Higher Education: Linguistic Competence under Discussion

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The twenty-two fundamental letters, he engraved them, shaped them, combined them, pondered them, exchanged them and with them formed what was created and everything to be formed in the future. (Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, 1988,p. 27)

Introduction

As Kristeva(1999, p.18)put it, "there is no society without language, as there is no society without communication". The social exchange is the proper and necessary field of the production of language. Since the 15th century, Portuguese, when confronted with the Trans-European linguistic universe, incorporated the vocabulary of many languages. The maritime, geographic and geostrategic determinants of the Discoveries and the European expansion shaped the activity of intercommunication with speakers of other languages, hence the ancient axiom of the 16th-century grammarian Nebrija (1441-1522) that "language has always been the companion of empire". The Portuguese language began to be spoken outside Europe in Ceuta on 22 August 1415 and then spread to central and southern Africa, South America, Asia and Oceania (Verdelho, 2008, p.109).

In Brazil, missionary efforts connected Christianization to elementary schooling (first in the towns and then among indigenous communities). In the 17th and 18th centuries, Jesuits continued this labour. When the Society of Jesus was expelled, by the Marquis of Pombal in 1759, schooling suffered a severe drop, from which it would only recover a long time later.

We should also point out that in Brazil the legislation known as Directory of Indians, drafted in 1755 (published in 1757), outlines important aspects of the language policy followed in Pombal's age. It is important to note, in this Directory, the intention of the government of the Kingdom of Portugal to avoid discrimination. The document defines, among other measures, a ban on the term *'negro'* ('nigger'), an incentive to the marriage of white settlers with indigenous people, the replacement of the general language for Portuguese. The Directory's main goal was to completely integrate the Indians in Portuguese society, with a view not only to putting an end to the discrimination of the former, but also to eliminating the differences between Indians and whites. In this way, it projected a future in which it would not be possible to tell one from the other, be it physically, through biological miscegenation, or behaviourally, through a series of mechanisms aimed at cultural miscegenation. It is important to highlight the compulsory use of Portuguese, which should be implemented through the schools funded to educate the Indians. In the Directory there is a paragraph specifically dedicated to the topic, in which the imposition of the colonizer's authority arises as derived from the enforcement of their language to the "conquered" populations.

Thus, with colonization, Portuguese became the single working language within administration and the education system. So much so that the Luso phone world is assessed today between 170 and 210 million people. Portuguese is the fourth most spoken language in the planet, with 261 million people, 3.8% of the world population (seethe website of the Camoes Institute at http://www.instituto-camoes.pt). It is the official language of the following countries: Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal, and São Tomé and Príncipe.

To reflect on language, we need to follow its route, we need to follow its constituent historic process. Its whole process has given it the distinctiveness it managed to achieve. It was in this interactive space that it asserted itself and reached the place it holds in the map of spoken languages. Its practice has a prominent place in the Portuguese-speaking community. In this sense, we can say that Portuguese has earned high status as tool for social interaction used in the communication process. With it and through it the large Luso phone community has the ability to understand and to make itself understood.

Linguistic competence is not innate. It is a skill learnt and developed throughout schooling, taking on more relevance and responsibility in higher education. Academic success is correlated with the command of the language, since its use intersects with all areas of knowledge and professional practices, reflecting in the ability to interact socially. Written communicative competence must, therefore, be an essential requirement of all higher education, with increased emphasis in students from Higher Degrees in Humanities. According to Canale (1996), written communicative competence is divided into several competences: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic, and can be explained by countless factors: reading habits, socio cultural and family background, textual cohesion and coherence, textual deixis, lexical diversity, command of morph syntax, of spelling, of vocabulary, of punctuation, of accentuation, etc... Communicative competence has, thus, a multifactorial nature. Nevertheless, it is not our purpose to discuss here all the variables which explain the command of written expression. In view of the above, we raised the question of knowing if the students of Higher Degrees in Humanities, as they start higher education, possess a good command of written textual production, according to the expectations regarding this type of students. This study aims to know if students starting higher education master basic knowledge of Prescriptive Grammar. Although written expression cannot be limited to knowledge of prescriptive grammar, still, mastering it implies good performance as regards written production. Despite the controversy among linguists on the more relevant elements of writing competence, the knowledge of Prescriptive Grammar does not explain the complexity of the phenomenon, but it is one of the significant factors (indicators).

The command of Prescriptive Grammar is important to the development of linguistic awareness and critical language awareness, as it helps work language as a linguistic phenomenon on its various levels and as social practice. Communicative competence and linguistic performance (despite the Chomsk yandichotomy) implies knowing grammar rules. Speaking grammatically correct language is a good indicator for the study of our problem. The knowledge of grammar rules is expressed in performance, and here there is no divorce between competence and performance.

It seems that this aspect integrates and intersects perfectly with the criteria that Perrenoud (2002,p.16) considers necessary for good training, among which didactic transposition grounded on the analysis of practices and on their transformations, a competences benchmark which identifies knowledge areas and the required skills, problem-based learning, and the articulation between theory and practice.

To this end, we have defined as **central goal** of this paper to identify the basic knowledge that the students of Higher Degrees in Humanities reveal on Prescriptive Grammar. With this we aim to know whether, in fact, this issue is a problem and its extent in Higher Education training. Indeed, we aim to ascertain the impact this issue must assume in the training of students in Higher Degree in Humanities/Language and Literature.

Theoretical framework

Writing is a communicative modality which comes up after verbal language and arose as a way of compensating the latter's shortcomings. It is born of a human need in the civilized world and carries with it the marks of the culture of many peoples. According to Cagliari (1993), writing, whatever it may be, has always been a form of representing the collective, religious, magic, scientific, political, artistic and cultural memory of a people. Regarding the concept of writing, the same author states that the whole graphic system of verbal language, or a means by which man represents his reality, is in fact his thought using graphic symbols. There are various communication systems.

Still, verbal language is the most complex and natural, since it is the only modality which uses words. Starting in the 1960s, the studies of Text Linguistics emerge, considering the text as linguistic unit ranking higher than the sentence. In this sense, it incorporates in its study a set of elements which contribute to allow a linguistic production to be considered a text. These elements are, for instance, text cohesion[1]and coherence[2], as well as intersexuality and intentionality (Schmidt, 1978; Beaugrande, 1981). Roughly speaking, Text Linguistics comprehends three broad phases: 1) trans-sentence analysis, 2) text grammar, and 3) the grammar of text theories. Trans-sentence analysis describes the syntactic-semantic phenomena which occur between utterances or sequence of utterances, but does not yet constitute a text as semantic unit.

According to Fávero & Koch (1998, p.4),"the study of referential relations was limited in general to the coreferential processes (anaphoric and cataphoric) operating between two or more text elements", with still very little study of non-coreferential remissive phenomena, associative and indirect anaphors, text deixis and others which today constitute some of the main objects of study of Text Linguistics". In the 1970s, there were grammarians closely connected with Structural and Generative Grammar aiming to present the principles that govern the constitution of text in every language. The assumption was that every native speaker possessed knowledge of what a text is, in other words, every speaker possesses a text competence, capable of identifying, understanding and interpreting a text. Text grammars see text as a strongly constituted theoretical unit, as opposed to discourse, a fictional, and communicative and inter subjectivity-promoting constructed unit, (Kock, I. V. &Travaglia, L.C. 2006). Thus, text is the focal object of Linguistics, considered as the primary linguistic sign, the highest-ranking linguistic unit, constituting an entity in the linguistic system, whose possible structures in every language must be determined by the rules of a text grammar (Schmidt, 1978). This means that the text grammar includes the speakers' role and their linguistic competence in the production and interpretation of the meaning of the utterance. Still, text grammarian's ultimately realized that the same text could produce different meanings at each reading by the same reader or by different readers in different times (Danes, 1974). From the 1980s, Text Linguistics develops, and it no longer sees the text as a finished product which must be syntactically or semantically analysed, but rather as an instrument to achieve the speaker's communicative and social intentions. In other words, the text is considered in its pragmatic context, the study of which goes from the text to the context, the latter understood as a set of external conditions of the production, reception and interpretation of texts (Heinemann & Viehweger, 1991). It is in this conceptual framework that Prescriptive Grammar has been for decades the target of criticism for not contributing to the enrichment of language. Seen as a manual which regulates, that is, imposes linguistic behaviour on speakers, it is seen, by the stance it takes, as marginalizing anyone who breaks its rules. However, supporters of the Prescriptive Grammar persist even today, such as, for example, Luft:

"True grammar is a prerequisite of speech. True grammar: a system of rules which makes acts of verbal communication possible. Even for more ignorant individuals, even for little children, there is no talking without grammar theory. Anyone who speaks knows the language's grammar, by intuition, without realizing it, but they know it." (Luft, 2000, p.87).

Also, Antunes (2003, p.26) sees the need that a language must, or rather, needs to have at its base; a set of rules which regulates its functionality, hence: "Every language has its grammar, has its set of rules, regardless of the social prestige or the level of economic and cultural development of the community where it is spoken. That is, there is no language without grammar."

To Bagno(2004, p. 9),teaching Portuguese in the traditional pedagogic practice means "instilling an almost endless set of syntactic prescripts considere d«correct», imposing series of artificial pronunciations which correspond to no actual linguistic variety, to charge the knowledge (rather, the mechanical and sterile memorization, the useless cramming) of a failed and incoherent nomenclature, together with contradictory and incomplete definitions." The author is very strongly set against prescriptive grammar since the rules and concepts it imposes actually, according to him, torment learners in the acquisition of their native language, as these

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[1] Textual cohesion refers to the text components whose significance depend son the interconnection with other elements of the text orof the same situational context, that is, cohesioninvolvesall the components of the lexical-grammatical system. For an in-depth look intotext cohesion, see Halliday & Hasan (1976).

[2] Text coherence results from the joint action of a complex network of factors of a linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural, interactional nature, among others. For an in-depth look into text coherence, see Charolles (1987),

prescriptive precepts do not have a coherent justification for their use; in other words, there is no scientific framework. Hence, according to this theorist, school must prioritize the Teaching of the Brazilian Language: "Teaching Brazilian Portuguese is having a vision more attuned with the contemporary scientific thinking. It is admitting that traditional grammar, after 2,300 years of sovereignty, is a turned page in history" (Bagno, 2004, p.10).To this author, teaching a language well would entail abolishing traditional grammar forever, and the teacher of Portuguese should respect the students' intuitive knowledge, cherishing what they already know of the world around them. The act of teaching implies extending and not repressing.

Rocha (2002), too, defends banning Prescriptive Grammar from the Teaching of Portuguese, since what must be taught, according to him, is the language from the student's natural linguistic competences. What must be considered is not a manual of rules which simply judge what is right and wrong. Most important, according to this author, is the fact that speakers communicate themselves with their own grammar.

Faced with such divergent, dichotomy visions, the role of grammar in the organic unit of the language is so great that from the advancements of linguistic studies it was possible to roughly identify two grammar dimensions as regards the structure of a language: one known as external, and the other internal.

a) The external grammar, more commonly known as prescriptive, would be the one to regulate the official dialect in which the academic language is expressed and, of this, the one used by the training units, by the sciences, the arts, among others.
b) The internal grammar, object of appreciation by Linguistics, would be the one perceived spontaneously through the daily speech acts which the native speakers of a language are exposed to.

Linguistics also explains the coexistence of many levels of the same language. Even disciplined by one or more grammars, a language in us ekeeps in it a certain degree of flexibility responsible for its evolutionary dynamics. For Sociolinguistics (Calvet, 2002), it is due to this dynamic nature that natural variations arise which occur within the same language. From such variations, dialects (variations spoken by geographically defined communities), idiolects (speaker-specific variation) and socialists (variations spoken by socially defined communities) are the more prominent expressions. Finally, because they are components natural to all languages, linguistic variations should be known and respected in that discursive-interactionist vision, but neither them nor the changes a particular language undergoes should inhibit a greater degree of appropriation of the standard language.

Research Methodology

In our search to find a path to collect the data, a grammar content study was initially conducted according to the National Curricular Parameters of Brazil, so that the goals of the project could be achieved. We carried out an exploratory-descriptive study, in which we aimed to research and analyse the level of academics' basic knowledge of Prescriptive Grammar in the Higher Degrees of Humanities in the districts of Bela Cruz, Itarema and Miraíma, located in the northern region of the Ceara State. The towns where the questionnaires were applied met the following criteria: they belong geographically to the northern region of the state and they offer Higher Degrees in Humanities, in institutions recognized by the Ministry of Education and Culture(MEC).

The questionnaire sample was105 (one hundred and five) academics, and they were not submitted to any restrictions regarding social status, age group or area of residence. Due to legal implications, and to uphold ethical principles, the identities of the subjects were kept secret and the information was assured confidentiality. Also, about the subjects involved in the research, 57% of the population work in the urban area, against 43%which belong to the rural area. As for the age group of the researched population,50%of the individuals' age falls between17 and22 years, in other words, young academics. In the 23-to-28-year group25%were recorded, and in the 29-to-35-year group, 11%. For people between the ages of 36 and 42 years, the percentage is9%, while those older than43 yearsrepresent5%of the academic population to whom the questionnaire was applied.

Also regarding the researched population, there is a relevant number of subjects who, in the period the field work was carried out, were teaching in educational institutions, belonging to the municipal, state or private networks. Moreover, 51% of academics involved in the study taught in the field of Languages, Codes and their Technologies, comprehending the subjects of Portuguese Language, Literature, Writing and Arts. Finally, 49% of those researched no longer teach.

In the Procedures for data collection, information was gathered from a structured questionnaire with self-applicable questions with queries referring to contents of Fundamental Schooling, as per the National Curricular Parameters of Prescriptive Grammar.

The questionnaire was organized according to the following items:
a) Importance of prescriptive grammar to the teaching of Portuguese;
b) Phonetics/Spelling (lexical notations, that is, the diacritic signs of the Language);
c) Morphology - taxonomic issues;
d) Syntax – verbal transitivity;

To formulate the questions, grammar contents in the fields of Phonetics, Morphology, Syntax and Spelling Analysis were used, divided into four moments, as follows: **Phonetics/Spelling**: Two diacritic signs were placed graphically for the subject of the research to recognize and name them. These were the grave accent and the apostrophe.

The decision to use these graphic signs derived from the importance they have in a language, since Phonetics is the part of grammar that studies the phenomenon of the distinctive units of speech, in other words, that analyses the sounds which have the function to differentiate meanings.

In written language, besides the letters of the alphabet, there are signs that help pronounce the words correctly. These accessory graphic representations in writing are called Lexical Notations or Diacritical Signs, that is, signs capable of changing sounds in a lexical environment. In the questionnaire, the requested signs were: T1FA - Term 1 of Phonetics – item A, with representation in the questionnaire = [`] – grave accent, used to indicate the phenomenon of crasis in the preposition "a", when the word is dominant, and the article "a" or pronoun when the word insubordinate. T2FB – Term 2 of Phonetics – item B, with representation in the questionnaire = ['] – apostrophe, used to supressa phone me, generally a vowel. This first stage of the questionnaire – Phonetics and Spelling – is complemented with words in which the subject of the study should indicate the reason why the presented words had a graphic accent. In a total of four terms, represented in the questionnaire as follows – Só [Lonely], Sabiá[Thrush], Sábia [Wise, feminine] and Académico [Academic, masculine]–were classified, for analysis, respectively, as T3FC, T4FC, T5FC e T6FC (Term 3 of Phonetics - item C, Term 4 of Phonetics - item C, Term 5 of Phonetics - item C, and Term 6 of Phonetics - item C).

As regards **morphology** (gr. *morphê* = figureand*logia* = study), a reference was made to the structure and formation of words, inflections and classification. According to the idea that these terms carry, the words are divided into ten groups known as classes: noun, verb, article, adjective, numeral, pronoun, adverb, preposition, conjunction and interjection.

As object of morphology, used in the study, we opted for the class of verbs, for its flexibility, in other words, because it is a language group which varies in number, person, tense and mood. The class of verbs possesses in flection by number because they can indicate the amount of beings involved in the verbal process, they can be inflected in the singular and in the plural. Verbs are also inflected by person in speech, in the first, second and third. As for tense, they are classified according to the moment when the action is performed: present, past and future. The present tense is when the action takes place at the moment of speech. As for the past, subdividedintopreterite, imperfect and pluperfect, the action of the verb was carried out before the utterance. And future, which indicates an action yet to be fulfilled by the verb.

The forth inflection of the verb concerns mood, how the fact takes place, that is, the way in which the action expressed by the verb is carried out. They are three: indicative, subjunctive and imperative. The indicative mood indicates that the action expressed by the verb is carried out is a definitive way, be it affirmatively, negatively or interrogatively. As for subjunctive, the verb makes no sense unless it is subordinate to another verb, since the former, to be correctly understood, will depend on another. The imperative mood, in turn, indicates that the verbal action is carried out as an order, plea, request.

Verbs can also be classified into three conjugation groups. The first comprehend those verbswhose infinitives end in –ar; the second, whose infinitives end in –er, and the third whose infinitives end in –ir. In the questionnaire used for the study, the chosen verb – *ensinar* [to teach] – belongs to the first conjugation. The subject of the research should conjugate it in the indicative mood and in the preterite. **Syntax** (gr. *syntáxis* = ordering) is the part of prescriptive grammar which studies the word, not in itself, as is the purpose of morphology, but rather the relation between the words that are grouped together para express thoughts.

Thus, syntax, because it studies the sentence in its own environment, a phenomenon in which one word is related to another, is called syntactical analysis. What was tested, in the study, concerns the transitivity of verbs. Aclause, sentence structured around a verb, may require a complement or not to its end which expresses an action. Faced with this idea, arises the classification of verbs: intransitive, transitive and linking. These verbs which need a complement, the so called transitive verbs (lat. *transire* = pass), are classified into direct transitive and indirect transitive. The DTV – direct transitive verb– is that whose action passes directly to the person or think upon which it falls, whereas the ITV – indirect transitive verb– is connected to its complement by a preposition.

Also, regarding the classification of verbs, there is the third group, the LV –linking verb–that which does not express an action, being devoid of meaning. Almeida (2005, p.156) defines it thus: "When we say 'Pedro é bom' [Peter is good], we are not assigning to Pedro any action, but rather a quality, that of being good. Such verbs are also of incomplete predicate, and, consequently, require a complement, with the difference that this is constituted by quality and not by a person or thing."

In the construction of the questionnaire, within the context of syntax, three clauses were prepared in which the transitivity of the verbs was required: *saíram* [they left], *gostam* [they like] and *contam* [they tell]. For each period, three alternatives were presented, and the subject had to tick just one. It is important to stress that the clauses used in the research are classified as simple period, since in each of them there is only one clause, that is, a single verb. This need to simplify the sentences was due to the fact that they need to comply with the contents of prescriptive grammar, according to the programme of the National Curricular Parameters of Fundamental Education.

In the analysis of the collected data, the terms O1SA, O2SB, O3SC (Clause 1 of Syntax – item A, Clause 2 of Syntax – item B and Clause 3 of Syntax – item C)were used, as representation form.

For O1SA the clause used was: "Osprofessoressaíramapressados" [The teachers left in a hurry]. For O2SB, the presented period was: "As criançasgostam de livros" [The children like books]. And the following period, O3SC was: "Osviajantescontamsuasaventuras" [The travellers tell their adventures].

Analysis and discussion of the results

The data were analysed through the results obtained by the questionnaire application, using statistical processing. The initial question of the questionnaire was: "Is Prescriptive Grammar an indispensable tool for the teaching of Portuguese?". In this early work procedure, we observe an agreement, for the most part, regarding the relevance of Prescriptive Grammarin the teaching of Portuguese. 97% of subjects, in other words, 102 academics are aware that this manual of rules and concepts is an indispensable tool in the classroom, without which the teaching of the language is not possible. Contrary to the question of the importance of prescriptive grammar, we found that only three percent of the respondents stated that, for language learning, there was no need for a book with its concepts and its rules. For these students, it is only necessary to work the pupils' internal language, since a descriptive study of the language would be sufficiently capable of filling the speakers' gaps. As for morphology, we opted for the verb '*Ensinar*' [To Teach], classified as regular for having maintained its radical '*ensin*', and belonging to the first conjugation (*-ar*). It had to be conjugated in the indicate mood – preterite tense. In appropriate spaces lines were inserted so that the subjects could inscribe the following verb forms: *ensinei* [I taught], *ensinaste* [you taught], *ensinou* [he/she/it taught], *ensinamos* [we taught], *ensinastes* [you taught], *ensinaram* [they taught].

The results obtained registered a figure of 83% who did not manage to achieve the purpose of the question. Only 17% of respondent conjugated the verb correctly.

Faced with this result, it is possible to infer, from this high figure that subjects are liable to make agreement errors in the context of a clause, bearing in mind the lack of knowledge of verbal inflection morphemes. A recurring error was produced by the confusion between the requested and the registered tenses, since respondents conjugated the verb in the present of the indicative since this is a basic tense in the conjugation of any other verbs. Next, we addressed syntactic analysis, which studies the period in its structure, preserving an intrinsic relation between the elements of the clause. Care was taken not to present the subjects with complex periods, featuring two or more verbs, so three simples causes, in other words, three simple periods, were used. The first clause – O1SA – submitted for analysis was "Os professoressaíramapressados" [The teachers left in a hurry]. It is possible to observe that there is a verb expressing an action with a meaning that does not require another term, since it attributes completely the activity performed to the subject of the clause. Consequently, this verb is classified asI.V. (intransitive verb).

When checking the results of the research, we detected, after the survey, a figure of 87% of respondents who could not correctly analyse the transitivity of the verb, whereas 13% of the subjects answered correctly.

It was possible to discerna lack of syntactic knowledge regarding the language, as in a simple period, students demonstrated weakness in the structural knowledge of the language. As for the second clause – O2SB – the analysis was made with the following sentence "As criançasgostam de livros" [The children like books]. It is possible to observe that the subject of the clause is 'as crianças" [the children], whereas the predicate is "gostam de livros" [like books]. There is a verb that needs a complement to the realization of the subject and that term must, in this case, be accompanied with a preposition. Thus, the answer to the item would be 'indirect transitive verb', due to the necessity of a complement assisted by a connecting word (the preposition '*de'*, inexistent in English).

Analysing the answers, it was possible to observe that 51% managed to get the transitivity right, whereas 49% ticked the wrong option. It is possible to note that knowledge is greater regarding transitive verbs.

The third clause – O3SC – was "Osviajantescontamsuasaventuras" [The travellers tell their adventures]. We observe that there is a verb that expresses an action and its *corpus*needs a complement to the fulfilment of the subject. This word does not need a connector. Therefore, the answer to the item would be 'direct transitive verb', for the need of a verbal complement without assistance from a preposition. When we examine the results, we detectthe subjects'difficulty in identifying a 'DTV', since only 30% managed to get the transitivity right, whereas 70% selected the wrong option, once again demonstrating,as in previous analyses, the difficulty in detectinga verb which requires a complement unassisted by a preposition. Also, regarding verb classification, there is the third group, the LV –linking verb–the one which does not express an action, and is therefore devoid of meaning.

As regards**Spelling**, we sought to analyse the spelling command of words with a low level of difficulty. Six words were selected.In the analysis of collected datathe following terms were used, as representative form: T1D, T2D, T3D, T4D, T5D e T6D (Term 1 ofthe dictation, Term 2 ofthe dictation, Term 3 ofthe dictation, Term 4 ofthe dictation, Term 5 of the dictation and Term 6 of the dictation) which refer the words 'ascensão' [ascension], 'concessão' [concession], 'sensacionalismo' [sensationalism], 'apaziguar' [to appease], 'concertar' (in the sense of concur) [to agree upon]and 'viajem' [travel] (verb form) respectively.

Opting for the words mentioned above was due to the need to analyse the students' spelling knowledge regarding words that contain sounds and corresponding letters, since Portuguese, for instance, has the phoneme / s / in very diverse representations: "s = salto [jump]; z= casa [house]; ss = cassa[to revoke, 3rd person singular of the Simple Present]; - c = caça [hunting];sc = crescer [to grow] - sç = cresça [to grow, 3rd person singular of the Imperative]; xc = exceeder [to exceed]; and x = exalar [to exhale]". Still in this issue of spelling practice, the subjects of the study were asked to call upon of basic knowledge of paronyms, that is, words that are similar in writing but have different meanings. Thus, words such as 'concertar' and 'viajem' were introducedon the listof spelling practice, and subjectsshould have at least basic knowledge of the semantic field of these words, namely, they should know the variety of meanings that the words may often have.

Conclusion

Language is important to the construction of the social group, to the constitution of a process of belonging. The loss of language causes a sensation of estrangement, loss and exclusion which even affects the building process of one's own subjectivity. The construction of meaning and of values, as identity-constituting elements, is compromised. Besides this aspect, a sense of belonging is fundamental to generating active citizenship. Language is a political instrument and, as such, should ensure everyone the appropriation of this heritage which enables an answer to the speaker's needs of each one of the elements which integrate society. Anything which may contribute to cause the process which Barthes (1987, p.75) calls *stammering*, in other words, a sign that language is not in good health. Grammar(s)arise to avoid this Barthian *stammering*. Adolfo Coelho – an intellectual of the so-called70s Generation of the 19th century – already insisted in the utilitarian use of Grammar, as a manual that would assist speakers in the social uses of language and a specific language. In his work *A Língua Portuguesa*, he explains that his purpose is to propose a grammar to "address the more urgent needs of the teaching of the native tongue and dispel erroneous opinions professed (Coelho, 1881, p. V). And to Celso Cunha & Lindley Cintra (1986, p. 5),"agrammar which aims to register and analyse the fact of the educated language must be based on a clear concept of norm and linguistic correctness".

It is commonly accepted that it is in grammar that we can find the rules which determine good speaking and good writing to the extent that Grammar becomes, by metonymy, a book filled with rules and divided into chapter which address, separately, phonetics, morphology and syntax. For a student of a Higher Degree in Humanities it will be important to know the different approaches to grammar: prescriptive grammar, on one hand, and, on the other, descriptive grammar, explicative or textual. And both these perspectives have supporters and opponents, as was demonstrated in the body of this text.

The analysis of the results enabled us to establish that the subjects of the study sample (105) submitted to the questionnaire (coming, as was stated, from three towns in the north of the Ceará State) who were admitted to a Higher Degree in Humanities/Language and Literature reveal basic lack of knowledge of Prescriptive Grammar in its various dimensions: Phonetics, Morphology, Syntax and Spelling. Other research works on the linguistic performance of university students have reached similar conclusions.

By way of example, the paper *Competências do século XXI, transição para o Ensino Superior e sucessoacadémico: estudo do nível de proficiêncialinguísticaemInglês e Português dos estudantes do 1ºano da Universidade de Coimbra*[3] [21st Century Competences, transition into Higher Education and academic success: study of the level of linguistic proficiency in English and Portuguese of 1st year students of the University of Coimbra], like other studies in the field of the evaluation of Portuguese students' linguistic proficiency, reveals disturbing results and appeals tourgent interventions. Also, the research project *A competênciaem Português dos estudantesuniversitáriosem Moçambique* [Competence in Portuguese of university students in Mozambique], supervised by Perpétua Gonçalves, has identified the "Errors" regarding formal traits (spelling and accentuation) and non-formal traits (lexis, lexis-syntax; syntax and morph syntax). The same author, in a significant study devoted to the structure and grammar of Portuguese, concluded that "ensuring educational success depends to a large extent on the appropriation of the language in which teaching is done" (Gonçalves et al., 1998, 142).

In view of these results, we believe that student training in the Higher Degree of Humanities/Literature should integrate the study of Prescriptive Grammar as well as the study of the branches of Linguistics(Sociolinguistics, Ecolinguistics and Psycholinguistics), of Text Linguistics and of Semiotics. Regardless of one's position on the different branches of Linguistics, it is not acceptable that students of a Higher Degree in Humanities/Literature should evidence such lack of basic knowledge of the principles of Prescriptive Grammar. This necessarily makes us reflect on two issues: the learning path of students in Basic and Intermediate Education in Brazil; and2) the training of students in Higher Education, future teachers of Portuguese. We believe that a language should be duly taught and learnt since it is, on the hand one, depositary of a country's identity and culture, and, on the other, a variable system of linguistic signs constructed throughout history, establishing interaction and power relations with its speakers (Baktin, 1975). In short: studying Grammar(s) must attend not only to the basic categories such as Time and Space–which present distinctive representation modes, both on the cognitive level and at the level of verbalization–but also the various socio cultural contexts that are decisive for the linguistic achievement of the different speakers (Mateus et al, 1994, p.27).

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[3]The paper was written by Andreia Soares, Marco Pereira and José Canavarro and was published in the*Revista Portuguesa de Pedagogia*, year 44-2, 2010, 107-130.

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