



## IN LANGUAGE, EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED

### Interview with Professor Uli Reich

## NA LÍNGUA, TUDO ESTÁ CONECTADO

### Entrevista com o Professor Uli Reich

*Uli Reich*<sup>1</sup>

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#### RESUMO

O professor Dr. Uli Reich possui mestrado em Literatura Espanhola pela Universidade de Munique (1996), doutorado em Linguística de Línguas Românicas pela Universidade de Munique (2000) e “Habilitation” pela Universidade de Colônia. Foi Colaborador Científico da Universidade de Colônia e Professor Visitante Estrangeiro pelo programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras Vernáculas da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. Atualmente é Professor Ordinário pela Universidade Livre de Berlim. Tem experiência na área de Linguística, com ênfase em Teoria e Análise Linguística, trabalhando sobre pragmática, prosódia, sintaxe, sociolinguística e contato linguístico em português, espanhol e francês.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Entrevista; Pesquisador; Linguística.

#### ABSTRACT

Professor Uli Reich holds an MA in Spanish Literature from the University of Munich (1996), a PhD in Romance Language Linguistics from the University of Munich (2000) and a “Habilitation” from the University of Cologne. He has worked as a Scientific Collaborator at the University of Cologne and Visiting Foreign Professor at the Postgraduate Program in Vernacular Letters at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Since 2008 he is Ordinary Professor at the Freie Universität Berlin. He has experience in Linguistics, with emphasis on Linguistic Theory and Analysis, working on pragmatics, prosody, syntax, sociolinguistics and multilingualism in Portuguese, Spanish and French.

**KEYWORDS:** Interview; Researcher; Linguistics.

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**Question 1**

**In a recent speech at *Abralin ao Vivo*, you identified yourself as a member of the “Brazilian linguistic community”. How has this partnership with Brazilian linguistics and Brazilian researchers been built in your academic career?**

**[Em recente fala no *Abralin ao Vivo*, o senhor se identifica como um membro da “comunidade linguística brasileira”. Como essa parceria com a linguística brasileira e pesquisadores brasileiros se construiu em sua trajetória acadêmica?]**

*I basically started my linguistic career in Brazil. In 1994, I was working as a teacher for German in Campinas and just dropped into the IEL at Unicamp to see if anything interesting was happening. At that time, I had no idea about linguistics. At Unicamp, I met a linguist who was working on the grammar of an indigenous language with only two speakers left and I learned about the projects on the grammar of spoken Brazilian Portuguese. In these perspectives on actual linguistic realities that mirror the rich diversity of human societies, I found an ideal field to combine my interests in foreign cultures and philosophy. Back in Munich, I concluded my studies of Spanish Literature in 1996, switched to linguistics and started a PhD project under the supervision of the late Wulf Oesterreicher who got very interested in Brazilian Linguistics. In 1997, I arrived at the University of São Paulo with a grant from the DAAD to stay for a year. My topic was the pronominal system and I learned generative syntax reading the articles from Mary Kato, Charlotte Galves and Sonia Cyrino. Sonia later invited me to Londrina where I gave the first public talk of my life. In São Paulo, I also participated in a course on Sociolinguistics led by Angela Rodrigues. We recorded so called Portuguese Popular in a small favela near the city airport and I learned Labovian variationist theory. I think that the unique blend of abstract representations of formal systems and the dedication to empirically controlled facts is what most attracted me to Brazilian Linguistics and I keep this scientific view point until today. That is one of the reasons why I think that in spite of being Bavarian by birth, I am a Brazilian linguist. The other reason, of course, are my colleagues from Brazil. Both Sonia and Angela later went also to Munich, where I had started to work as a Scientific Collaborator at the chair of Wulf Oesterreicher. We started an intense cooperation with several Brazilian universities and I met Célia Lopes who became an important colleague and friend of mine in Rio. She invited me later to apply for a position as a guest lecturer at the UFRJ in 2007 and I spent a whole year at the fundão. There, I had the pleasure to work not only with Célia Lopes, but also with Antonio de Moraes, Afrânio Barbosa, Dinah Callou, Eugênia Duarte, Silvia Rodrigues and many other colleagues. I learned a lot from all of them and many of their perspectives and insights still play a decisive role in my linguistic thinking.*

## **Question 2**

**Talking specifically about academic-institutional issues, you were a visiting professor at the Graduate Program in Vernacular Letters at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) in 2007. What were your experiences with the Brazilian community of linguists?**

**[Falando especificamente sobre questões acadêmico-institucionais, atualmente o senhor está como professor visitante no Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras Vernáculas da UFRJ. Quais são as suas expectativas/projeções para mais essa interlocução com pesquisadores brasileiros? Conte-nos sobre o projeto que o traz a mais uma vez à UFRJ.]**

*I think I experienced the best and the worst aspects of Brazilian universities. The worst are the poor facilities many scholars have to work with. This starts with the libraries that did not cover contemporary linguistic publications, let alone old documents and grammars from the colonial period. Also, funds for empirical projects are tight and the technical equipment is not always up to date. While the situation regarding recent linguistic publications is improving now, because of the spread of open access publications in the web, I hear from my colleagues that funding is getting even worse under the new government. The best aspects of working at the Fundação were the people. Both scholars and students turned out to be passionate, skilful and creative linguists who love what they are doing. We had many challenging discussions packed with new ideas and we had great fun in the courses and seminars I taught and participated in. I remember especially a course on Prosodic Phonology in the graduate program. The first day I noticed that Antônio de Moraes and Dinah Callou would participate. I got very nervous because, of course, they knew better than I did, but we managed to run the course together and it ended up as a very lively workshop in which we shared a lot of insights and ideas.*

## **Question 3**

**In addition to your dialogue with Brazilian linguists/Brazilian research, you recently became a member of the Association of Linguistics and Philology of Latin America (ALFAL), with a mandate from 2014 to 2021. One of the initiatives coordinated by you at ALFAL is the series “Linguística Latino Americana”, a collection of works published by De Gruyter. What is the importance of this series for ALFAL and for you?**

**[Além da interlocução com linguistas / pesquisa brasileira, o senhor atuou recentemente como membro vogal da Associação de Linguística e Filologia da América Latina (ALFAL), com mandato entre 2014 e 2021. Uma das iniciativas coordenadas pelo senhor no âmbito da Associação é a série “Linguística Latino Americana”, um conjunto de obras publicado pela De Gruyter. Qual a importância dessa série para a ALFAL e para o senhor?]**

I believe that LILA can become an important vehicle for Latin American Linguists. Beside all classical topics, we want to focus also on indigenous languages, the impact of African languages, and especially on theoretical contributions from Latin America hardly known abroad. In my opinion, Brazilian and Hispano-American Linguistics is far better than a survey of the impact of international publications makes us believe. USP, Unicamp, UFRJ, Colegio de México, UNAM, UBA, to name only a few, are all universities with very advanced researchers whose contributions to general linguistics are hardly known abroad. I also feel that the richness of linguistic diversity in Latin America still lacks the attention it deserves. Portuguese and Spanish are only two out of hundreds of languages spoken in Latin America that can feed our understanding of the many possibilities the human faculty for language provides to cope with very different ways of living. The Afro-American traditions in the historical formation of the two big Ibero-American Languages are also far from being well documented and sufficiently understood.

There is also a political intention in this new series. The hostility of the actual Brazilian government to the linguistic diversity of Brazil is very dangerous and we must work to improve the visibility of the indigenous communities in the international scientific community to strengthen the pressure on Brazil to protect them. I believe that the more we publish on these languages and the cultures they express, the more the general society, including politicians in governments, will be aware of the menace to assimilate indigenous people to the dominant cultural and economic patterns. LILA can contribute to this endeavor.

#### **Question 4**

**Your academic production covers multiple areas of investigation (intonation and its interfaces/morphosyntax/sociolinguistics/languages in contact). As a researcher, how does this variety of interests shape your scientific production? Do you currently devote special attention to any of them?**

**[A produção acadêmica do senhor transita por múltiplas áreas de investigação (entoação e suas interfaces/morfossintaxe/Sociolinguística/contato entre línguas). Como pesquisador, de que maneira a pluralidade de interesses molda a sua produção científica? Neste momento, o senhor dedica a alguma delas uma atenção especial?]**

*I consider myself a linguistic decathlete. Or better, as my friend and colleague Horst Simon once put it, I practice duck sciences. A duck is not the best animal in flying, nor in swimming, nor in walking, but it is one of very few animals that performs quite well in all three types of movement. In language, everything is connected and the subdisciplines are only a way to reduce the complexity of the phenomena we face in linguistics. To make these reflections a little more concrete, if you study pronouns for objects in Brazilian Portuguese for example, you need knowledge both of the syntax and the phonology of clitics, you need knowledge about the social*

*indexicality that governs the use of clitics and free pronouns in different situations and you might want to relate the prosodic, syntactic and social configuration of the whole inventory to historical situations of extreme multilingualism in which it arose.*

*At the moment, I am preparing a sociolinguistic project on the city of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, where more than 20 indigenous languages are spoken together not only with Portuguese, but also with Spanish because of the proximity to Colombia and Venezuela. The indigenous language that will be at the heart of the project is Nheengatú, maybe the most Brazilian of all languages, since it arose from the complex multilingualism in colonial Brazil and Grão-Pará e Maranhão. The Jesuits used it in their missionary practice, it dominated the communication across different communities and later it became nativized throughout the Amazon. Today it is one of the bigger languages of the Rio Negro, spoken by the Baré and other communities. I am cooperating with the FOIRN, the organization of indigenous people of the Rio Negro, who is founding right now the Academia do Nheengatú. Most scholars that go to São Gabriel da Cachoeira are looking for smaller communities upstream to study particular languages without regard to multilingualism, but nobody ever studied the sociolinguistic configuration of the city's languages. In this project, too, it will be important for me to show the impact of the multilingual feature pool on syntactic, morphological and phonological forms I can observe in linguistic performance. After all, I am a linguist and therefore I will have to relate all social configurations and communicative intentions to the form of linguistic expressions.*

### **Question 5**

**Thinking specifically about your considerations presented in the communication in *Abralin ao Vivo*, in what ways can Formal Pragmatics contribute to the unveiling of ideological discourses? How can we make these findings reach non-academic audiences?**

**[Pensando especificamente nas suas considerações apresentadas na comunicação no *Abralin ao Vivo*, de que maneira(s) a Pragmática Formal pode contribuir para o desvelamento do(s) discurso(s) ideológicos? Como fazer essas descobertas chegarem ao público não acadêmico?]**

*Formal Pragmatics helps to give a precise account of meanings that are not said explicitly, but elicited tacitly as assumptions about background beliefs or deliberately added as not-at-issue information. If we sum up these additional meanings, we arrive at a picture of the ideological configuration the speaker evokes. These meanings often are more stable and deeper than the actual meanings denoted by the expressions. Let me give you an example: If somebody says "The privatization of the state owned oil company is too slow", he says something about the speed of a particular, actual process, but he also conveys the presupposition that the privatization of the state owned oil company is desirable - something that is not taken for granted by all economists, since there are good grounds to believe that the state needs additional income to*

*set up programs for social security, health systems and education. Thus, the “only economies that maximize private profit are good and politics that want to control the market are evil” is smuggled into the discourse in the fashion of an axiom without explicit discussion. I think that we need to discuss underlying assumptions about economic systems openly in rational democracies. This is true for every field of politics, if we want a goal-oriented, fruitful debate, we need to understand the basic convictions and ideas of our interlocutors. If we build our analyses of political statements on the grounds of well-established linguistic theories of the interactional construction of meaning, we can identify underlying assumptions and discuss them in a controlled way.*

*The word “formal” in Formal Pragmatics points to the aspect of these theories that is probably not easy to convey outside of specialized scientific communities, namely the mathematical representation that serves precision and intersubjective control, but it is easy to show background meanings and implicatures in concrete utterances, everybody understands them immediately. Trained by Formal Pragmatics, we can raise the awareness for hidden meanings and unchallenged presuppositions. We can do this analyzing concrete statements in publications and everyday conversations, in the university, at the bus stop, in bars and restaurants and back home in our families.*

### **Question 6**

**Professor Uli Reich, you have said that “Linguistics cannot recommend political positions” (REICH, Abralin Online, June 29, 2020). How to maintain neutrality if linguistic analysis reveals the saying? In other words, what to do with the scientific evidence that discourses provide?**

**[Professor Uli Reich, o senhor disse que “a Linguística não pode recomendar posições políticas” (REICH, Abralin Online, 29 de junho de 2020). Como manter a neutralidade se a análise linguística revela o dito? Em outras palavras, o que fazer com as evidências científicas que os discursos fornecem?]**

*I did not say that scholars should maintain neutrality, what I said was that linguistics as a science cannot deliver arguments for moral and economic preferences that lie at the heart of the political discussion. Social justice, coined as the equal accessibility of economic and cultural resources, and the demand to protect the ecological balance that future generations need to live on this planet do not derive naturally from the theory of language. The position that cultural diversity and political autonomy of minorities enrich our world and therefore need to be protected against the interests of individual profits is not a linguistic law. What we can do is reveal the ideological configuration behind certain statements. Let me give you an easy example for some tacit meanings without using abstract symbols. If somebody says “O índio mudou. Cada vez mais o índio é um ser humano igual a nós”, he presupposes semantically*

*that there is a category of beings called “índio” that comprises the Baré, the Baniwa, the Dâw, the Ianomâmi and some 200 other communities that live in Brazil. The verb “mudou” and the adverbial expression “cada vez mais” presuppose a different state of affairs before the one that is reported, to be like us, again a category that opposes us to “the índio”. So the speaker does not say it, but he means that the people he subsumes under the cover term “índio” have not been humans before their integration into the society he subsumes under the cover term “nós”. Now you will find such a view point at least ignorant and probably disgusting, just as I do. But this evaluation is not linguistic in nature, it is moral. The linguistic analytical procedure only reveals the epistemic and ideological configuration of the common ground the speaker evokes, but it gives us no moral system to evaluate the revealed view point. I think that this is what we see generally in the relation between science and politics: science can help to understand what the world is like, but politics has to decide what to do with this knowledge. During the pandemic crisis of Covid-19, Brazil paid a very bitter price for this fact: One of the possibilities to handle scientific knowledge in politics is ignorance.*

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Professor Uli Reich, we are very grateful for another partnership with UFRJ, especially with *Diadorim: Revista de Estudos linguísticos e Literários*. The publishers and the Post-Graduate Program in Vernacular Letters are honored by your interview. Thank you very much!

**[Professor Uli Reich, estamos muito gratos por mais uma parceria com a UFRJ, especialmente com *Diadorim: Revista de Estudos linguísticos e Literários*. As editoras e o Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras Vernáculas estão honrados com sua entrevista. Muito obrigado!]**

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