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A STUDY OF THE OBSERVATION TO “CUSTOM AND USE” IN FERNÃO DE OLIVEIRA’S GRAMMATICA DA LINGOAGEM PORTUGUESA

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Résumé

L’analyse de l’ouvrage de Fernão de Oliveira discute les oppositions et les tensions (historiques, mais aussi actuelles), qui ont trait à l’examen du langage en usage. Il s’agit notamment de celles qui s’établissent entre : « les faits et la description des faits », « la description et la prescription », « la variation et le changement », « la langue et la société/nationalité », « la filiation à des auteurs et l’auteur de la grammaire ». Enfin, dans le cadre de l’ouvrage de Fernão de Oliveira, nous estimons que ces questions sont révélatrices, dans leur ensemble, de la position de l’auteur en tant qu’observateur de la « coutume et usage ».

Mots clefs

Histoire de la grammaire, grammaire portugaise, variation et le changement.

Abstract

In this paper we present evidence that Fernão de Oliveira’s *Grammatica da Lingoagem Portuguesa* is a descriptive grammar of the Portuguese language whose basis are usage facts. We defend that Oliveira’s reflections and conclusions about the Portuguese language are guided by “costume and use”. In order to do so, we discuss oppositions and tensions (historical, but also current) regarding his examination of language, like those established between facts and description of facts, description and prescription, variation and change, language and society, grammatical authorship and authorship affiliation. We conclude that these matters reveal Oliveira’s notable position as a keen observer of “costume and use”.

Keywords

History of grammar, portuguese grammar, variation and change.

INTRODUCTION

ca esta arte de gramática [...] é resguardo e anotação d’esse costume e uso
(Oliveira 2007 [1536], p 41)

The basic conception from which we depart in this study about Fernão de Oliveira is that a manual of grammar, as instituted in Western culture, is a “linguistic instrument”, a “theoretical object” (Auroux 1998), as any other object and instrument used in a society, and, therefore, it has operational value in revealing the theoretical and philosophical commitments of its author. Within this broad frame of what is a manual of grammar and its social meaningfulness, in the present paper we place under observation the description of the Portuguese language as carried out by Fernão de Oliveira in his *Grammatica da*

*lingoagem portuguesa*¹ [Grammar of the Portuguese language], published in Portugal in 1536, arguing this particular grammar is a true example of a *téchne* with original proposals in various areas of the study of language, as we will see below, specially for its time.

The aspects that we analyze here are those which set Oliveira's grammar apart from Western inaugural *téchnes* (and also from most part of traditional manuals). Thus, in this paper we consider those aspects that reveal Oliveira's conception about the relationship between SYSTEM² and USAGE. The reference point of our analysis is the treatment of the category USAGE in Fernão de Oliveira, from which we discuss tensions and oppositions (historical, but also current) regarding the examination of language. Among many, we have established the following tensions as revealing Oliveira's observation to "custom and use": a) facts and description of facts; b) description and prescription; c) variation and change; d) language and society; e) grammatical authorship and authorship affiliation.

In this paper we evaluate these aspects within Fernão de Oliveira's work, defending that the author's approach to these themes reveal his position as an observer of the "custom and usage" of the language in the 16th century, and his position as the proponent of a descriptive grammar of the Portuguese language – the first of its kind.

FERNÃO DE OLIVEIRA'S *GRAMMÁTICA DA LINGOAGEM PORTUGUESA*: A *TÉCHNE* OF LANGUAGE USE IN 16TH CENTURY

Os homens falam do que fazem
(Oliveira 2007 [1536], p. 23)

Here we partially address the theme "The work of Fernão de Oliveira: a *technè* of language use in the 16th century"³, and present new analysis of aspects of Oliveira's theory of grammar that make it a "descriptive" theory of the grammar of the Portuguese language. Our departing point for the present paper are some of the topics addressed in Coseriu's "global appreciation" of Oliveira's grammar published in the commented, semi-diplomatic edition of *Grammatica da lingoagem portuguesa*, edited by Torres and Assunção (2007). These points go in a similar direction of what we defend in this paper, and they are elaborated here according to the interpretation conferred in Neves (2009).

Thus, it should be stated that, according to Coseriu (2007):

(1) Fernão de Oliveira is among other grammarians from the Renaissance that strove to break free from the Latin grammar model, which constitute a not at all trivial evaluation (Coseriu 2007, p. 50).

(2) In Fernão de Oliveira we find a conception of a "descriptive grammar", in which Oliveira explicitly prescind from definitions of grammatical categories and focuses on identifying and describing the forms that express these categories (Coseriu 2007, p. 51).

¹ For the present paper, we have consulted the critical and semi-diplomatic edition of Oliveira's grammar, edited by Torres and Assunção (2007).

² Small caps are used to indicate technical terms.

³ This is a study conducted by Neves (2009), as the result of a conference presented at the "Commemorative Symposium Fernão de Oliveira: 500 years" at the University of Campinas (Unicamp, Brazil).

(3) With respect to the phonological system of the Portuguese language, area in which the grammarian was extremely thorough in his description, Fernão de Oliveira, at least intuitively, distinguishes structuring levels in language which we call system and norm, that is, distinguishes among the levels of functional oppositions and of their traditional realization (Coseriu 2007, p. 53).⁴

(4) Fernão de Oliveira not only establishes analogies and anomalies in language use, but he also conceives language as a system of possibilities that, in actual use, are realized and constrained (Coseriu 2007, p. 54).⁵

(5) In Oliveira, a historical language is *usus*, a traditional institution (“custom”) and the rules of a language are the rules of the law and of the custom, that is, social and historical norms (p. 57). As Oliveira considers in his grammar, “we should not take our language for granted, for men make the language, not language the men”⁶ (Oliveira 2007 [1536], p. 4). Therefore grammar is in essence descriptive, not normative: its goal is simply to register the custom, not to impose rules. As such it does not imply any constraint to the liberty of the speakers but it cannot teach anything to those who already know the language (Coseriu 2007, p. 57-58).

(6) Fernão de Oliveira does not consider the process of language change to be a process of “corruption” of the language, as many theoreticians from the Renaissance believed it to be. Oliveira considers such process to be natural, and intrinsic to the essence of language (p. 58).

(7) Fernão de Oliveira repeatedly points out linguistic varieties, that is, internal diversification in the historical language. Oliveira not only establishes diachronic and diatopic differences, but also presents social variations in spoken language. As the grammarian makes explicit: “Every man speaks according to who they are”⁷ (Oliveira 2007 [1536], p. 45) and “Men speak of what they do”⁸ (Oliveira 2007 [1536], p. 59).

(8) Fernão de Oliveira divides his “usage” dictions in “general”, that is, common to all speakers, and “particular”, which vary according to the region and social groups, since every region and every group – artisans, crafters, clergies, courtesans, knights, etc. – have at their disposal their own “special” words.

To these points so pertinently made by Coseriu (2007 [1975/1991]) in characterizing Oliveira’s work, in a similar direction given to this paper, it should be added the revealing definition that our grammarian presents to the entity “language”.

In the beginning of the first chapter, Oliveira brings us the following definition for **language**: “[The] language is figure of knowledge: so true is this that the mouth only

⁴ Oliveira notes for the linguistic system of Portuguese /e/ and /o/, although he realized that the norm of realization is [e] and [u] (Coseriu 2007, p. 53).

⁵ Coseriu ponders that, regarding this particular point, Fernão de Oliveira takes one step further than Varro (1938, Book 8), who also describes regularities not actualized [*analogia quae in consuetudine non est*], but categorically rejects regularities contraries to usage facts (p. 54). Thus Oliveira confronts rules and actualizations.

⁶ Original text: “E não desconfiemos de nossa língua, porque os homens fazem a língua, e não a língua, os homens”.

⁷ Original text: “Cada um fala como quem é”.

⁸ Original text: “Os homens falam do que fazem”.

speaks as much as told by the heart and no more” (Oliveira 2007 [1536], p. 4). This definition sets the tone and the direction for the study Oliveira carries out in his grammar: a grammatical study about the facts of the language.

This definition comprises not only the psychological (mental) aspect of language (“figure of knowledge”), but also its usage counterpart, found in “the mouth that speaks”, by the orders of the heart. This two-fold characterization of language is enhanced when, in the final of the same paragraph, Oliveira ponders that “every men speaks according to who they are: the good speak virtues, and the wicked, wickednesses; religious men preach about the forsaking the world, and the knights praise their deeds”⁹ (Oliveira 2007 [1536], p. 04). This constitutes, thus, the first indication of a recurrent framing of the facts of grammar, a framing of adequacy to language use, which necessarily leads to the actual experience of language.

Oliveira captures in his definition of language the intentionality inherent to language use – the pragmatic component of the language –, since “to speak” virtues and malice, “to preach” the forsaking of the world, and “to praise” one’s deeds, are not logical categories, based on which studies about language were conducted historically, but are categories of manipulation, defined and constituted in practical usage events. Dare we say these are pragmatic categories.

Given such a framing for language and language use, it is natural that in establishing the facts of grammar and their description Oliveira would incorporate levels of adequacy, thus the “good custom” of use, which does not (necessarily) constitutes a normative judgment, as will be discussed in the following section.¹⁰

LANGUAGE USE AND THE SYSTEMIC VIEWPOINT ON GRAMMAR: HOW TO SITUATE FERNÃO DE OLIVEIRA

Cada homem fala como é
(Oliveira 2007 [1536], p. 45)

We have so far attempted to show Fernão de Oliveira as an observer of “custom and use” of the Portuguese language in the 16th century. Let us now turn to an examination of Oliveira’s approach to the SYSTEM of the Portuguese language, in order to show how he achieves an original proposal of a descriptive grammar for the Portuguese language.

First, it should be considered that, from the point of view of the description of the fact of the language, Oliveira attained a consensual description with the grammatical “system” of the grammar of the Portuguese language, which means that Oliveira made a description of the facts according to the “systematicity” of the Portuguese grammar. This approach to the description of Portuguese moves away the subordination to the model of Latin grammars proposed at the time. For example, in the chapters on sound production, Oliveira constantly compares Portuguese with Castellán and Latin, fixating on the particularities and specificities of the Portuguese language with respect to phonetic and phonological facts. Similarly, Oliveira’s account of functional linguistic entities, such as

⁹ Original text: “... cada um fala como quem é: os bons falam virtudes e os maliciosos maldade; os religiosos pregam desprezos do mundo e os cavaleiros blasonam suas façanhas”

¹⁰ Fernão de Oliveira acknowledges the possibility of variation even in the territory of sound production. The grammarian compares phonological differences of different languages spoken at the time (cf. Oliveira, 2007 [1536] p. 5).

“article”, “nouns”, “word formation processes”, explicates facts that are language-specific to Portuguese grammar, and Oliveira does so by reinterpreting (and, in some cases, providing a complete reformulation of) postulates made by Latin and Greek grammarians¹¹.

Although historically situated in a pre-scientific stage in the development of the grammatical discipline, Oliveira employs a descriptive method that allows him to reach the specificities of the actual linguistic system of the Portuguese language. It is by employing such a method that the grammarian deals with a myriad of linguistic facts, that is, by the application of the “distributional” method that Oliveira describes language-specific facts of the Portuguese grammar. Among these facts are: the description of different patterns of word order in the Portuguese utterance; the description of nominal gender, revealed by the combination of the nominal expression with the article; the description of word formation processes, revealed in the alternation of affixes. These descriptions make all the more clear the establishment and the configuration of a linguistic “system”. In Coseriu’s (2007[1975/1991]), p. 40) analysis of Oliveira’s grammar, he presents arguments that go in the same direction as we present here, invoking facts that were established by the grammarian regarding the Portuguese vocalic system.

In this fashion, Oliveira’s grammar is built according to the basis of the “good custom”, or the “good treatment”, however in a configuration that does not allow us to interpret “good custom” as a compliment to the notion of (linguistic) “norm”; rather, “good custom” refers to the notion of actual “functionality”, that is, the “normality” of actual usage.

It is pertinent, in this context, to consider briefly what has been considered to be the discourse of linguistic norm in Fernão de Oliveira¹². Oliveira’s grammar has been considered to present a “single, unique, natural norm” of the Portuguese language (Barros 2011, p. 293), because he frames the Portuguese language as being a “homogenous norm”, which comprises a single possible use of the language; in the same direction, the term “good custom” is considered to make reference to this single possible use of the language. However, if our proposal that “good custom” in Fernão de Oliveira stands, in fact, as a reference to the “good use of language” in terms of adequacy of use, we have before us not a grammar that proposes a homogenous language, but, as Barros (2011) would suggest for other grammarians, a grammar that considers the heterogeneity of non-hierarchical variants, unless so by their frequency of use.

It is beyond the purpose of this paper to discuss the minutia of Oliveira’s grammar¹³, however let us consider the author’s conception of what is GRAMMAR. Oliveira writes that GRAMMAR is the art that teaches how to read and speak well, and that “we ought to know to first taught it [GRAMMAR], how and where, so we can now use it in our old and noble language”¹⁴ (Oliveira 2007 [1536], p. 8). This excerpt, if taken in a contextual vacuum, would certainly lead to the consideration that he builds on a normative and homogenizer

¹¹ A good example of this is Oliveira’s analysis of the pronominal system in Portuguese, in chapter XLVI (p. 70).

¹² See Barros (2011) for an in-depth and comprehensive discussion about the discourse of linguistic norm in the grammatical tradition of Portuguese language.

¹³ For a more detailed analysis of Oliveira’s theory of grammar, see Neves and Coneglian (in prep).

¹⁴ Original text: “... saibamos quem primeiro a ensinou e onde e como, porque também agora a possamos usar na nossa antiga e nobre língua”.

discourse about the grammar of the language. Nonetheless, if we consider this excerpt in its proper context, we see that it precisely indicates what adequacy of use is. The context in which this excerpt appear is framed in a discussion about the possible origin of human language, which may have happened, according to the grammarian, when men talking to each other knew to come up with words and speak (Oliveira 2007 [1536], p. 8), so it is not licensed to think of GRAMMAR in the context of norm.

If, on the one hand, the grammarian's attribution of "nobility" to his old language should be understood as an appraisal expression to a Portuguese man who, in coming up with words, spoke to his community in Portuguese¹⁵; on the other hand, the "read and speak well" to which the grammarian makes reference can comfortably be accommodated in this particular context, and in the broad context of the whole grammar, as being correspondent to "linguistic competence" in actual language use.

In this same direction, with focus on Fernão de Oliveira's own voice on "custom and use", it should be added another aspect of his theoretical formulation, an aspect that closes this section confirming the insertion of his grammar in a universe of attention to usage and functionality. Says Oliveira: "this art of grammar in all of its parts and more so in this analogy is safeguarded and the annotation of this *custom and use, carried out after men learned how to speak*" (Oliveira 2007 [1536], p. 60, *added emphasis*). Oliveira establishes, for his Grammar and the description of language facts, a firm direction towards a characterization of men's linguistic production, and of language use and what men achieve in using language. Oliveira's procedure towards the description of linguistic facts is in itself a significant distancing from the adoption of a model of grammar with pre-established facts, a model that rules out the commitment of the grammarian to the facts of the language that should be described according to their "custom and use".

IN THE HISTORY OF GRAMMATICAL THOUGHT: THE PRODUCTION OF A "DESCRIPTIVE
GRAMMAR" WITH THE OBSERVATION TO "CUSTOM AND USAGE"

*E não desconfiemos de nossa língua, porque os
homens fazem a língua, e não a língua, os homens.*
(Oliveira 2007 [1536], p. 04)

In consonance with the main points proposed by Coseriu (2007 [1975/1991], p. 29-60), discussed in the first section of this paper, an examination of Fernão de Oliveira's Grammar leads us to two essential observations, that come from opposite direction, and yet converge: (i) the development of grammatical ideas in the past of its history shows that the seminal grammar, of which we have a sample in Western culture (the Alexandrine, in Dionysius Thrax) offers the "description" of a language that was historically constituted, but did not propose the "descriptive grammar" as the model of grammar; (ii) the development of grammatical ideas in the sequence of its historicity – and, here, with focus on the grammatical tradition in Portuguese language – shows that many "grammars" proposed were not fixed in the programmatic direction of a model of a "descriptive grammar". Given the grammatical works we find in the history we know so

¹⁵ It should be born in mind that Oliveira sets the tone of honor and appraisal to the Portuguese language in the very first chapters of his grammar.

far, we can safely argue that there is a lack of programmatic determination configured in basic assumptions of “custom and use”.

And it should be stated, following Coseriu (2007 [1975/1991], p. 57), that at the crux of a “descriptive” grammar is the conception of the historical language (which is the focus of description) as a “traditional institution”, with its “use” molded in the “custom”, thus with no implication to the imposition of normative rules.

FINAL REMARKS

In closing this discussion, whose aim is to present evidence for the consideration that Fernão de Oliveira’s grammar is descriptive in nature, we return to the four epigraphs that endorse this paper. With these epigraphs we find in Fernão de Oliveira’s grammar clear theoretical-programmatic directions for a “descriptive grammar” of “custom and use”, that can be summarized as follows:

- a) the proposition of a grammar that goes to the identification and to the functional description of the actual forms of expression of grammatical categories;
- b) the distinction of the structural linguistic levels, in the sense of configuring, in the “language” and its “use”, functional oppositions and actual realizations (“system” and “form”);
- c) the conception of a language as a system of possibilities that naturally involves “restrictions” to the “realizations”, in language use.

These points represent, as we have shown, the grammarian’s most relevant “theoretical theses”, which allow the proposition of a “descriptive grammar”, always based on the “costume and use” of language. These theses, as we have argued with the guidance of Coseriu (2007 [1975/1991]), represent aspects that are currently recognized as indispensable to the treatment of language and to any grammatical investigation: the “nature of language and languages”, “language change”, and the “historical variety of the language”. In this line, and furthermore, it could be added the valuable point made by Bühler (1990 [1934]) that of a Saussure (2006 [1916]) interested in language use. Bühler’s (op. cit.) consideration of Saussure’s interest, as explicated by Daalder and Musolf (2011, p. 234), is his motivation to reconceptualize linguistic theory from a “semiologic” point of view, one that these authors interpret as the functional ground for Linguistics.

Thus, having accomplished our analysis, we register as a corollary so fortunate to Sociolinguistics that, in the 16th century, we find that what is expected of an exercise of grammatical description is always the “language”, in its essence, historically inserted, masked by mutability and internal diversity. This is directly related to the diversity of the “users”, in their diversity of conditions and insertions, that is, in their “custom and use”.

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