Subjectivity Versus Objectivity in Teaching Foreign Language

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In this paper we propose to discuss the issue of subjectivity versus objectivity in the teaching practice of foreign language, especially English, in Brazil. Starting from the short story "The Parrot and Descartes" by Pauline Melville, we argue that Cartesianism has influenced a view on education which tends to consider good and valuable what is "scientific", "objective" and "universal". The subjective and the local seem to be considered undesirable and unreliable. Brazilian scholars on the education field, such as Coracini and Souza are important support for our argument.

Keywords: foreign language teaching, subejctivity, objectivity, rationalism

Introduction

In the story "The Parrot and Descartes" the author Pauline Melville, born in the Republic of Guyana, satirizes the Cartesian perception of the world that causes Europe to separate scientific knowledge from magic, contrasting the vision of a parrot from Orinoco with that of a European thinker, René Descartes. Melville's work, in a way, mocks at the European scientism that does not serve to explain the Amerindian reality. Melville's text, we argue, serves to alert us to the danger of wanting to become scientific and rational and to forget subjectivity in our educational environment. In this article we explore Cartesianism and objectivity versus subjectivity present in educational subjects and in the training of language teachers. We argue that educators need to rethink some Cartesian views and to look at regional particularities. Furthermore, we need appreciate values not necessarily known as "universal" and related to European writing and scientism. Scientific knowledge is sometimes contrasted with orality and, in a sense, South American magic, the first being considered superior, the second, inferior. For the purpose of our discussion we will briefly explore Melville's short story and then move on to the educational field.

"The Parrot and Descartes"

Pauline Melville's short story combines myth and history, beginning with a first narrator who recounts a myth of the oral tradition of the Caribbean:

> In the Orinoco region, it is believed, everything began with a desire and a scent. A hand caught from the side of the earth. An arm. The earth opened. A woman who was watching turned into a male parrot and started to alarm. Then all sorts of things. A man dropped a gourd of urine, burning his wife's flesh. The woman's skin got roasted. His bones melted. Night burst through the world and something white like a monkey nail rushed into the forest. That's what they say. Myself He was not there alone. [Our translation] (Melville,1998, p. 101)

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In Melville's text, the South American parrot which symbolizes just the oral tradition (p. 112)—is captured and taken to Europe where it also represents the things of the earth, the telluric, the unsophisticated world. At first he seems to like places such Heidelberg and Prague: [...] the wondrous city of Prague was host to every sort of cabbalist, alchemist and astronomer and housed the most up-to-date artistic and scientific collections. Curious, the South American bird wanted to learn more about Europe and its culture:

> The Parrot inspected the paintings of Arcimboldo. The Marvelous (who had also been the Master of Masquerade) which showed men made of vegetables, tin pots and books. Tycho Brahe had Discovered the fixed position of seven hundred stars and Johann Kepler Raced to discover the periodic laws of planets. [...] Ideas were propounded which made men's mouths dry with excitement and fear, giving them Palpitations and erections, often at the same time. (Melville, 1998, p. 105)

These centers of scientific learning lived in harmony with magic, with the inexplicable, not perceived by science. In the eyes of the parrot, the wonder of science and knowledge does not leave man less vulnerable in the universe. The separation of science form magic will come out with Descartes' philosophy.

In addition, Melville's tale presents historical facts, such as the arrival of Rene Descartes as a soldier in the Hapsburg army. There is a visible carnivalesque version of the story because Descartes has been placed below as an inferior, side by side with the parrot. This is how the dialogue between South America and modern European enlightenment is formed, which is precisely what we want to explore in the text. The parrot intuitively recognizes the danger of a man who contributes to the path of a certain imagination (p. 110) and is not surprised when spirit and matter began to divide body and soul, to separate science and magic to march in opposite directions (p. 111). One sees an allusion to the Puritan, dichotomous, Manichaean view that separates the rational from the irrational, the soul from the body, the correct from the wrong, and so on. In the end, one see's in Melville's story, a critique of the privilege given to the scientific method and the written word in relation to magic, to experiences, or to orality, in other words, to what is related to the parrot. As the narrator says, "The books have become the truth. The written word becomes the proof. The laws were based on books containing the preceding ones" (p. 111).

What we want to argue is that this literary piece of the Guianese-British writer suggests a critique of Eurocentrism and a dichotomous view that separates the rational from the magical, the Cartesian from subjectivity. Or more than that, a vision about education that tries to privilege objectivism and rationalism, and that disregards and despises subjectivity and the "non-universal". A colonizing education often disregards the experiences, subjectivities and particularities of the place to privilege what is "universal", which is "objective" and represents the "correct".

Cartesianism and Objectivity Versus Subjectivity in Research and Teaching

In a bilingual information board for tourists in front of the Federal University of Rondonia, known by everyone in the city and even in Brazil as UNIR, since its foundation, one reads in English: "Federal University of Rondonia—UNITE". The fact of translating UNIR—literally, without questioning the context, demonstrates how one disregards the history of the university ("UNITE" was founded in 1982). The translator hired by the local government did not pay any attention and did not show any respect to the name UNIR. In a colonial manner he disregarded the place, history, the subject he was dealing with. This happens, unfortunately, more often than we think. Here prevails the logical, the Cartesian mind: UNIR = unite. When we refer to the foreign language, it seems that we have to think of something totally rational, Cartesian, universal. One tends to believe

that all peculiarities must be forgtotten, for everything has to be "cartesianly" objective and "universal" without any regard for the "place", for the local, that is for the non-universal preipheral environment.

As we have mentioned UNIR is a name, which in this case is a Noun and not a verb. Perhaps for the translator who comes from the "center" one does not have to consider the particularities of a periphery in the Amazon. The context, history and all subjectivity have been erased. Therefore, this leads us to a discussion on the importance of thinking about subjectivity when we think of a foreign language.

In the evolution of scientific thought, the notion of scientificity is shaped by objectivity and neutrality. Logical empiricism and the Cartesian model of science instituted a conception of objectivity marked respectively by the proof of the intellect and the proofs of the senses. Cartesianism emerged with the important work of the Frenchman René Descartes, whose original title "Discours de la méthode pour bienconduitesa raison, et chercher la véritédans les sciences" suggests that this was the method of correctly conducting our reason in the search for Truth in Science.

It is important to remember that Descartes' book was published in 1637, a period in which Europe was leaving for other lands, conquering peoples, colonizing non-European lands. This certainly helped to foster the idea that Europe could take its colonies through its "civilizing mission". Descartes' method—the method of correctly guiding reason and logically combating everything which had nothing to do with the European world—that is everything which it was irrational became an aid to colonization.

Working under a humanistic belief the central idea was that human beings, despite their differences, had a universal nature received from God. Rene Descartes by writing this in 1619 was somehow trying to make sense of the world, and wanting to explain what every Human knows for sure. In this respect, we can say that Cartesian philosophy placed European humans at the center of their world and allowed them to believe that nature could be controlled through the acquisition of knowledge, the classification and analysis of its surrounding world. Simply placed, we could say that this way of seeing the world favored the belief that the European was the universal and vice versa. In this way, this "scientific thought" reinforces the notion that the particularities of other worlds, other perceptions of truth or, we might say, subjectivity, should not be considered, since they may even be harmful to the process of knowledge production. Therefore, in this perspective one should not speak of his world, but receive the rational, Cartesian (European) indisputable truth.

Australian postcolonial thinker and critic Bill Ashcroft explains that the Cartesian separation of subject and object, the separation of consciousness from the world of which it is conscious, is the schema that still guides the episteme of the Western world, with its obsession with the "scientific objectivity", one sees a tendency to see the world through a continuing technological data (Ashcroft, 2002, p. 67). This world view denies, excludes or suppresses all that is not Western, all knowledge that runs away from a preconceived pattern. In this context, if we go further, we can induce that Cartesian philosophy has produced ways of perceiving the world that places the white (colonizing) European as the center of the world having the responsibility to educate the ignorant, to bring to rationality, to the "progress" those who walk in another rhythm, who see the world from another perspective.

These Cartesian and "Objective" currents found a place in Comte's positivism (1798) and Carnap's neopositivism (1891-1970), which reinforce objectivity and neutrality as criteria for scientificity, to the detriment of subjectivity and non-objective values (Araújo, 2003, p. 145).

According to this view science must rely basically on empirical reality and be endowed with a language about phenomena that is independent from value judgments, purposes and interests, once these elements relate

to the subjectivity, that is, strange to science. Since subjectivity is an obstacle to objectivity, any proposition with scientific pretension, has to adopt the model of physics and chemistry (ARAÚ JO, 2003, p. 145).

This orientation, in the area of social and human sciences, allows us to understand the bases of the conflictual relationship between objectivity/subjectivity. Positivist scientific thought reinforces the myth that subjectivity is harmful to the process of knowledge production.

The evolution of scientific thinking is associated with the adoption of the method. This systematic and rational posture provides a methodological rigor and establishes the notion of scientificism for the knowledge. Kuhn's paradigmatic conception undoes this pattern of rationality by establishing that the adoption of this or that paradigm. Kunh's paradigatic conception undoes this pattern or rationality by establishing that the adoption of this or that paradigm does not follow the ration criteria of external, neutral, timeless reason, common to the rival theories (1993, pp. 138-139). However, according to Assis, it is erroneous to judge that Kuhn proposes an irrational form of decision-making between paradigms, since there is no way to rationally weigh all the factors to be taken into account in deciding whether or not to abandon a paradigm, under the peril of being accused of inconsistency or irrationality for those who do not admit them.

We share Kuhn's approach when he suggests that science is what the scientific community regards as such and not a breakthrough in itself. However, we know that the research projects in the area of Humanities, special Education, have been increasingly fragile in the face of this dialectical relationship. This fact has generated challenges such as the recognition and credibility of the "scientific" research in the humanities and social sciences. Bachelard (1978, pp. 89-179) also points another way to scientific knowledge by saying that science today knowledge is based on the project and is therefore situated above the subject and beyond the object. In this sense, the author postulates that it is necessary to take objectivity as a difficult pedagogical task and no longer as a primitive data.

Speaking on the issue of neutrality, Kuhn (2006) affirms that there is no set of categories in the natural sciences or in the human sciences that is neutral, reinforcing here the importance of hermeneutic interpretation in the area of the humanities. Also in this direction, Azanha (1992, p. 181) states that doing research in the area of education, for example, Besides follows the path of doing science in other areas of knowledge: "[...] scientific practice, in any field, encompasses activities such as proposing problems, constructing theories or hypotheses, formulating concepts, observing, inventing instruments, etc." (p. 270).

However, the same author notes that within this range there is, of course, a broad space for the scientist's creativity; so it would be a counterfeit simplification to conceive of scientific practice as a space where actions are always reduced to the emergence of rules (Azanha, 1992, p. 181). Azanha draws attention to an essential element of scientific practice, the research subject that would leave the mark of subjectivity in scientific doing. For this reason the author criticizes the posture of an excessive rationalism adopted by previous scientists, as we can see:

> Bacon and Descartes' hope and their epigones' optimism in formulating a universal method, whose strict application would guarantee the progress of science, reveals itself as an unfulfilled and probably unreachable fantasy. The mistake of all those who engaged in this utopian quest was to imagine that the modis operandi of science would be reducible to a formal pattern of rationality. The core of this deception was the assumption that the variety of concrete scientific practices would have something in common and essential when, in fact, there is only a "family air". (Azanha, 1992, p. 182)

The author goes on to say that both Bacon and Descartes built a profoundly methodological view of the production of knowledge, especially for the literate lay public (Azanha, 1992, p. 166). Subjectivity then started

to be understood as "relativity", "dependence on its constructor" (Coracini, 1991, p. 36). And in this sense it becomes undesirable and constitutes as an obstacle to research, especially social research.

Even Nagel (1967), who attributes the merit of research to the scientific method employed, emphasizes that objectivity is not a consequence of science, but is due to a community of thinkers (Nagel, 1967, p. 20). The author acknowledges, at least discursively, the manifestation of subjectivity in scientific practice by asserting not only that no scientist is infallible and that everyone presents their peculiar intellectual and emotional deformations, but also that any meaningful collection of facts, aiming at researching is controlled by assumptions of various kinds, depending on the scientist and not on the subject investigated (Nagel, 1967, pp. 20-21).

Coracini (1991, p. 105) in making a study of the subjectivity present in the discourse of science, observes that scientific discourse is largely a discourse on things, where a nonhuman is the subject of state verbs and process. The author discusses not only the myth of the objectivity of science, but the objectivity of scientific knowledge which is supposed to be neutral, impersonal and impartial. Coracini contends that the positivist ideal of science rejects subjectivity in scientific activity, as we can see in the excerpt below: "as one would expect in view of scientific conventions, the subject enunciator assumes, all the time, the position of an observer far from the observed object, as proving, with his explicit absence, the absence of the researcher subject in the step of scientific investigation" (Coracini, 1991, p. 104).

Discussing the question of how science is configured in non-positivist sciences, Evangelista (1990) states that there is no science but effective scientific practices. However, it is science which conglomerates all this flow of practices into a unit. For this reason science seems to be an essence, to have a life of its own, to move by itself (Evangelista, 1990, p. 215). From this perspective, science, by diminishing diversity (facts and phenomena of reality) and establishing unity, has a cognoscent subject who assumes a neutral and zero position in front of the object.

Based on what we have been reading, we observe that objectivity and subjectivity are constitutive of scientific doing and retain their positivity. Objectivity—the hallmark of classical science and allied to rigor and accuracy—has brought us important insights into the world we live in. On the other hand, subjectivity, in the same way, propelled the expansion and creation of new fields of knowledge (social and human sciences) as well as demythologized the scientific practice, recognizing it as an activity ruled not only by rules to be followed but also guided by the scientist's creativity.

It is not our intention to prioritize either objectivity or subjectivity in scientific research, but to make an observation that both are constitutive of scientific practice and that, therefore, they should not be seen from a Manichean point of view or treated in an excluding manner.

Different positions in front of the world produce different knowledge and this is productive for the field of knowledge. The nature of the object defines the type of research to perform. We will always be confronted with different looks for the world, giving account of different realities and composing different and several truths. Productive struggle, quarrels around the explanation of certain phenomena will always exist. We have learned from Kuhn and Popper that in order to make progress, theories must be faced, confronted, tested, some abandoned, and others elected. The purpose of research, of doing science should be here.

The (Undesirable?) Subjectivity in Teacher Training

In problematizing the way of producing and disseminating knowledge in the educational field, Souza (2008) legitimizes our idea that subjectivity becomes undesirable because:

> Education tends to purge affection and to consider the subjective dimension as propitiating error and failure in the processes of producing and disseminating knowledge. In general, Education adopts the conception of the subject of full reason capable of controlling the affections and expelling them from the psychic and cognitive process of teaching and learning. (p. 66)

According to Souza this Cartesian, linear and positivist thinking of rationality has promoted a split between processes that are reciprocal and relational: The processes of knowing and subjectivizing. Souza (2008, p. 65) reminds us that, in the contact with new contents, situations and experiences, that is, in the process of learning, we are constrained to a cognitive work as well as a subjective work.

In this sense, the author proposes, for educational work, the presence of a relationship that allows participants to deal with the doubt and with the limits inherent in the acquisition of new knowledge and actions (Souza, 2008, p. 67). Such thinking goes against what actually happens in practice. What usually happens in the process of formation and education is the postponement of doubt. Subjectivity thus presents itself as undesirable.

In earlier studies concerning the training of English-speaking teachers, for example, we have already observed that the nodal point of Teaching Practice in the English-language courses was related to the fact that this training course subject did not regard heterogeneity as constitutive of training future teachers (Martins, 1998). The results of such studies have shown that the English Language Teaching Practice, by stifling the heterogeneity of/in the classroom and by avoiding contradicitons inherent to the education process, limited to the legitimation and instrumentalization of the language teachers (Martins, 1988, p. 18). Our studies, thus takes us to the following reflection: English teachers training, in order to keep the control of education and because it is determined by the rules of pedagogical and institutional discourse, masking the heterogeneity, tries to hide the conflicts. Conflicts stablished by the power relations in the classroom (Martins, 1998, p. 91).

It seems that all heterogeneity is stifled in the name of unity and homogenization. The desire is also observed by Josso (2002, p. 1999) regarding the notion of universalization of the education process. He argues that each teacher knows the differences among school, learners and teachers, but constructs the pedagogical scenario as he/she should prepare to a universal man, ptototype or the ideal way of learning in that age.

Final Considerations

When we promote discussions on foreign language teaching these reflections always occur to us. It is not difficult to remember what happens to the character of Bernard Shaw in *Pygmalion*: the phonetics professor, Higgins believes in concepts of scientism, such as visible speech, and uses all the material resources to document the phonetics of his student Eliza Dolittle. For the teacher the student is an object, reducing to a material of observation to make it a "ladilike" girl. Higgins' scientism ignores any particularity of Dolittle, her provenance, her history and experience. When an English teacher tells his/her student "you have to think in English to learn the language", we believe that he/she is already restricting learning possibilities. He wants to limit learning to those who submit to thinking the Cartesian, the "rational". In the same way when we speak of teacher training: not everything is measurable, rational and does not have a Cartesian conclusion. Each subject

is a subject. Respecting the particularities of a place, the language of a particular people as well as their history and their beliefs is fundamental to an effective learning. It is necessary to promote an interest in the new learning, new ways of speaking and seeing the world. When a foreign language teacher, for example, looks at local issues, the particularities of the community, before imposing an interpretation of the world and a way of perceiving things, learning becomes lighter and more interesting. We do not want to suggest a total subjectivity, we do not argue for magic instead of science. What interests us is that we do not privilege one and neglect the other. We argue that Cartesianism can be harmful when it does not ponder on "non-universal" questions when it disparages oral or local traditions. We think that it is important to reflect on the danger of labeling, of creating formulas and homogenizing the other; classifications that disregard the different are not good for education. Whether Pauline Melville's South American parrot or any apprentice who carries with him/her, his/her particular world and stories must be regarded as important to our construction of knowledge. As the author Pauline Melville suggests, not all scientism serves to explain particular realities.

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