

LANGUAGE AND AGING: A SEARCH FOR RESIGNIFICATIONS OF LIFE STORIES

Trabalho com a linguagem e envelhecimento: uma busca por ressignificações de histórias de vida

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ABSTRACT

To describe the experiences of elderly participants in a Language Workshop (LW) that stimulates discussion and writing through autobiographical narratives. A case report of a qualitative study which was performed a semi-structured interview with 10 elderly people. All subjects were participants of the LW from a health unit center of Curitiba/PR. The subjects reported that had not knowledge about the LW before the moment of their application. However, the invitation to write their life stories as well as the contact with other participants, the sharing of stories and the mutual encouragement motivated them to take part of the LW. The experience of writing and narrating their life stories made them reframe their positions relative to each other as well as their aging process into the society where they are inserted. Through the LW, they developed their talents; they changed their ideas and performed their childhood dream of writing. The subjects believe that the material produced in the LW will be read for future generations. Participants believe that the LW has an important role to provide such experiences by supporting for each member. The LW showed a practical way of language work that provides satisfactory subjective experiences for elderly subjects in their processes of aging. The LW can promote health and quality of life for aging people, and the realization of dreams and old memories that bring a new sense for aging.

KEYWORDS: Language; Aged; Personal Narrative as topic; Quality of Life.

■ INTRODUCTION

The literature indicates that, since ancient times, linking old age to decrepitude, an idea that is widespread in contemporary society, valuing the new and disparaging the old, is guided by the imperative of productivity and consumption. Subjects on an assembly line, as Faleiros and Justo (2007) describe it, which should not be reduced to a homogeneous discourse about what is beautiful and good.¹

These derogatory comments, engendered in a culture that devalues the old and worships the new, affects the seniors who participate in that culture when, it is found that they do not have the attributes

advocated in this society, are subjectively excluded. In this argument, the questioning from Goldfarb is enlightening:

We should then ask about the particular subjectivity of 'being old' at a moment in history when the seniors have lost the attributes that are praised in traditional society, which seems to be more of a 'social invention', and they are put into a category in which it is possible to deposit all that transmits feelings of uselessness, pain, finitude, and death, and are thus driven out toward the edges, marginalized².

The question that arises is that, given the IBGE statistics³ that estimate a population of 32 million seniors in 2025, there is a need for the creation of practices with them. And these practices must be created with theoretical perspectives in mind that emphasize subjectivity because in the care

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physiological aging, the medical field is acting rigorously. The state of subjectivity is connected to that which is immeasurable and unfathomable by empirical demonstration. The psychic material which engenders Man refers to his feelings and emotions such as fears, anxieties, insecurities, pleasures, miseries, and delights, which constitute the subjectivity of each human being ⁴.

Work with language favors subjective experiences and the authorship of life itself, as pointed out by Medeiros (2006), and the engendering of a subject that is responsive and responsible when faced with his own existence ⁵.

We emphasize that speech set in the present-day setting about old age is linked to decrepitude, as a discursive position that engenders barrenness in the lives of seniors, and this is able to be subverted and overcome by working with the language. This, in turn, stands out in this article regarding powerful derivatives which nurture seniors into forging new statements about what is old, and allows them to extract light from their misfortune, in the words of Sigmund Freud (1930-1974) ⁶.

The Language Workshop group has a specific goal to write stories about people's lives, providing for meetings with other seniors to achieve the goal of writing and publishing their life stories. The group serves as a space for dialogue as it inserts the seniors in an arena of social voices and a busy cacophony of voices in Bakhtinian ⁷ terms that produces conflict and convenes negotiations. The group then emerges as an enabler of exposure to differences, and these provokes the seniors to look at themselves again. The space represents the collective mark and allows for knowledge of self and others, leading to the participants' development. This discursive diversity enables one who lives in the aging process to perceive in himself, and in others, both the uniqueness of each person's aging as well as the multitude of aging processes. In this sense, Bakhtin says:

"When we understand other people, we match their word to a number of our own words; when want to be understood by others, we know that our words are being matched by a series of their own words" ⁶.

Inspired by this Bakhtinian saying, in this article we point out group situations as favorable to meetings with others in that we (re)constitute a favorable view of ourselves and, in the specific case of the Language Workshop group, the meeting of the seniors with each other and with other members of the group. This is because, as pointed out by Marques and Seminotti, groups have a strength

and unique ability to mobilize feelings and attitudes that appear as new hopes about the possibilities of individual and social achievements. These authors argue that a group has therapeutic possibilities, which, if well used, can lead to changes in lifestyles, attitudes, vision of mankind, world, and society ⁸. This is not a therapy group for seniors, because that is not the objective of the Workshop, but when working with what constitutes human language, it is impossible to exclude therapeutic effects. These findings are also in agreement with Olmos (2004), who recounts experiences in workshops with seniors. Towards the therapeutic effects of subjectivity in language, already addressing some results of this research, one senior in the group stated that the Language Workshop straightened out his life, ideas, and opinions ⁹.

In this way, the work done by the Language Workshop group aims to provide good meetings for the participants. It also looks to offer experiences with oral and written language, which allow the negotiation of conflicts and bad feelings engendered by the marks of civilization in its subjectivity. When negotiating with these dissonant voices together, the seniors create new looks for old age and different guises, as brilliantly elucidated by Mucida (2006) ¹⁰, which earns them physical and mental health as well as quality of life. This study took 10 seniors to seek out a Language Workshop, and the achievements arising from this subjective experience, in the reframing their life stories.

■ CASE PRESENTATION

The Language Workshop group, linked to the Master's and Doctoral Programs in Communication Disorders from Tuiuti University, emerges as a work practice with subjectivity in the seniors, which promotes interactive situations through language. This group met between the 2003 and 2012 at the Ouidor Pardini Square Health Unit, which is a benchmark senior care in the city of Curitiba. Currently, in 2013, the Workshop takes place in the University itself. The group meets weekly for an hour and a half, with the idea to have seniors write their life stories.

The research presented here was approved by the Ethics Committee of the institution, under number 102/08. It was conducted with 10 seniors subjects between 60 and 86 years of age, of both sexes and without neurological difficulties related to language.

The criteria for inclusion in the study were for subjects to be over 60, who signed up for the group, and remained there throughout 2010.

Exclusion criteria were individuals who were over 60 but who did not have the cognitive ability to write their life stories.

The method used was qualitative research that dealt with meanings and values of a personal and private nature, and data collection was made from a semi-structured interview. Similarly, Moreira (2006)¹¹ argues that the semi-structured interview be derived from a script that includes the topics to be discussed in the research but leaves the participant free to respond to them without obeying the order of questions and without limiting itself to the that was asked. For example: "What are you looking for in the Language Workshop?" was asked to 10 seniors present on March 14th, 2011. The subjects agreed to participate and signed a consent form.

The responses of each participant were recorded concurrently by the authors. Subsequently, we analyzed the content of the responses in relation to these 10 seniors who wanted to enroll as participants in a Language Workshop and what they found there.

For reading and organizing data, were established categories of analysis for participants' speech. It refers to our research question, i.e., what the seniors were looking for in the Language Workshop.

The answers given by seniors to this question were categorized into four items referring to the recurring content in their speech, which are:

- 1) When registering, they did not know exactly what a Language Workshop was.
- 2) The invitation to write their life stories led them to enroll in the Workshop.
- 3) The need for being in a group, to share stories with others, and mutual encouragement, made them seek out the group.
- 4) The changes that could happen from participation in a Language Workshop.

Survey participants authorized the disclosure of their answers. These were transcribed as written, without spelling corrections and inferences on the part of the researchers. The seniors' read and endorsed their own responses.

Still, as a methodological clarification, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, the seniors were captured by expressions like writing life stories, interaction with peers, written on posters put up around the beginning of each year by the Health Unit, announcing the existence of the Workshop, inviting participants to join the group. These expressions invited people to narrate their personal experiences, through oral narration, writing stories, and reconnecting with friends.

■ RESULTS

Below can be found some of the responses from seniors to the question: What are you looking for in the Language Workshop? The responses to this question were analyzed according to explicit methodological criteria. The subjects are referred to by their initials in order to protect their identities.

1st category of analysis: When registering, the subject did not know exactly what a Language Workshop was.

M. "When I heard the term 'Language Workshop' I wondered: What is it?"

V. "Regarding the Language Workshop, I wanted to say something, and that is first the term 'workshop'. Workshop for me means something is broken, and when I saw this saying on the poster I said to myself that I had nothing broken about me and so I did not sign up. (*Translator's note: The translation for "workshop" in Portuguese is "oficina" which means both "workshop" and "auto repair shop", hence the line of thinking seen above.*) Then I thought for a minute and thought, you know, I think there is something broken, yes. So I came and loved it. Then they asked me what I came to do there. After starting the workshop I could see what was broken: it's my use of language! I'm fixing it."

MA: "I've said to the veterans here that I've always wanted to write and read stories, but I had no schooling. One day I saw the invitation for the Language Workshop and thought it was to work on our voices. I got here in the first meeting, we chatted with Giselle, and it was so much talking that she said, "Would you all like to write it down?" I think she thought: Better if they are writing and silent. At least, I assumed as much."

As we can see above, the seniors who could not explain what the workshop was when they read the poster for the first time believed that their language skills were broken and had to be fixed and that, in the group, like in our society which cares little about seniors, the coordinator also wanted them to keep their mouths closed. This thinking highlights the effect that society's discourse to belittle seniors has on the older citizens and that is reflected in the group.

Furthermore, regarding the "broken" seniors group, responses show that from their participation in the Workshop, repairing their language, the seniors are imposing their views less at home and listening more to their families, something that did not occur before their experiences in the Workshop.

2nd category: The invitation to write their life stories led seniors to enroll in Workshop.

T: "All my life I wanted to write, always liked to write, I have a lot of notebooks filled with old stuff, everything that I felt was beautiful, a phrase, I put in writing. Here, then, I could realize this dream at the Workshop. I will not stop coming here, even though it might be raining or cold... I love it!"

ME: "It's a way to express all that we have in our heads. Anything we want, good or bad, but there comes a time, together, that we produce something good to pass on. So I think for me that this is a marvel. It is an oasis. And I want it."

MA: "The Language Workshop, in my point of view, is you and the thinking you bring to your language, and then you transfer it to paper because language can be forgotten, but never when in writing. Only half of what we talk about here makes it home, we forget it, but not what you have written. This is the value of the Language Workshop, bringing thought into writing."

E: "So when I came here I started dreaming. I always had the dream to write my life story. I have many memories, recollections, and do not know where to start to write my life story. So I've already benefited, because I'm writing my story."

M: "Actually, in the beginning, when I heard the term, "Language Workshop," I thought it was just talk, talk, talk. I always had an intimate and personal dream of writing. When I got here and saw that it was not just talking but writing, I realized that dream. There was something that came from things that I already had too. I can contribute."

These narratives reveal the role that writing their life stories had in the subjective reframing of these seniors, to be able to realize this old dream, recording and immortalizing their memories through the ages.

3rd category: The necessity of living in groups, to share stories with others, and give mutual encouragement made them seek out the Language Workshop.

TH: "We miss the people, the rapport is important."

T: "The best thing is that you miss people. So I think that's the most important thing. Nowadays nobody cares anymore about saying "good morning," "good afternoon," and we miss it, to talk, to have company, to belong... we overcome our difficulties by helping each other. Live and learn!"

M: "I'm writing my life story, and hearing the stories of people in the group encourages me to write my own."

As theorized in this paper, these statements reaffirm the role of the seniors in helping the others

find new meaning to their life stories, framed by the group and its members.

4th category: Changes from participation in a Language Workshop.

TH: "I think the Workshop here is changing a lot of my beliefs. We believe, everyone believes, grandchildren and old people, that seniors should stand there and do nothing. I think we're showing a lot here, not in the sense that people that old people need to become old, no, there are other things because you see things in the media how seniors need to dance around, you have to do this and not that. No, we still have many things to show, to do, because that the youth you see around, if you look, is not equal to our generation, we leave them in the dust, because we know a lot. We still have a lot to do."

AA: "The Workshop develops talent."

JA: "The Language Workshop, in speaking, is our life, our word, our being, and how much we have done. The Workshop is not only our being, but our ideas, knowledge. I learned a lot, I'm very proud and I intend to never quit. Only when I die."

Y: "In the Workshop I learn in old age and I will leave to others my stories."

These statements corroborate what was supported in this work, the role that language work practiced in the Language Workshop has symbolic rectification of seniors and others to whom they relate as citizens, as the individuals and collective subjects they are.

■ **DISCUSSION**

Once again, the objective of this study was to present what the 10 people above 60 years of age wanted upon enrolling as participants in a language workshop with the purpose of writing and publishing their life stories in their subjectivity. It was found that most of them did not know what the Language Workshop was, or what was done in the workshop they had enrolled in.

It should be clear, in the reader's understanding of how the Language Workshop emerged in 2003 having been founded by speech-language pathologists (of whom Giselle, cited in the response of one of subjects, was one of the founders), that the speech-language pathologists do not direct the activities, from the beginning, to move the group toward the writing life stories. In its beginning, the group was entitled the "Voice Workshop". The work was focused more on the organic and physiological aspects of voice. However, as things progressed, the direction taken, led by the seniors who participated at the time, was the desire to narrate their

unique life stories and have them heard. This desire was welcomed by the coordinator, which is pervaded by the language philosophy of Bakhtin. To put in another way, we can say that today it is a workshop of grandparents who have a grand voice. These grandparents wanted to work on their voices, but mostly metaphorically.

Thus, from a workshop which aimed to work with organic voice, has emerged work with metaphorical voices, from accounts of life stories, which encouraged to be written down. These writings turn into books, which are published annually, with book signings in various cultural spaces in Curitiba. This subjective position of social recognition and being noticed by others puts the seniors into the position of writers and authors of their life stories, which, according to their reports, is a dream that they have had since their youth.

The Workshop emerges, in this article, as the opportunity of these seniors to realize a dream of the past, which is the writing, as the main thing that hooked them on the poster that calls for participation in the Language Workshop. In similarity to reality, the seniors who came due to the poster did not claim to know what this group was about, and even its coordinator thought it was going to be something else. It is together that they built new meanings in an arena of joining heterogeneous voices that constitute all of us, which is the condition of beings defined by language as we are.

This arena of struggle and agitated cacophony of social voices, in Bakhtinian terms, is experienced in a group environment. The encounter with others that adds, conflicts, questions, and battles, projects beyond the individuals to create measures that make them extract light from their existence. Inevitably, when engendered by social discourses that belittle the old and all that it concerns, the Language Workshop group is an unusual opportunity to construct discourses about aging by its senior participants. Due to this place that has been conquered and continuously built up on, older people connect their participation in a group of other seniors as the reason why they registered for the Language Workshop. The necessity of living together in a group, to share stories with others and receive and give mutual encouragement, made them seek out the Workshop, according to reports.

Referring to what has changed in their lives as a result of participation in this Language Workshop, seniors point out the possibility of developing talent, showing society that seniors know much, and that has helped them to reframe their concepts about aging. The seniors state that the Workshop repaired and rearranged their ideas and knowledge, and that they have learned a lot and do not intend to drop it

anymore, only when they die. They further declare that they wish to convey these things learned to others in the form of written reports.

These subjective reports about the ways seniors in the Workshop analyze their aging processes are anchored in what was said by Teixeira (2003)¹², that man builds in the social space and, in this sense, the group of the Language Workshop is in the social space where seniors have the opportunity, from the narrative and reconstruction of their life stories, to “become aware of the nuances of their journey and reframe their experiences, leaving behind a position of alienation when faced with the Story, standing as an agent of their lives and collectivity.”

■ CONCLUSION

We note, in this study, that the experience of individuals in groups that intend to work with the subjective aspects of aging in written language, such as the Language Workshop – provides an opportunity to live the life phase called old age, the golden years, the elderly years, the best age, etc. whatever the terms used in an attempt to name the un-nameable, with quality of life and experiences full of meaning. The possibility that the group offers subjects who participate in being authors of their own stories, which is what is presented for such a privileged group to put (re)significance in their life stories. The seniors in this study were able to narrate and write their autobiographical narratives by being placed in a group directed to the subjective aspects of aging rather than to focus on the wear on their biological body caused by the passing years. The dialogical conception of language that directs the master’s and doctoral program in Communication Disorders from the University of Tuiuti does not conceive aging as a disease that must be cured with orthopedic practices aimed at the normalization or fixing of old age, but that it is a process of subjective and psychological development while a senior is still alive.

From the experience of the seniors in a group with this view of language, which prioritizes the subjective satisfactions that are still possible to be experienced at the time of aging, is that aging can assign meaning to and take advantage of this phase highlighted by contemporary discourse as the last in life, with the realization of dreams and projects postponed in previous moments of their existence.

We conclude, from the statements of the seniors in this study, that they were able, from experiences of language proposed by the group of the Language Workshop, to (re)define their stories toward aging and life, against the contemporary discourses that belittle the old and extol what is beautiful and new.

The writing of their own life stories inserts the seniors in this study into society and earns them a place in the company of writers, which goes against the grain of a society that excludes seniors and throws them along the wayside.

The results of this study suggest the feasibility of practices with seniors to consider the subjective aspects of aging in a society with eminent practices aimed at repairing the wear and tear on the biological body.

RESUMO

Este estudo propõe-se a descrever as vivências de idosos participantes de uma Oficina de Linguagem (OL) que promove discussões orais e a escrita de narrativas autobiográficas. Trata-se de um relato de caso de uma pesquisa qualitativa realizada, por meio de uma entrevista semi-estruturada, com 10 idosos. Todos os sujeitos eram participantes da OL de uma Unidade de Saúde de Curitiba/PR. Os sujeitos relataram que, ao se inscreverem para participarem do grupo, não sabiam exatamente o que era a OL. Entretanto, o convite à escrita de suas histórias de vida os levou a se inscreverem na OL, assim como a necessidade que tinham da convivência em grupo, de compartilhar histórias com outros e incentivo mútuo. A experiência de narrar e escrever suas histórias de vida os fez ressignificar seus posicionamentos em relação ao outro, a eles próprios, bem como aos seus envelhecimentos e a sociedade em que estão inseridos. Por meio da OL, organizaram suas ideias e realizaram o sonho de infância de escrever. Acreditam que o material produzido na OL será lido pelas gerações futuras. Atribuem ao grupo papel fundamental de propiciar tais vivências por meio do apoio que seus membros oferecem uns aos outros. A OL desempenhou uma prática de trabalho de linguagem que proporcionou vivências subjetivas satisfatórias a sujeitos idosos em seus processos de envelhecimentos, promovendo a saúde e a qualidade de vida, no momento da velhice, bem como a realização de sonhos antigos e experiências que dotam a velhice de sentido.

DESCRITORES: Linguagem; Idoso; Narrativas pessoais como assunto; Qualidade de Vida.

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