

# ALTAR GLADIATORS? DISCUSSING THE STRANGENESS NOTION IN THE RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

GLADIADORES DO ALTAR? DISCUTINDO A NOÇÃO DE ESTRANHAMENTO  
NO DISCURSO RELIGIOSO DA IGREJA UNIVERSAL DO REINO DE DEUS

¿GLADIADORES DEL ALTAR? DISCUTIENDO LA NOCIÓN DE EXTRAÑAMIENTO EN EL  
DISCURSO RELIGIOSO DE LA IGLESIA UNIVERSAL DEL REINO DE DIOS

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**ABSTRACT:** Nowadays, not rarely has the term “gladiator” been applied in certain discourses, like the religious, the business, the sports, among other ones, which corresponds to a knowledge element coming from another place, as a consequence of history movements and, thus, of senses. In this article, I analyze the occurrence of the term “gladiator” in the religious discourse of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, or, better yet, the strangeness, according to Ernst (2009), caused by the presence of this term in the linearity of a discourse to which, at first, it would not belong. For the analysis, I take as *corpus* three discourse sequences extracted from a report, published on the Universal Church website of 08/03/2015, concerning the Project “Altar Gladiators”, which consists on preparing young people to propagate the religion. In the theoretical review, I mainly consider the notion of discourse formation, developed by Pêcheux, focusing on the instability of its borders, which results in the discourse heterogeneity.

**KEYWORDS:** Discourse. Strangeness. Discourse Formation.

**RESUMO:** Na atualidade, não raro o termo “gladiador” tem sido empregado, em determinados discursos, como o religioso, o empresarial, o esportivo, dentre outros, o que corresponde a um elemento de saber que vem de outro lugar, decorrente de movimentos da história e, assim, dos sentidos. Neste artigo, analiso a ocorrência do termo “gladiador” no discurso religioso da Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, ou ainda, o *estranhamento*, conforme Ernst (2009), causado pela presença desse termo na linearidade de um discurso ao qual, em princípio, não pertenceria. Para análise, tomo como *corpus* três sequências discursivas extraídas de uma reportagem, publicada no site da Igreja Universal de 08/03/2015, sobre o projeto “Gladiadores do Altar”, o qual consiste em preparar jovens para propagar a religião. No percurso teórico, volto-me principalmente para a noção de formação discursiva, desenvolvida por Pêcheux, focando na instabilidade de suas fronteiras, o que resulta na heterogeneidade discursiva.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Discurso. Estranhamento. Formação Discursiva.

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RESUMEN: En la actualidad, no ha sido raro el empleo del término “gladiador”, en determinados discursos, como el religioso, el empresarial, el deportivo, entre otros, lo que corresponde a un elemento del saber que viene de otro sitio, originado de movimientos de la historia y, de este modo, de los sentidos. En este artículo, analizo, entonces, la ocurrencia del término “gladiador” en el discurso religioso de la “Iglesia Universal del Reino de Dios”, o aún, el extrañamiento, de acuerdo con Ernst (2009) causado por la presencia de este término en la linealidad de un discurso al cual, de pronto, no pertenecería. Para el análisis, tomo como *corpus* tres secuencias discursivas extraídas de un reportaje, publicado en la “Folha Universal” de 08/03/2015, acerca del proyecto “Gladiadores del Altar”, el cual consiste en preparar jóvenes para propagar la religión. En la trayectoria teórica, vuelvo la mirada principalmente para la noción de formación discursiva desarrollada por Pêcheux, focalizando en la inestabilidad de sus fronteras, lo que resulta en la heterogeneidad discursiva.

PALABRAS-CLAVE: Discurso. Extrañamiento. Formación Discursiva.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In an article entitled *The lack, the excess and the strangeness in the constitution/interpretation of the discursive corpus*, Ernst (2009) presents a perspective to the work of the discourse analyst of building up the discursive *corpus*, in order for the analytical gesture to go through the necessary, constant and coherent way between analysis and theory. For such, the author proposes three key concepts – the lack, the excess and the strangeness –, postulating that they work in an operational way insofar as they help the analyst to create the interpretation gesture before the *corpus*. Ernst (2009, p.1) observes that such concepts serve “[...] as general principles and not as technical devices, of formalistic and empirical character. On the contrary, such concepts can and must comprise countless modes of saying and not saying”.

Based on the mentioned study, I will work the notion of strangeness in this article, from the occurrence of the term *gladiator* in the religious discourse of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG). The notion of strangeness concerns what emerges in a discourse formation as the external stranger that breaks out in the linearity bringing in itself the incidence of some other knowledge which works destabilizing a memory network and instituting the presence of another one. Thus, I will start by approaching the issue of discourse heterogeneity according to Pêcheux, (1997a, 1997b). Before continuing, I emphasize that the discourse heterogeneity, problematized by Pêcheux since the second phase of Discourse Analysis, was intensified in the third phase, an important moment of theoretical review, when it established a dialogue with the Enunciation Heterogeneity theory, proposed by Authier-Revuz, which approaches the occurrence of “other” discourses in the enunciator’s saying.

## 2 THE INDETERMINACY OF DISCOURSE BOUNDARIES

When we propose to talk about the boundaries of discourse, it is necessary to start by approaching the concept of discourse formation since it establishes the discourse domains, although its boundaries do not ensure the condition of a closed domain, free of the invasion of the external stranger, that is, of knowledge coming from other discourse formations.

In the early years of Discourse Analysis (DA), when the discourse formation (DF) started being developed, it was seen as a regulated ideological space, closed and homogeneous. It comprised an element of the ideological formations, concerning the production conditions, mainly as a position inside the struggle of classes (HAROCHET et al., 1971). The concept of discourse formation was, nevertheless, resumed by Pêcheux, first in *Semantics and Discourse: a critic to the statement of the obvious* (my emphasis), being problematized and conceived not as a closed and homogeneous ideological space anymore, but as a heterogeneous one, identified by the multiplicity of voices which could complement, dialogue, disagree and even oppose one another. All due to the fact that the discourse formations are regionalized in the interdiscourse, defined as the “whole dominant complex” of the discourse formations, intricate in the complex of the ideological formations” (PÊCHEUX, 1997a, p. 162). In *The Discourse Analysis: three epochs* (my emphasis), when approaching DF, in what he calls second phase of DA, Pêcheux (1997c, p. 314) postulates: “[...] a DF is not a closed structural space, since it is constitutively ‘invaded’ by elements which come from another place [...]”.

In this phase, the discourse heterogeneity starts to appear in the *corpora* analyses, as a consequence of knowledge infiltrations among discourse formations, but not preventing them from having their own rules of formation, keeping a certain regularity which sustained them. Thus, the meanings internal to the discourse formations are under the domain of the interdiscourse. In this stage of the theory, the interdiscourse started to be pointed out as a discourse regulator, due to the fact that it controlled the possible displacement of the boundaries among the discourse formations. Meanwhile, Courtine approached the interdiscourse not only as a vertical repetition of knowledge related to the memory of saying, but also “[...] as an instance of formation/repetition/transformation of knowledge elements of this DF, [which] may be retained as what regulates the displacement of its boundaries” (2009, p. 100). Thus, according to this author (2009), the interdiscourse encompasses a contradictory space, comprising/organizing the interior and the exterior of a discursive formation, allowing what, in thesis, should not and could not be said, that is, the “stranger” to a certain discursive formation. The relationship between interdiscourse and intradiscourse is also focused, at this moment, being on the linguistic basis, in the intradiscourse, that the knowledge coming from the interdiscourse is materialized.

In the relationship between intradiscourse and interdiscourse, the issue concerning the language as “relatively autonomous” is emphasized. Because of the influence of ideology in the discursive formations, the language is susceptible to misconception, flaws, displacements. The constitution of the intradiscourse as a heterogeneous and breaking space follows the instability of discursive formations. Focusing on the issue of the instability of DFs, in the DA-3, Pêcheux (1997b), besides admitting the permeability of the knowledge which is other than that of the discursive formation, reinforced the issue of the discourse marked by heterogeneity, comprising the different positions assumed by the subject when, under the effect of identification, the discourse of the other arises. In the theoretical reviews to which DA was being submitted, Pêcheux (1997b) brought the studies of Authier-Revuz (2004, p. 69) about the issue of enunciation heterogeneity to whose development the author based herself on the notion of interdiscourse developed by DA, on the bakhtinian dialogism and on the psychoanalytic split subject. According to her, “[...] every discourse shows itself constitutively crossed by other discourses and by the discourse of the other. The other is not an object (exterior, about which one may talk about), but a condition (constitutive, for one to talk) of the discourse of a speaking subject which is not the first source of this discourse.”

Heterogeneity, according to Authier-Revuz (2004) is divided into constitutive and apparent. The former comprises the processes of discourse constitution, in which the voice of the other will always be on the basis of the sayable, not being shown in the “discourse thread”, altering the apparent unit of the discursive chain. Thus, the heterogeneity issue was developed under the enunciative view, pointing out the incidence of the other over the same.

It is in this rethinking about “the primacy of the other over the same”, problematized in the early eighties, in the so called DA3, that the contradiction and the flaw in the subjection are reinterpreted and understood in the scope of heterogeneity, escaping from any attempt to control the subject. When emphasizing the issue of heterogeneity, approaching the “discursive-linguistic forms of the other-discourse”, Pêcheux points out that: “[...] discourse of one another, put into the scene by the subject, or the discourse of the subject putting themselves in the scene as another one [...]” and, as the author especially states, “[...] the insistence of an interdiscursive ‘beyond’ which comes, in spite of all functional self-control of the ‘I-ego’ [...]” (1997c, p.316-7).

In Pêcheux’s last reformulation about the DA theory, he focused on the indeterminacy of the boundaries of a discursive formation, emphasizing its inconsistency. According to the author,

[...] for its existence only, every discourse marks the possibility of a destructuring-restructuring of these networks of paths: every discourse is the potential index of agitation in the social-historical affiliations of identification, insofar as it constitutes at the same time an effect of those affiliations and a work (more or less conscious, deliberate, constructed or not, but anyway permed by unconscious determinations) of displacement in its scope: there is no identification which is totally successful, that is, social-historical connection which is not affected, in a way or another, by any “happiness” in the performative sense of the term – that is, in this case, by a “person misconception”, that is, about the *other*, object of identification. (PÊCHEUX, 1997b, p.56, author’s emphasis)

From these observations, in which it is emphasized “the primacy of the other over the same”, the fragility or dilution of discursive boundaries and the intradiscourse as a heterogeneous place where the discourse of the other breaks out, the strange element is approached, provoking strangeness, disturbing the discourse analyst, calling them to the work of analysis.

### 3 THE GESTURE OF ANALYSIS

When we conduct a study in the light of the Discourse Analysis, it is necessary to consider the theoretical and methodological particularities which belong to this theory, in order to guide the analytical procedure. First, it is important to emphasize that, although we base ourselves in the linguistic content in order to be able to understand the processes of subject constitution and meaning production, it is not the way the text is linguistically organized that matters, but the relationship between language and history, understanding the former not as a closed and homogeneous structure, but subject to flaws, slides, opacities, for being historically inscribed. Thus, what matters to Discourse Analysis is the “signifying order”, that is, the way the language is organized is what makes it possible to understand the modes of meaning production. For this reason, when conducting the analytical work, the analyst does not intend to cross the linguistic structure to reach the content, an original pre-existing meaning in there, but to point out “interpretation gestures” – symbolic acts of meaning productions – of subjects in the constitution of meaning in its historical and linguistic materiality. According to Orlandi (2011, p. 17)

[...] the meaning is a determined relation of the subject with history and it is the interpretation gesture which realizes this relation between the subject and language in the production of meaning. This is the mark of subjectivity, a trace of the relation of language to externality. This is, by the way, the most discursive way of saying that the subject constitutes themselves in the relationship with the symbolic.

It is, therefore, in the subjection of the subject to the language in history, in their relationship with the symbolic, that occurs the constitution of subjectivity, considering that the interpretation gesture applied by the subject determines the meaning, showing the place from where the saying is produced. Because of this, when analyzing, the analyst must, as a determined device, be able to describe the interpretation gesture, with the meanings which, from then on, are produced, considering the conditions of discourse production as well.

Considering the memory of saying as determinant in the process of discourse production, the analyst must conceive the meaning as constituting from the positions occupied by the subjects according to the Discursive Formation(s) they are identified with. At this moment, it is important to consider the possibility of misconception as a consequence of the process of a combined action of unconsciousness and ideology. About this, Pêcheux postulates: “Every enunciation, every sequence of enunciations is, therefore, linguistically describable as a series (lexical-syntactically determined) of possible drift points, giving place to interpretation.” And concludes: “It is in this scope that Discourse Analysis intends to work.” (1997b, p.53).

Bearing in mind that the constitution of discourse occurs in the crossing of intra and interdiscursive axes, it is about this functioning that the analysis must operate, because it is from the intradiscourse – first element exposed to observation – that the analyst has access to the interdiscourse, since it is in the former that the latter sediments and updates itself.

The gesture of analysis proposed here has this movement, since the starting point is the intradiscourse, which in the materiality has caused strangeness – in the work here in question – the occurrence of the term *gladiator*, to the interdiscourse, observing the memory networks mobilized by the discursive subject, that is, the intercrossing of knowledge that comes from different regionalizations of interdiscourse, which, in turn, characterizes discursive heterogeneity.

#### 4 THE GLADIATORS

The term gladiator originates from *gladius* – a kind of sword which was normally used in combats by the fighters of Ancient Rome. Because of their relationship with this kind of armament, these fighters started being called “gladiators”. They fought against one another or against fierce animals, watched by a great number of spectators in places named arenas or amphitheaters.

According to Guarinello (2007), when the gladiatorial games started, around 246 b.C., fighters were mostly war prisoners or slaves, but less than two centuries later, they were mostly free people. The first disputes were a kind of religious ritual aiming at keeping the memory of a deceased person alive. As time went by, although the sacred character did not disappear, the combat and the presence of death were prevalent. According to Guarinello (2007, p.128), those were combats for life, in a space (the amphitheater), “[...] at the same time of honor and degradation.”

However, about those spectacles and their fighters, what remains in the common sense is the idea of force, violence and idle pleb, who lived of bread and circus (GARRAFFONI, 2008), but there were important aspects beyond that apparent impression: the fight for interests, the power games, the teachings (pedagogical aspect). For the author, “[...] the Roman gladiator is withdrawn from their original context and reinterpreted from modern values.”(GARRAFFONI, 2008, p.7). In contemporary discourses, (sports, business, and, in the specific case of this work, religious), the gladiator profile: “[...] is not founded in the Roman historical specificity; on the contrary, from the generalizations and homogeneity of that society a bridge is created between past and present, based on universal and eternal principles.” (GARRAFFONI, 2008, p.8).

The gladiators underwent intense physical and psychological training, aiming at overcoming death, that being the reason of the prevalent idea of their having been models of courage, power and resilience. According to Garraffoni (200, p.8), the use of the term “gladiator”, recurrent nowadays, mainly in the mediatic scenario, has suffered generalizations, being the gladiators seen as “[...] symbols of self-control, victory and male competitive model [...]”.

Nowadays, the term gladiator has, not rarely, been applied in certain discourses, among them the religious one, the business one, the sports one, which, if unperceived to the perception of a great number of subjects, must not be missed by the perception of the discourse analyst. This strange element is a knowledge element which comes from another place, by a historical movement, bringing as consequence movements in meanings.

#### 5 STRANGENESS IN THE RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE: ANALYZING THE OCCURRENCE OF THE TERM *GLADIATOR*

From now on, I analyze the occurrence of the term gladiator in the religious discourse of the Universal Church of the the Kingdom of God, or better saying, the strangeness caused by the presence of this term in the linearity of a discourse to which it would not belong. In order to do the analysis, three discursive sequences are taken from the *corpus*, elicited from a report, published on the *Folha Universal* of 03/08/2015, concerning the Project Altar Gladiators, which consists in preparing Young people to propagate the referred religion. The Altar Gladiators comprise a group formed by around 4000 youngsters who appear in uniforms, with military posture and march.

The discursive sequences for analysis are the following:

DS1: In front of the temple of Solomon, youngsters in uniforms and in line salute in synchrony. Although they carry the military discipline with themselves, it is another type of soldier: those who fight in the name of the Word of God. They make part of the Project “**Altar Gladiators**”. [my emphasis]

DS2: For such, weekly meetings are promoted, which conduct to the theoretical and practical teaching about the importance of the Work of God, besides the consciousness of the real reason why a “**gladiator**” must know to serve people spiritually, that is, in the same way as a soldier does not worry about the obstacles faced to serve their nation. [my emphasis]

DS3: The Bishop Marcelo Brayner, responsible for the group, explains that “the Young Strength was always a barn of Altar men. However, because of the fast growing of church, we observe the necessity of doing something more, bringing the youngsters closer to us, leading them to a disciplined and balanced life – after all, God is the Lord of the Armies. Hence the idea of **gladiators**, that is, servants of their Lord, servants of Lord Jesus”. [my emphasis]

First, it is convenient to observe the fact that the expression *Altar Gladiators* itself causes strangeness, since it refers to a group of young people who, according to the UCKG would be particularly devoted to serving God, considering that, in the religious discourse, the altar represents a sacred place of sacrifice and worship, not a place of fight; a place of religious leaders and their followers, not soldiers. However, this apparent incompatibility produces an effect of meaning according to which in the religion there is no space for the combat, being the sacrifice possibly the fight to take followers to the altar (interpreted by the religious ideology under the risk of force), but also the fight for preserving, against the enemy domain, the altar, one of the most important symbols of devotion.

In the three discursive sequences, the presence of the term *gladiator*, despite being unpredicted, strange, is in the intradiscourse, bringing a memory network which makes another discourse with its knowledge present. Although the term *gladiator*, as already mentioned, must not be related only to the idea of fight and strength, in the three discursive sequences it refers mainly to this, since it is working together with other expressions like “fight”, “soldiers”, “armies”, which reinforce the notion of fight, battle, and to a certain extent, violence. Therefore, which effect of meaning could be being generated in the intercrossing of those pieces of knowledge? Would there be any relationship between the religious discourse and the warlike one? Against whom would the *gladiators* fight? Which obstacles would they face? Which army would they take part in?

Such questions elicited by those discursive sequences indicate that there is an enemy and a fight. The religious discourse subject (the one of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God) is being affected first by a kind of memory, that is, that one of strong, brave, disciplined men, determined to win, a memory which is, in general, affected by the knowledge brought by the term *gladiator*, which occurs in those conditions of production. On the other hand, it brings in itself another memory – the issue of the eternal fight between good and evil –, which is present in the religious discourse.

Resuming the last three questions of the set presented before, it is possible to observe that there is a battle and there is an enemy, which is not set. However, only one side of the combat is set, the one of the *Altar Gladiators*, representing the UCKG, but who or what would be on the other side? The sinners? The atheists? The subjects deviating from religion? The subjects from other religions? In being the answer the last one, which religion or religions? In the meaning produced by this concealment resides a possibility of religious intolerance and fundamentalism, since in the UCKG there is the negation of other religions. From a religious action, apparently innocent and glorious, - youngsters who dedicate themselves to serve God and show the way of God to other subjects – emerges the issue of the religious conflict, or better yet, the so called “Saint War”. According to Lima (2002), although the Afro-Brazilian religions are the most strongly opposed by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, the spiritist religions and the Catholic Church are also opposed by them. In the discourse in question, coercion is reinforced by the fact that not following or deviating from what the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God advocates would imply making part of another army, the one of the enemy.

In those discursive sequences, the postulate of Pêcheux, which had its beginning in the second age of DA, is confirmed, the idea according to which a discursive formation is not a closed place, since it is crossed by the knowledge that comes from another place. As it is possible to observe in this work, the religious discursive formation did not remain homogeneous and hermetic, becoming permeable to some knowledge not belonging to it, that is, that one associated by the term “gladiator”, which although strange, does not contradict it, but destabilize and re-signify. Considering, according to Pêcheux (1997a), that the discursive formation comprises what may and must be said in the scope of an ideological formation, I observe here that the inconsistency of its boundaries has made possible the formulation, on the part of the subject of the discourse, of something that, at first, could not have been said, but was formulated, realized, “organized” harmonically by the subject, but not without causing some movement in meanings.

When observing the discursive sequences, I also identify in the DSs 1 and 2 the presence of the quotation marks in “Altar Gladiators” and “gladiator”, indicating the heterogeneity shown, theorized by Authier-Revuz (1998). The quotation marks, according to the author, inscribe the other in the “discourse thread” because, even not breaking up the linearity, they register the alterity that is present. When making use of quotation marks, the subject of saying, moved by the illusion of controlling the homogeneity of discourse, of keeping its apparent unit, tries unconsciously a negotiation with the presence of this other, which imperatively puts itself in there. It is important to observe that not only the term “gladiator” is between quotation marks, but also “Altar gladiators”; in the former, because it marks the insertion of the other in the discourse and, in the latter, because it marks the fusion of that other in the discursive formation of the subject.

I observe in those discursive sequences that the strange element, the term *gladiator*, featured in the intradiscourse, refers to what, in the interdiscourse, the whole complex with dominant of the discursive formations, concerns the gladiatorial games of Ancient Rome. However, the language has been worked by history and by ideology, having had some movement in meaning in relation to what it was in that time to the commonsense meaning conveyed nowadays, according to what is observed by Garrafoli (2008), in which discipline, strength, courage and determination to the fight are predominant. Thus, those last pieces of knowledges intercrossed with the religious discursive formation of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, emerging in the saying of the discursive subject, through the term “gladiator”, provoking displacements and making another memory present. Indursky (2005), resuming the issue pointed out by Pêcheux (1997a, p.9) according to which the meanings may become others, due to the fact that “there is no ritual without flaws”, points out as one of the ritual flaws:

[...] entrance of new knowledge, first strange to a certain knowledge domain, producing a transformation/reconfiguration of a DF. And that occurs because the DF has quite porous boundaries which allow the entrance of some other knowledge which was strange to them in a given moment.

This flaw in the ritual, in the subjection, corresponding to the entrance of the other in the discourse, symbolized in this study by the occurrence of the term *gladiator* in the religious discourse of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, provoking the “strangeness”, puts into question the discursive heterogeneity, through the incidence of the other over the same.

## 6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As it was possible to verify, the occurrence of the term *gladiator* in the linearity of the discourse of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, caused strangeness, because it comprehends, according to Ernst-Pereira, the appearance in the interdiscursive level of an element characterized by the “[...] unpredictability, the inadequation, and the distancing from what is expected.” (2009, p.5). However, such strangeness could not be seen as an “incoherence” of the discursive subject, but as an occurrence which has brought to the discourse where it is taking place the presence of a memory, of some knowledge which, coming from another discursive field, was reallocated, asking for meanings.

The presence of the term *gladiator* in the formulation is a consequence of the permeability of discursive formations, according to what was developed by Pêcheux from DA-2 to DA-3. Infiltrated by an element which is not part of its constitution, the discursive formation undergoes a process of adjustment and reconfiguration to accommodate what came from another place, because, according to Pêcheux (1997b), “there is no ritual without flaws”. Such presence and consequent strangeness were perceived, although unconsciously, by the discursive subject, which was possible to be seen when, before the “non-coincidence of the saying”, the subject employed the quotation marks, trying deceptively to homogenize the discourse which, in its own constitution, is heterogeneous.

Considering this strangeness that breaks up in the discourse, pointing to the different, the alterity, means, according to Pêcheux (1997b), working with discursive universes not logically stabilized, considered in the social-historical scope. Thus, the element *gladiator*, representing the strange in the formulations analyzed here, indicates that, in the apparent “semantically regular world” the discourses and the subjects escape from this logical-illusionary, but necessary homogeneity.

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