Critical Realism (CR) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): reflections for the educator of languages in the process of emancipation and social transformation

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Abstract: This paper presents some interdisciplinary reflections about Critical Realism and Critical Discourse Analysis which can contribute to the educator of languages in process of emancipation and social transformation. Concepts of ‘causal powers’ and ‘causal agents’ provide a critical view of micro and macrosocial contexts. I also show part of my research study that has been developed since 2006, in the Social Educativa Center of Pomeri Complex, in Cuiabá/MT. Through the collective participation in groups of studies with the teachers, I identify and analyze the impressions, motivations and attitudes of a Spanish teacher. The data has been collected through of informal talks with the teacher, also including narratives of her life histories.

Keywords: Critical Realism; Critical Discourse Analysis; Public School; Emancipation; Social Transformation.

Introduction

In the last few decades, social critical contemporary science has demonstrated special interest in the understanding of the social, ontological and epistemological issues, as well as its mechanisms, powers and causes. The philosophical British movement known as Critical Realism appears to have incited even more the debate on the philosophy of social science. According to Baert (1995: 277), this new thought is consolidating itself among several academic subjects and has found many followers. In his article entitled Critical Realism and Social Science, Baert questions: why is Critical Realism so seductive and why has it attracted so many adherents? I will answer these questions at the end of this work.

Critical Realism as a Philosophy of Emancipation has served as a basis for the theoretical and methodological reflection of a great number of social scientists interested in understanding the dialectic interrelation between society and individuals. According to Critical Realism, society would consist not only of individuals, but of the sum of relations within which the individuals are located (BHASKAR, 1998).

Based on the philosophy of Critical Realism (BHASKAR, 1998; 2002) and Critical Discourse Analysis (FAIRCLOUGH, 1989; 1992; 1995; 2003), this work

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presents some interdisciplinary reflections that can contribute to emancipatory social science, more specifically, for the educator of languages. I will attempt to understand the relationship between the causal agents and their powers. Who are the ‘causal agents’? Which ‘causal powers’ do they have? The answers to these questions will allow me to understand the micro and macrossocial contexts.

1. Why Critical Realism?

The term Critical Realism can be found since 1887 in the work entitled ‘Zur Wissenschaftslehre und Metaphysik’¹, written by Aloys Riehl. It is a kind of realism that is associated with the transcendental or critical philosophy of Kant. According to Collier (1994: 43), the transcendental term presented by Kant refers to “all knowledge that is not preoccupied so much with objects as with the familiar form of the objects, as far as this type of familiarity is possible ‘a priori’.” In this sense, the understanding of any transcendental philosophy is therefore something that comes ‘a priori’, independent of the experience. In a more contemporary version Bhaskar (1998) emphasized the relationship between one type of realism and some aspects of Kant’s work. A Realism that presents the combination of ‘transcendental’ and ‘critical naturalism’. Bhaskar says:

“I called my general philosophy of science ‘transcendental realism’ and my philosophy of humanities as ‘critical naturalism’. Gradually, people began to mix the two and refer to the hybrid as ‘critical realism’. It occurred to me that there were good reasons not to object to hybridism. To begin with, Kant has called his transcendental idealism ‘critical philosophy’. Transcendental Realism had the same right to the title of critical realism”. (BHASKAR,1998:190).

Critical Realism mentions the idea of the existence of an exterior reality; independent of the conceptions we have about it. Bhaskar (1998) not only distinguishes the world and our experience, but its ontological stratification — the issue of Being, represented by the three domains of reality: the Real, the Actual and the Empirical. The domain of the Real can be understood as everything that exists in nature, being themselves natural objects (atomic structures and chemical structures), or social (social ideas, relations and ways of production). The domain of the Actual consists of events or activities that are carried through and that, therefore, generate effects of power, which are observable, or not. The domain of the Empirical is understood as the domain of experience. Take the example of any worker, a professor, a doctor, etc., his physical and mental capacity is concentrated in the domain of the Real, while his work, as an activity that generates the effect of power, is concentrated in the domain of the Actual (COLLIER, 2000:12)

In his emancipatory view and of social transformation, Bhaskar (1998: 462) offers a promise for social science; since the mechanisms generating the problems can be

¹Teaching of Science and Metaphysics.
removed. According to the author, emancipation cannot be reached only by changing the conscience; on the contrary, it must occur in practice. He says:

“It is my contention that the special qualitative kind of liberation which is emancipation, and which consists in transformation, in self-emancipation by the agents concerned, from an unwanted and unneeded to a wanted and needed source of determination, is both causally presaged and logically entailed by explanatory theory, but that it can only be effected in practice”. Bhaskar (1998: 462)

If emancipation means liberation, self-emancipation proposes, then, the transformation of an individualistic, I-centered person, toward solidarity and fraternity. The self-emancipation which Bhaskar points out must necessarily go through the transformation of the agents or participants. If we observe the social reality, we see nothing more than the (re)-action, with its causes and effects.

2. Critical Realism: ‘causality’, ‘causal powers’ and ‘causal agents’

To understand the concepts of ‘causality’, ‘causal agents’ and ‘causal powers’, terms which have been frequently used in Critical Realism, we need to clear up what we understand by ‘causality’. The term ‘causal’ has been based on the Aristotelian analysis that the “principle that influences the ‘being’ of something or that depends on the ‘being’ of that thing, or on the occurrence of a phenomenon” (SELVAGGI, 1988:303). The cause as the principle influencing the ‘being’ from the outside signifies causality as an act. We can understand, for instance, when the professor teaches something to the students, the lesson is the cause of teaching.

The philosopher Kant (2007[1781]) explained better the concept of cause, accepting critical humanism, when admitting the impossibility of deriving it only from experience as defended by the rationalists. The causality presented by Kant could not be reduced only to repeated experiences. In contrast, it must be understood as ‘a priori’ category of experience. Causality as a category of intelligence has knowledge value only for the phenomenon, it serves to describe and to unify the experience, but it does not cause us to know the thing itself. The reality of causal influx establishes all human action, whether in daily life, artistic production or education.

Critical Realism understands that life is not a closed social system -, it is an open system, in which any event is governed by mechanisms or emergent powers that operate simultaneously. In an open system, for instance, it is not possible to identify definitive sequences of events. The crucial point of Bhaskar’s argument is that the causal mechanisms that operate in experiments (natural science) continue operating in the real world (open system), considering the independence of the causal mechanisms in the events that they generate. For example, in any experimental activity the scientist is the causal agent of a sequence of events. A sequence of events allows the identification of a
possible causal relation between two or more events; however, it is not the agent of the *causal law* (BHASKAR, 1997:12).

In short, Critical Realism defends the idea that it is necessary to understand the deepest layers of reality, including the agents and their causal powers. According to Bhaskar (1989) it is necessary to know the causes of the phenomena, that is, to transcend to the facts and the appearances of the events and also unveil the reality and the structures, mechanisms and generating trends of the events.

3. Critical Realism (CR) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): some reflections

For critical discourse analysts (cf. Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999:19), the term Critical Realism appears for the first time in their studies in explaining the organization of social life as an open system. These authors, in harmony with Bhaskar (1998), see various dimensions of social life, including physical, chemical, biological, economic, social, psychological and linguistic chemistry, possessing distinct structures, with effect in the events, through particular mechanisms. Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999), succeeded in organizing an analytical model to identify social problems, appeaing in verbal or written texts. This fact has opened transdiciplinary possibilities, which gained CDA more and more space in critical social science, making it possible for discourse analysts to gain a better understanding of social life, especially in relation to the micro and macro social.

Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999) understand that research in CDA must be related to the practical problems of social life, with the objective of an ‘explanatory critical’ (Bhaskar, 1998), based on their discoveries of social practices, and from searching out methods for their solution. To reach the explanatory potential, according to Bhaskar (1998b: 238) the starting point, is the analysis of how meanings are constructed in social practice. Fairclough (1989; 1995; 2003) proposes an approach of discourse analysis that can contribute to the growth of critical social research, since CDA emphasizes the dialectic relation between discourse and other practical elements of social practices (other forms of *semioses*: corporal language, visual images etc).

A similar approach to the CDA is the Systemic-Functional Grammar (SFG). The SFG was developed by Halliday (1994) and allows us to look at language under the socio-semiotic perspective, in which meanings are understood from structurally organized linguistic choices. The SFG has been presented as a system of meanings associated to three metafunctions: interpersonal, ideational and textual (HALLIDAY, 1994). These three metafunctions occur simultaneously in the texts. Through them we can identify the way speech is organized. Language users not only interact to change sounds, words or sentences, they also interact to construct meanings, in order to understand the world. The three metafunctions supply explanations for the use of language starting from the necessities and intentions of the speaker and the situation in context.

Fairclough (1992; 1995; 2003) carried out a detailed analysis of the texts in order to understand the relation between the micro and macro social levels, that is, between social structure and social events. In this sense, SFG and CDA allow the researcher to
get a holistic view of the social phenomenon investigated. Although the contributions of
the authors above are excellent for the CDA, there is still a long way to go. Nothing is
ready and finished. Fruitful reflections are still to come and certainly they will. From
the point of view of the analysis of meanings constructed in the texts, some
transdisciplinary methods appear to be an attempt at better understanding the micro and
macrossocial levels.

I understand that narratives of life histories, for example, can be a rich tool to
extend the researcher’s view in the analysis of verbal and written texts (PAPA, 2005;
2008). The narratives of life histories can contribute to the CDA once it supplies clues to
the analyst to other meanings which may or may not be present in the texts. The
narratives of life histories are descriptions of events where the meanings of the actions
of the participants are grasped, including their beliefs, values and experiences.
According to Clandinin and Connelly (2004: 415), the experiences are life histories of
people and consist not only of facts, but also of values, emotions and memories. In the
same perspective, Goodson and Sike (2001) argue that “all stories are memories and all
memories are stories”. That is, when we speak, we are relating our identity, feelings,
images, and the stories that demonstrate the way we see the world. However, it is not
possible for the researcher to catch all the life history of the citizen or a research
participant. There is always a covering of sad experiences they have been through. In
this case the discursive elements that could be crucial for analysis are not disclosed and
the analyst is unable to trace any other elements from this subject.

4. The Research

Research² has been developed in the ‘Future Boys’ State High School located in
the Socio-Educative Center of the Pomeri Complex, in Cuiabá/MT city. In this work, I
present part of the research that has been carried out at school. I seek to discover the
actions of the causal agents and their powers through these questions: Who is the
‘causal agent’? Which ‘causal powers’ do they have? The attempt to reveal these causal
influxes will allow me to understand the micro and macrossocial contexts of the
investigated phenomena. The teacher who is the participant of the research has worked
at the school for four years. I could evidence through her life histories, other meanings
that were not presented in the interview. The narratives of her life experiences have
been made without the use of a tape recorder. The mutual confidence built up between
this researcher and the teacher contributed to the usage of this type of tool.

Keila³ has worked at the school since 2006. She is a Spanish teacher. She said she
had never worked with adolescent students in social risk. When I asked about her
personal experiences through informal talks, without the use of a tape recorder, she
mentioned her family. She said she has never known her biological mother. She was
raised by the biological father and her stepmother since she was a child. For not having
a daughter, her stepmother adopted her as legitimate, giving her love and affection.
Keila also said that she saw the stepmother drama with her legitimate young boy. He

² The title of the Project is: ‘Continued formation of the language teacher’: (Re) Construction of the
Pedagogical Practice’.
³ For reasons of identity protection, the names of the participants have been changed
was addicted to drugs. She said that she suffered together with the adoptive mother, seeing her brother taking the drugs route.

For the data analysis I used informal interviews, which were recorded and transcribed in the year of 2006. I sought to understand the meanings constructed through the identification of the ‘causal agents’ and ‘causal powers’ signaled in her discourse. In the example below, Keila comments on the Literature Seminar, carried out for the first time at the school, in the year of 2006. She says:

Example 01:

Keila: This literature seminar was supposed to have taken place since 2004… but here … for us to develop any kind of event …we need to have there must be the support of security … even financial… why? Because if we want to do it on our own there’s no way to do it… we have the reading books … we can offer it … but to put on this kind of work … there are always a lot of difficulties… in what way? We have to have authorization … for the kids to take the books home the same authorization we need to take the books to the classroom… to the rooms… to take the pencils… the eraser… there are lots of school formalities”

In this example, we can observe her difficulty in carrying through any type of activity in the school. The relational process ‘was’ signals a period of time in the past (2004), when there was already an embryonic proposal so that the literature seminar could be developed with the students. When she says “for any type of event we have there must be the support of security”, Keila uses high degree of modulation, disclosing the prohibition of the school for this type of event. In the next statement “we have to have authorization”, she also uses another high modulation to register the impossibility of the school in providing any type of activity for the students.

The macrossocial analysis shows that it is possible to understand other meanings that not noticed in Keila’s speech. For critical realism, it is necessary to understand the deepest layers of reality. It is in the deeper layers that the determinative causals are accurately hidden, including the agents with their causal powers. Keila’s speech allows us to unveil the reality, that is, the facts beyond the appearances. Thus, if we analyze more critically her discourse we can observe the causal agents with their powers. What are these ‘causal agents’? Which ‘causal powers’ do they have? They can be explained by the following schema:
According to Keila, the students do not take books out of the room because it is not allowed. Since this is the case, there is no reading. It is necessary to have authorization and financial support to develop any event of this nature at the school. The students do not have the freedom to take books, pencils and rubbers to their rooms. In this case, we ask: who is the ‘causal agent’ in this type of event? In the following illustrative example, Keila speaks about the authorization given by superintendent of the Socio-Educative Center of the Pomeri. She said:

Example 02:

Keila: We have to have authorization, you know… (…) Why? Because this pencil could at any time represent a weapon… we always have to think this way… like it or not… if anything happens, the school is responsible… this year Cristiano believed in our project and decided to support it … the education… he saw the proposal … the proposal… came from him … we got involved in it… we sat together … he said… if you believe in it, I’ll support it.

Keila mentions the authorization to develop the literature seminar, and she points out the superintendent Cristiano - a causal agent - with the power to (de-) authorize any educational activity at the school. When saying: “Cristiano believed in it and decided to support it”, Keila uses the mental process ‘believe’ to signal an attitude of decision on the proposal of carrying through the seminar. She is the one responsible for the attempt to have the proposal approved. When using the mental process ‘see’, Keila discloses that the proposal was initially made to Cristiano. While being the ‘causal agent’, with her power as educator and committed to this social reality, she became responsible for the negotiation of the proposal with the superintendent. The mental process ‘support’ is used in the superintendent’s speech to signal his authorization for the literature seminar.
to be developed. As causal agent, with powers attributed to him by the Socio Center of the Pomeri, this only him give the voice to authorize the realization of the seminar.

The following schema is presented to show the causal agents and their causal powers.

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We can point out the ‘causal agents’, with their powers, considered the ones responsible for the realization of the literature seminar in the school. As the superintendent, Cristiano (de-) authorizes the activities carried out at the school, whether educational, cultural or not. He is the person responsible for the maintenance of order throughout the Pomeri Socio-Educational Center. And Keila as causal agent responsible for the education of the students, holds a particular kind of power. She demonstrated herself to be a committed educator for the school and her students, and also that she had courageous attitude to negotiate her innovative and challenging proposal, considering that she was violating the rules imposed by the Socio-Educative Center of the Pomeri.

It is important to emphasize that Keila’s life histories corroborate for a better understanding of the deepest layers of the social reality lived by her. It is in the deepest layers where the causal determinants are found, including the agents and their powers. As Bhaskar points out (1989), it is necessary to know the causes of the phenomena to transcend the facts and the appearances of events. Her effort in improving these young students’ lives lived out day-by-day in the Socio-Educative Center of the Pomeri is close to her own experience of life. Keila also lived deeply the drama of her stepmother with her adoptive brother during adolescence. Many young students that live today in the Pomeri have looked to drugs to forget their sad and discouraging past.
Conclusion

This study was based on the desire to realize, in light of the CR and CDA some interdisciplinary reflections that could contribute to emancipatory social science, more specifically, for the educator of languages. I sought to understand the relationship between causal agents and their powers, and to understand the micro and macrossocial contexts. I considered the narratives of life histories as a data collection tool for the CDA. The life histories can contribute to help the CDA in understanding the social mechanisms of domination and resistance or emancipation and social transformation. The use of this tool allowed, for example, for the capturing of other meanings that were not present in Keila’s speech, through her life histories. Her efforts in defense of educational activities in order to improve the quality of life of these young students who live in the Pomeri reveal that she is an active agent in the process of emancipation. In so doing, she is also contributing to the transformation of her own educational practice.

Finally, I return to my first question at the beginning of this work: why is critical realism so seductive and why has it attracted so many adherents? I would say that there is a prioritization in modern social critical science of ontology, more than epistemology, it is a starting point to question the ‘being’. What is the ‘social being’? We need to know more about this ‘being’ in depth, to understand that we live in an open and intransitive world, and that the purpose of research is to know the causal structures, mechanisms, forces and powers, that determine the social phenomena. As educators, researchers and discourse analysts we can understand that to reach an emancipatory science and social transformation, we cannot be indifferent to these issues.

References


