

Book Review

Maria Helena de Moura Neves, *Gramática de Usos do Português*. São Paulo: Editora Unesp. 2000. pp. 1037. ISBN 85-7139-288-9. R\$ 70,00.

Reviewed by

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This is a monumental work – magisterially conceived, methodically planned and meticulously executed. In the Brazilian context at least (and – for all you know – in the entire context of Portuguese language linguistics as well), it is sure to be greeted as a trail-blazing endeavour. Neves, who needs no introduction to Lusophone linguists, has brought to bear on the task she took upon herself with uncommon courage aplomb years of experience in the study and teaching of Portuguese, as well as functional linguistics – her happy hunting ground for the past several years, where she has established for herself a solid reputation as one of Brazil’s leading researchers. In other words, the book under review may be viewed as the culmination and crowning achievement of an intellectual journey marked by such important milestones as *Curso de Grego – Propedêutica* (1985), *A Vertente Grega da Gramática Tradicional* (1987), *Gramática na Escola* (1990), *A Gramática Funcional* (1997), with many more sure to come in the years ahead.

According to Neves’s own estimates (cf. Neves, 1999), the history of functional linguistics in Brazil dates back to the early 1970s when Evanildo Bechara, Rafael Hoyos-Andrade and Rodolfo Ilari made their pioneering incursions into the then burgeoning field. In the following decade, Ataliba Castilho joined in. The 1990s saw the start of intensive group work in functional linguistics as part of the ambitious “Grammar of Spoken Portuguese” (*Gramática do Português Falado*) project, coordinated by Castilho, involving more than thirty researchers from all over the country. Neves has been at the helm of the functionalist sub-group of this mega-project since 1993. Side by side with this, she has also been busy coordinating, in collaboration with Francisco da Silva Borba, the no less ambitious project “Dictionary of the Uses

of Contemporary Brazilian Portuguese” (*Dicionário de Usos do Português Contemporâneo do Brasil*), involving researchers from several universities in the state of São Paulo.

The importance of a book such as *Gramática de Usos do Português* can only be fully appreciated against the backdrop of the dire paucity of authoritative and comprehensive studies of Brazilian Portuguese from a functionalist perspective. Functional linguistics is, by definition, linguistics geared to the study of the actual use of particular languages in live contexts as opposed to the analysis of the human capacity for language (linguistic competence) in the abstract. Unlike formal linguistics, which is interested in sentence types, functional linguistics looks at sentence tokens. Unlike formal linguistics, whose practitioners often use examples from natural languages as mere props for specific theoretical claims being advanced (while, also, strategically sweeping under the carpet data that do not fit the bill), functional grammars focus on concrete cases of usage first and then set about identifying a theory that will adequately explain the data painstakingly gathered. Unlike formal linguistics, where the hegemonic paradigm decrees that the only meaningful statements about human language are the ones made deductively, functional grammarians are unrepentantly inductive. This means that the larger the database, the stronger the explanations offered. A functional grammar cannot therefore help being objective and down-to-earth in a way its counterpart, conjured up in the theoretician’s private closet, is under no obligation to be. Furthermore, all those phenomena, such as ellipsis, broken or unfinished sentences, repairs and repetitions, false starts, etc., that are typically shunted by the formal grammarian as being of marginal or secondary interest, are grist to the functionalist’s mill. The underlying principle is spelt out by Votre and Naro (1989: 170) in the following words: “[...] from the use of language – communication in social situations – there arises the linguistic form with all its distinctive characteristics, including the different degrees of instability associated with different sub-systems” (my translation).

Gramática de Usos do Português is essentially a reference grammar, elaborated on the strength of a data-base comprising an impressive 70 million occurrences kept at the *Centro de Estudos Lexicográficos*, UNESP (Universidade Estadual Paulista). The first thing that will catch the attention of the casual browser is the rather unusual format of its organisation. The work is divided into four parts: “The basic formation of predications: predicate, arguments, and the satellites” (Part 1), “Situational and textual referencing: phoric words” (Part 2), “Quantification and indefiniteness” (Part 3), and “Junction” (Part 4). As the author warns us early on in her introductory note, the book does use the traditional parts of speech as a point of departure, if only for the reason that readers who are unaccustomed to the novel approach will nonetheless be able to find their way about and locate the specific information they are looking for. The four-part division of the contents takes into account the major syntactic,

semantic, pragmatic, text-linguistic and discursive processes at work in the organisation of utterances to form larger chunks of meaningful text.

Part 1 starts with a discussion of the verb in its fundamental role as the nucleus of predication. The classification of verbs, following a brief discussion of the nature of the class as a whole, is informed by recent and contemporary research in semantics and makes use of criteria such as dynamic vs. non-dynamic, completive vs. non-completive, etc. (The author well-advisedly avoids putting unnecessary theoretical burden on the readers by offering independent definition for only one of each pair of terms in polar opposition, defining the other as simply ‘non-X’, i. e., the complement of the set with respect to the universe of discourse). Besides verbs, the other major parts of speech handled in this section of the book are nouns, adjectives and adverbs (whose syntactic role is explained by the astronomical trope of ‘satellites’, i.e., elements that are, strictly speaking, peripheral and accretive). Interestingly, the structure of predication is explained with recourse to terminology derived from mathematical logic (a sea change indeed from the sort of explanation one typically comes across in traditional grammars). Thus, instead of the familiar categories of subject, object, etc., predicates are presented as taking arguments that play the semantic roles of agent, object, patient and so on, as in

Em Julho de 1991, o Poder Executivo remeteu ao Congresso Nacional o texto da Convenção 169.

The argument structure of nominal units and the combinatorial possibilities therein are explicated by appealing to the notion of ‘valency’, derived from chemistry, introduced into linguistics by the French linguist Lucien Tesnière and later extensively utilised in so-called ‘dependency grammars’.

Part 2 deals with the pragmatics of reference. In accordance with a certain terminological convention that has gained some currency lately, the author speaks of *referenciação* (referencing) as opposed to *referência* (reference), the former referring to the speech act of reference and the latter to the semantic relation between a referring expression and its referent (cf. Rajagopalan, forthcoming). The parts of speech singled out under this function – to wit, definite article, and personal, genitive, and demonstrative pronouns – are grouped under the umbrella term ‘pronominals’, whose function is described as ‘phoric’ (from Lat. *fero*; Gk. *phéro*: ‘to take’, ‘to fetch’). Among the curiosities listed under the use of the definite article in Brazilian Portuguese are instances of place-names that are sometimes used with a preceding definite article and sometimes without: e.g., *mora no Recife* vs. *ao chegar em Recife* (p. 415); *Vamos embora para a Espanha* vs. *Somos pela liberdade de Espanha* (p. 414). (Many L2 speakers of the language, like the present reviewer, are sure to heave a sigh of relief if this turns out to be the beginning of a sweeping change in this notoriously vexatious area of Portuguese grammar!)

Part 3 focuses on the indefinite article and on pronouns which are characterised as non-phoric and non-descriptive. Incidentally, the explanations given for the term ‘non-descriptive’ are far from helpful to the uninitiated reader.

Locutions such as “[...] *não dão informação sobre a natureza dos objetos, operando sobre um conjunto de objetos previamente delimitados em razão de suas propriedades*” ([...] don’t provide any information regarding the nature of the objects, having in its range a set of objects previously circumscribed in virtue of their attributes) (p. 511) are hard nuts to crack for the lay reader. The tip offered a little later, viz. “*propriedade de não-descrição (ligação com a determinação, isto é, com a classe dos determinantes)*” (property of non-description (connection with determination, that is, with the class of determinants)) (*ibid.*), fares no better either and may actually confound the already perplexed reader even further. One way out of this terminological and explanatory imbroglio might be to appeal to the notion of ‘distribution’ (as familiar from classical, syllogistic logic) in lieu of the rather confusing and unhelpful ‘description’.

Part 4 is devoted to the topic of ‘junction’. The parts of speech that fall into this category are, broadly speaking, connectors, including prepositions in their transitive function (introducing complements and adjuncts) and such syntactic operations as subordinating and coordinating conjunctions. The novelty in Neves’ treatment of this class of constructions is explained by the author herself in the introductory note to this part (There are similar introductory notes to each of the previous parts):

By frequently resorting to the concept of structural or syntactic dependence in contradistinction to semantic independence, the traditional grammar does reveal recognition of the specificity of these relations, but refrains from interrogating the differences in their respective status. From the perspective of a use grammar, the relations between the principal clause and an adverbial clause are viewed as analogous to the rhetorical relations that help construct a text. Thus, it is understood that these relations permeate and govern the entire text, regardless of the level of the constituents (micro- or macro-structures) involved (phrases, clauses, utterances, paragraphs, chapters, etc.), eventually seeping into the sub-parts, in response to and as a result of the overall organisation to which they happen to be subordinated. (p. 601)

What makes *Gramática de Usos do Português* truly innovative and pioneering is the readiness on the part of the author to mix levels in accounting for actually attested linguistic data. As she herself put it on another occasion: “The integration of different components is a characteristic of any functionalist approach – and this is true of even the more moderate ones – where the pragmatic component takes precedence over the remaining ones” (Neves, 1997: 24).

As already pointed out, the book under review is a welcome addition to the private libraries of both scholars and novices; for public libraries, it is a must. No doubt, as time rolls by, the author is most certain to want to re-work some of the specific analyses proposed in order to achieve greater clarity of exposition and more efficient classificatory grids. She may also be tempted to touch up

claims of a more theoretical nature such as the one made in her general introduction to the book where she points out that the two underlying principles of her approach are (a) that the maximum unit of functioning is the text and (b) that all items are multifunctional. Although it is tempting to see the text as the maximum unit of linguistic communication in opposition to such minimum units at their respective levels of analysis as the phoneme, morpheme, lexeme, sememe, etc. – all part of the familiar stock-in-trade of structural linguistics –, what Neves should be claiming is that, insofar as communication through the use of language is concerned, the text is the *minimum* unit. To suppose otherwise, that is, to claim, as she does, that it is the maximum unit (*unidade maior*), is to fall into the ‘structuralist rut’ of hierarchising constituents on the basis of their structural complexity. Even a single word utterance like “Go” becomes functionally meaningful just in case it is primarily approached as a text and placed within an appropriate discursive context. As a matter of fact, in the very next sentence, Neves underscores the essential textuality of all linguistic units and, in so doing, undoes the basic thrust of her earlier claim when she says:

On the view that the real functioning unit is the text, what is being foregrounded is the construction of the text’s meaning by dint of a network [of relations] which is more than the simple sum of its parts. (p. 15)

But these and other possible minor corrections that may prove to be recommendable for a second edition of the book by no means detract from the greatness of the work as it is. Also, as efforts are undertaken to enlarge the available data-base, more fine-grained analyses may be needed, calling for the use of additional theoretical apparatus. Worth special mention in this context is a most interesting discovery made by Borges Neto (1986) that the familiar distinction between the referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions is, curiously enough, formally manifested in Brazilian Portuguese by the pre-positioning and post-positioning respectively of the possessive pronoun as in *Meu filho não vai estudar Letras* vs. *Filho meu não vai estudar Letras* (where the first presupposes, in a way the second does not, the existence of the speaker’s son). Subsequent research has shown that additional contextual clues can force interpretation one way or another. Obviously, only massive data can help arrive at any worthwhile generalisations.

But that is work for the future. What is most significant as of now is that the essential ground work has been laid so that others can from now on engage in the arduous task of building upon it.

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