

Literatura de Língua Inglesa IV

Luiz Eduardo Oliveira



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Literatura de Língua Inglesa IV

Elaboração de Conteúdo
Luiz Eduardo Oliveira

Projeto Gráfico e Capa
Hermeson Alves de Menezes

Diagramação
Neverton Correia da Silva

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NÚCLEO DE MATERIAL DIDÁTICO

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Marcio Roberto de Oliveira Mendonça
Nevertton Correia da Silva

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SERGIPE
Cidade Universitária Prof. "José Aloísio de Campos"
Av. Marechal Rondon, s/n - Jardim Rosa Elze
CEP 49100-000 - São Cristóvão - SE
Fone(79) 2105 - 6600 - Fax(79) 2105- 6474

Sumário

AULA 1	
Representation	07
AULA 2	
Representantion At Work: Institutions.....	17
AULA 3	
Representanting The Other (Part I).....	29
AULA 4	
Representing The Other (Part II).....	41
AULA 5	
Mito E Mitologia: O Caso Da Inglaterra.....	55
AULA 6	
Literary History And Cultural Supremacy.....	71
AULA 7	
The Institutionalization Of The Teaching Of Modern Languages In Brazil.....	83
AULA 8	
Possibilities And Limitations Of The Maintenance Of The Hegemony Of English In The Brazilian School Curriculum	101
AULA 9	
Literatura, Cultura e Exclusão Social	111
AULA 10	
Música Para Dançar No Brasil Da Ditadura: Do Samba Ao Soul, Do Soul À Disco (1970-1979).....	123

Aula 1

REPRESENTATION

META

Apresentar o conceito de representação e suas complexas relações com a cultura e a linguagem.

OBJETIVO

Ao final desta aula, você deverá ser capaz de:
Making evident the complex relationship between culture and representation and the process through which the latter is constructed;
Identifying the main concepts of representation;
Presenting some theorists' contributions to the development of the theme in point.

PRERREQUISITO

Familiaridade com os períodos formativos da literatura inglesa;
Conceitos-chave da Teoria da Literatura e da história literária.
Noções de história dos Estados Unidos.

Luiz Eduardo Oliveira

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction of a very interesting book he organized, Stuart Hall (2003, p. 1) explains in plain words what is the relationship between representation and culture. According to the author, if culture is about sharing meanings, language is the privileged medium through which we can “make sense” of things. In other words, we can only produce and exchange meaning through language. Thus we can say that language is a central element in culture, being regarded as an important repository of cultural values and meanings. But how does language produce meaning? Operating a “representational system”, that is, signs and symbols that, in turn, can be spoken or written words, images, objects and musical notes, which themselves stand for ideas and feelings. That is why the author says that representation through language is central to the process by which meaning is produced.

As for culture, although it is one of the most difficult concepts in human and social sciences, it can be taken both traditionally or anthropologically. In a traditional way, culture is defined as “high culture”, which means the great ideas of an age or of a country, represented in literature, painting, music, history and philosophy. From the twentieth century on, it began to refer to a large amount of forms of popular culture – publishing, design, movies and many other forms of entertainment associated to what is generally called popular or mass culture, always used in contrast to “high culture”. On the other hand, the word culture is used to refer to anything which is distinctive of the “way of life” of a certain people, nation or social group during a certain period of time. This is what we call an anthropological perspective.

But with what has been called “the cultural turn”, the importance of meaning to the definition of culture was emphasized. From this perspective, culture is not a set of things – novels, paintings, movies, songs –, but of “practices”. It means that it is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings among members of a society or social group. Thus, to belong to the same culture of a social group is to be able to understand and interpret their thoughts and feelings about the world. Language, in this sense, is a signifying practice, which means that any kind of representational system which works this way follows the pattern of the representational system of language.

DESENVOLVIMENTO

The concept of representation occupies a very important place in the study of culture, once it connects meaning and language to culture. There are three different conceptions of representation: the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist. According to the *reflective concept*, language simply reflects a meaning which already exists in the world of objects, peoples and events. The *intentional concept*, in turn, understands that language expresses only what the speaker or writer or painter or musician wants to say, play or write. To the *constructionist concept*, finally, meaning is constructed in and through language. Given the powerful impact this last concept had on cultural studies, the constructionist approach can be divided into two variants or models: the *semiotic approach*, influenced by the Swiss linguist *Ferdinand de Saussure*, and the *discursive approach*, associated with the French philosopher and historian *Michel Foucault*:

Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the real world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events (Hall, 2003, p. 17).

There are two systems of representations involved in this process: a mental representation and language. Talking about the first, meaning depends on the system of concepts and images formed in our thoughts which can stand for or “represent” the world. It consists of different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts, establishing complex relations between them. An easy example is when we use principles of similarity and difference to establish relationships between concepts or to distinguish them from one another. The second system is language. Without it, our shared conceptual map cannot be translated and comprehended by the others. That is why we can correlate our concepts and ideas with certain written words, spoken sounds or visual images. The term which is generally used for words, sounds or images with meaning is *signs*. The sign represents the concepts and the conceptual relations between them:

Signs are organized into languages and it is the existence of common languages which enables us to translate our thoughts (concepts) into words, sounds or images, and then to use these, operating as a language, to express meanings and communicate thoughts to other people (Hall, 2003, p. 18).

Thus, representation is the process which links things, concepts and signs in the production of meaning. But what does meaning mean? Meaning means, basically, the sharing of common codes. That is why meaning does not lie in the objects, persons or things referred to, but in the words. The users of the language fix the meaning of the words, in such a fixed way that they seem natural. Thus, meanings are constructed by the system of representation. This is the way culture is understood from this perspective: as shared conceptual maps, shared language systems and the codes which govern the relationships of translation between them. It becomes easier to understand, thus, the way how meaning, language and representation are central elements in the study of culture. To belong to a culture, in this perspective, is to belong to the same conceptual and linguistic universe and to know how concepts and ideas can be translated in different languages.

THE THEORIES OF REPRESENTATION

As we could see previously, there are basically three approaches which try to explain the way how representation of meaning through words works.

In the *reflective approach*, meaning is thought to lie in the object, person or event in the real world. This is in fact the oldest notion of representation in the Western civilization. *Aristotle*, for example, used the notion of *mimesis* to explain how language imitated, or “reflected” nature. Of course any kind of representation has many things to do with reality, or with the real world, but its process deal with signs, and not with the things themselves. Besides, many words, sound and images are entirely fictional and refer to imaginary worlds.

In the *Intentional approach*, it is argued that it is the speaker or the author who imposes the meaning through language. On one hand, we all, as individuals, use language to express our way of seeing the world. On the other hand, however, we cannot be the only source of meaning in language, unless we spoke private languages. Quite the contrary, one of the most important characteristics of language and communication is that it depends on shared linguistic conventions and shared codes.

Last but not least, we have the *constructionist approach*, which recognizes the public and social character of language. From this perspective, things do not mean: we construct their meaning, using representational systems. Thus, we cannot confuse the material world, where things and people exist, and the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate:

Constructionists do not deny the existence of the material world. However, it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent

our concepts. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational system to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about the world meaningfully to others (Hall, 2003, p. 25).

We could also see that there are two major variants of *the constructionist approach*: the semiotic approach, influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure, and *the discursive approach*, associated with Michel Foucault. *Semiotics* is the study of signs in a culture, but it doesn't consider language in its use. Saussure believed that language was a system that could be studied with the precision of a science. He called this structure "la langue," and referred to individual language acts as "la parole". Saussure's model became paradigmatic, motivating the so called linguistic turn in human and social sciences. He offered a closed, structured and scientific approach to culture, according to Culler (1976, p. 29). His great achievement was to force us to focus on language as a social fact. More than that, on how language actually works and the role it plays in the production of meaning. Thus, he broke with the traditional notion which put language as a mere transparent medium between things and meaning, what means that words, images and objects themselves can function as signifiers in the production of meaning. According to Hall, Saussure failed to address questions related to power in language (2003, p. 34). His ideas, however, would be widely used by later scholars who tried to account for such issues among whom was Roland Barthes.

Roland Barthes (1915-1980) was a French structuralist and Foucault's contemporary (of whom we will talk again), who undertook semiotic studies in which he made extensive use of Saussure's ideas. The assumption behind the application of such ideas beyond the boundaries of language was grounded on the fact that, if cultural objects or practices conveyed meaning, therefore they would do so through signs, making it possible for one to analyze them as if they were a type of "language". In his *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes looked into some cultural practices and tried to "read" them. When studying "the world of wrestling", he was interested not in its sports dimension, but in the meaning it produced as a cultural practice, as a "language" so to speak. Every cultural object or practice, thus, can be looked at in at least two different perspectives: a narrow one which perceives only the immediate or more obvious aspects of the object or practice and a wider one which strives to unravel its (cultural) meaning within a social group, class or race.

A very trivial example, offered by Barthes, might help one understand these two levels of perception. Just like words and images, he argues, objects can function as signs, too. That is particularly perceptible in the world of fashion. Despite having a physical function, i.e. protecting the body, clothes also carry meaning. Some convey elegance or formality such as a bow tie or

a dress while others suggest informality or casualness as it is the case with jeans and trainers. Thus, they form a language which the aforementioned scholar referred to as “the language of fashion” and, by extension, become susceptible of “linguistic” analysis. In such an analysis, the clothes themselves (the objects) function as the signifiers and the concepts to which they are commonly associated as the signifieds, turning them into signs. That said, he goes on to argue that there are two levels of reading. The first is the descriptive one or the level of denotation. Here we have a simple, basic meaning on which there is wide consensus. For instance, when someone utters the term “bow tie” it is easy to agree that everyone has more or less the same concept of it, i.e., that it is an item of clothing which consists of a ribbon of fabric tied around the collar of a shirt in a symmetrical manner so that the two opposite ends form loops. The next level is that of connotation. In it, in addition to their descriptive concepts, objects take on wider and more abstract meanings which are not so obvious as they are in the first level. Initially perceived as a mere item to be used around one’s neck and that had specific physical characteristics, the bow tie starts to mean “elegance or formality”. Such levels of signification, according to Barthes, are more “general, global and diffuse...” (HALL, 2003, p. 39).

Another clarifying illustration of how Barthes applied Saussure’s assumptions to analyze the way representation may work in a broader cultural level is that of the cover of Paris Match magazine. It featured a black soldier saluting the French flag. That is, he says, the first meaning one would apprehend after decoding a set of individual signs (images in this case): a black soldier, arms lifted, gazing at a French flag. In order to advance to the next level of understanding, one has to inquire what such an act means or which message it intends to convey. The combination of those individual signs, therefore, forms a new sign which is in no way meaningless. One of the messages a person may draw from it is that France is faithfully served by all its sons despite any color discrimination of which the black soldier’s devotion portrayed on the magazine cover is clear evidence. It is on that level which ideology operates to help maintain power structures. Let us now turn to Foucault.

Despite being to some extent indebted to Saussure and Barthes, Foucault’s work put an emphasis on relations of power more than on relations of meaning. He used the word “representation” to refer to the production of knowledge – as opposed to meaning - through the use of discourses – as opposed to language. He once claimed[...] one’s point of reference should not be the great model of language (langue) and signs, but that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power not relations of meaning (Foucault, 1980, p. 114-115).

To understand his discursive approach to representation, we have to sketch the major ideas upon which it rests, namely, his concept of discourse, the relation between power and knowledge and the question of the subject.

Foucault understands discourse as a group of statements which provide the terms for talking about a particular subject matter in a given historical moment. From his perspective, it is closely related to the production of knowledge. In fact, a person cannot “know” something if it has not yet been “produced” by discourse. Thus, the objects of human knowledge are without exception products of discourses which, in turn, are attached to different time periods in history. A widely known example offered by the French philosopher is that of madness. According to him, madness only exists meaningfully within the discourses which produced it and, most importantly, such a phenomenon was not an objective, unchanging fact in all historical periods nor in all cultures. The same could be said about sexuality as an object of study or the “homosexual” as a specific type of social subject. Discourses, however, not only determine what can be “knowable”, but also control what can be said about something, i.e., what right or wrong and, ultimately, what is true or false.

One of the implications of this concept of discourse is the historicization of representation, knowledge and eventually truth. Meaning, therefore, cannot be properly analyzed without taking into account the historical circumstances under which emerged the discourse that produced it. That being the case, absolutes have no place in a discursive approach. Everything must be seen as being intrinsically historical, including authority which is inevitably related to power as well as knowledge.

With regards to the latter two, Foucault shows how knowledge is frequently put to use in institutional settings with the objective of regulating or controlling individuals. He claims that the institutional apparatuses, strategies of relations of force used to exert power over the others, support and are supported by types of knowledge. In his words, “There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations” (FOUCAULT, 1977, p. 27). Thus, power and knowledge are inseparably intertwined. Upon analyzing this relationship, he also demonstrates that power is not always exerted through violent means or in a direct fashion, but can act in subtle and apparently legitimized ways, since it has been grounded on some type knowledge. In such contexts, instead of speaking of truth, Foucault uses the term “regime of truth”, as knowledge can make itself true when it is linked to power.

As for the issue of the subject, his ideas bear to a certain extent some similarities with those of Saussure. For the latter, “language speaks us” that is to say that we are not the ultimate source of meaning or knowledge. Similarly, in Foucault’s discursive approach knowledge is not produced

Ver glossário no final da Aula

by the subject either, but by discourse. Besides, discourse itself does not need to find a subject for its power/knowledge to operate. A person may write a text but it is almost always located within a **discursive formation** of a given time period. The French scholar goes on to argue that even the subject is produced by discourse in two different manners. The first one is when it produces figures which embody particular types of knowledge that discourse produces such as the madman and the hysterical woman to mention only two. The other is when discourse produces places for the subject from which its knowledge can be better apprehended. These are called subject-positions. To put it simply, Foucault believes that there is no subject outside discourse and that one always has to subject oneself to it if one wants to apprehend its knowledge/power. This way of thinking certainly complexifies our concept of representation, since makes it a less straightforward process and links it to particular entity without which such a concept would be inconceivable.

CONCLUSÃO

In this class, we have outlined some theories about representation and its relationship with culture. Some emphasis was put on the constructionist approach which seems to be the most practiced in academia. Among the ideas one should take away from this exposition are: (i) the acceptance of some degree of cultural relativism is allowed in the said approach; (ii) at least three different order of things are involved in the process of representation in the constructionist approach, namely, the world of things, people and experiences, the mental concepts and the signs, all of which interact with each other in the meaning-making process; (iii) lastly, you should bear in mind the two versions of constructionism mentioned earlier: the one which focuses one language and signification later referred to as semiotics and mostly influenced by Ferdinand Saussure and Barthes; and that which puts an emphasis on how discourse produces knowledge, mainly developed by Foucault.



RESUMO

This class aims to look into the complex relationship between culture and representation by introducing you to the main linguistic notions necessary for its understanding. Also, we set out to contrast the three main approaches which try to explain how representation works: the reflective approach, according to which meaning lies in the object, person or event

in the real world; the intentional approach which claims that the speaker or the author imposes the meaning through language or that the user of a language is wherefrom meaning emerges; and the constructionist one which essentially argues that we construct meaning by using representational systems. Meaning, therefore, is neither in objects nor in the speaker, but it is constructed in and through the language. Such a theory gave birth to two major models. The semiotic approach, which is indebted to Ferdinand de Saussure as well as Roland Barthes, and the discursive approach that draws on the theoretical contributions credited to the French philosopher Michel Foucault. As it will be noticed, our focus rested upon the constructionist approach, since this seems to be the most frequently employed in academia.



ATIVIDADE

Answer these questions below in English:

* How do people who belong to the same culture, who share the same conceptual map and who speak or write the same language know that the arbitrary combination of letters and sounds that makes up the word 'TREE', for example, represent a large plant that grows in nature?



PRÓXIMA AULA

REPRESENTATION AT WORK: INSTITUTIONS

GLOSSÁRIO

(1) **Discursive formation:** There is a discursive formation when the representation of the knowledge about the same object, the meaning of the statements, has a heterogeneous nature, have the same coherence and systematicity, occurs in common institutions and is implicated materially in the conduct of social life (Johnston, Gregory, Pratt, Watts, 2000).

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