them. Although the elements of social practice (discourse, social relationships, material activities, mental phenomenon, according to Chouliaraki and Fairclough's frame) maintain among themselves a dialectical relationship, structures and actions are distinct in nature.

As Ramalho and Resende (2011, p.37) argue, "[…] in a particular synchronic moment, society is not the creation of human beings, but it exists before them (although diachronically society is the result of human beings' actions)." There is a conceptual distinction between individuals acting and the society that enables and constrains their action. Structures, though forged by previous social actions, are anterior to the social action they now constrain. This determines the transformational – and not dialectical – characteristics of the relationship between structure and action or, in Bhaskar's terms, between society and individual. Therefore the need for the intermediate category represented in the position-practice system.

According to Bhaskar (1998), it is as much true that societies only exist as a result of human action (the humanist principle), as it is that the social context determines which actions are liable to become actual (the structuralist principle). The author states that "[…] society is both the ever-present **condition** (material cause) and the continually reproduced **outcome** of human agency." (BHASKAR, 1998, p.215, original emphasis).

For the CR perspective, the relationship between structure and action is not dialectical, but transformational, that is, society and human practice "[…] do not constitute two moments of the same process. Rather they refer to radically different kinds of things." (BHASKAR, 1998, p.214). On the one hand, society is means-and-end, it is material condition and result of praxis. On the other hand, praxis is both reproduction and transformation of society. This is what the author calls the *Transformational model of social activity*. He represents his model in the following way:

Figure 1 – Transformational model of the Society/Person Connection



Source: Based on Bhaskar (1998, p.217); Resende (2009a, p.27).

When discussing the figure, Ramalho and Resende (2011, p.39) explain that

> […] the descending movement of the arrow represents human action as depending on rules and resources (including mechanisms and their causal powers) available in the social structure. At the same time that this structure, as a means, is a facilitator for allowing the action, it is also a constraint, as it 'regulates' conducts.
>
> On the other hand, the ascending movement of the arrow indicates that the triggering of rules and resources of social structures by social actors can result in reproduction or transformation of such a structure as a result. Thus, action and structure constitute each other transformationally and reciprocally.

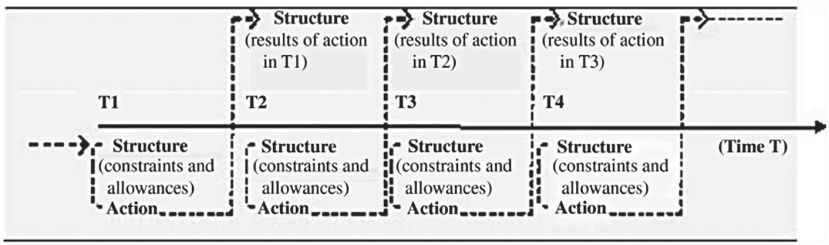
To say that society and praxis maintain an asymmetrical relationship between themselves – given that structures are always previous to the actions that, in their turn, take advantage of the preexistent forms of social orders to reproduce and transform them – suggests a conception of agency in which human actions and changes in the social structure, though mutually dependent, are categorically different. For Bhaskar (1998, p.215),

> Thus one can allow, without paradox or strain, that purposiveness, intentionality and sometimes self-consciousness characterize human actions but not transformations in the social structure. The conception I am proposing is that people, in their conscious activity, for the most part unconsciously reproduce (and occasionally transform) the structures governing their substantive activities of production. Thus people do not marry to reproduce the nuclear family or work to sustain the capitalist economy. Yet it is nevertheless the unintended consequence (and inexorable result) of, as it is also a necessary condition for, their activity.

There are here, among others, two aspects that must be emphasized in the present discussion. The first concerns the historicity of social change, and the second, the relationship between social (dis)positions and existing possibilities for action.

Considering that structures always foreshadow actions, what the social actors deal with at the moment of praxis is conformed by the actions of previous actors who were also constrained by the existing structures at the time of their action. Based on this characterization, Resende (2009a, p.28) suggests "[…] a temporal relationship (in terms of synchrony/diachrony) between the two elements of the structure/agency recursivity".

Figure 2 – Synchronic/diachronic relationship between structure and action



Source: Resende (2009a, p.28).

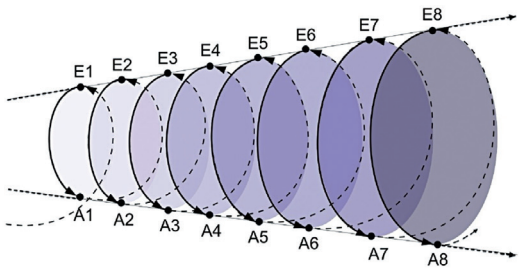
We exist as human beings in societies full of mechanisms that condition and enable our potentially transforming action. The human activity objectified by those who came before us becomes object of our appropriation, which generates in us needs, desires and motives that did not exist in the same way in the past and that, consequently, will lead us to new objectifications and appropriations in an endless process (DUARTE, 2001).

Within this framework, whatever the historical moment, it always reveals the socio-historical conditions in which individuals exist, as well as the situational circumstances they created based on the structural allowances and constraints. Thus, the material and symbolic structures reproduced and transformed by the praxis of previous generations and appropriated by individuals in their process of insertion in social life circumscribe the possibilities and limitations of future generations. Because of that, human actions of reproduction and transformation keep the meaning of totality of the history of humankind in a never-ending process of rupture-and-continuity. In the words of Marx and Engels (1998, p.172),

> History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances and, on the other, modifies the old circumstances with a completely changed activity.

Therefore, the relationship between the objectified practice – that is, the one presented to the individuals and groups as structural mechanisms that enable-constrain their actions – and objectifying practice – that is, human action that reproduces and transforms society – is not linear. In fact, historicity happens in cyclical movements that neither come back to the same point, nor come in the same way. Also, they are never entirely different from the previous ones, maintaining traits of the objectified practice, though in **radically transformed circumstances**. In this sense, Figure 2 represents a new synthesis of the historical movements of the structure/agency recursivity:

Figure 3 – Historical movements of social reproduction and transformation



Source: Made by the author.

In the figure, we propose a refinement for the illustration of temporal asymmetry between structure and action. The spiral movement represents loom of the mesh of the social fabric with its relationships and practice networks. The threads intertwine in conformity with the objectified practices that constitute networks of allowances and constraints for the human action which also reconfigure the social fabric in a perspective of transformation-permanence of the preexisting circumstances. Structures are placed above in different times (E_1, E_2, ...) to signal their abstract character of potentiality that can be taken synchronically to the actual level (by means of action), represented below, in the concrete event plan. The descending lines indicate that, in synchrony, structures provide resources and constraints to the situated action; this is how these lines connect structure and action always at the same time (E_1-A_1, E_2-A_2, ...). The ascending dotted lines indicate, on the other hand, the diachronic relationship, that is, the possibilities of transformation-reproduction of structures by the situated action, but always at different times: action in A_1 results in structure in E_2, and then successively. The model is transformational as it comprehends this asymmetry between the structures that govern the action, always previous and conformed to previous actions, and the very action they govern. Therefore, the action in A_1 is structured by E_1, but carries the potential to transform E_1 in E_2. Finally, the dotted line does not have a defined start due to the impossibility of locating the "zero point", as the Eva myth does.

In contrast to the previous ones, this illustration of the transformational model of social activity more clearly states the asymmetry between structure and action and the transformational relationship they establish, as well as the dynamics of the social change historicity.

Considering social structures exist in inter-dependence with the activities they govern, and with the meanings that social actors attribute to what they do in such activities, it is therefore necessary to have

> […] a system of concepts designating the 'point of contact' between human agency and social structures. Such a point, linking action to structure, must both endure and be immediately occupied by individuals. It is clear that the mediating system we need is that of the positions (places, functions, rules, tasks, duties, rights, etc) occupied (filled, assumed, enacted, etc.) by individuals, and of the practices (activities, etc.) in which, in virtue of their occupancy of these positions (and vice-versa), they engage. (BHASKAR, 1998, p.220-221).

This mediating system is called **position-practice system** by Bhaskar. As an epistemological principle, the position-practice system intertwines the threads that knit explanations for the events empirically captured from the preexisting conditions, and generates knowledge about the investigated social realities. It fosters choices that allow for the analysis of positioned practices' moments in their relationships of causality in the reproduction and transformation of the society. The position-practice system favors the analytical attention that should be paid to the social relationships as a basis for the explanations. It is, then, an epistemological principle capable of establishing connections between the transformational model of social activity (an ontological perspective of the Critical Realism revisited by CDA) and the method of discursive analysis put forward by CDA.

Associated with the ontological principles discussed above, this mediating system works towards the overcoming of both voluntarism, which takes social structures as a direct product of human action, and structuralism, which treats human action as totally derived from the configuration of structures. Approaching society as a network of positioned practices allows for the study of historicity within the power and agency categories.

When discussing such ontological and epistemological implications in CDA, Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p.62) state that the explanatory critique of a social problem in its semiotic aspect "inevitably raises questions about power". This happens, partially, due to the fact that the analyses of specific practices treat discourse in its double function – as part of the activity or as a representation of the practice, or both – in relation to the other elements such as material activity, social

relationships and personal (dis)positions. Because of these specific relationships, people's roles and identities are internally related, so that what is possible for a social actor to realize, that is, his/her power to act, depends not only on the existing and sedimented relationships but also on those that are transformed in the becoming. In Fairclough's (2003, p.41) words,

> Power in its most general sense of 'the transformative capacity of human action', the capacity to 'intervene in a series of events so as to alter their course', depends upon 'resources or facilities' which are differentially available to social actors; and Power in the 'relational' sense of the 'capability to secure outcomes where the realization of these outcomes depends upon the agency of the others' is also differentially available to different social actors.

Therefore, power relationships are tension relationships between those whose positions enable them to exert power on a particular practice and those who occupy positions to reproduce or resist these power structures. Changes that occur in occupied positions both influence and generate potential of change in the practices. However, as a study by Resende (2009b, p.9) shows, "[…] the change of position inside a structured institution is not a free-of-conflict process – the previous positions continue to exert pressure for the continuity of the practices inherent to the previous relationships."

In this sense, agency is constrained by the preexistent structures with their conditions and circumstances at the same time that human action affects and even changes structures in the process of changing (dis)positions. As we will discuss further, the (dis)positions of a particular social actor within particular social practices represent particular configurations for the particular participants' (inter)actions. The resulting tensions and disputes of new positions, therefore, can only be analyzed and understood inside particular social practices, with the use of particular methodological choices coherent with the ontological and epistemological stands adopted in each study.

In the position-practice system, agency is no longer conceived as in humanism conceptions, which place human agency at the core of the explanation. For Thorne (2005, p.400), "[…] agency in this sense is not a preexisting value; [...] with its concomitant components of intentionality and desire, agency is a culturally (in) formed development shaped by participation in specific social practices."

Thus, the study of the position-practice system in a particular context is the study of how, historically, social actors' (dis)positions are reproduced and transformed in contexts that include already existing hierarchies, in which the potentials to act are, likewise, previously distributed among subjects, institutions and groups. Therefore, approaching the position-practice system as

an epistemological principle means to acknowledge that changes inside social practices, as well as between them and the network of practices, are related to changes in the dynamics of the power that sustain the same practices. The epistemological nature of this principle – focus of our discussion in this article – is justified because the approach of this system, in particular cases, situated in specific practices, allows us to know the constraints and possibilities foreseen in a particular objective position and analyze, in situated events, the resulting tensions involved in the creation of new positions or the subjective occupation of preexisting positions by historically located groups or individuals.

For studies that focus on the discursive aspects of practices, CDA presents itself as a theory about the social functioning of language, and a set of methods that can map connections between specific social practices and discursive products of events associated to the practices under analysis (some of these methods can be seen in FAIRCLOUGH, 2012; PARDO-ABRIL, 1996, 2007; PARDO, 2011). As such, CDA methodological framework introduces a series of analytical categories associated to discourse as action (genres), as representation (discourse), and as identification (styles) that can be usefully applied to bodies of texts taken as analytical objects. CDA is key for the critical explanation of sociodiscursive problems (RAMALHO, 2007, 2008, 2010; PAPA, 2008; RESENDE, 2009b, 2009c, 2010; FAIRCLOUGH, 2010; RAMALHO; RESENDE, 2011).

Our focus here, however, is not the analytical method or the specific categories of analysis. In the next section, we will exemplify how the position-practice system was used as an epistemological category in two research projects: the first one implemented within a Teacher Education Program at State University of Londrina, and the other accomplished within the National Movement of Street Boys and Girls, in Brasília D.C., Brazil. We will therefore present the basic methodological framework of both studies with the aim of showing how the focus on the position-practice system enabled the observation of discursive tensions associated with particular (dis)positions.

Epistemological and methodological possibilities: the position-practice system in two situated studies

Our objective in relation to the following narratives is to illustrate how the position-practice system, used as an epistemological category, fostered the analysis of positioned practices within two distinct research projects, and allowed for an explanatory critique of hybridized positions and fluctuant positions.

Resende (2008) focused on the (militancy, pedagogical, financial, political) crisis of the National Movement of Street Boys and Girls, in the Local Committee of the Federal District (In Portuguese, **Movimento Nacional de Meninos e**

Meninas de Rua – MNMMR/DF)[2]. This social movement, founded in 1985, had a fundamental role in the creation of the National Permanent Forum of Non-Governmental Entities for the Defense of the Rights of Children and Adolescents (Fórum D.C.A), in 1988, and in the design of the Statute for Children and Adolescents (Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente – ECA), in 1990. However, due to several reasons, the movement faced a severe crisis from 2000 onwards. Among the discursive causes investigated were resistance to change, illegitimacy of the Movement's social cause; adhesion to determinist discourses; lack of legitimate room concerning position changes within the movement. This last aspect is the focus of the current discussion.

The illustration of how the position-practice system was epistemologically explored in the study requires contextualization. As can be read in its statute, the main ideals of the Movement are the conquest and defense of kids' and youths' rights, the development of educators and the mobilization of a community group of street boys and girls. The conquest of rights was a fundamental aspect in the work of the movement during the period just after its creation, with the pressure exerted on political representatives at the time of the writing of the 1988' Constitution, and with the design and approval of the Statute of Children and Adolescents and the councils of rights' constitution. The defense of rights is still a main focus, as "[…] dozens of MNMMR committees work as virtual centers for the defense of children, as they are a channel to express the voices of boys and girls whose rights are violated." (SANTOS, B., 1994, p.40).

The education of educators to work in the streets was based on the creation of the Development and Support Center for Educators, which used to have three branches in different Brazilian regions: the first was created in 1989 in São Paulo, the second in 1990 in Belem, and the third in 1992 in Recife. The Development Centers provided training courses for educators, activities for work professionalization and team maintenance. However, they do not operate anymore, according to information given to the researcher by educators and adolescents in individual interviews.

The organization and education of a community group of boys and girls are at the core of the Movement activities, and figures as its "[…] basic principle is the promotion of the child and adolescent as subjects of their history and citizenship." (MNMMR, 1997). These projects are carried out in nuclear bases, "[…] spaces that are co-managed by the children themselves, where they can discuss their social condition of exclusion and acquire knowledge and awareness of their rights (and available services) and think about alternative solutions for their lives." (SANTOS, B., 1994, p.31). At the back panel, based on the concept of 'juvenile protagonism', lies the principle that by means of active participation,

[2] For full access, read Resende (2008).

the adolescent can get involved in the solution of problems in the community as well as in society.

However, in the beginning of the 2000's, the nuclear-based activities started to face severe crisis due to lack of resources for the maintenance of educators to coordinate the work. As a result, a group of young protagonists ('former girls', as they are called by the Movement, that is, young women who had been 'girls' nucleated in the body of this social movement and who remained connected to it as partners) took over the coordination tasks of the base nuclei of the Movement, therefore creating the position of 'girl-educators'. Such aspect is of particular interest to us. Resende's data analysis focused, among other features of the crisis, on the tensions that resulted from the creation of this new position, hybrid in its nature for articulating both elements of the position 'girl' and elements of the position 'educator'. The institutional hierarchical differences between one and other position made it difficult to reconcile.

The textually oriented analyses of interviews with two girl-educators revealed their lack of confidence when identifying themselves in the position of educators. One evident cause of such a conflict is that, although the Movement projected the position of 'girl-educator', it did not enable them full identification as educators – this being the focus of the conflict around this new position created in the practices of this movement. Once structures are previous to relational agency, there is a contradiction and tension between emergent represented positions and actualized social roles within resistant encounters. The 'girl-educator' position was a new position created in the heart of the Movement due to its financial crisis and consequent lack of human resources. However, the subjective occupation of the 'girl-educator' position is partially conditioned by the position of 'girl' previously occupied by the group members – a position that hinders the occupation of the new created position. Although the 'girl-educator' position gathered characteristics of both previous positions (girl and educator), the position of girl, with its internal historical characteristics, prevails due to the already established hierarchical relationships. Considering the broader picture, periods of crisis are periods when there is little definition of roles and identities. This is also a source of conflicts and a possible cause for the position misoccupation.

The hierarchies and the emergent position generate tension between the anteriority of the given structures and the posteriority of the implicit action in the new position. In this sense, the previously structured hierarchies function as mechanisms that hinder the agency imagined in the practices of this new position, both restricting and limiting it. This can be noticed, in the data analysis, in the contradiction between the representation of the Movement as a space where boys and girls have voice, present in all the data generated, and the silencing of the young girls' voice when they take over the role of educators,

revealed by one of the girls when she expresses dissatisfaction with her desire to be heard, valued in her role of educator. In this sense, Madalena Pinto dos Santos (2002, p.8) suggests that "[…] it is necessary to guarantee the possibility of a space of participation where the resistance to and/or transformation of what exists is possible, where the others' contributions, beyond the ones by those already instituted with power, is not only allowed but pertinent." This is of fundamental importance so that the several members recognize the value given to their efforts.

The difficulty to satisfactorily accomplish the change of role in the Movement also seems to be related to the interruption between participation and action, in which participation constitutes the nature of juvenile protagonism, and of the position of girl, whereas the field of action is reserved to the position of educator. Thus, although the position of 'girl-educator' was created, it remains circumscribed to the domain of participation. The breaking of this symbolic barrier between participating and acting seems to be one of the problematic aspects of juvenile protagonism, which ties young people's performances to the Movement space. Maybe the creation of spaces of effective action of the Movement's protagonists favored the organization for action also outside the institution. In terms of the position-practice system, the conflict comes from the fact that, in the new hybrid position 'girl-educator', at the same time that the participation as 'girl' is imposed, the young women get involved with some practices that are typical of the position of 'educator' – which refer to the coordination of a base nucleus. There is lack of definition concerning places, functions, tasks, duties and rights connected to the new created position, 'girl-educator', whose perception was possible, in the scope of this research, thanks to the focus on the position-practice system as a central epistemological category in the study, aligned with a multi-methodological approach for the generation and collecting of data and a textually oriented lens for the analysis of these data.

A study by Mateus and Resende (2014) analyzed issue of national policies for the adaptation of local educational practices to the globalized market and their implications for teacher education. More specifically, it focused on the Institutional Program of Scholarships for Teacher Apprenticeship (**Programa Institucional de Bolsa de Iniciação à Docência** – Pibid), inserted in a series of measures of the National Plan of Development (**Plano Nacional de Desenvolvimento** – PDE) – an educational component of the Growth Acceleration Plan (**Plano de Aceleração do Crescimento** – PAC) – proposed at the beginning of the second mandate of then president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in April 2007.

Pibid emerges nationwide as a presence-based program aimed at "[…] altering the current scenario of teacher education by establishing the permanent relationship between higher education and basic education." (BRASIL, 2008

p.16). It is a Program, therefore, developed and based on the assumption that the current practice in teacher education must be altered, indicating that what exists does not correspond to what is desired, and that the alteration of such practice is dependent on a permanent relationship between universities and schools. The normative texts describing Pibid follow a problem-solution macrotextual structure, in which the problem lies in the **quality of school teachers' pre-service education**, and the solution lies in the **integration between higher education and basic education**[3]. This structure sets the grounds for rules and procedures to be implemented in teacher education programs (MATEUS, 2014), and discursively projects reformulations in the teacher education position-practice systems. The prescribed texts "[…] create particular degrees of stability and durability for particular articulations, and particular potentials for articulating practices together in new ways." (CHOULIARAKI; FAIRCLOUGH, 1999, p.13).

Considering the aim of this essay, we will concentrate specifically on the aspects that deal with the processes of recontextualization related to social actors, their roles and (dis)positions as discursively stated in seven English Language undergraduate subprojects developed by five higher education institutions (HEI) when answering the Pibid's public notices published by MEC/Capes between 2009 and 2012.

These subprojects are conceived of both as actions – that inform, define and project socialization practices in accordance with what is permitted and forbidden by established rules – and as ways of representation – that assess, justify and position social practices and actors in specific ways, based on values and beliefs legitimated by particular groups. All seven subprojects follow the same problem-solution macrostructure of governmental documents, but with inverted logic – the problem is identified as lying in the basic school and in the school teachers' inability to incorporate the results of academic research, and the solution is represented by the university and the educational work it develops with basic education teachers.

The analysis of the subprojects, in dialogue with the representation theory of social actors (VAN LEEUWEN, 2008) and its functionalization categories, enabled us to design a grid of naming practices used to represent different social actors involved – named, in the study, by anchor terms such as **licensure students, basic education teachers** and **higher education professors**. Both the governmental public notices and the subprojects created a repertoire of positionings that led us to proposition of the concept of **fluctuating positions** as a category of analysis for the explanatory critique we conducted. By fluctuating positions we understand "[…] those positions that are densely recontextualized by

[3] Excerpts in italics taken from Art. 3o of Decree n. 7.219, from June 24, 2010, about the Pibid and its objectives (BRASIL, 2010).

several classifications, which position social actors in unstable ways, sometimes with meanings close to those already consolidated, sometimes with different meanings." (MATEUS; RESENDE, 2012, p.88).

In the case of the licensure students, the data analysis showed 10 different names associated in the public notices and 19 different names employed in the subprojects. In this positioning *spectrum* some representations are closer to the consolidated positions such as 'student', 'licensure student', 'academic', and others are entirely new positions such as 'apprentice-teacher', 'novice teacher', and 'new teacher'.

For basic education teachers, 7 and 13 representations were identified in the public notices and subprojects, respectively. Here, also, they are named in a *continuum* between those historically objectified and fulfilled positions such as 'pre-service teacher, 'in-service teacher', and those created by the governmental documents and recontextualized in the subprojects like 'supervisor-teacher' and 'co-teacher educator'.

Likewise, higher education professors are (re)named in 5 different ways in the public notices and in 8 different ways in the subprojects. Their (dis)positionings are also discursively recontextualized in a *continuum* from pre-existing, historically consolidated positions, such as the ones of 'educators' and 'researchers', to new ones such as 'area coordinators' and 'fellow teachers'.

Beyond the relevance of classification systems, our data showed that there are tensions that emerge from the discursive instantiation of such fluctuating positionings, which are revealed by means of the density of the existing namings in the texts. In the case of the licensure students, the study shows that not only are they more diversely represented and classified, but they are also more represented in new positions and in hybrid or intermediate positionings than are basic education teachers and higher education professors. If, on the one hand, this expresses the tensions typical of those who move between the two worlds – the university world, as a student, and the school world, as a *quasi*-teacher – on the other hand, it indicates licensure students' position is the one in which the roles are less consolidated and in which the dynamics of power relations are more important. Fluctuating positions operate, in general, towards the indetermination of the social roles and indicate non-consolidated power dynamics. In this case, the bigger the fluctuation, that is, the greater the diversity in the naming and its hybridism, the lesser the power of the particular group in the recontextualized practice.

The (dis)positioning of higher education teachers indicates other tensions that the analysis of the position-practice system as an epistemological category allows us to comprehend and critically explain. On the one hand, the public notices

and governmental official documents do not name higher education teachers as much for their pre-existing and historically consolidated positions as for their new positions, particularly the position of area coordinators and fellow teacher. On the other hand, the HEI subprojects, produced by higher education teachers, recontextualize this very same role due to the teachers' positions as educators and researchers and mitigate the new created positions, specially the one of fellow teacher. Such resistance to changes in the roles revealed in the Pibid subprojects can be understood in the light of the constraints present in the structure that tends to relocate the HEI to the role of service renderers, in accordance with neoliberal policies and practices (FAIRCLOUGH, 2003).

The discursive creation of new positions enables us to suppose that the power relations are somehow discursively relocated. That, however, operates both as a possibility of opening up to differences and as a way to highlight the permanence to adhere to a project that intends to be transformative. The recognition that structures precede actions leads to the understanding that the tensions present in the recontextualization processes are typical of practices undergoing transformations, in which the new roles and social positions, though textured, have not been subjectively fulfilled. That only happens in social events, with the configurations that are characteristic of the practices that become real in the ways of negotiating meaning, acting, interacting, representing, identifying, being identified. Wenger (1998) apud Tusting (2005, p.39), in a fresh reading of Wenger (quoted by him), states that "[…] even where reifications are imposed from above, they 'must be re-appropriated into a local process in order to become meaningful'." Thus, only ethnographic studies of such practices and of the texts they instantiate can deepen the understanding of the ways in which elements of these 'old' and 'new' positions and dispositions are articulated in hierarchically pre-existing contexts.

Implications

In this study, we discussed the position-practice system as an epistemological category that allows the understanding and the critical explanation of the changing networks of social practice, as a mediating category between the durable and abstract preexistent structures and the more concrete actions. We argued that this kind of analysis is relevant to those interested in learning about the constraints and possibilities present in a particular position and in investigating, in situated events, the tensions resulting from its subjective occupation by social actors.

This innovation has some implications for CDA.

In the theoretical field, the study has particular bonds with Bhaskar's philosophy of social functioning and argues for greater clarity in the type of

discursive analysis carried out by critical researchers. This does not intend to set boundaries to all the many other possibilities of interdisciplinarity, but aims to argue for the importance of a necessary coherence in the field. The stratification of social reality as an ontological framework defines important boundaries to deal with matters such as agency and power in a transformational perspective.

In the epistemological arena, the essay presents the position-practice system as an element that allows for the analysis of discursive tensions associated with particular (dis)positions in relation to the power dynamics that support particular practices and argues that the position-practice system as an epistemological category makes it possible to critically explain empirical events based on their casual powers. This is relevant when one is willing to generate knowledge about the investigated social realities, bearing in mind the situatedness of agency and the possibilities to act within particular practices.

The power to act and the potentialities to participate in social practices, once distributed among social actors, institutions and communities of practice, bear relation to ways of participating and of reproducing-transforming these same practices. The ways social actors position themselves and are positioned, as well as the effects of their (dis)positions in the investigated practices, are important to the understanding of agency as a relational-transformational endeavor, constantly in the process of becoming by means of participation in situated practices. In this sense, it is not an individual preexistent attribute, but a potentiality. The previous research findings deal with what is possible for social actors to accomplish in relation to the consolidated practices and in relation to what is possible to be re-organized in the practice-to-come.

In the methodological field, this essay argues for analyses as processes where the elements of the social practice are taken in their situatedness, bearing in mind the aspects of the structure that orients them. The situated social practices we discussed here were investigated in relation to their more abstract sociocultural structures, as well as in relation to the events experienced by particular social actors and groups.

In this sense, our contributions are strongly committed to the methodological-epistemological-theoretical interweaveness made explicit by the indissolubility between the stratified social reality as an ontological framework, the position-practice system as epistemological choice and the critical discourse analysis as a pre-requisite for a critical explanation.

MATEUS, E.; RESENDE, V. de M. O sistema posição-prática como categoria pistemológica: contribuições para adc. *Alfa*, São Paulo, v.59, n.3, p.431-454, 2015.

- *RESUMO: Estudos críticos do discurso têm se consolidado como instrumento importante no campo da crítica explanatória de práticas sociais. Este artigo propõe uma reflexão epistemológica em torno do diálogo transdisciplinar entre o Realismo Crítico – abordagem filosófica do funcionamento da sociedade proposta por Roy Bhaskar – e a Análise de Discurso Crítica na versão de Norman Fairclough – abordagem teórica do funcionamento social da linguagem e dispositivo metodológico para análise situada de textos, e, mais especificamente, aborda a relação entre estrutura, prática e ação social, tomando o sistema posição-prática como argumento epistemológico. A discussão teórica decorre de dois estudos situados: um que trata de posições híbridas e tensões entre posições objetivas previamente existentes e sua ocupação subjetiva no contexto de um movimento social; outro que trata de posições flutuantes em contexto de formação de professores/as de inglês, conforme texturizadas em subprojetos institucionais. O texto explora implicações da categoria sistema posição-prática no campo teórico, epistemológico e metodológico, e reitera o enquadre teórico de agência situada.*

- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Análise de discurso crítica. Sistema posição-prática. Modelo transformacional da atividade social. Epistemologia.*

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