

**The Properties of Word, the Prerogative of Language: Specificities and Primacy of Language in Vološinov and Benveniste / *As particularidades da palavra, o privilégio da língua: especificidades e primazia do linguístico, em Volóchinov e Benveniste***

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**ABSTRACT**

This article aims to establish a preeminence of language in relation to the other forms of semiosis. To this end, we orchestrate two reflections that, beyond Ferdinand de Saussure's Course in General Linguistics, address the specificities that lead to such a preeminence. They are: the reflections by Valentin N. Vološinov and Émile Benveniste. Vološinov advances specificities of language regarding the socio-cultural functioning of the word, thus external to the sign. Benveniste discusses specificities that are internal to language, related to its ability to interpret itself and interpret the other systems. Finally, based on the conclusions derived from the theoretical analyses, we argue that such specificities could guide discussions about the place of language in the debate on school teaching of Portuguese.

**KEYWORDS:** Linguistic Sign; Vološinov; Benveniste; Language; Discourse

**RESUMO**

*Este artigo objetiva delimitar uma preeminência do linguístico frente às demais semioses. Para tanto, são orquestradas duas reflexões que, para além do Curso de linguística geral, de Ferdinand de Saussure, abordam as especificidades que conduzem a essa preeminência. São elas: as reflexões de Valentin N. Volóchinov e de Émile Benveniste. Em Volóchinov, estão postas especificidades do linguístico atinentes ao funcionamento sociocultural da palavra, portanto, externas ao signo. Em Benveniste, estão dadas especificidades internas à língua, relativas à capacidade de a língua se autointerpretar e interpretar os demais sistemas. Finalmente, com base nas conclusões decorrentes das análises teóricas, defende-se que tais especificidades poderiam nortear discussões sobre o lugar do linguístico no debate em torno do ensino escolar de língua portuguesa.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Signo linguístico; Volóchinov; Benveniste; Língua; Discurso

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*The word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence.* The entire reality of the word is wholly absorbed in its function of being a sign.

A word contains nothing that is indifferent to this function, nothing that would not have been engendered by it. A word is the purest and most sensitive medium of social intercourse. (...) All manifestations of ideological creativity – all other nonverbal signs – are bathed by, suspended in, and cannot be entirely segregated or divorced from the element of speech.

Valentin N. Vološinov

(...) language is the preeminent semiotic organization. It explains the function of a sign, and it alone offers an exemplary formula of the sign. Thus language alone can – and, in fact, does – confer on other groups the rank of signifying system by acquainting them with the relationship of the sign.

Émile Benveniste

## Preliminary Considerations

It is not new, nor without reason, that the *Course in General Linguistics* (hereinafter called *CGL*, or *Course*), published in 1916 and attributed to the Genevan linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), has become a reference for most modern reflections involving the linguistic sign. With the formulation of concepts such as “arbitrary nature of sign” and “linear nature of the signifier,” with the elaboration of his theory of value, in addition to the distinctions between “signifier” and “signified” and between “syntagmatic relations” and “associative relations,” *CGL* certainly has added something to the ideas about the sign, developed since Augustine of Hippo.<sup>1</sup>

However, there is, in our understanding, an issue that needs to be emphasized: Saussurean formulations around the sign are important, but they are not the limit nor the foundation of every modern discussion about the linguistic signs. Despite scholars who base their theories on the *Course*, or limit their theories to it, there are, in fact, those who establish their discussion on a basis other than that of Saussure. Similarly, there are those who do not think of him as the last word on the theme, even if they do interact with Saussure. Therefore, verifying the terms through which the idea of sign appears in other proposals, seems to be an important reflective exercise, which might allow a broader

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<sup>1</sup> Although certain ideas of St Augustine regarding language had appeared since the work *De magistro*, from AD 389, here, we mainly highlight the following words, present in *The Christian doctrine*, from AD 397: “I name signs everything that is used to mean something other than itself” (Agostinho, 2002, p.43).

understanding of the underlying epistemologies to important theories on human language. Thus, in the following pages, we propose a discussion of the reflections elaborated by the Russian thinker Valentin N. Vološinov (1895-1936) and the Syrian-French linguist Émile Benveniste (1902-1976) about the place suitable to the linguistic in face of other types of semiosis.

In what follows, we try to demonstrate that both in Vološinov's line of thought exposed mainly in the work *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (hereinafter *MPL*), from 1929 – as well as in Benveniste's reflections – presented, above all, in the essay “The Semiology of Language” (hereinafter *SL*), from 1969 –, the issue of linguistic preeminence gains dimensions not yet properly considered by many readers. More precisely, we seek to highlight the fact that, with Vološinov (1973), in the wake of the neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945), a set of questions is raised that aim to highlight the primacy of the word among other types of signs. In the same way, we try to show how much Benveniste's proposal (1981), going beyond the concepts of sign and language presented in Saussure (2011), points towards the recognition of a unique place for language in face of other sign systems.

To articulate the views of Vološinov (1973) and Benveniste (1981) on this preeminence of the linguistic in relation to the other semiosis and, simultaneously, to emphasize the distinction between their starting points, it is important to clarify, at once, a pertinent terminological and conceptual question. As we argue on the following pages, despite the possibility of translating the Russian term *slovo*<sup>2</sup> as “word” or “discourse,”<sup>3</sup> the fact is that, with such a term, Vološinov (1973) refers to what he understands to be the linguistic sign, in a conceptual formulation that maintains a distance from the most famous sign concept in the West, namely, the Saussurean concept, exposed in the *CGL*. Similarly, we must say in advance that, as it will be seen in our argument, the concept expressed by the French term *langue*, in Benveniste (1981), is not limited to a system of signs, as proposed by Saussure (2011). In fact, the concept of language in Benveniste (1981) encompasses Saussure's sign system (2011) but goes beyond. Thus, Benveniste

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<sup>2</sup> The Russian terms, thus presented, are transliterated from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Roman alphabet.

<sup>3</sup> In this regard, you can consult the relevant note from the translators, which accompanies the title of the essay “The word in life and the word in poetry: for sociological poetics,” in Volóchinov (2019a).

(1981) says, “no longer the language understood as a system of signs, but the language assumed by the man who speaks, by the man in the language” (Flores, 2017, p.1023).<sup>4</sup>

At this point, it is important to consider that, if we speak of “primacy of the word over other types of signs” and “a unique place for language in face of other sign systems,” based on Vološinov (1973) and Benveniste (1981) – respectively – we are highlighting properties that, in the set of sign systems, are exclusive to language. Maybe for some people this might sound like an attempt to impose a hierarchy, which, in the end, would lower the other systems. But, for us, the focus is not a comparison that would make possible a hierarchy, but rather, the confirmation of the linguistic specificities. Regarding the consequences from the findings of Vološinov and Benveniste, we see no other way of dealing with them but to recognize the primacy of the linguistic.

That said, we can now describe our steps in this article. In the first section, giving evidence to the connection between *MPL* and Cassirer (1980), we will talk about the *properties of the word* which, according to Vološinov, confer it a place of prominence. Next, revisiting the relationship between *SL* and Saussure (2011), we highlight the *prerogative of the language*, which, according to Benveniste, grants it a unique position. At the end, as final considerations, more than exploring the possible investigative paths that are revealed with such formulations, we highlight the fact that this attribution of primacy to the linguistic can be heavily related to teaching practices and certain curricular guidelines that have been put forward recently in the public debate.

## **1 Vološinov and the Properties of the Word**

As it is well known, *MPL* explicitly presents Vološinov’s opposition to Saussure (2011). For this reason, we are inclined to think that, in order to avoid certain interpretative mistakes, it is necessary to emphasize the following from the start: *Vološinov’s presentation on the world of signs, in the three chapters of the first part of MPL, rather than revealing an interaction with Saussure (2011) evinces Cassirer’s influence (1980) on the Russian thinker.* This means that Vološinov’s (1973) long reflection on the world of signs, presented in the first part of *MPL*, is due mostly to his

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<sup>4</sup> In Portuguese: “não mais a língua entendida como um sistema de signos, mas a língua assumida pelo homem que fala, pelo homem na língua.”

familiarity with Cassirer's writings, in particular with the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (from here, also *PSF*), which is dedicated to the theme of language.

In this regard, it is worth remembering that, in the fourth activity report delivered to the Institute for the Comparative History of the Literatures and Languages of the West and East (ILIAZV), the then graduate researcher Valentin N. Vološinov mentions two translations prepared by him, one of which is the translation of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (cf. Grillo; Américo, 2019, p.40). Additionally, we must keep in mind that, both in his work plan for *MPL* and in the text published in 1929, Vološinov records what seems to constitute a certain positive nod to Cassirer's work. That is, in the *MPL* work plan, the author states that Cassirer's text, originally from 1923, is "the principal neo-Kantian work on the philosophy of language" (Vološinov, 2004, p.232).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in *MPL* text itself, by means of complementary notes, Vološinov (1973) seems to exempt Cassirer, to some extent, from the criticisms he addresses to what he claims to be the conception of the "idealistic philosophy of culture and psychologistic cultural studies" (Vološinov, 1973, p.11),<sup>6</sup> and, moreover, registers his understanding that, until that moment – meaning, 1929 –, "the reader will find an outline of the history of the philosophy of language and linguistics, so far the only substantive one of its kind, in Ernst Cassirer's book, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen: Die Sprache*" (Vološinov, 1973, p.47).<sup>7</sup>

In addition to all that, and considering that the theme of the sign is fundamental in *MPL* – and is already present on the first page of the first chapter of the initial part –, it is a symptomatic fact that the first mention to Saussure appears only in what can be considered the last third of the first chapter of the second part, that is, only when Vološinov had already discussed the fundamental character of the sign, the place of the word as a sign, the relationship between sign and ideology, and even the relationship between sign and consciousness.

Furthermore, we must say that, in addition to not acknowledging any of the Saussurean considerations on a semiology still to be built, Vološinov (1973) – shortly

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<sup>5</sup> VOLOŠINOV, V. N. Archival Materials. In: BRANDIST, C.; SHEPHERD, D.; TIHANOV, G. (eds.). *The Bakhtin Circle: In the Master's Absence*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004, pp.223-250.

<sup>6</sup> VOLOŠINOV, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by L. Matejka and I. R. Titunik. New York: Seminar Press, 1973.

<sup>7</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

after presenting excerpts from the *CGL*, and during the entire discussion that he brings out about ideas that he attributes to Saussure (2011) – repeatedly mentions and criticizes what he understands to be an immutable system of “forms” (*forma*, in Russian) that are normatively identical.<sup>8</sup> Without discussing the qualifiers used by Vološinov (1973), it is important to observe that the term *znak*, equivalent to the English “sign” and omnipresent in previous moments of *MPL*, seems to be left out on occasions when the Russian makes reference to what, it seems to us, would be the *sign* of Saussure (2011). We, by the way, have even a hypothesis for this unusual terminological consistency in Vološinov (1973). For us, the Russian thinker does not use the term equivalent to “sign” to refer to Saussure’s work precisely because he intends to protect the term, of great importance in *MPL*, from the concept that he believes to find in the Genevan’s work, that is, a concept supposedly marked by normativity and immutability – both, apparently, linked to the Saussurean thesis of the arbitrary nature of sign (cf. Vološinov, 1973, p.54).

Therefore, *despite the seductive illusion of the signifier, the term equivalent to “sign,” in MPL, does not correspond to the concept of sign present in the CGL.* This means that, although words equivalent to the English word “sign” are present in both works, the Saussurean formulation is not seen as sufficient for Vološinov (1973). *In this thinker’s conceptual realm, signs are material phenomena, whose outbreak is conditioned by the interactive process, which consequently gives them the mutability that, according to the Russian, was allegedly not included in Saussure’s work, since Vološinov (1973) assumes that the Saussurean perspective excludes the labor of the speaker from the processes of historical formation of the language (see, e. g., Vološinov, 1973, pp.12; 81). In the words of Vološinov (1973, p.21; emphasis in original):*

every sign, as we know, is a construct between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction. Therefore, *the forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction.* When these forms change, so does sign.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Even knowing that the *CGL* “was widely discussed shortly after its appearance in 1916 and, thus, exerted a formative influence on the development of Soviet linguistics [In Portuguese: *foi amplamente discutido logo depois de seu aparecimento em 1916 e, assim, exerceu uma influência formadora sobre o desenvolvimento da linguística soviética*]” (Lähteenmäki, 2006, p.190; cf., also, Sériot, 2015, pp.107-108), it is important to consider that its first publication in Russian is from 1933, after the publication of *MPL*. Thus, we are not sure about the conditions under which Vološinov came into contact with Saussure’s work.

<sup>9</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

At this point, it is worth mentioning Faraco (2013), who says that the terms equivalent to “ideology” and “ideological” are used, in *MPL*, with two distinct meanings: first, to allude to a particular world view of a social group; second, to refer to formalized cultural creation fields, such as art, science, law and religion.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in a formulation very close to that of Cassirer (1980), the author of *MPL* points out the inextricable relationship between signs and what he calls “field of ideological creativity” (Vološinov, 1973, p.10),<sup>11</sup> the various fields of cultural creation.

More precisely, when exposing his philosophical proposal about symbolic forms, basically assumed as specific modes of grasping and configuring the world (e.g., language, science, myth, art, etc.), Cassirer (1980, p.86) establishes the symbolic function and, consequently, signs, as “an all-embracing medium in which the most diverse cultural forms [*i.e.*, symbolic forms] meet.”<sup>12</sup> This is the same as saying that, for Cassirer (1980, p.84), the sign is ultimately the desired “factor which recurs in each basic cultural form but in no two of them takes exactly the same shape.”<sup>13</sup>

As we understand it, Vološinov’s (1973) reasoning follows a very similar path. After all, as he points out – in a passage that carries incomprehension that is proportional to its fame – “*without signs, there is no ideology*” (Vološinov, 1973, p.9; emphasis in original);<sup>14</sup> which, of course, means that any field of cultural creation, and even any product related to these fields, can only emerge via sign.

Thus, it seems clear to us how much the ideas of Cassirer (1980) influence the Russian thinker in relation to the sign and symbolic forms. However, it is still necessary to highlight one last question: although Cassirer (1980) leaves several scholars with doubts about the place of language in relation to other forms of apprehension and

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<sup>10</sup> Even today, it seems to us that we need to insist on the fact that, as you can see, none of the terms “carries a critical, negative or pejorative sense - as sometimes seems to be presupposed in the [bakhtinian] vulgate [In Portuguese: *carrega um sentido crítico, negativo ou pejorativo – como algumas vezes parece estar pressuposto na vulgata [bakhtiniana]*” (Faraco, 2013, p.180). Any interested reader can also consult Lähteenmäki (2012).

<sup>11</sup> For reference, see footnote 5.

<sup>12</sup> CASSIRER, E. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Volume one: Language. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

<sup>13</sup> For reference, see footnote 12.

<sup>14</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

configuration of the world – such as science, art and myth –,<sup>15</sup> Vološinov (1973), on the other hand, is more categorical. *For the author of MPL, word is the condition to – and, therefore, a constituent element of – any field of cultural creation, be it science, religion, art, etc.*<sup>16</sup>

We consider these observations as justification for our understanding that it is under the influence of the first volume of *PSF* and not of *CGL*, that Vološinov (1973) discusses the particularities of the linguistic, of the word. That considered, let's move forward.

The 1929 Vološinovian text, or the previously mentioned *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, has the discussion of a materialist and sociological perspective for language studies as one of its directives. For this reason, Vološinov then begins the first part of his *magnum opus* discussing the relationship between what he denominates “science of ideologies” and the philosophy of language. More specifically, the author undertakes a proposal that aims to give more consistency to how the problems of ideologies are treated based on questions pertaining to language – that is, the problems that are related to the fields of cultural creation, such as art, science, philosophy, religion, etc.

To achieve this goal, the Russian thinker begins by considering that all objects related to a field of cultural creation carry a meaning, that is, the property of signifying. As he argues,

any ideological product is not only itself a part of a reality (natural or social), just as is any physical body, any instrument of production, or any product for consumption, it also, in contradistinction to these other phenomena, reflects and refracts another reality outside itself. Everything ideological possesses *meaning*: it represents, depicts, or stands for something lying outside itself. In other words, it is a sign.

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<sup>15</sup> In fact, it would be interesting to know how Vološinov interpreted Cassirer (1980) on this issue. However, to our knowledge, there are no elements that can be regarded as proof, or even evidence of such interpretation. Be it as it may, it is worth mentioning that, in the set of interpretations that affect Cassirer's philosophy, the fact of language being, or not “a privileged, or fundamental symbolic form, in such a way that it is presumed in any other, with an essentially asymmetric relationship existing between it and all others” [In Portuguese: “*uma forma simbólica privilegiada ou fundamental, de modo tal que esteja pressuposta em toda outra, existindo entre ela e o resto uma relação essencialmente assimétrica*”] (Porta, 2011a p.297), it still presents itself as one of those concrete questions “not definitively answered in relation to the ‘philosophy of symbolic forms’” [In Portuguese: “*não definitivamente respondidas em relação à filosofia das formas simbólicas*”] (Porta, 2011a, p.296; emphasis in original).

<sup>16</sup> Next in the text, we will address this issue in more detail.

*Without signs, there is no ideology. A physical body equals itself, so to speak; it does not signify anything but wholly coincides with its particular, given nature. In this case there is no question of ideology (Vološinov, 1973, p.9; emphasis in original).<sup>17</sup>*

It should be noted that this formulation, in addition to claiming that ideological objects – that is, the products of a certain field of cultural creation – “represents, depicts, or stands for something lying outside itself” the author leaves a glimpse of his conception that there is a sign reality alongside “reality (natural or social).” This conception is made evident when Vološinov (1973) states that “side by side with the natural phenomena, with the equipment of technology, and with articles for consumption, there exists a special world – the *world of signs*”<sup>18</sup> (Vološinov, 1973, pp.9-10; emphasis in original).<sup>19</sup>

To this discussion, Vološinov adds other issues related to the fundamentally social nature of the sign. However, for our objective, it is important to highlight only the reasons that make the word the ideological sign – we insist: related to a given field of creation of culture – *par excellence*.

As we understand it, there are five reasons for Vološinov (1973) to claim a singularity to the word compared to other signs: first, the word is unique for its *semiotic purity*, that is, because it is the most representative sign of what it is to be a sign; second, it is unique in its neutrality; third, due to its omnipresence in everyday communication; fourth, its peculiar role is due to “*its ability to become an inner word*” (Vološinov, 1973, p.15; emphasis in original),<sup>20</sup> that is, to be the sign of conscience; finally, fifth, its exceptional character is due to its unavoidable presence in the realization of any cultural product, regardless of the field of cultural creation in question. Let us reflect on each of these reasons in more detail.

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<sup>17</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

<sup>18</sup> In this regard, it is worth remembering a few words by Cassirer (1980). In censoring the epistemological position that he calls “Dogmatic sensationalism,” the philosopher states: “it fails to recognize that there is also an activity of the sensibility itself, that, as Goethe said, there is also an ‘exact sensory imagination’, which operates in the most diverse spheres of cultural endeavor. We find indeed that, beside and above the world of perception, all these spheres produce freely their own *world of symbols* which is the true vehicle of their immanent development – a world whose inner quality is still wholly sensory, but which already discloses a formed sensibility, that is to say, a sensibility governed by the spirit. Here we no longer have to do with a sensible world that is simply given and present, but with a system of diverse sensory factors which are produced by some form of free creation (Cassirer, 1980, p.87; our emphasis).

<sup>19</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

<sup>20</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

Regarding the first reason, Vološinov's (1973) point seems to be simple: if what defines signs is signification – we insist: the property of representing and replacing another reality that is beyond its boundaries –, there is nothing more representative of what it means to be a sign than the word. According to the *MPL* author, “the entire reality of the word is wholly absorbed in its function of being a sign. A word contains nothing that is indifferent to this function, nothing that would not have been engendered by it” (Vološinov, 1973, p.14).<sup>21</sup> In other words, no other sign embodies the role of fomenting signification as well as the word.

Although Vološinov (1973) does not necessarily articulate these reasons in a cause-and-effect interrelationship, one can say that the first reason seems strictly linked – as a cause and/or effect – to the second. In more detail, the Russian thinker believes that this second reason to claim a particularity of the word in face of all other signs refers to the fact that it does not have an exclusive commitment to a particular field of culture. For Vološinov (1973), the word is “*a neutral sign*” (Vološinov, 1973, p.14; emphasis in original), or – if one assumes the unfortunate assumptions such expression could currently be submitted to – a culturally free sign, meaning a sign that unlike other types of signs – “the artistic image, the religious symbol, the scientific formula, and the judicial ruling, etc” (Vološinov, 1973, p.10)<sup>22</sup> –, is not restricted to a field. As he asserts,

every other kind of semiotic material is specialized for some particular field of ideological creativity. Each field possesses its own ideological material and formulates signs and symbols specific to itself and not applicable in other fields. In these instances, a sign is created by some specific ideological function and remains inseparable from it. A word, in contrast, is neutral with respect to any specific ideological function. It can carry out ideological functions of *any* kind – scientific, aesthetic, ethical, religious (Vološinov, 1973, p.14; emphasis in original).<sup>23</sup>

As for the third reason to attest the “exclusive role of the word” (Vološinov, 1973, p.15),<sup>24</sup> its formulation in *MPL* is inextricably linked to a fundamental concept for the entire Vološinovian proposal, namely, the concept of “communication in human life,” a

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<sup>21</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

<sup>22</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

<sup>23</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

<sup>24</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

place that actually materializes a “life ideology.” As Vološinov (1973, p.14; emphasis in original) recalls:

there is that immense area of ideological communication that cannot be pinned down to any one ideological sphere: the area of *communication in human life, human behavior*. This kind of communication is extraordinarily rich and important. On one side, it links up directly with the processes of production; on the other, it is tangent to the spheres of the various specialized and fully fledged ideologies. In the following chapter, we shall speak in greater detail of this special area of behavioral, or life ideology. For the time being, we shall take note of the fact that the material of behavioral communication is preeminently the *word*.<sup>25</sup>

Obviously, in the aforementioned excerpt, we could have withdrawn the clarification about what will be seen in the next chapter of *MPL*. However, in our understanding, more than a secondary information, important only for those who read the book in full, such clarification reveals a fact that is frequently not considered: that which Vološinov (1973) will later treat as “social psychology” and, overall, as “life ideology,” assuming the material connection between the socioeconomic basis – the infrastructure – and the different fields of cultural creation – the superstructure – cannot exist if not materialized in the “communication in human life,” where the word is unarguably the most common sign. Thus, as it is considered the most common sign element, “the material of the verbal sign allows one most fully and easily to follow out the continuity of the dialectical process of change, a process which goes from the basis to superstructures” (Vološinov, 1973, p.24).<sup>26</sup>

It is in this formulation, in which the linguistic element is portrayed as the first principle to understanding the relationship between base and superstructure, that Vološinov (1973) highlights the “*social ubiquity*” (Vološinov, 1973, p.19; emphasis in original) of the word. As he understands, “the word is implicated in literally *each* and *every* act or contact between people – in collaboration on the job, in ideological exchanges, in the chance contacts of ordinary life, in political relationships, and so on”

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<sup>25</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

<sup>26</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

(Vološinov, 1973, p.19; our emphasis).<sup>27</sup> Therefore, it would not be unreasonable to distinguish it from other types of signs.

As a fourth special reason that raises the linguistic expression to a prominent position in relation to other signs, Vološinov (1973) mentions the relationship between word, body, and conscience. More specifically, the author of *MPL* highlights the fact that the word

is produced by the individual organism's own means without recourse to any equipment or any other kind of extracorporeal material. This has determined the role of word as *the semiotic material of inner life – of consciousness* (inner speech). Indeed, the consciousness could have developed only by having at its disposal material that was pliable and expressible by bodily means. And the word was exactly that kind of material. The word is available as the sign for, so to speak, inner employment: it can function as a sign in a state short of outward expression (Vološinov, 1973, p.14, emphasis in original).<sup>28</sup>

As can be seen from the above passage, the Russian thinker considers that other types of sign, of which he previously mentions “the artistic image, the religious symbol, the scientific formula, and the judicial ruling” (Vološinov, 1973, p.10),<sup>29</sup> cannot, by themselves, serve as an inner sign, that is, support consciousness. This position of inner sign, of a basic element of human consciousness is a property unique to the word, according to Vološinov (1973).

It is precisely because of this fourth reason that Vološinov (1973) can then assume the fifth and final reason that leads him to considering the word as an element of unique character in relation to other types of signs. For the *MPL* author, “it is owing to this exclusive role of the word as the medium of consciousness that *the word functions as an essential ingredient accompanying all ideological creativity whatsoever*” (Vološinov, 1973, p.15; emphasis in original).<sup>30</sup> This means that it is no longer about taking the word as a culturally free sign. More than that, what is enunciated is the fact that, because it is an element of inner discourse, that is, of the consciousness, the word is established as a condition for any other cultural creations. In the words of the Russian thinker,

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<sup>27</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

<sup>28</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

<sup>29</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

<sup>30</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

the process of understanding any ideological phenomenon at all (be it a picture, a piece of music, a ritual, or an act of human conduct) cannot operate without the participation of inner speech. All manifestations of ideological creativity – all other nonverbal signs – are bathed by, suspended in, and cannot be entirely segregated or divorced from the element of speech. (...) at the very same time, every single one of these ideological signs, though not supplantable by words, has support in and is accompanied by words, just as is the case with singing and its musical accompaniment (Vološinov, 1973, p.15).<sup>31</sup>

To end this review of the reasons that, according to Vološinov (1973), place the linguistic element in a situation of prominence in relation to the other signs, it is worth highlighting his statement, published in an essay dated 1930: “without words there could have been no science, or literature, etc. In a nutshell, no culture could have come to existence if mankind had been deprived of the possibility of social interaction, the materialized form of which is our language” (Vološinov, 1983, p.103).<sup>32</sup>

As we understand it, the passage from the 1930 article corroborates what, in view of the five reasons listed above, we seek to emphasize: *for Vološinov the word as a linguistic sign has primacy in relation to other types of signs.*

## **2 Benveniste and the Prerogative of the Language**

Those who read the *CGL* attentively are able to notice that, in the unfinished thoughts of the Geneva scholar, there is an interesting question that would occupy linguists in the future. Presenting Semiology as a science yet to be built, which would deal with the study of “*the life of signs within society*” and that, therefore, it would teach us “what constitutes signs, what laws govern them,” Saussure proposes that “the task of the linguist is to find out what makes language a special system within the mass of semiological data” (Saussure, 2011, p.16; emphasis in original).<sup>33</sup>

Although part of a thought in formation, this important task that Saussure (2011) assigns to linguists allows us to observe that, for him, one cannot place language at the

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<sup>31</sup> For reference, see footnote 6.

<sup>32</sup> VOLOŠINOV, V. N. What Is Language? In: SHUKMAN, A. (ed.). *Bakhtin School Papers*. Russian Poetics Translation, n. 10, Translation Noel Owen. Somerton: Old School House, 1983, pp.93-113.

<sup>33</sup> SAUSSURE, F. *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by Wade Baskin; edited by Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

same level of other semiological systems, that is, in the same level of other sign systems that express ideas, as it is the case of writing, of symbolic rites, of military signals etc (cf. Saussure, 2011 p.16).<sup>34</sup> In other words, this proposal makes it clear that for Saussure (2011), language is the main system among all, but linguists are still to bring to light that which places it in such a privileged position.

With this short review of the words of Saussure (2011), we understand that better conditions are set up for a more effective comprehension of what is said in Benveniste's text. Dated from 1969, the essay "The Semiology of Language" can be seen as the culmination of what Flores (2013, p.26) – when organizing Benveniste's enunciative theory for didactic purposes – called the "moment of semiotic/semantic distinction."<sup>35</sup> This is because, according to our understanding, this text synthesizes and organizes more precisely what has been drafted first in the article "The Levels of Linguistics Analysis" (1962/1964) and, later, in *La Forme et le Sens dans le Langage* (1966/1967).

As the first paragraph suggests, Benveniste's (1981) reflection aims to discuss a satisfactory answer to the following question: "what is the place of language among the systems of signs?" (Benveniste, 1981, p.5).<sup>36</sup> This question is established as a consequence of the enterprise that, to an extent, was performed in different ways, by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and by the previously mentioned Saussure: the attempt to formulate the basis of what would be a science of signs. It is worth noting that such a question comes close to the aforementioned Saussurean statement that "the task of the linguist is to find out what makes language a special system within the mass of semiological data" (Saussure, 2011, p.16).<sup>37</sup>

Assuming a critical tone to the Peircean proposal, Benveniste (1981) states that "as for language, Peirce made no precise or specific formulations" (Benveniste, 1981, p.5).<sup>38</sup> And more: according to Benveniste (1981), the American philosopher "never concerned with the way language functioned, if he even paid attention to it" (Benveniste, 1981, p.5).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> For reference, see footnote 33.

<sup>35</sup> In Portuguese: "momento da distinção semiótico/semântico."

<sup>36</sup> BENVENISTE, E. The Semiology of Language. Translated by Genette Ashby and Adelaide Russo. Supplement of *Semiotica*, 1981, pp.5-23.

<sup>37</sup> For reference, see footnote 33.

<sup>38</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

<sup>39</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

For Benveniste (1981), Peirce's formulations cannot assist the linguist in the construction of a "semiology of language as a system" (Benveniste, 1981, p.6).<sup>40</sup> If not for other reasons, mainly due to a certain hypersemioticism that the Syrian-French linguist observes in Peirce's proposal:

the difficulty that prevents any specific application of Peirce's concepts (except for the well-known but much too general tripartite framework) is that the sign is definitively posited as the base of the entire universe, and functions simultaneously as the principle of definition for each element and as the principle of explanation for the entire ensemble, be it abstract or concrete. Man himself is a sign; his thought is a sign; his every emotion is a sign (Benveniste, 1981, p.6).<sup>41</sup>

In other words, Benveniste (1981) understands that, in the American's formulations, everything is a sign, there is no distinction between the sign and the – so to speak – signified object. Therefore, there is no relationship of significance and, as all signs work in identical ways, there is no sign system to be discussed.

This issue that Benveniste (1981) identifies in the basis of Peirce's proposal will not be identified, in the same way, in the Saussurean program. According to Benveniste (1981), since "for Saussure, in contrast to Peirce, the sign is a linguistic concept which extends more widely to certain orders of anthropological and social data," it is possible to state that, in Saussure's thought, signs have a domain area that, "besides language (...) includes systems homologous to it" (Benveniste, 1981, p.9).<sup>42</sup>

Benveniste (1981), however, does not fail to notice a certain problem that can be apprehended in the *CGL*: at the same time that it is said that Linguistics is part of Semiology, this one regarded as a future science that "would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them" (Saussure, 2011, p.16),<sup>43</sup> there is a presentation of the linguistic sign as being the instrument that characterizes the semiology proper to Linguistics. In other words, Benveniste (1981) realizes that, contrary to the idea that Semiology "would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them" (Saussure, 2011, p.16),<sup>44</sup> Saussure (2011) already shows that Semiology, as a broader science, can only be constituted from

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<sup>40</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

<sup>41</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

<sup>42</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

<sup>43</sup> For reference, see footnote 33.

<sup>44</sup> For reference, see footnote 33.

a solid basis, which is Linguistics. Thus, for Benveniste (1981), the fact that Saussure (2011) considers that Linguistics, as the science that studies the main of semiological systems, can be thought of as the model for Semiology – “linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system” (Saussure, 2011, p.68)<sup>45</sup> – reveals two facts: first, that Saussure’s thought “is less clear on the relationship of linguistics to semiology, the science of the systems of signs” (Benveniste, 1981, p.9); second, that “semiology, as a science of signs, remains latent in Saussure’s work as a prospect which in its most precise features models itself on linguistics” (Benveniste, 1981, p.9).<sup>46</sup>

Still in regard to the connection between Linguistics and Semiology, Benveniste (1981) understands that Saussure (2011) fails to define the *nature* of this connection. On this, Saussure (2011) would have limited himself to evoking the principle of arbitrariness of the sign, “which would govern the totality of systems of expression, and above all, language” (Benveniste, 1981, p.9).<sup>47</sup> In his lesson from January 6, 1969, in a course on Semiology at the *Collège de France*, Benveniste explains his criticism of Saussure (2011) regarding this aspect: “he [Saussure] was happy enough in leaving the task of defining the sign, its place etc. to future semiology. He only says that language was the ‘main’ semiological system. But, from which point of view?” (Benveniste, 2014, p.103)<sup>48</sup> Last, still in *SL*, Benveniste points out the limitation of references to other sign systems by Saussure (2011).

These findings regarding the Saussurean program enable Benveniste (1981) to emphasize that the object of Semiology cannot be only the sign systems considered individually. Before that, at least equally, Semiology should also investigate its own relationships with the various systems that constitute it. Thus, given what was observed in Saussure (2011), there is nothing more natural than beginning with the only system that can be used here as a model to reach better understanding of Semiology: language. It is, therefore, through this kind of syllogistic reasoning that one can conceive that the main

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<sup>45</sup> For reference, see footnote 33.

<sup>46</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

<sup>47</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

<sup>48</sup> In Portuguese: “ele [Saussure] se contentou em remeter à semiologia futura a tarefa de definir o signo, seu lugar etc. Ele somente disse que a língua era o ‘principal’ sistema semiológico. Porém, sob qual ponto de vista?”

problem of Semiology – the only one that, once solved, can shed light on it – is “the status of language among the systems of signs” (Benveniste, 1981, p.10).<sup>49</sup>

To reflect on this capital issue of Semiology, Benveniste (1981) states that “the common characteristic of all these systems and the criterion for their inclusion in semiology is their signifying property, or *meaning*, and their composition into units of meaning, or *signs*” (Benveniste, 1981, p.11; emphasis in original).<sup>50</sup> This statement is followed by a sophisticated argument that intends to list two *groups of characteristics that can establish the necessary distinctions between the different systems*: on the one hand, the group of the external settings of a given system; on the other, the group of internal settings. The first group brings together the *mode of operation* of a given system – defined from the bodily sense to which the system is directed – and its *domain of validity* – understood as the field of human activity in which such a system is socially legitimized. In turn, the second group encompasses *nature and number of signs* of a given system – that is, the quantity and constitution of the signs that make up the system – as well as its *type of operation* – understood as the type of relationship that is established among the signs of that system.

Thus, Benveniste (1981) advances in his proposal stating that the establishment of the four distinctive characteristics, included in two different groups, makes it possible “to extract two principles which pertain to the relationships between semiotic systems” (Benveniste, 1981, p.12).<sup>51</sup>

The first principle, called the *principle of nonredundancy* between systems, advocates that semiological systems of different basis cannot be used to – so to speak – state something that is the same. In the words of Benveniste (1981), “nonredundancy in the universe of sign systems occurs as a result of the nonconvertibility of systems with different bases. Man does not have several distinct systems at his disposal for the *same* signifying relationship” (Benveniste, 1981, p.12; emphasis in original).<sup>52</sup>

In turn, the second principle, which we can call the *principle of the non-transsystematicity of the sign*, consists in the fact that “the value of a sign is defined only

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<sup>49</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

<sup>50</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

<sup>51</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

<sup>52</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

in the system which incorporates it” (Benveniste, 1981, p.12).<sup>53</sup> This means that what we believe to be the same sign serving two different semiological systems only appears to be the same, because, in the end, its value is established by the relationship it draws with the other signs of its system and not only by its identity.<sup>54</sup>

As we have seen, in *Semiology of the Language*, the progress in Benvenistian reasoning is due to an outstanding ability to chain arguments and infer the possible implications. This is also the movement carried out in face of the two principles previously exposed – the principle of non-redundancy between systems and the principle of non-transsystematicity of the sign. For Benveniste (1981), the assertion of such principles leads to an important question: “are these systems, then, just so many closed worlds, having nothing between them except a relationship of coexistence, itself perhaps fortuitous?” (Benveniste, 1981, p.12)<sup>55</sup>

More than simply negating that the only possible relationship between the different systems of signs is that of coexistence, Benveniste (1981) affirms the fundamental character of another relationship, the *semiotic relationship*. For the author, “the relationship laid down between semiotic systems must itself be semiotic in nature” (Benveniste, 1981, p.12).<sup>56</sup> That is to say, in Benveniste’s perspective, there is a relationship between different systems of signs in which one presents itself as an *interpreting system* and the other as an *interpreted system*. Such a relationship has the fact that both systems of signs are themselves nourished by the same cultural environment as its *conditio sine qua non*.

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<sup>53</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

<sup>54</sup> Regarding this issue, it is worth noting the following statement by Benveniste (1981): “two systems can have the same sign in common without being, as a result, synonymous or redundant; that is to say, the *functional difference* of a sign alone matters, not its *substantial identity*” (Benveniste, 1981, p.12; our emphasis). As we believe, this Benvenistian formulation of the *principle of non-transsystematicity of the sign* allows us to see a resonance of the notion of value proposed in the *CGL*. It also brings to mind one of the key elements of Ernst Cassirer’s initial work, who published the celebrated *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff: Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen der Erkenntniskritik (Concept of substance and concept of function: investigations into the basic issues of knowledge criticism)* in 1910, which, as is known, has a clear resonance in other works by the author, such as in the volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* dedicated to language. It seems to us that the proximity between *CGL*’s notion of value and Cassirer’s work, which is practically contemporary, deserves further investigation.

<sup>55</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

<sup>56</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

Thus, after an excerpt dedicated to comparisons between language and music, and between language and “so-called plastic arts” (Benveniste, 1981, p.14),<sup>57</sup> Benveniste’s ideas (1969) lead us to understand that, *as society can be taken as a system of signs, it can be said that the relationship between the system of signs called “language” and the system of signs called “society” is configured as a semiotic relationship* (cf. Benveniste, 1981, p.18). More precisely, a semiotic relationship in which language, as a system of signs, interprets society, also taken as a system of signs.<sup>58</sup>

Rephrasing our previous notes, we will say, then, that the proposed formulation in Semiology of Language not only resembles, but, rather, establishes itself as Benveniste’s own response to Saussure (2011). Taken literally, if “the task of the linguist is to find out what makes language a special system within the mass of semiological data” (Saussure, 2011, p.16),<sup>59</sup> Benveniste (1981) has fulfilled the proposed task: what gives language, as a system of signs, a privileged place compared to other systems is exactly its unique capacity to interpret all others, without it being able to be interpreted by them. In this sense, we are interested in subscribing to the words of the Syrian-French linguist on the semiotic relationship:

from the standpoint of language it is the fundamental relationship, the one which divides the systems into articulate systems, because they exhibit their own semiotics, and articulated systems, whose semiotics appears only through the grid of another mode of expression. Thus we can introduce and justify the principle that *language is in the interpreting system (interpretant) of all other semiotic systems. No other system has at its disposal a ‘language’ by which it can categorize and interpret itself according to its semiotic distinctions, while language can, in principle, categorize and interpret everything, including itself* (Benveniste, 1981, pp.17-18; our emphasis).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

<sup>58</sup> It is necessary to clarify that, for Benveniste, in “The Semiology of Language” (1969) and in “Structure de la Langue,” Structure de la Société (1968/1970), the term interpret and its correlates – that is, interpretant and interpreted – are used in a very unique sense. Without going into too much detail, we shall say that if the role of the interpretant is to interpret, in the context of these writings, to interpret is to “make the interpreted exist and transform it into an intelligible notion” [In Portuguese: “fazer existir o interpretado e transformá-lo em noção inteligível”] (Benveniste, 2006, p.98). Therefore, there is nothing strange in the Syrian-French linguist thinking that, in terms of a semiological relationship, “language alone permits society to exist” [In Portuguese: “somente a língua torna possível a sociedade”] (Benveniste, 1981, p.18).

<sup>59</sup> For reference, see footnote 33.

<sup>60</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

That said, it is now important to notice that, more than performing the task left by the Geneva scholar – we reinforce saying *what* makes language a special system in the set of semiological facts – Benveniste (1981) proposes to take a step further: clarify the *reason* for which the language, as a sign system, is the interpretative system of all other sign systems (cf. Benveniste, 2006, p.64). For him, in this articulation between *responding* and *justifying* – a striking characteristic of his texts –, the answer to this question must avoid confusing the causes with the consequences; therefore, it cannot be arranged in terms that claim the dissemination and effectiveness of the language in the processes of interaction.<sup>61</sup>

Long before that, the linguist attests that the special condition of language in the whole of Semiology is due to the fact that “it is invested with *double meaning*” (Benveniste, 1981, p.19, emphasis in original).<sup>62</sup> This means that at the same time that the language includes a mode of signification that is *semiotic*, taken as being related to the system of signs, it also encompasses a mode of *semantic* signification, which is plural and concerns the discourse. The first mode, the author reminds us, is validated by the criterion of *recognition*, identification; the second, in turn, is validated by the criterion of *understanding*. It is important to give place to the words of Benveniste (1981, p.20) himself:

it is the prerogative of language to comprise simultaneously the meaning of signs and the meaning of enunciation. Therein originates its major strength, that of creating a second level of enunciation, where it becomes possible to retain meaningful remarks about meaning. Through this metalinguistic faculty we discover the origin of the interpreting relationship through which language embraces all other systems.<sup>63</sup>

With this formulation, it is important to emphasize that Benveniste (1981) does not only present what, from his perspective, gives primacy to the linguistic. More than

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<sup>61</sup> We think that it is possible to perceive one of the elements that differ Benveniste (1981) from Vološinov (1973) more clearly at this point. For Benveniste (1981), what we can conceive as the social omnipresence of the word, an element highlighted by Vološinov (1973), is not the cause of the singular place suitable to the linguistic in relation to the other types of sign. Rather, such a condition is only a consequence of what truly gives this linguistic uniqueness: its double significance.

<sup>62</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

<sup>63</sup> For reference, see footnote 36.

that, this formulation allows the *SL* author to go beyond the concept of language presented in the *CGL*. That is to say, when proposing an articulation between semiotics and semantics, Benveniste (1981) gives rise to a conception in which the language is a system of signs, but not only a system of signs; rather, it also encompasses “the event that each statement raises” (Flores, 2017, p.1023).<sup>64</sup> *This is, therefore, Benveniste’s (1981) reason for admitting the primacy of the linguistic: the double significance of language, insofar as it encompasses the system of signs and enunciation (discourse), semiotics and semantics, allows the language to interpret the world and itself. From this privilege of the language comes the primacy of the linguistic.*

## **Final Considerations**

We have announced in our “Preliminary considerations” that, at this final moment, we would make a small “deviation,” in relation to the line of reasoning adopted in the course of this text. In other words, we have anticipated that, more than addressing the investigative path about the language that each of the authors presented here provides, we would seek to outline some displacement, for the scope of reflection on teaching practice, of what we consider, in each one, the *primacy of the linguistic*. In particular, we would do some shifting to think about the curricular guidelines that have occupied so much public debates.

There has been, therefore, from the beginning, an explicit purpose that has guided the traced path. This purpose, however, has not been taken here as a means of reaching an end, but as a means of reaching an observation post for language. Let us explain.

We believe that our path has made it clear that the two thinkers mobilized here – Vološinov and Benveniste – allow us to argue in favor of a primacy of the linguistic, in relation to other symbolic systems. Therefore, there is a coincidence regarding this aspect. However, such coincidence does not prevent us from having a glimpse of the uniqueness of each one’s reasoning.

It is important to remember that Vološinov (1973) presents five points that make the word the sign par excellence: its sign purity, its cultural neutrality, its outstanding

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<sup>64</sup> In Portuguese: “o acontecimento que cada enunciação suscita.”

participation in everyday communication, its condition as a sign of consciousness and its mandatory presence as a “companion” of any cultural product. Certainly, we would not infringe the author’s system of thought if we considered such points as *specifics of the linguistic*, which, in the absence of a better expression, can be taken as *external* to the sign itself. That is, specificities pertaining to the socio-cultural functioning of the word.

Benveniste (1981), in turn, by highlighting the dual significance of language, that is, the semiotic and semantic spheres, as something that places the language in a pre-eminently significant position as a system – a position from which any pragmatic consideration that can be made is only a consequence and not a cause – it sheds light on the inner workings of the language. Well understood, in that linguist’s opinion, it is the articulation in two dimensions, that of semiotics (of the *significance of signs*) and that of semantics (of the *significance of enunciation*), which allows the language to speak of itself and of the other systems, revealing itself as the symbolic system par excellence. Here, we will say, *internal specifics* are given.

In this sense, if it is true that, on the one hand, Vološinov (1973) tells us that it is enough to see the socio-cultural functioning of verbal language to be convinced of its primacy; it is no less true that, on the other hand, Benveniste (1981) tells us that it is enough to see how the language works in its immanence and in contrast to the other systems of signs to be convinced of its preeminence. *In this way, external and internal specificities are brought together to raise the linguistic to a place of preeminence.*

Now, would such specificities not be enough to warn anyone that the teaching of Portuguese language in schools, before being structured on a discussion around languages, should be built on the *primacy of the linguistic*? That is an observation point for language that would require a fresh start from all of us!

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### **Statement of Authorship and Responsibility for Published Content**

The authors *Valdir do Nascimento Flores*, *Carlos Alberto Faraco* and *Filipe Almeida Gomes* have equally engaged in the production of the article “The Properties of Word, the Prerogative of Language: Specificities and Primacy of Language in Vološinov and Benveniste” by conceiving, writing, proofreading the paper and approving its final version. As such, they are responsible for all aspects of the work and guarantee the accuracy and integrity of any part of the text.

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