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“O que é que a Brasileira tem?” A Linguistic Analysis of the Representation of Brazilian Women in the TV Series As Brasileiras

Introduction

Narratives such as Soap Operas and TV series occupy an important role in the lives of Brazilian families since “they have the function of entertaining and provoking reflection” (p. 3 – our translation, Poma & Viegas, 2009), contributing to form the Brazilian identity. Considering the discourse that is usually linked to the identity of Brazilian women, ideas of sexuality, beautiful bodies and heterosexual relationships are highly emphasized in the media.

This paper aims; therefore, to analyze the discourse that permeates the representation of female characters in the TV Series *As Brasileiras* as a way to understand whether it conforms to or challenges the typical image of Brazilian women. By focusing on the description of 5 characters from 5 episodes in light of Halliday’s Transitivity and Theme and Rheme systems as well as Gender Studies, our goal is to find linguistic evidence that supports this view as a way to better understand how Brazilian women are seen in media discourse.

Review of Literature

Sexuality and Discourse

Within the field of Language and Gender studies, an important distinction has been made between gender, seen as socially constructed, and sex, seen as biological. According to Cameron and Kulick (2003), “sexuality, like gender, is intended to underline the idea that we are dealing with a cultural rather than a purely natural phenomenon” (p.1). The authors explain that sexuality is not limited to sexual orientation but it is also related to whom and what is desired by someone. Considering that desire is not biological, the understanding of one’s sexuality “is always dependent on the kind of discourse about sex that circulates in a given time and place” (p.10, Cameron and Kulick, 2003).

Discourse can be understood as a social practice. As explained by Wodak (1997), “discourse is constitutive both in the sense that it helps sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it” (p. 6). Language, then, ceases to be just a matter of word choice to become “a shaper of ideias” (p. 94, Spender, 1998).

If one bears in mind questions of gender, desire and sexuality concerning women, a linguistic pattern can be revealed. Cameron and Kulick (2003) illustrate that “to be a ‘woman’ as opposed to a ‘female’ takes more than just being born with the ‘correct’ reproductive organs. It is a cultural achievement which has to be learned” (p.3). Coates (1998) affirms that “the dominant discourse constitutes women as loving, dutiful (in relation to parents), uncritical (in relation to children), and caring about appearance, in particular by trying to stay slim” (p.305).

Focusing on gendered appearance discourse, Kimmel (2000) highlights that the standards of female beauty have a lot to do with the status women occupy in society. The author shows that in many societies, such as in Brazil, women’s beauty is highly valued and discussed, so much so that women are trapped in what Kimmel (2000) defines as the ‘beauty myth’ – “a nearly unreachable cultural ideal of feminine beauty that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement” (p. 340). Cameron and Kulick (2003) explain that women’s sexuality usually occupies a passive position of object of male desire. At the same time, as emphasized by the authors “while women and girls are not supposed actively to pursue their own sexual desires, they are regularly held responsible for provoking men’s desire” (p. 34).

Taking the aforementioned in mind, it can be concluded that desire and sexuality are indeed socially mediated. Women’s sexuality, then, can also be seen as a socially constructed pattern represented through different types of discourse, such as in daily conversational engagements as well as in media-driven channels.

Brazilian TV Series

The television is surely one of the most popular means of communication in the world. Poma and Viegas (2009) show that in Brazil the scenario is not different since, as explained by the authors, for a great part of the Brazilian population, “the television is the only way culture can be accessed” (p. 3 – our translation).

Although the television holds a significant position concerning opinion-making and behavioral aspects of Brazilians’ lives and citizenship, it is still considered a type of means of communication that has little concern with culture (Poma and Viegas, 2009). The TV Series, in that sense, come as a cultural alternative for the mass since they are seen as “responsible for raising the Brazilian audience’s awareness about historical events as well as literary canons that a great part of the population does not have access to” (p. 4 – our translation). Mungioli (2009) explains that more than just telling a story, the Brazilian TV Series can be considered “a space for meaning making, and, therefore, as one of the ways by which the Brazilian identity is formed” (p. 2 – our translation).

The Brazilian TV Series started in 1982. Mungioli (2009) explains that the usual length to this type of show varies from 5 to 40 episodes. The author points out that typically the themes discussed in the TV Series as well as the quality of the narrative are important characteristics that differentiate these shows from others in Brazil. Due to

these aspects, the Brazilian TV Series can be considered to have an important role in the formation of what constitutes the Brazilian identity.

Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), based on Halliday's work (1985, 1994, 2004), has theorized language as functional, meaning-making and semiotically-oriented. In other words, language is used to achieve communicative purposes, seen as any other semiotic process which is made of choices available within systems of meanings, and influenced by the cultural and social context in which it is inserted in (Eggins, 2004). In this sense, the functional grammar (Halliday, 1985, 1994, 2004) serves to understand how language is structured, as well as to comprehend how people use it in different contexts and purposes.

Taking into consideration that language is a meaning-making resource, that is, it serves to convey meaning, Halliday (2004) claims that there are three types of meanings – the metafunctions – which work simultaneously in language in use: ideational, interpersonal and textual. Each metafunction informs distinct types of meanings. When analyzing a clause (the basis for analyzing any type of text), it is possible to understand how people perceive the world around them, represent their inner world and experiences (Ideational), how is the relationship among participants and institutions (Interpersonal), and how is the message organized according to the information value (Textual).

The systems used to describe each meaning are, respectively (considering the order of the aforementioned metafunctions), the systems of Transitivity, Mood and Modality, and Theme and Rheme. In terms of the transitivity analysis, the experiential meanings are conveyed by the processes (verbs), participants involved and the circumstances in which the events take place. Regarding the textual analysis, the system of Theme and Rheme reveals how a certain text is organized. Every clause starts with a Theme, which is, according to Halliday (2004), "the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that which locates and orients the clause within its context" (p.64), followed by the Rheme, which is the new information.

Due to time constraints, our text analysis is limited to transitivity and textual descriptions, considering that our focus is on the representation of the female characters, as well as on what type of information related to them is foregrounded by the textual meanings.

Method

The TV series "As Brasileiras"

This study aims at analyzing the description of the main female characters in 5 episodes of the Brazilian TV series "As Brasileiras", in order to investigate their representation of the Brazilian woman. The first episode of "As Brasileiras" was aired on February 2nd, 2012. Each episode lasted 30 minutes and sought to represent the Brazilian women from different places of the country. As mentioned in the web site of *Globo*, the channel that broadcasted the TV series, the women in "As Brasileiras" are "beautiful, hard working, fun and sensitive" (our translation). The series offers the female audience an opportunity to see themselves represented "from North to South, by 22 actresses carefully chosen" (our translation).

All episodes start similarly. By making use of a short documentary tone, the voice over narrator (a male voice) describes the geographical region in which the story happens. Next, the narrator introduces the main character, the woman, and summarizes her personality so as to establish the main plot. All the episodes are centered on a heterosexual relationship and on the difficulties faced by the heroines to either maintain their boyfriends/husbands or find one. Additionally, all episodes discuss issues related to the main characters' sexuality and body appearance.

The title of each episode is presented similarly: first the name of the character is given, followed by a strong personality trait and then the home place. As part of the advertisement kit, *Globo's* web site offers a description of each character as a way of introducing the viewer to the main traits of each female lead in every episode. The descriptions contain personality attributes, the profession of the character, the relationship she has with a male character (boyfriend, husband, boss, fling, lover, etc) and the title, which reinforces the personality traits.

In this study, our goal is to analyze some of these descriptions as a way to understand how these women, who supposedly represent the Brazilian women, are portrayed in the series. Thus, the textual evidence was examined in the light of Systemic Functional Linguistics aligned with theories from Gender Studies. Due to time and space constraints, the description of only 5 characters were chosen: "Araí, A Selvagem de Santarem", "Mirtis, A Indomável do Ceará", "Rosa, A Sexóloga de Floripa", "Janice, A Mascarada do ABC", "Augusta, A Inocente de Brasília". The episodes to be analyzed were selected so as to guarantee that each of the 5 Brazilian regions would be represented.

Procedures for Textual Analysis

As previously mentioned, this research aims at analyzing the description of 5 female characters available on the website of *As Brasileiras*. In order to find out how these women are portrayed, these texts were investigated through the system of Transitivity, as well as the system of Theme and Rheme found in Halliday's (2004) framework of description and interpretation of language. Respectively, these systems reveal the ideational and textual meanings from a determined text, providing textual evidences of how language was used and organized to represent these characters.

Firstly, the texts were divided into sentences. Then, they were analyzed through the transitivity system, being each 'unit of language' classified as participants, processes and circumstances. The sentences were also divided into theme and rheme units. Considering that our analysis is about the female representation, we focused on the

female main characters and their involvement into these linguistic elements. Later on, we discussed the implication of these textual evidences in terms of the discursive practices which are being promoted, based on the studies of Language and Gender. The following figure illustrates a sentence being analyzed through the systems of transitivity and theme/rheme:

Figure 1 - Example of the textual analysis

Ela é índia, mas é infeliz na tribo das lendárias.

	Ela	É	índia,
Ideational	Token	Pr: relational	Value
Textual	THEME: topical	RHEME	

	Mas	(ellipsis of <i>ela</i>)	É	Infeliz	na tribo das lendárias.
Ideational			Pr: relational	Attribute	Cir: location
Textual	THEME: textual	THEME: topical	RHEME		

Textual Analysis – Description and Discussion of the Results

In terms of the analysis through the transitivity system, the female characters were mostly engaged in relational process. In other words, they are mainly being identified as someone or receiving attributes. In this sense, the text provides their physical and personal characteristics by saying who they *are*. Additionally, the analysis also reveals that describing their traits seems to be relevant throughout the text, considering that most relational processes are introduced or followed by circumstances of *role*.

Regarding the Attributes and Values given, we found a patronized way to describe the characters: they are either identified by their fictional names (Araí, Rosa, Janice), followed by the actresses names in parenthesis (Suyane Moreira, Leandra Leal, Alice Braga), or by the title of the episode, as it occurs in Augusta's description, who is identified as *A Inocente de Brasília* instead of by her own name. Furthermore, other Values mentioned are related to individual and uncommon aspects of each character, as it happens to Araí (a Brazilian Indian) who is firstly introduced as *índia*; and Mirtes, who is a chef officer and has, therefore, her profession mentioned in first place, as an introduction and explanation of her personal characteristics (a strong woman). The only attribute found as the result of a relational process is "unhappy" (*infeliz*), which is given to Araí. Curiously, the Attribute *infeliz* is put in a position of an opposite for the Value *índia* by the textual theme *mas* (but). In this sense, Araí is not only different from the other characters, but she is also unhappy being that way. The following table shows the relational processes occurred in each description, followed by the Attributes and Values.

Table 1 – Relational Processes

Relational process	Attributes	Value
Ela é índia, mas é infeliz na tribo das lendárias. É Araí (Suyane Moreira), "A selvagem de Santarém"!	Infeliz	Índia Araí (Suyane Moreira)
Essa é Rosa (Leandra Leal), "A sexóloga de Floripa"!		Rosa (Leandra Leal),
É uma delegada, Ela é Mirtes (Alice Braga), "A indomável do Ceará"!		Delegada Mirtes (Alice Braga)
Ela é Janice (Juliana Alves), "A mascarada do ABC"!		Janice (Juliana Alves)
Augusta (Claudia Jimenez) é "A inocente de Brasília"!		"A inocente de Brasília"!

As foresaid, the Circumstances of Role presented a significant contribution in terms of the characters description. According to Halliday (2004), this category expresses the meanings of "being" (attribute or identity), as an extension of an Attribute or Value in relational processes, or it expresses the meaning of "becoming" (p. 274). Specifically, the Circumstances of Role are identified as Guise (being) and Product (becoming) (Halliday, 2004). In our analysis, only the Guise Circumstances of Role were found and they are present in the descriptions of the 5 characters. Furthermore, not only the number of these circumstances has to be mentioned, but their positions in the sentences are also essential to claim their relevance in our analysis, based on our findings through the Theme/Rheme system that will be discussed later on this session.

It is relevant to mention that one current circumstance (which seems to be an extension of their names) is the repetition of the title of the episode as their identification. These identifications refer to either an event of the episode or to their personal characteristics, followed by the place they are from. For instance, Janice (Juliana Alves) is *A mascarada do ABC* (the masked from ABC), because she works as a dancer that wears a mask, in a region from São Paulo called ABC. Another example is Araí whose episode title holds a stereotype concept of native communities. She is identified as *A selvagem de Santarém* (the savage from Santarém). In fact, savage can refer to the Brazilian Indians (as the opposite of civilized communities) or to a sexual connotation, considering the appeal of the TV series, which seems to be to sensualize the Brazilian woman.

Furthermore, other qualities given to the characters are related to their physical attributes and amorous matters. *Mulher linda* (beautiful woman), *Jovem* (Young), *linda* (beautiful) are some of the qualities found among others in the circumstances of role. It is noticeable that the characters which receive these kinds of descriptions are played by actresses who are considered to have the ideal standard of beauty in Brazil. They are slim but have “curves”, average height, most of them are white but have tanned skin. The only exceptions found to this stereotype of beauty are Augusta, who is an overweight woman and who does not receive any type of attribute related to her beauty or physical traits; and Janice, who is a black woman (but still slim and curved).

Another trait that is shared by most of the characters is the exaggerated romanticized idea of life that they are given.

For instance, although Rosa is a sexologist (sexóloga), she is firstly a romantic girl, since this characteristic (being romantic) comes before her professional career, *Romântica, sexóloga e comportamental* (Romantic, sexologist and behavioural). Similarly, Augusta is in love with her boss. She is also strongly characterized as “ingenuous, very innocent and naïve” – *Uma mulher ingênua, muito inocente, inocente*. Coincidentally, Augusta is out of the standard of beauty patronized by our society; therefore, her innocence which is repeatedly reinforced, might refer to the fact that she cannot recognize that her boss is “out of her league”.

Janice, on the other hand, is qualified as a good wife. It is assumed that a good wife is a woman who does not betray her husband’s trust. At first sight, that is not Janice’s case since she hides from her husband that she works as a dancer at night. However, although she is hiding something from him, she feels guilty and by feeling so, she is somehow “saved” from her sin. Besides, according to the description, Janice only accepts this job for a good reason which is helping a friend. It can be understood, therefore, that Janice is indeed a *boa esposa*, one that only betrays for a good, missionary reason but, who, even so, feels extremely guilty for doing it.

On the contrary, Mirtes is the only one who has an opposite representation of being a romanticized woman. However, this representation is annulled when she is involved in the mental process of “falling in love” as the Senser participant, that is, she is the active participant of a mental process which does not represent a concrete action, but a feeling – the feeling which she claims to despise the most. In other words, even though she claims not to trust men and romantic love, she falls in love with a prisoner and her whole story is centered on him. She is even tied to him by handcuffs throughout the episode which emphasizes their connection and her submission besides hinting a sexual connotation. Therefore, even though she is characterized as a very serious, very demanding and rigid woman, her life also is centered around a man (as the other characters’ lives) and she ends up putting her own beliefs in second place because of passion.

Taking into consideration the meanings of the circumstances of role in the construction of the characters’ representations that have been discussed so far, it is also relevant to mention that most of them are put as *theme* in each clause. In terms of our analysis of the textual meanings, the results showed that most of the Themes occurrences are the *topical* themes, which it means, in other words, that the organization of the clauses has emphasized the participants (the female characters), as well as the circumstances they were involved. Mainly, we observed that the message structure of each description tends to introduce the characters by their attributes and identities, reinforcing the stereotypical representation of these women. The following table shows the circumstances of role occurred in each description. Some of them are also the themes (marked by a star).

Table 2 – Circumstances of role/themes

Character	Circumstance of role *Theme
Araí	- "A selvagem de Santarém"!
Rosa	-Romântica, sexóloga e comportamental. Jovem, escritora e apresentadora de um programa de televisão com grande audiência, o "Susexo"*
Mirtes	- Mulher linda e com uma força incrível,* - muito séria, terror dos malfetores, desacreditada no amor e nos homens. - "A indomável do Ceará"!
Janice	-Taxista,* - Boa esposa, linda e amiga, - "A mascarada do ABC"!
Augusta	- Uma mulher ingênua e apaixonada por seu chefe. Funcionária padrão e muito inocente,* Inocente,

As it can be seen, therefore, both the transitivity and the theme and rheme analyses show that the image of Brazilian women in television is related to questions of sexuality, gender roles and body issues. The TV Series *As Brasileiras*, which aimed at representing different types of Brazilian women throughout the country, broadcasted a stereotypical view of them by giving special emphasis to their attributes (seen by the relevant amount of relational processes found) which are all linked to romanticism, sexual appeal and beauty. Besides, the circumstances of role identified in the descriptions of the five characters analyzed not only emphasize these idea that these women occupy a position of object of male desire but that they also fantasize about it romantically. Similarly, the fact that these circumstances of role appear first in the descriptions (as themes) also lays emphasis on how the characters are constructed and seen in the series.

Conclusion

Based on the results from the Transitivity and the Theme and Rheme analyses understood in light of Gender Studies, the representation of Brazilian women found in the TV Series *As Brasileiras* conforms to the stereotypical discourse that defines women as 1) trapped in the beauty myth of perfect, sexual and curve-shaped appearance, 2) object of and responsible for provoking male desire, 3) heroines who romanticize life when it comes to love and sex. Moreover, the clichéd view of Brazilian women highly sexualized was reinforced while issues such as race seemed to have been misguided.

It can be concluded, therefore, that the female Brazilian identity proposed in the TV Series *As Brasileiras* strengthens problematic gender discourses concerning women's representation.

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