

# Aphasia and construction of meaning: study focused on comic strips

## Afasia e construção de sentido: estudo com foco em história em quadrinhos

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** to observe, in the language of aphasic adult subjects, the constitution of meanings, considering the enunciative (re)organization in reading and writing. **Methods:** qualitative research with applied and exploratory methods and a perspective of enunciative analysis on language, using the notions of form and meaning as analytical base. From an activity performed by three subjects with aphasia (Bir, Cr and Aul), members of the Interdisciplinary Coexistence Group (GIC), formed by participants with and without aphasia, which constituted of (re)organizing the panels (frames) of a comic strip, in order to constitute meaning – since the reading/writing of texts are skills that are commonly affected in aphasia. **Results:** the chronic time category shows itself to be fundamental for the elaboration of the narratives of the subjects with aphasia, however they found different ways of sustaining meanings, but always linked to experiences arising from the relationship between man and world. **Conclusion:** the narratives were organized/constructed by the participants, having the images as a base (formal base) – since the ability to read verbal texts is impaired. Bir, Cr and Aul used chronic time as an organizational axis of their narratives and their comic strips show that these subjects with aphasia promote reading and writing when considering enunciative bias of language analysis.

**Keywords:** Comic strip; Interpretation; Aphasia; Writing; Portuguese language

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** observar, na linguagem em afasia de sujeitos adultos, a constituição de sentidos, considerando a (re)organização enunciativa na leitura e na escrita. **Métodos:** pesquisa qualitativa com método aplicado e exploratório e perspectiva de análise enunciativa sobre a linguagem, tendo as noções de forma e sentido como base analítica. Foi realizada uma atividade com três sujeitos com afasia (Bir, Cr e Aul), integrantes do Grupo Interdisciplinar de Convivência (GIC), formado por participantes com e sem afasia. Tal atividade consistiu em (re)organizar quadrinhos de uma história, visando constituir sentido, uma vez que a leitura/escrita de textos são habilidades comumente comprometidas nas afasias. **Resultados:** a categoria de tempo crônico mostra-se fundante para elaboração das narrativas dos sujeitos com afasia. Entretanto, eles encontraram formas distintas de sustentação de sentidos, mas sempre atrelados a experiências provenientes da relação entre homem e mundo. **Conclusão:** as narrativas foram organizadas/construídas pelos participantes, tendo por base as imagens (base formal) – uma vez comprometida a habilidade de leitura de textos verbais. Bir, Cr e Aul usaram o tempo crônico como eixo organizacional de suas narrativas e suas histórias em quadrinhos, demonstrando que promovem leitura e escrita ao se considerar o viés enunciativo de análise da linguagem.

**Palavras-chave:** História em quadrinhos; Interpretação; Afasia; Escrita; Língua portuguesa

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## INTRODUCTION

Linguistics must be interested in language in all its aspects - in the language in the act, in evolution, in a nascent state, and in dissolution<sup>(1)</sup>. From this finding, the observation of aspects of language in aphasia has yielded interdisciplinary investigations (Speech Therapy, Psychology, Neurology, etc.) that, together with Linguistics, complement studies about the nature and functioning of these language disorders.

From the perspective of observing aphasia from a linguistic point of view, the Theory of Enunciation<sup>(2,3)</sup> was chosen because it is understood that it includes conceptual propositions that privilege the language in use and subsidize the linguistic analysis of singular manifestations of language. Thus, it refers to the formal apparatus of enunciation<sup>(3)</sup> that is used in each enunciative act and operationalizes the conditions of language use. It is the study of enunciation considering the individual and unrepeatable manifestations that it updates. To this end, in this act of language appropriation, the categories of person, time and space are mobilized.

The category of *person*<sup>(1)</sup> considers the pair *I-you*, in which *I* indicate the one who speaks and who, necessarily, enunciates about him/herself. When speaking, it addresses the *you*, thus designated for being the person to whom the *I* refers in a proposed situation of communication. It is in this category that the subjective experience of the subjects that are situated in and through language is conceived, because, by appropriating the language, each speaker becomes subject in his unique and unrepeatable saying. As for the category of time, it is established at the moment of enunciation. When he or she speaks, the speaker establishes a *now*, and it is at this moment that events are located, concomitant or not to the moment of speech, but always from the present of the linguistic act. The category of *time*<sup>(3)</sup> is understood in three different notions: *physical time* (continuous and irreversible), *chronic time* (sequence of events), and *linguistic time* (exercise of speech). Thus, the category of time indicates various ways of representing temporal forms. The category of *space*<sup>(3)</sup> is defined as a set of coordinates organized in discourse from a reference point - the *I*. The demonstratives imply something and designate themselves in the instance of discourse, in which they are produced, being, therefore, dependent on the *I* that enunciates.

It is from the perspective of the singularity of the language in use that we arrive at the distinction between the notions of form and meaning in two modes of language significance: the semiotic and the semantic<sup>(3)</sup>: as a semiotic unit, the sign has its form related to the ability to dissociate itself at a lower level, in *phonemes*, for example, and these phonemes are responsible for giving the sign a fixed sound form that distinguishes it from others and thus makes it recognizable - the value of a sign is in being what all the others are not. By understanding them, in the inventory of words in the language, their meaning lies in the fact that they exist and are linked to other signs to compose a discourse endowed with meaning. Its meaning is directly related to the intentions of a speaker in a given enunciative act. It is in the use of language that the sign comes into existence.

Therefore, in the sphere of language use, the sign gives way to the word, semantic unit par excellence. In this domain, while the form is related to the syntagmatic string of words, designed to account for an idea, the meaning is the very idea that the discourse expresses, the result of the systematization of words

that define the message to be semantized through sentences - the semantic and discursive expression par excellence. It is, then, in this domain that the forms acquire a singularized meaning, depending on the uttered enunciative act.

Thus, for this research, the notions of *form* and *meaning* in language are adopted, specifically by the semantic domain to understand and interpret an activity with comics carried out with members of an Interdisciplinary Coexistence Group (GIC) from the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), composed of individuals with aphasia, researchers and professionals from areas such as Health and Education. The GIC is an extension project that aims to provide interdisciplinary monitoring of subjects with aphasia through actions that address real and diverse situations.

Therefore, the objective of this research is to analyze how the meaning (form and meaning) is (re)organized in an enunciative way in the reading of subjects with aphasia. An activity with a narrative sequence of a comic strip disorganized in its frames was considered to observe in the language in aphasia how to constitute the meanings resulting from the word/image dialog - once the reading/writing of texts are abilities commonly compromised in aphasia.

## METHODS

To carry out this qualitative research, one of the methods used was *bibliographic research* - which focused on texts that discuss basic notions, therefore, indispensable to understanding the several narrative constructions that the same comic book aroused in different subjects with aphasia. The participants' adherence was obtained by signing the Free and Informed Consent Form, and this research was approved by the Ethics Committee on Human Research of the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), under number CAAE: 46539421.8.0000.5346.

It also includes the investigation of real situations and the formulation of hypotheses in the development of theories. This method requires sagacity from the researcher, who must possess analytical skills that ensure the quality of the research findings. Thus, we classify this research as *applied* and *exploratory*, since narrative (re)constructions are phenomena observed in a specific situation.

As for the practical aspects, this research was developed through three procedures: 1) Selection of participants for the proposal; 2) Selection and preparation of the material for the development of the data collection practice (comics); 3) Application of the proposal and data collection.

Regarding the first procedure, we selected three participants with aphasia (Bir, Cr, and Aul) who manifest different language disorders: the first is a 73-year-old man who does not read or write voluntarily and has been diagnosed with anomie. Bir, as we will call him, has an incomplete High School education, is divorced, and has two children. Before his stroke 11 years ago, Bir worked in retail. Today he lives alone and is responsible for his basic and complex daily activities. The second participant is a 38-year-old woman, identified as Cr. She has an incomplete university degree and worked in the commercial sector before her car accident in May 2009. After the accident - which resulted in a traumatic brain injury - she was hospitalized for four months, two of which were in the ICU. Cr reads and writes well, although her writing takes more time to elaborate and there are orthographic/grammatical deviations. Finally, the third

participant chosen for this study is a 58-year-old man identified as Aul. Aul had a stroke in 2017 and stayed in the ICU for most of the time he was hospitalized. His listening comprehension is more preserved than his speech, which is non-fluent, in addition to having his gestural expressions impaired. Before the episode, he worked as a driver and carpenter. Married for 39 years, he lives with one of his two children and his wife, for whom he is under care.

These participants attend the GIC, whose meetings take place weekly lasting 2 hours and 30 minutes. The meetings are divided into two moments – a *time for novelty* in which they share experiences, and a *time for activity* in which they carry out playful activities in an interactive process. They are promoted to provide interdisciplinary care and expand knowledge about language based on the contribution of professionals from different areas, such as Speech-Language Pathology, Occupational Therapy, Psychology, and Literature.

The work with comics was defined because this genre is accepted in all generational groups and because it is possible, through it, to observe reading and writing in a dialogical way between the image and the verbal. It should be noted that the notion of writing reflected here refers to the inner language, i.e., it is an iconization of thought, a representation of reality, not, therefore, the act in itself of producing graphemes<sup>(4)</sup>. To select the comics, the theme “friendship” was defined based on criteria such as reach, universality, and especially, representativeness of the theme - since it is one of the pillars that support the GIC, besides characterizing it. Then, the comic book with the same name was chosen: *Amizade*<sup>(5)</sup>, by Maurício de Sousa, part of the issue “Cascão Nº 305” (Ed. Globo, 1998) (Figure 1).

To optimize the reading and interpretation work, as well as the management of the comics (writing), the story was synthesized by selecting eight of the 37 drawings that make up the original comic strip. The adaptation kept the essence of the story, with no losses that would alter the proposal, resulting in the final version delivered to the participants of the Group (Figure 2).

Data collection took place on May 6, 2012, in room 4018, building 26D, UFSM, where the Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy courses are held. The GIC meetings are carried out weekly in this room. In this action, they received the chosen story printed and cut into their comics. The participants had to look at the disorganized comics and make up a story, reassembling the comic, promoting a global understanding of the narrative - which, after being organized, should be told to the rest of the group. The resulting stories were photographically registered and identified for analysis.

## RESULTS

The narratives of Figure 3 were elaborated by Bir, who proposes the reading in columns (here understood as a formal arrangement of relevant linguistic elements), dividing the comics into three parts in a way that creates independent narratives (meaning), read vertically.

They stand out from left to right: in the first column, the two characters are babies, in the second children, and in the third young/adults. By separating the comics by chronological images, Bir appropriates language, constructs three narratives, and establishes meaning to the three micro-stories that take shape in columns revealing the fragmentation of Bir’s reading process.



Figure 1. HQ “Friendship”; by Maurício de Sousa, 1998

Cr’s story (Figure 4) differs from Bir’s because it is understood as a unit, read from top to bottom and horizontally. Although she has little difficulty in reading verbal texts, Cr resorts to images to organize her story: even if she recognizes the word “end” in the third drawing, it follows the logic of her own narrative. The same happens with the title “Friendship”, even in a different color, size, and font, was not recognized as such: it is no longer a question, this time, of the meaning of the sign, but of what can be called the intended, what the speaker wants to say, the linguistic actualization of his thought<sup>(3)</sup>. Both textual markers are overlapped in the name of meaning to which Cr seeks to give shape, by linking units that can be reinterpreted and, thus, creating new syntagmatic relations.



Figure 2. Adaptation delivered to the research subjects



Figure 3. Story proposed by Bir. Text originally in Portuguese. Translation: (First column) Since they were little babies!/Friends know when they are friends!; (second column) Friendship, simply, exists!/ Friendship: This is Casc o!/ Because they share moments.../ ...They give strength!; (third column) Friendship that is friendship never ends!/ Because friendship can't be explained!

In the Figure 5, Aul's story consists of two horizontal lines: the first line contains three drawings, and the second five. Supposing that Aul's intention was to order the comics in two lines of four, but that he has been prevented by a barrier (formed by a bunch of images in the upper right corner) from following this logic.

It can be seen that in its macrostructure the story does not obey the chronology well defined in the narrative constructions of Cr. and Bir: from the beginning to the end and vice versa there is no linear progression of time elapsed to the characters. However, if we look at the microstructures, we can find signs of temporality that separate and define small narratives - and, then, it is understood that there is not one, but several independent stories. The way Aul arranges the drawings is directly linked to the meaning of a subject that reads the figures and attributes meaning to them: sometimes the meaning is in the sequence of these figures, and sometimes some figures retain meaning in themselves<sup>(4)</sup>.

## DISCUSSION

The organization of the stories of the Bir shows that the speaker, when appropriating the language, uses the chronic time to promote the meaning - a crucial notion for the ordering and interpretation of the comics proposed by Bir, since this time is the time of events that "also encompasses our own life as a sequence of events"<sup>(3)</sup>.

In the first column, the first comic shows two mothers meeting their respective children, both in strollers and in the second comic, the babies engage in dialogue. By producing this little story, Bir transforms the disorganized comics into his own discourse, making himself subject by mobilizing these comics and appropriating them. It seems to make sense that to have a dialogue between the two babies, the mothers need to meet, and this meaning is the result of the subjectivity of a subject that not

only reads but seeks to organize in chronic time an interpretation that ensures intersubjectivity since this is the only condition that makes linguistic communication possible<sup>(2,6,7)</sup> - an *I* that necessarily organizes its discourse by establishing a *you*.



**Figure 4.** Story proposed by Cr. Text originally in Portuguese. Translation, from left to right: (first line) Since they were little babies!/ Friends know when they are friends!; (second line) Friendship, simply, exists!/ Friendship: This is Cascão!; (third line) Because they share moments.../ ...They give strength!; (fourth line) Friendship that is friendship never ends!/Because friendship can't be explained!

The same is seen in the story constructed in the second column, when Bir puts two friends in a soccer match to each other, evidencing the subject's intersubjectivity highlighted by the selection of images. The concern with the ordering of the pictures evokes the *you* for whom the story is proposed. This means that the individual act of language appropriation is only possible by having a speaker as a parameter who addresses a listener by transforming language into discourse. The enunciative act, then, presupposes dialogue: since he (the speaker) declares himself speaker and assumes the language, he implants the other before himself, whatever the degree of presence he attributes to this other<sup>(3)</sup>. Again, chronology is the basis for sustaining the narrative and the organization of the images reflects Bir's reading that orders the events: it indicates that to be accomplished, something must be first considered - and this subjectivity illustrates a behavior inherent to the human condition<sup>(2,8)</sup>. Through language, Bir manifests his own experience<sup>(8)</sup> and, based on chronic time, gives meaning to his narrative.

No different, in the last column, the chronic time guides the narrative construction: in the first comic, the light colors suggest the day, while the night is identified by the predominance of the dark color. Bir's reading of the world is translated by the image sequentially ordered into day and night: they are the reference points that give the objective position of events, and also define our situation in relation to these events<sup>(3)</sup>.

The meaning of the micro-stories built by Bir lies in the idea they express and are inseparable from the choices of a subject who acts upon elements to promote meanings in a given circumstance. These micro-stories - like every enunciative act - were produced in a specific time/space, so they refer to a unique discursive situation that cannot be predicted. Therein lies the uniqueness of each linguistic act promoted by Bir, for it is understood that his reading is set in the unrepeatable here/now of the comics' organization: "The enunciatee has existence at the exact moment ...] in which the speaker appropriates the language. [...] when it comes to reading, it only exists when the (speaker) produces reading, implying the notions of a person, time, and space"<sup>(9)</sup>. However, the characteristics of Bir's reading process and the promotion of meaning in the construction of



**Figure 5.** Story proposed by Aul. (Text originally in Portuguese. Translation, from left to right: (first line) Friendship, simply, exists!/ Friendship that is friendship never ends!/ Because friendship can't be explained!; (second line) Since they were little babies!/ Friends know when they are friends!/ Because they share moments.../ ...They give strength!/ Friendship: This is Cascão!

comics refer to a subject that mobilizes language, even though it does not recognize many of the verbal-linguistic elements, promotes meaning with chronologically organized narrative sequences, considering images as a fundamental subsidy, and assumes the position of a subject that says I - the subject of its language, even if deviant.

In the Cr's story, the chronic time, again, serves as the basis for the sustaining of the narrative, since the mobilization of the comics and their organization in pairs (form) marks both the passage of time for the characters and groups and delimits their actions (meaning). This organization in pairs is not only an aesthetic division but also, above all, a form that gives meaning to smaller units to then make the set of these smaller units express the general idea of his text. When entering in contact with a previously produced enunciation, Cr assumes the position of an *I* that appropriates the language and, thus, places herself as the subject of language, updating meanings based on his experiences. Can be considered that in reading there is the question of the speaker who reads and who, when reading, becomes the subject, being then the field of reading the field of intersubjectivity, because all reading comes from a speaker who proposes himself as subject<sup>(9)</sup>.

Some notions are repeated like the logic of the conversation between the babies that first need to meet each other; the act of playing soccer that needs to be thought about first; like the character that first appears alone during the day to then appear with someone at night. Bir and Cr work with the same elements and appropriate the chronic time, but they make themselves subjects by re-signifying the same story, each one in their own way, singularly placing themselves and, therefore, assembling meanings that imprint the subjectivity of an *I* established in the language.

It is immediately apparent that the drawings that open and close the comic proposed initially are placed, here, in an inverse logic, making it seem that Aul's story begins at the end. However, no diagnosis indicates that Aul has reversed the orientation of his reading or writing. Thus, he is considered to have structured his story in the conventional system - from left to right. Aul's narrative begins with the representation of the thought that encloses the meaning in itself, with enough elements that give support for the interpretation<sup>(6)</sup>. Then, the pair of drawings that represents the characters in their adult phase is arranged: the dichotomies "day/night" and "alone/accompanied" concern the order of occurrence of the facts and seem to support Aul's story from the chronological perspective. The larger space between the first drawing and the subsequent pair seems to indicate that they are two independent proposals; it is by considering the available elements, arranged in a certain time/space, that the analysis of this meaning is possible<sup>(4,10)</sup> for, as a unique act and an unrepeatable situation, the enunciation retains only part of the enunciative act<sup>(9)</sup>. By organizing them intersubjectively, Aul reaffirms the idea that in language use a sign comes into existence<sup>(2,3)</sup>.

In the first drawing of the second line, there are the mothers with their babies. Next, is the drawing in which the two children talk to each other. Note, again, the spacing between one and the other. It is implied that in the first, Aul had as a reference the representational image of two adult women, just as, in the second, the babies were the focus of his observation<sup>(4,10)</sup>. It seems that the contrast between the characters made Aul not relate them in the same context, dissociating the drawings and forming two independent stories. The meaning attributed by Aul to two unique

and independent drawings comes from the reading of a subject that gives them meaning by placing himself in the text<sup>(10)</sup>. For Aul, these drawings have complete meaning and can therefore be considered sentences, which are "the semantic expression par excellence"<sup>(3)</sup>. By semantizing, Aul subjects the drawings to his interpretation and thus places himself in the realm of language in action when considering a *you*: In the end, this is how we communicate by sentences, even if truncated, embryonic, incomplete, but always by sentences<sup>(3)</sup>. On the other hand, in the last trio, Aul brings the images closer together to tell the story of two children playing soccer. However, contrary to Cr and Bir's interpretations, Aul understands that Casc o leaves after the game taking the ball that would be his. The comic that illustrates this action closes Aul's narrative. This is a clear gesture of the singularity of the reading<sup>(9)</sup> of a subject who interprets from his own references and sustains them, also, in chronic time, but in a way contrary to the other subjects: Bir and Cr understand that Casc o goes to meet Cebolinha as soon as the idea of the game arises - and, then, place the picture as the first action. These observations are only allowed due to the inseparability of form and meaning. The text, which has its meaning given by the global idea, is while looking at the form of the text is an analytical issue, because it occurs from the dissociation of the totality in semiotic units<sup>(9)</sup>. The title "Friendship" from the original comic serves here, too, as a kind of keyword that sums up the relationship between the two characters.

There are three unique readings of subjects that found, in different ways, the sustenance of meanings coming from experiences and relationships between man and the world<sup>(6,8,10)</sup>. The characteristics of the reading process of these subjects and the promotion of meaning in the construction of comics refer to subjects that mobilize the language (even if some do not recognize many of the verbal linguistic elements) and promote signification with chronologically organized narrative sequences (form in images). Considering images as a fundamental subsidy, these speakers assume the position of subject that says "I" - subjects of their language, even if it is deviant<sup>(8)</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

In the case of Bir, Cr and Aul, the narratives were built based on images - once their ability to read verbal texts was compromised. They then use chronic time as the formal organization axis of their narratives. This is the time of events, and of our own sequence. It is in chronic time that events are organized from the definition of a referential point that allows us to allude to the before and after. They share the perception of chronic time by the participating subjects: The phases of life (baby - child - young/adult) are strongly imprinted in Bir and Cr's stories, although they appear briefly in Aul's narrative. Thereby, the meaning manifests itself freely and unpredictably while the aspects of form are concrete and describable.

In all three proposals, too, it is understood that day comes before night, just as thought precedes action. This tells us about not only the organization of the facts in time, but also how they interpret the world. There is an established order that governs these actions. The organization (form) of the comics in narratives (meaning) shows that subjects with aphasia mobilize language and promote meanings (reading/writing), but this becomes understandable when one considers the enunciative perspective for analyzing language in aphasia.

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