

*Subject, Memory and Ideology:
Meaning Effects about the illiterate
subject and his inscription into the
order of discourse*

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the meanings that traverse the discourse of a Black adult who is illiterate, based on the account of his schooling trajectory in Youth and Adult Education (EJA). From the perspective of Materialist Discourse Analysis, we discuss conditions of production, subjectivation, and discursive formations that stabilize, displace, and reconfigure meanings about the self and the school. The corpus comprises three discursive sequences taken from an interview. The specific objectives are: (i) to discuss the impacts of EJA on the participant's life; (ii) to analyze the effects of meaning mobilized when he describes his literacy process. The theoretical framework includes Althusser, Pêcheux, Orlandi, Indursky, and Arroyo. The results show processes of resignification: from recognizing historical and ideological barriers to rupturing with sayings that kept him away from school, with slippages between discursive formations that reorient the subject's place in the order of discourse. We conclude that, in this case, EJA operates as a space for the production of meanings that fosters agency and the subject's inscription in the literate universe.

Keywords:

Black subject; discursive formations; conditions of production.

Resumo:

Este artigo analisa os sentidos que atravessam o discurso de um sujeito negro, adulto e analfabeto, a partir do relato de sua trajetória de escolarização na Educação de Jovens e Adultos (EJA). À luz da Análise do Discurso Materialista, discutem-se condições de produção, assujeitamento e formações discursivas que estabilizam, deslocam e reconfiguram sentidos sobre si e sobre a escola. O corpus compõe-se de três sequências discursivas recortadas de uma entrevista. Os objetivos específicos são: (i) discutir os impactos da EJA na vida do participante; (ii) analisar os efeitos de sentido mobilizados quando expõe seu processo de alfabetização. O referencial inclui Althusser (1970), Pêcheux (1997), Orlandi (1984, 2010, 2015), Indursky (2000) e Arroyo (2017). Os resultados evidenciam processos de resignificação: do reconhecimento de barreiras históricas e ideológicas à ruptura com dizeres que o mantinham afastado da escola, com deslizamentos entre formações discursivas que reorientam o lugar do sujeito na ordem do discurso. Conclui-se que a EJA opera, neste caso, como espaço de produção de sentidos que favorece a agência e a inscrição do sujeito no universo letrado.

Palavras-chave:

Sujeito Negro; formações discursivas; condições de produção.

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Subject, Memory, and Ideology: Meaning Effects on the black illiterate Subject and his Inscription into the Order of Discourse

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INTRODUCTION

In Brazil, the schooling of youth and adults historically reflects social inequalities rooted in slavery, racism, and structural exclusion. Even though education is a constitutional right, the access to literacy remains uneven, particularly among black populations who have been systematically marginalized from educational policies and cultural capital. In this context, the discourse of late-attained literacy individuals reveals not only biographical elements but also ideological interpellations that shape how they recognize themselves as illiterate subjects in the social order.

This study investigates the meanings produced in the discourse of a black illiterate subject who attained literacy at the age of 18, focusing on how he constructs and reconstructs his identity through narrative. The interview presented here offers material for analyzing how memory operates as a space of conflict between exclusionary past experiences and the desire for social participation through literacy.

This research is anchored in Materialist Discourse Analysis (MDA), mobilizing the categories of production conditions, discursive formations, discursive memory, subjectivation, paraphrase, and polysemy, in dialogue with Althusser, Pêcheux, Orlandi, and Indursky. From this perspective, discourse is not a mere expression of the individual, but a material space where ideology acts, producing positions and effects of meaning that determine who can speak and under which circumstances.

Thus, when the interviewee narrates his trajectory, he does not simply report events of his life. He repositions himself in discourse by revisiting memories shaped by racism and by lack of access to schooling, while also constructing new ways of identifying himself within Adult Literacy Education in Brazil. This research describes such displacements in the order of discourse, contributing to reflections on literacy, subjectivation, and social transformation.

This work is structured as follows: the introduction contextualizes the theme, presents the discursive research question, as well as the objectives, methodology, and results; subsequently, it briefly approaches the trajectory of youth and adult education and discusses its role in the identity re-signification of the subject; then, the analysis section examines the conditions of production, discursive formations, and the meanings that traverse the subject throughout his literacy process; and, finally, the concluding remarks present the outcomes achieved.

YOUTH AND ADULT EDUCATION (EJA): PATHWAYS FROM PAST TO PRESENT

Regarding Youth and Adult Education (EJA), Miranda, Sousa, and Pereira (2016) states that its first traces in Brazil is dated back to Jesuit missions, which, through the schooling of indigenous people, promoted catechesis and incorporation into Christian religious values. Both children and adults were taught.

Education, in that context, was not an end in itself but a way to a religious and political expansion. There was no focus on the intellectual autonomy of the individual through teaching, but using education as a way to align indigenous with an order alien to their own culture, mediated by faith.

Due to the arrival of the Portuguese Court and, later, the expulsion of the Jesuits, the colony underwent decisive changes, and, consequently, adult schooling did not remain consistent. Although secular initiatives appeared sporadically, the access to instruction became far from being universal. Even when, the idea of education could “solve” national problems was widespread, during the end of the Empire and the beginning of the Republic, the opportunities to adult education remained limited and inconsistent.

Evening schools were established in the Court in imperial period. The decree No. 7,031-A, September 6th, 1878, defined that “in the evening courses, any free or freed male over fourteen years old might enroll at any time,” further determining that the enrollment would be conducted by teachers “based on forms issued by the respective Delegates,” recording birthplace, parentage, age, profession, and residence (Arts. 5–6). This decree marked a formal window of access for workers and freed people, yet, conditioned by administrative and sanitary restrictions, which limited significantly the policy’s effectiveness (Brasil, 1878).

Concerning the relationship between schooling and political citizenship, Saraiva Law (Brasil, 1881) introduced an electoral reform that, effectively, excluded illiterate citizens from voting — a central measure for understanding why “combating illiteracy” became a recurrent agenda in the early twentieth century (Brasil, 2022).

In summary, adult education remained a privilege for a few group, being, frequently, instrumentalized for economic and social purposes. In other words, training workers for roles defined by the dominant classes. Schools often worked as an Ideological State Apparatus, that is, a device that contributes to “the reproduction of relations in production,” as had already observed Althusser (1970, p. 62–63)

In the early twentieth century, anti-illiteracy leagues emerged (in 1910). They wanted to eradicate illiteracy immediately and linked literacy campaigns to the expansion of the electorate. Simultaneously, the school network expanded, but in an uneven way across regions and social groups (Friedrich *et al.*, 2010).

From the decade of 1930, the Constitution of 1934 and the institutionalization of a National Education Plan strengthened the role of the State for education, and so, progressively expanding access and opening space for EJA policies — though marked by discontinuities and shifts in direction over the decades. During the military regime, the MOBREAL (Brazilian Literacy Movement) was created. However, in 1980, it was finished and replaced by Educar Foundation, which retained part of the former structure and lacked sufficient financial support, compromising its effectiveness (Friedrich *et al.*, 2010).

The most stable normative framework was consolidated by the Law No. 9,394/1996 (LDB), which guarantees the provision of regular schooling for young and adults, with characteristics and modalities suited to their needs and circumstances, ensuring access and permanence for workers. This

guideline remains in force, aiming to repair interrupted educational paths and promote continuity of learning (Brasil, 1996).

Despite institutional advances, inequalities persist. According to the 2022 Census conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the illiteracy rate dropped to 7.0%, yet remains disproportionately high among racial groups: Blacks (10.1%) and Browns (8.8%) have more than the double rate observed among Whites (4.3%). These data help to delineate the EJA student profile, which encompasses intersecting educational, socioeconomic, and racial vulnerabilities (Teixeira, 2024).

In this horizon, EJA is not limited to reading, writing, and arithmetic, but represents a right to integral education and to the recognition of lived knowledge — a process of (re)signification of oneself and his world, in which historically subalternized subjects contest the absence of knowledge and claim conditions of voice in the public sphere. As Arroyo (2017, p. 14) writes: “Other children, other adolescents, youth, and adults from peripheries, from rural areas, workers, the poor, blacks, indigenous, and Quilombola peoples [...] do not struggle merely for the school knowledge to which they are entitled. They fight for the right to absent knowledge [...] to understand themselves.”

METHODOLOGY

From the perspective of Materialist Discourse Analysis (MDA), a set of Discursive Sequences (DS) excerpted from an interview is analyzed, considering the conditions of production, discursive formations, and the subject’s position. The procedures include analytic-interpretative reading, controlled paraphrase, and confrontation with discursive memory, aiming to describe meaning effects related to late schooling and written inscription.

The methodology used to analyze the corpus is Materialist Discourse Analysis, proposed by Michel Pêcheux and further developed by Brazilian scholars. An interview was conducted with a black illiterate subject, who began schooling in the early 1990s, at the age of 18, motivated by the expectation of improving his life through studying. The reports constitute the corpus of the investigation, and three Discursive Sequences (DS) will be analyzed due to their discursive representativeness in the subject’s trajectory toward literacy.

The theoretical foundation follows the contributions of Althusser (1970), Pêcheux (1997), Orlandi (1984, 2010, 2015), and Indursky (2000) to discuss the central notions of Materialist Discourse Analysis, as well as Arroyo (2017), who reflects on youth and adult education, among other authors who approach the theme. The categories discussed include subject, conditions of production, discursive formations, paraphrase, and polysemy.

ANALYSIS

Before entering the discursive materiality itself, it is necessary to understand that this study will employ two instances of reading: from the perspective of the discourse analyst and from the perspective of the subject-reader. Reading, oriented by the position of the discourse analyst — who stands outside the conditions of production of the subject under examination — treats the text through its discursivity, according to the determinations of Orlandi (2005, p. 60). The author explains that: “The principle of these reading practices would consist in relating what is said in one discourse and what is said in another, what is said in one way and what is said in another, seeking to ‘listen’ to the presence of the unspoken in what is spoken: a presence produced by a necessary absence.”

Moreover, there is also a focus on reading from the subject position, in which “[...] the social place from which we state, marks the discourse with the force of the locution represented by that place [...]” (Orlandi, 2010, p. 16). That is, reading is seen as a practice of a discursive and ideological nature, operating in the process of constitution of the subject in their position as reader-subject, through socio-discursive traversals in which subjectivation is permeated by the multiple possibilities of reading, broadly defined by Orlandi (2008, p. 7). Thus, reading:

[...] in its broadest sense, can be understood as ‘attribution of meanings.’ That is why it is used indistinctly for both writing and orality. When faced with a sample of language of any kind, there is the possibility of reading. One can therefore speak of reading both of the shop assistant’s everyday speech and of Aristotle’s text.

In line with the author’s concept, reading — whether oral or textual — allows the attribution of meanings concerning one’s worldview, as well as the signification of the subject in the position of reader-subject.

Thus, the human being ceases to be an individual (which he never was), that is, “the individual is always already an ‘individual interpellated into subject’” (Pêcheux, 1997, p. 141), and undergoes the process of subjectivation as he is constituted and signified through interpellation, being traversed by the system of ideas and representations that dominate him: “The subject is constituted and signified himself by being affected (‘the individual is interpellated as subject by ideology’) by language and by the world (relation of the symbolic and history: ‘discursivity is the inscription of the effects of language [...]’)” (Orlandi, 2005, p. 46).

This process occurs in both directions: in the reader position, as already explained, and also in the author position, because “the subject, in turn, by saying, signifies himself and signifies the world itself” (Orlandi, 2005, p. 44). Therefore, the author position is not restricted to written textual production, but refers to any discursive production, as addressed by Orlandi (2008, p. 56):

The subject constitutes himself as author in constituting the text. The author is the place in which the unity of the subject is constructed. It is where the subject’s totalizing project is accomplished. This is one of the dimensions in which the interpellation of the individual into subject is revealed.

Considering reading as an instrument of signification, this work understands the unsettling position of the illiterate subject. For such a subject, both the reader-subject and the author-subject positions are affected, since the access to the reading of codified text through the linguistic system — and consequently to its production of meanings — is denied to him.

Thus, this subject ceases to have access to various discursive materialities that are available only to subjects inserted in the dominant discursive order, in which literacy becomes fundamental. By not being inserted in this order — occupied by literate subjects — he undergoes a social and discursive displacement and, for this reason, is always situated at the margins.

As a consequence of this displacement, his discourse assumes effects of illegitimacy, and the subject undergoes a process of silencing, constituted by “[...] a process of containment of meanings and asphyxia of the subject, because it is a way of not allowing the subject to circulate through different discursive formations” (Orlandi, 2008, p. 60). In this way, the one who does not master reading through the decoding of written text occupies a subject position deemed inferior to that of the literate subject.

One cannot speak about the lived experience of an Adult Literacy Education student solely based on what is read in books, magazines, and newspapers, since these are stories of subjects who face internal, external, and particular challenges, who have shared and share the classroom with several others — each with their own reality, singularities, experiences, and struggles.

Therefore, data alone about projects implemented and completed with the purpose of reaching these subjects cannot adequately narrate the impact of classroom practices as well as those who have actually experienced them. Such conditions are evidenced in the report presented through the Discursive Sequences (DS) below, collected from an interview with a subject who was among so many “night passengers”.

He is a male, black subject, married, currently 50 years old and a state civil servant. As a child, he lived in a rural area and, from very early on, needed to work in agriculture with other family members. Thus, school tools (books, notebooks, pencils, erasers) were replaced with work tools such as hoe, sickle, and machete. In this way, he had his basic right to attend school denied, without any opportunity to study.

Here follows the first Discursive Sequence:

DS1 –“The first time I saw the possibility of studying was when, by chance, I came to live in São Luís in 1991, at the age of 18 [...] At that moment, I did not feel motivated, because I was ashamed that, at 18, I would go to school to learn how to read. In my mind, the time to study had already passed.”

In the first discursive sequence, one observes the identification process through which the subject is dominated by an ideological formation. He constitutes himself as such by responding to the call of the ideology to which he belongs, through discursive repetition. This process, elucidated by Althusser (1970, p. 94), explains “that the category of the subject is constitutive of every ideology insofar as every ideology has as its function (which defines it) the ‘constitution’ of concrete individuals as subjects.”

Thus, whenever the subject says something, his utterance is caught in a web of discourses composed of discursive formations that define what meanings can be produced. Ferreira (2001, p. 15) explains that “*Discursive formation [...] is the matrix of meanings that regulates what the subject can and must say, and also what he cannot and must not say [...]*”. Therefore, the conformism of the subject in relation to the situation imposed by the system occurs through this process of subjectivation, since he finds himself in a context in which the conditions of production lead him to repeat a discourse of acceptance present in the social and family organization to which he belonged.

Repetition is produced through memory, which Pêcheux (1999) elucidates as the dialectic of repetition, through which the pre-constructed is established. Through this regularization of saying, the subject identifies with the pre-constructed discursive formation that dominates him.

This takes place through interpellation, when the individual responds to his subject position. Pêcheux (1997, p. 163) posits: “*We can now specify that the interpellation of the individual as subject of his discourse is carried out through the identification (of the subject) with the discursive formation that dominates him (that is, in which he is constituted as a subject) [...]*”.

In this way, when the subject reports the reasons why schooling ceased to be a viable option, he situates himself within the conditions that led him to take part prematurely in family labor activities. In his discourse, one hears the reverberation of the utterances of his parents and grandparents that originate from these same conditions — the discourse works through memory and manifests itself in the sayings recounted.

The context in which the subject appears in this discursive situation is constituted by immediate and broader circumstances that cannot be understood in isolation: one is tied to the other. Orlandi (2010, p. 15) names this process conditions of production:

The conditions of production include the subjects and the situation. The situation, in turn, may be thought in a strict sense and in a broad sense. In the strict sense, it comprises the circumstances of enunciation, the here and now of saying, the immediate context. In the broad sense, the situation comprises the broader socio-historical and ideological context. If we separate the immediate context and the broad context, it is for explanatory purposes; in practice, we cannot dissociate one from the other, that is, in every language situation these contexts operate jointly.

Subjects are always affected by the conditions of production; they enable discourses inscribed in history to claim meanings. The discourse that dominated the interviewee presented mechanisms associated with the feeling of shame. For him, studying was something outside of his context. There was full identification with the discursive formation that dominated him, through the utterance that the time for studying “had already passed” — mere functioning of the bourgeois discourse, which tries to silence class struggle (Silva Sobrinho, 2017), a way through which subjects belonging to the dominant class keep working-class subjects in subaltern conditions.

Thus, one sees that the discourse of the subject, given the conditions of production in which he found himself, reflects his subjectivation stemming from the discursive formation that dominated him, producing what Indursky (2000, p. 72) defines as overlapping: “This overlapping reveals a full identification of the discourse subject with the subject-form of the DF that affects the subject, which marks his reduplication of identification and, consequently, the return to the same.” This process emerges as linguistic marks in the subject’s discourse.

In this excerpt, when he states that “the time to study had already passed,” the subject reiterates the discourse of his family members, who, like him, had to give up basic education to work toward supporting themselves and their families; and, due to this circumstance, they could not envision the possibility of attending school — much less aspiring to better living conditions.

This discourse points toward other memories functioning through the pre-constructed, which Pêcheux (1997, p. 164) clarifies as the one that: “corresponds to the ‘always-already-there’ of ideological interpellation that provides-imposes ‘reality’ and its ‘meaning’ in the form of universality.”

It thus refers to the colonial memory of a marginalized, abandoned, and silenced people who, since emancipation, had to renounce possibilities of access to education in the name of survival, thereby constituting subjects who, to this day, suffer from the stigmas society places upon their capacities when confronted with the possibility of schooling — leading them to repeat what has already been said.

This process of repetition, from the already-said, from the same, is conceptualized by Orlandi (1984, p. 11) as: “*paraphrase (the same, the given): the process through which one attempts to keep meaning equal under different forms.*” Paraphrase enables the stabilization of meanings, and this process occurs through the repetition of sayings.

However, this subject soon encounters another context, marked by a different discursive formation: the notion that he could benefit from the education made available in São Luís — the *big city* (another paraphrase linked to people coming from rural or less developed regions). This idea reverberates in his discourse and may also be perceived in Arroyo’s (2017, p. 37–38) reflection:

Collective identities of class, race, and gender assert themselves in these itineraries from labor to education. These exercises-itineraries of building recognition of belonging to segregated, victimized, marginalized, but resistant collectives, are a construction that emerges in childhood and adolescence, in the lived experiences of the poor, working, black, rural family.

DS2 - “But life in the city had some challenges for an illiterate person, such as taking a bus. So, I left the shame aside and convinced myself that it was necessary to learn how to read to take the bus at least.” (*Mas a vida na cidade tinha alguns desafios para um analfabeto, como, por exemplo, pegar um ônibus. Assim, eu fui deixando a vergonha de lado e me convenci de que era necessário aprender a ler pra, pelo menos, pegar o ônibus.*)

Moving to the capital put the subject in contact with the dominant discursive formation of the social organization in which he becomes inserted. In this new conjuncture, reading and writing are valued in a way that simple everyday practices become challenges due to lack of access to printed information surrounding him. This can be observed when the subject says: “life in the city had some challenges for an illiterate person, such as taking a bus.” Such recognition drives the individual to distance himself from his previous discursive formation and accept the possibility of attending school.

The imposition of the subject-form of the juridical discourse shows that possessing legal registration (such as an ID number) is not enough: one must be inserted into the universe of language. Without this, the subject is silenced by a system that circulates through spaces accessible only through the linguistic symbol and its mastery, which enables access to spaces of power.

There is no longer full acceptance of the previously imposed condition, and the subject allows himself to begin the process of literacy. A slippage, rupture, or displacement of meanings occurs as the subject takes a new position by accepting to be literate. This process of breaking, sliding, and shifting meanings is what Orlandi (1984) defines as polysemy.

It is essential to emphasize that, leaving a discursive formation that oppressed him and migrating to another, the processes of domination and oppression do not cease. On the contrary, domination operates in other ways, preserving what drives history: class struggle.

Although the subject continues to claim in his discourse that attending school is conditioned only by the need of learning how to read, he becomes interpellated by the discursive formation to which he is exposed in this new conjuncture, as may be observed in the following discursive sequence:

DS3 – “I didn’t have any goal except learning when I started. Later, I realized that something else was possible; why not live from my own studies? So, the goals changed, and the end of this story you already know...” (*Não tinha nenhum objetivo, a não ser aprender quando comecei. Depois, vi que era possível mais; por que não viver do próprio estudo? Assim, os objetivos mudaram, e o final dessa história você já conhece...*)

The moment of rupture with the discursive formation with which the subject once identified becomes marked when he asks himself: “*why not live from my own studies?*” Orlandi (2015, p. 37) highlights the incompleteness of the subject and discourse: “*Hence we say that meanings and subjects can always be other.*” This statement is ratified in the subject’s question above, as he discovers that the world of written language may offer far more than reading the sign on a bus with the name of his neighborhood destination, for instance.

This discourse shows that the subject breaks with what is already established, with what is crystallized. It is important to note, however, that he does not merely affirm “I can live from study.” Reflexively, he makes that declaration echoed through a question: “*why not?*” This question points at the rupture of all the negations present in the discourse that, previously, interpellated him. Time,

embarrassment, shame, and fatigue — which he had once repeated with conviction as reasons to deny himself access to education — did not cease to exist. They would still be challenges to be faced daily. However, the discourse that once interpellated him by turning these challenges into prohibitions no longer operates for this subject.

CONCLUSION

Through this analysis, we explored the meaning effects produced in the discourse of a black subject who, at first, was interpellated by discursive formations that kept him in a position of accepting his condition as an illiterate person, but who, throughout his trajectory, experienced a rupture, a significant discursive displacement.

It is possible to infer that the outlined objectives were achieved, insofar as we carried out the analysis of the meanings that traverses the discourse of a black illiterate subject through the account of his trajectory toward literacy.

The results show a re-signification process of the subject in relation to education and to his own identity. If, at the beginning of his path, he reproduced a discursive formation that limited him, the analysis revealed a slippage toward new meanings, in which the subject questions his previous position and begins to envision new horizons for himself, grounded in the process of social and economic emancipation brought about by literacy.

Thus, it is necessary that effective public policies ensure continuity regarding the education of these subjects who look for a new opportunity and wish to recover the time that has elapsed. These are subjects whose childhood was taken from them by circumstances that affect and compromise their trajectory, preventing them from experiencing the educational process within the pre-established time.

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