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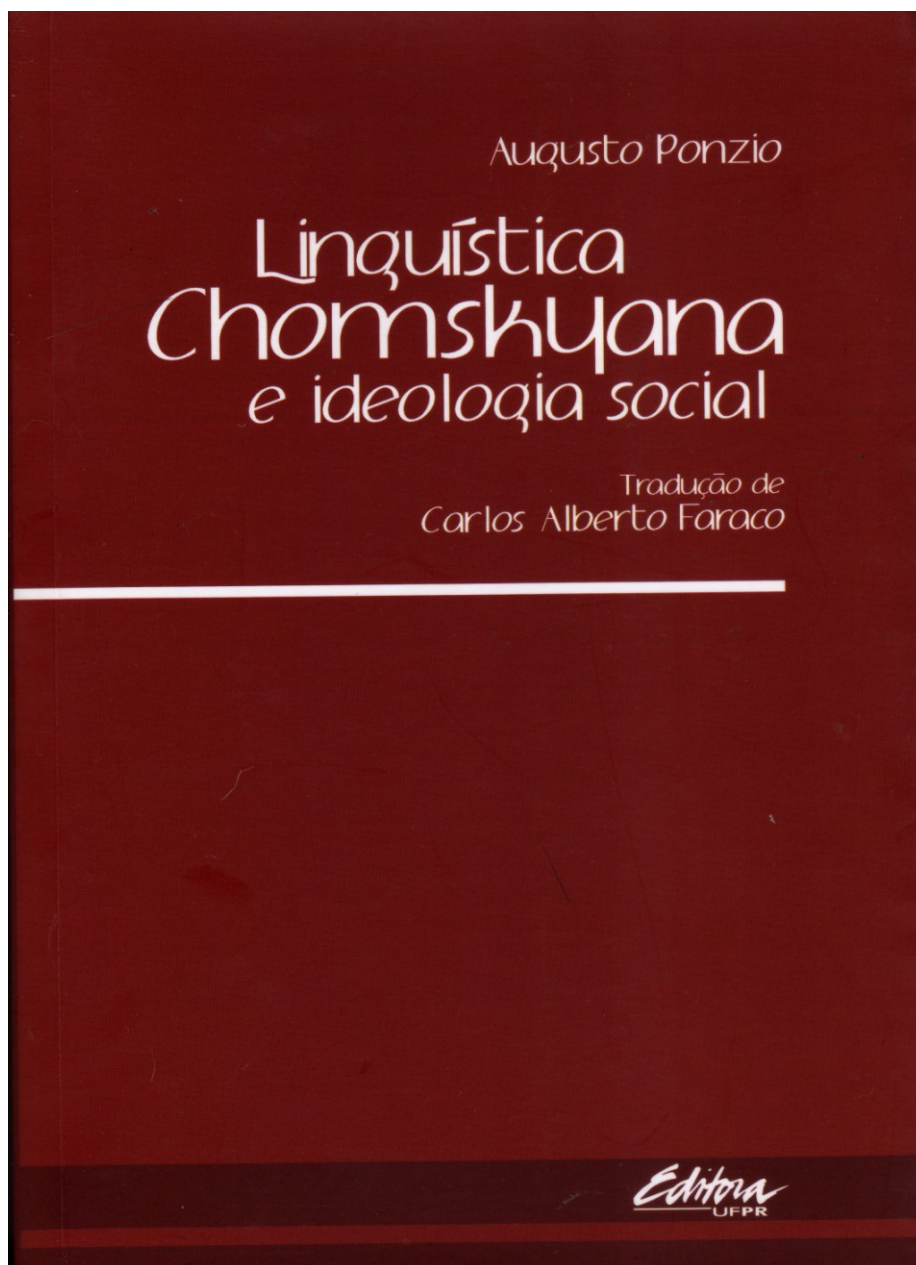
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PONZIO, Augusto. *Linguística chomskyana e ideologia social*. [Chomsky Linguistics and Social Ideology] Trad. [Translated from Italian to Portuguese] Carlos Alberto Faraco. Curitiba: Editora UFPR. 2012. 323 p.

Sírio Possenti\*

### Re-Reading a book



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In 1976, at Livraria Pontes, in Campinas, I found a book by Augusto Ponzio, entitled *Gramática transformacional e ideologia política*. In the same bookstore, and in the same week (if not on the same day), I also bought a book by Voloshinov, which had just arrived from Buenos Aires.

In those times, finding a book of or on Linguistics that confronted structuralism or generative grammar was very difficult. I can remember Schaff, Rossi-Landi, Ponzio and Voloshinov, whom I cited in my Master's dissertation, in a rather naïve attitude, in the effort to fight an almost completely dominating Chomsky, especially in ideological terms, with his innate theory and his grammar with universals (which we simply used to read as universal).

In my Master's, I wanted to fight Chomsky from the inside (I belonged to a generation that only wanted to change the world and thought that it was almost there), and for this reason I adopted the natural phonology thesis – there was no Marxist phonology (I am glad that Lisenko did not touch this). However, as already mentioned, I chose a direct ideological criticism, given with the weapons provided by the quartet above.

In Ponzio, what made the most surprising impression on me was the analysis showing the coincidences, not accidental at all, between passages of Chomsky's work and of the United States Declaration of Independence and by Thomas Jefferson – which I cited in the conclusions of my dissertation. Ponzio wanted to show that they are both the same speech (let us say that they were almost paraphrases). And as time passes, this only becomes clearer!

I also remember that the volume that I read and on which I made some notes was green and small, published by Nueva Visión, from Buenos Aires, which I do not see anymore among my books (some colleagues thought that I had books that would be more appropriate belonging to them, than to me, and thus decided to permanently keep some of the borrowings... by the way, they can still return them, since I still live on the same address). Among my books, however, there is a work by Ponzio called *Producción lingüística e ideología social; para una crítica marxista del lenguaje e de la comunicación*, published by Alberto Corazón, in Madrid, in which the first chapter, with about 100 pages, has exactly the same title of the book I mentioned above (and in my dissertation's bibliography), and contains the so-called "discourse analysis", that

Ponzio accomplished by comparing texts from different periods of time, but with the same ideological principles.

Now this book is available for the Brazilian readers, translated by Carlos Alberto Faraco, preceded by an Introduction and a long Appendix by the author himself, with a presentation of the translator (who exposes the fundamental thesis of the book in a sober and competent manner) and the cover flap text by João Wanderley Geraldi, calling attention to the fact that Ponzio takes into account the whole work of Chomsky, and not only his Linguistics, because he considers that the principles of his grammatical theory are the same as the ones of his political activism (which some Brazilian linguistics do not take into consideration, signals Geraldi).

Besides the cited texts, the volume contains three chapters: I. Chomskyan Linguistics and Political Ideology, II. Generative Grammar, Biology and Cybernetics and III. Linguistic production and social system. The latter engages in the most direct debate with Chomsky, based on Marxist postulates, on one side, and on the other side, proposes a more radical consideration of the social points of view, highlighting the difference of status of the "linguistic abnormalities" when viewed only from an "internal" grammar mechanism and when considered in the light of social factors. In short, Ponzio claims that the characterization of schizophrenic language, for example, takes into account some "parameters by which, in the intersubjective communication, it is presented as pathological", just because no isolated traits (paralogisms, neologisms, etc.) are enough to characterize a pathology. We can see clearly, here, the consideration of factors of a social order (ideological), and not only of an *internal* grammar

Some ideas are repeated along the book, which is evidently unavoidable, whether in the four paratexts, or in its several chapters. If Ponzio had to reduce his book to a 'tweet', for any purpose, maybe he would choose the passage: "language is not just natural, as it is not non-natural: it is, as every human fact, a fundamentally social-historical phenomenon" (p.203).

It is around this question, explaining and fighting thesis and presuppositions, and adding facts and factors not considered by Chomsky, that the book is built. At the time, it was a blow against the Chomskyan thesis, in the hand of readers who already had this position and only needed more (or some) arguments, or, alternatively, simply remained unknown, because it did not deal with the same issues as Chomsky.

It is known that there are two ways of fighting a theory: to contest the facts it deals with (they are not quite as you present them) or their analysis (they mean this and not that), or else, trying to destroy the whole project, attacking its metaphysics (it is/ it is not a biological fact, there are/there are not universals, syntax is/ is not central or autonomous).

This is what today still makes the fortune or causes people to ignore works like this one, as well as their antipodes. In fact, who is the Chomskyan that reads Bakhtin, Pêcheux or Foucault? And who is the reader of these authors (except them, of course, each one at their own time) that is also familiar with the "formalist" works, generativist or not?

It is known that the generative grammar is a theory based on the competence of speakers, i.e., the fact that they can produce and understand new sentences (or the ones never heard before). Ponzio asks what it means to understand statements like “The workers threaten the public order when they strike for their demands” (plus four others of the same nature). It is quite clear that we are dealing with two senses of the verb “understand”. And certainly, if there is a debate on the theme, each side will end up more convinced that the other one does not understand the meaning of “understand”.

This kind of confrontation marks the whole book: Chomsky’s theory is exposed (maybe a follower will not agree with the presentation) and criticized, whether for its limitations (such as not including pragmatics), whether for not taking seriously what he says, as in the case above or in others of the same type, regarding understanding or speaking – activities that are also subject to a number of external conditions, which Chomsky’s theory ignores or relegates to parallel domains, when it does not include them among the mysteries.

Whether about the nature of languages, about the competence question, about the senses question, or about the linguistic pathologies, the book intends to show that Chomsky’s linguistics is limited and eventually mistaken in its own terms.

It ends up by exposing to light that the debate is either internal (discussing the solutions in the terms of the proposed hypotheses on defined objects) or external, and about how to define the objects (in this case, the language). Ponzio’s book is much more committed to the second one than to the first one, either by the space it takes, or by the cited authors, or yet, for the arguments exposed, or for the counterproposals. But mainly, this position is absolutely clear by the fact that it does not present a syntactic (or

phonological) theory that should occupy the place of the Chomskyan and that is compatible with its requirements for a linguistic theory. And it does not clarify if this would be necessary or not.

What the book does, basically, is to demand from Chomsky a less alienated position, from the ideological point of view, more complex, from the point of view of production and the interpretation of statements, that will not reduce grammar to a sort of program (cybernetic, as people used to say at the time) that recognizes its idealistic commitments (and which will abandon them, on behalf of the evidence of other factors!).

As long as I am concerned, I sign it all. But it is necessary to remember that this is a fight that follows the rules written by one of the sides. If it were possible to look at the debate from outside and if we were allowed to employ a “sports” metaphor, we could probably say that the competitors practice different sports and that, besides the desire to win, with the rules and the blows, after the fight, they intend to allow just one “modality” to survive.

Therefore, it is a book that everyone should read, to consider what it says, the judgments it presents, and what it proposes, but also to better understand the politics of the fields, the relationship of theories with the institutions and the powers, from which no one escapes, although each one prefers the role of accuser.

For all those who like debates, there will be plenty of that. For those who want an ally in their positions, a book to be either celebrated or disdained.

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