

Enunciating To Interact: A Semiotic Analysis of Discussion Forums for Distance Learning Materials

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ABSTRACT: *The present work is an attempt to discuss questions about the interactions that take place in distance courses through documents produced by professors within the Digital and Distance Education Agency (Agead/UFMS). First, we return to theoretical questions from the semiotics of French origin (FIORIN, 2011; BARROS, 2008), and we select some essential concepts for the object in question, such as the relationship between enunciator and enunciatee and the study of interaction regimes (LANDOWSKI, 2014; FARIA; TEIXEIRA, 2013). Next, examples of activities produced by teachers are analyzed, specifically, forum statements, in order to observe which production strategies and how materials reach their pedagogical objectives and make students comply with the proposed activities, even if, to a certain extent, there is the predictability of what students encounter when attending the different disciplines of their course. It is concluded that, although the production grants a certain degree of freedom to teachers, it is necessary to know how to choose and explore strategies that awaken the want-to-do on the part of the enunciatees, in particular, in the chosen discursive genre, as well as to reflect on whether other paths could be selected regarding the interaction with the figurative enunciatee as a student.*

KEYWORDS- *French semiotics, Interaction, Enunciation, Distance learning.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The verb “to interact”, in Portuguese language, means “1. act affecting and being affected by other(s) 2. have dialogue, communication (with another) in a given situation; relate”, according to Houaiss dictionary (2010, p. 444). Although this concept is relevant in discursive productions, from everyday conversations to written academic texts, here our focus is to show some aspects of interaction which are considered during the production of didactic material for distance learning. Inside French semiotics theory, the enunciator needs to understand the existence of an enunciatee who is distant in time and space in this kind of discourse (the enunciator should never forget this condition). In other words, teachers who prepare those documents should think about the interpretative power of the enunciatee, when they are preparing those materials.

French semiotics assume its methodology can analyze any discursive production. And because of this characteristic, we chose this theory to better understand our corpus. As Landowski affirms: “There is no semiotics (nor any other human or social science) that is free of all commitment to meaning; and none of our systems of analysis is not contaminated, to a greater or lesser degree, by its object.” (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p. 13)

The object under analysis comes from the “learning trail”¹, which is largely used in distance learning courses at the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS, Brazil). It comprehends steps completed in sequences: each task needs to be finished, and the other one can be done only when the previous one has been finalized.

In this paper, we look closely at discussion forums, like an important discursive genre in distance learning course materials. Thus, the main issues addressed in this paper are: a) Semiotics theory and its main topics related to the texts chosen; b) the analysis itself of some forums of UFMS courses and results from that; c) final considerations of the paper. It is expected that this research will contribute to a better understanding of how discursive theories can assist our knowledge about textual productions that fulfill the role intended by the enunciator.

II. FRENCH SEMIOTICS: MAIN ASPECTS AND INTERACTION REGIMES

Since the initial proposal made by Greimas, in the past century, semiotics is dedicated to the signified study. Historically, many scholars have been discussing and revising the way they examine multiple and distinct discourses they find in societies. Semiotics methodology includes the fact that each text is built in meaning levels, from the most abstract to the most concrete level, what is called generative process (BARROS, 2008; FIORIN, 2011). In this specific process, every content plan comes from a minimal semantic with two words in opposition (for example, life and death) and it makes them evaluated dysphorically or euphorically - this is the fundamental level. The second level is known as narrative level, which contains subjects and objects that relate to each other and there are four narrative stages: manipulation, competence, performance and sanction. Finally, there is the most concrete level, known as the discursive level, in which both the relationship between enunciator and enunciatee and the use of themes and figures reside. It's important to clarify that we can focus on one level or all of them when we're studying discourses, although it's known that any text comprises the three stages.

Overall, this paper highlights the need to select some semiotics concepts so that we can comprehend teaching materials, and our goal is not to make a historical recovery of this theory. The first concept is enunciation, which is understood briefly as an “act of saying” and this idea makes it a unique event. Every enunciation has two sides, like two coin sides: the enunciator, which is presupposed and produces discourses, and the enunciatee, that is defined as discourse addressee. Thereby, “the enunciator is defined as the addresser-manipulator responsible for the values of the discourse and capable of making the enunciatee believe and do.” (BARROS, 2008, p. 62). In the established contract between these two instances, the enunciator role is to reveal how the enunciatee must interpret the discourse. Hence, in this relationship, the enunciator's choices reflect an argumentative aspect that goes through every discourse as a consequence of an act that we are always trying to convince the other based on the enunciator's intentionality.

In addition to the paths taken by the subject of enunciation within the discursive level of analysis, one can understand, in parallel, how the interactions proposed by the four regimes explained by Landowski (2014) help to understand discursive meanings. He comes, therefore, by two regimes widely studied by semiotics: programming and manipulation, respectively based on regularity and intentionality. The regime of programming refers to the idea of being able to predict what the other person will do, almost mechanically. We can cite the example of folk tales, where princes act like princes, or any machine (if we know how they work, we'll know how to use them). After that, there are adjustments and accidents, in which sensitivity and randomness are the pillars. The regime of accident corresponds to meaninglessness, the maximum unexpected impact that can befall a subject, as in certain natural events such as hurricanes, for example. These four regimes are not isolated from one another and it is possible to move from one to another, since “Its reading should therefore be done in the manner of a journey, which will take place in two stages: first, from the area of the accident to that of manipulation and, from there, to the regime of programming, the provisional point of arrival” (LANDOWSKI,

¹ The idea for the trail can be found at <https://youtu.be/Uvqj4UTi0Fs?si=olz299RHuwDYyfh1>.

2014, p. 81). It is still possible for a regime to project itself: programs that lead to programs, manipulations that make the manipulated also manipulate, and so on. Finally, with regard to the spatiality pertinent to the regimes, programming and accident - controlled by an 'external body' - come together, as do manipulation and adjustment - which interfere within the subjects involved in the regime.

If we look closely at intentionality, there is an interesting question made by Landowski: "How do we know what drives the other person to act if they are neither a thing among things nor a puppet?" (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p. 25). In fact, in this case there is less predictability, because it's difficult to know exactly what the other one carries entirely inside. From the beginning of its development, semiotics proposes four ways to manipulate (FIORIN, 2011): (a) temptation, in which positive values are offered to the other, some reward; (b) intimidation, whose values are negative, concerning a threat; (c) seduction, in which the manipulator makes a positive judgment about the other person's competence; (d) provocation, in turn, which translates into a negative judgment, also leading the other person to act. In summary, in the manipulation, the subject considers the other as a subject and no longer as an object, attributing competence to them and finding spaces in them to adhere to what is proposed.

The inevitability that belongs to the regime of adjustment, on the other hand, is much stronger than in manipulation, because "there is effectively the permanent possibility of finding oneself overflowing, overtaken, lagging behind the cadence of the other's impulses [...] or dragged along by their impetus" (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p. 60). In adjustment, two sensibilities come into relationship and the subjects try to adapt and fulfill each other. The last regime raised by the scholar corresponds to the accident, whose name refers to the unexpected, whose discontinuities "place us before the meaningless; excluding all possibility of anticipation, they offer us no moral security: in a word, they sink us into the absurd." (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p. 71). Because it is based on randomness and fatality, we understand that it does not fit in with the pedagogical approach studied here.

If the regimes are intended to explain ways of living and broaden the focus of semiotic analysis, it is possible, due to the complexity that guides this "being in the world", to say that manipulation can lead to programming while adjustment to accident, placing the more stable pairs against the less controlled ones.

From now on, we are interested in seeing how these concepts from semiotics can help us to analyze teaching materials for distance learning courses, especially because in the didactic sphere in which they are inserted, they are strongly linked to making the other do, since, separated in time and (physical) space, teachers and students must each act on the learning process and, in this interaction, "The subjects in relation, placed in presence, are interconnected because they share common interests and recognize themselves in a given context, in the same discursive field." (FARIA; TEIXEIRA, 2013, p. 199).

III. ANALYZING DISCUSSION FORUMS

Within the pedagogical proposition of the undergraduate courses offered through the Digital and Distance Educational Agency (Agência de Educação Digital e a Distância- Agead/UFMS), there is the concept of "learning trail", in which the students have to walk along a route and are free to do the tasks in their own time - because those tasks are asynchrone -, however the students don't have the option of not doing any of them, since an undone activity prevents the next task from being opened and carried out. These materials are registered under a Creative Commons license and can be used within the Moodle platform.

Each course contains - among other things - video lessons, compulsory and supplementary readings, even forums, checkout activities (which count as attendance for each module completed) and, finally, the assessment which gives you a grade in the course. If you don't answer the questions in the question bank, you won't get a grade and you'll pass or fail the course. The choice of complementary readings and video lessons, within the division by modules and units, is fundamentally vision-based on what the enunciator wants the enunciatee to read and watch and have at their fingertips from the beginning to the end of the learning process.

It's appropriate to emphasize, shortly, the fact that when students access study materials on AVA/UFMS (Moodle platform), the environmental organization suggests a programming regime. They know where to click and which paths to follow in order to complete the course. The programming with its maximum

degree of predictability, generates comfort to the enunciatee, because students know what they will find, in which level, in their environmental learning. Thus,

Semiotically speaking, for a subject to be able to operate on any object, it is necessary for that object to be “programmed”; but the notion of programming refers to the idea of a “behavioral algorithm” [...] which not only semantically delimits particular spheres of action, but which, in certain contexts, will make it possible to anticipate, down to the smallest detail, the behaviors of the actors (human or otherwise) who are invested in them. (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p. 23)

In the field of production, each specialist teacher² must complete ten different steps to finish each academic subject. The first two documents are syllabus and class schedule, that are guide documents for the goals that the discipline intends to take on. In this production, the general and specific objectives of the subject stand out, as they are focused on skills and knowledge that students need to achieve. Therefore, the construction of a work of mutual interference begins, as Landowski points out:

Shared by the subjects, this properly semiotic competence enables them to communicate with each other and, for this very reason, makes them manipulable by each other, both because of their respective motivations and reasons, and because of the calculations they make regarding the modal competence of their interlocutors. (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p. 28)

The document we are highlighting in the present paper is the discussion forum, because in this case it is necessary to use the manipulation regime with more intensity. Its elaboration establishes a “you” with whom it is necessary to have something to say and produce interest in doing. Thus, by using personalized expressions, such as “dear student” or “hello, student”, and some commands using verbs in the imperative, always with the “me-you” game in mind, the simulation of enunciations made in a way that is closer to the enunciatee is constructed. The general idea of manipulation tends to be negative, but in semiotic terms, the manipulation phase occurs when one subject makes another want to do something or have to do something. And wouldn't it be precisely this thought that guides the stimulus made by the teachers' discursive choices within this textual genre? In this relationship, both are placed as subjects and no longer - as in programming - subject and object. A difficulty within the regime of manipulation occurs precisely in the imprecision of this other subject - let's think about the student enunciatee - since it is not possible to know their preferences, values, points of view and rationalities in depth (LANDOWSKI, 2014). Faced with this difficulty, it is up to the enunciator to delimit a more comprehensive enunciatee in line with the discipline's guiding objectives, in order to be able to construct texts that are in line with what is taken as known and what needs to be known. This informational calculation and interaction strategies are crucial to the final result of the course, whatever it may be. Within the regime of manipulation, once again we use Landowski's vision: “To interact in this way is therefore first of all to attribute to the other or recognize in him 'a will' and, from there, to try to weigh his reasons for acting.” (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p. 32).

In a manipulation regime it could happen to unpredictable behavior, but it's possible to see some kind of “invariant principle” (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p. 35) that is under all of these unpredictable actions. Thinking, for instance, about the forum production, which is a mandatory step for the student to progress along the path, although it doesn't give to the student any class attendance or grades, there is a risk of escaping from the given task: they can just copy any previous response of a classmate or simply answer something generic. Therefore, it should not be forgotten that “in adjustment as in manipulation, the same causes do not always and automatically produce the same effects.” (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p. 49). It consequently remains to discover strategies that minimize the enunciatee's disinterest and encourage their engagement.

² The specialist teacher is the one who plans and prepares all the teaching materials for a subject. The delimitation of their tasks and those of the other players in this process is regulated institutionally and can be found at <https://boletimoficial.ufms.br/bse/publicacao?id=489341>.

In the forums, there are at least three linguistic uses that are repeated with the intention of getting closer to the other: a vocative (“dear student”) - already mentioned - the request for an invitation to participate and a proposal ending with “good studies” or a greeting from the teacher. The guiding idea is also to seek the “engagement and participation” of others. Here are three concrete examples, taken from teaching materials in the UFMS open repository: the first corresponds to the subject “Distance learning, digital media and technologies”, the second to the subject “Ethics, citizenship and society”, and the third to “Basic Maths”, they are all part of the common training content of the UFMS Digital Program³ courses. Take a look at the first one:

Dear Student!

I hope you've enjoyed the content you accessed before coming here.

We have learned that distance education is not new and has not always been mediated by digital technologies. In today's context, digital technologies are essential for us to have opportunities for online interaction and participation, as well as access to digital resources and educational content.

Digital technologies in distance education also allow the learning process to be more centered on the student's time and space.

In this forum, we're going to discuss/share a few points:

- 1) In your perception, what are the benefits of distance education?
- 2) What was the main reason you chose a distance learning degree course?
- 3) What are the main challenges you face today in organizing a study routine in distance education?
- 4) Do you feel safe to use digital technologies more intensively for learning?

To reply to the forum, reply to the topic started by the tutor.

Big hugs, (RIEDNER, 2023, s/p)

In this first example, the discursive construction aims to receive four distinct responses from students. However, in this dialogue with the other (“you”) in all of these cases, each forum participant is required to give a particular response, based on their “perception” and their own “challenges”. Therefore, an enunciatee is required to take a particular position when producing a response discourse (which, in practical terms, would stimulate different responses from each student in the course). Let's see one more example:

Dear Student!

After watching the lesson “Topics in ethics and education”, we learned about the different theoretical positions regarding the discussion of food production and distribution.

In today's world, what is evident is that the increase in the world's population has made the demand for food not only an economic or political challenge, but also an ethical one.

People need to be fed, but how can so much food be produced without thinking about the issue of environmental balance and/or global warming? What do you think about this situation? (DINIZ, 2023, s/p)

In this example, even though it may generate a personal response, there is also a request for some specific knowledge (which intertwines the themes of food production with the environment and global warming). Thus, as the required knowledge is more specific than the previous example and less personal, the responses of the first question could be similar among students. Take the following example:

Hello students!

I hope you're enjoying the topics we're working on.

³ Available at: <https://agead.ufms.br/carrossel/ufms-reuni-digital/>

In this module, we've seen more mathematical concepts that can solve various problems that arise in our daily lives. However, some of them can be confusing to model in a mathematical expression, but don't give up! Remember that you have to practice and you can watch the videos provided several times, which is very important. In the exercises, it's important to copy the activity that the teacher is going to solve, stop the video and try to solve it yourself, and then check with the video if it worked, where there were problems, etc.

The task in this forum is to discuss the differences between ratio and proportion:

- What difference did you notice between ratio and proportion?
- Are ratio and proportion related? If so, how?
- An example using ratio and/or proportion that you have experienced in your daily life.

If you need help, you can count on the support of the tutors.

To reply to the forum, reply to the thread started by the tutor.

Enjoy your studies! (BURIGATO, 2023, s/p)

This text has much more closed-ended questions and answers that can't get away from mathematical concepts of ratio and proportion. Even though the last question points to a personal response from the student, the first two ones can be found in a textbook and therefore copied and pasted. Of course it's important to notice that Maths is a logical science, and sometimes it doesn't allow us to request some story from our students and the third question is the only place where the tutors will read different responses.

It's worth saying that it's possible to construct a question for the forums that demands only a subjective narrative, for example, when the student needs to tell a personal experience about their own life (some experience about books read during primary school or activities that caught their attention, among others). By accepting the contract proposed by the enunciator, it is up to the enunciatee to take a position and do something, because "it is, after all, always up to the rationality (understood in one or other of its various possible forms) and motivations of the other party, and more specifically their ability to assess the values at stake." (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p. 50).

In these analyzed examples, the enunciator is projecting a first-person narrator that always talks to the narratee in a more informal way and the narratee needs to take on various competences. This understanding comes from the clarity with which the commands are organized (contextualization, followed by questions, for example), so that the other person knows the tasks they have to do and wants to do them. Thus, due to his initial motivation to take the distance learning course, we have fertile soil in which to 'plant' a 'will to do' the proposed activities. In general,

The implication of content, the choice of a particular linguistic norm, the citation of authoritative texts or discourses and the way in which they are cited, the presentation of opposing arguments to refute them are all examples of argumentative mechanisms that can be used. All these procedures cause effects of meaning that impress the enunciator, holding their attention and provoking their adherence (GOMES, 2006, p. 206).

Compared to the results of Faria and Teixeira (2013), there are two similar aspects in the examples studied here: "the idea of the space for a conversation [which] corroborates the rapprochement between newspapers and their readers" (p. 209) - in this case, between teacher and student - and the fact that giving the opportunity for the other to be the enunciator of a comment broadens "the interaction between the actors of the enunciation" (p. 210), in other words, it encourages participation (no longer for comments, but for different productions within the scope of learning).

As Landowski (2014, p. 93) shows us once again, "To try to make the other collaborate with one's own project is therefore to invite them to accept a certain way of hierarchical values". In other words, we encourage the other - in this case, the student - to see value in our values, our proposals. In other words, we encourage the

other - in this case, the student - to see value in our values, our proposals. This is not to say that the other documents and videos on the trail don't require interaction from the enunciators. Broadly speaking, all discourse requires the interpretative action of the enunciatee, as pointed out earlier, which never results in simple passivity in the face of the discourse to which one is exposed, whether the student is reading a compulsory text, listening to a podcast episode or watching video lessons. However, because they demand the production of new discourses (responses to forums), the forum is, in our view, a task that demands clarity about what is wanted and how the student's new discourse should construct the answer.

IV. CONCLUSION

One aspect worth highlighting to finalize these discussions regarding the manipulation regime is the issue of failure. There's always the possibility that strategies won't achieve the desired result if you apply a manipulation that doesn't work for the other person. For this reason, the examples given here do not exhaust the discourses and possibilities of manipulation already realized in the repository's teaching materials. They are examples that point to possible paths, since teachers, even if they follow a plan, are free to adapt their commands to meet the needs of the subject.

The question that remains is: is it possible to weave practices that take us more concretely into a regime of adjustment? In Landowski's view, it is possible to adapt a machine so that it adjusts to the user, in other words, so that it moves from the regime of programming to adjustment. In this sense, we are left to reflect on how we should (and if we should) design our practices and materials, so that teaching becomes more focused on this sensitive adjustment that the theory elucidates. From the point of view of the production of materials, the adjustment regime can occur at a macro level in the changes that are made over time, based on the mistakes and successes of previous stages and also based on the feedback received from participants in the process. Postulating that there are no worse or better regimes, but only those that are more appropriate to the diverse circumstances of our social practices, the interaction sought in the teaching-learning process in the Agead/UFMS model has been effective.

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