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**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ESSAY IN THE ENGLISH MAJOR AT
UFSM**

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Trabalho de Conclusão apresentado ao Curso de Letras Inglês e Literaturas da Língua Inglesa, da Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM, RS), como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de licenciada.

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RESUMO

UMA ANÁLISE CRÍTICA DO ENSAIO NO CURSO DE LETRAS - INGLÊS DA UFSM

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Esta pesquisa aborda o gênero ensaio no curso de Letras-Inglês da Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM). Apesar da prevalência do ensaio nas disciplinas de Literatura do curso, suas características linguísticas e estruturais permanecem pouco conhecidas. Uma extensa busca no Google Acadêmico por artigos sobre o tema revelou um número limitado de artigos, evidenciando uma lacuna no estudo do gênero. Assim, o objetivo deste trabalho é analisar a estrutura retórica do ensaio. Para isso, emprega-se uma abordagem qualitativa, concentrando-se nas perspectivas de três professores do curso sobre o gênero. Foram realizadas entrevistas com esses professores visando identificar as características linguísticas e estruturais do ensaio, sob o enfoque da Gramática Sistemática Funcional, da Análise Crítica de Gêneros e Análise Crítica do Discurso. Pode-se depreender, a partir das respostas dos professores, que o gênero ensaio dentro do curso de Letras-Inglês da UFSM possui um tom informal e uma subjetividade que tornou difícil a tarefa de construir os seus movimentos retóricos.

Palavras-chave: Gênero. Ensaio. Características linguísticas e estruturais

ABSTRACT

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ESSAY IN THE ENGLISH MAJOR AT UFSM

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This research addresses the essay in the English Major at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM). Despite the prevalence of essays in the Literature disciplines of this program, their linguistic and structural characteristics remain poorly understood. An extensive research on Google Scholar for articles on the subject revealed a limited number of papers, highlighting a gap in the study of this genre. Therefore, the objective of this work is to analyze the rhetorical structure of the essay. For this a qualitative approach is employed, focusing on the perspectives of three Literature professors. Interviews were conducted with these professors to identify the linguistic and structural characteristics of essays, under the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar, Critical Genre Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis. It could be inferred from the professors answers that the essay in the English Major at UFSM possesses an informal and subjective tone making the assignment of building its rhetorical moves difficult.

Keywords: Genre. Essay. Linguistic and structural characteristics.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The essay is highly consumed in the Languages field, especially in Literature. Although its relevance, the study of this genre and its linguistic characteristics is scarce, which seems contradictory. An extensive research was made in Google Scholar, based on three key words: essay, genre and critical analysis. The initial intention was to limit the period of research to 10 years ago, but the lack of studies on this topic is so expressive that this interval had to be disconsidered. Thus, only five articles (CARRARO; KÜNSCH, 2012; PAVIANI, 2009; PENA, 2006; SEVAIO; SILVA, 2021; SILVA; SILVA, 2010) were found. They are focused on few characteristics and they compare essays with other genres (articles, for example). In addition, what is mainly discussed in the papers is the adequacy of the essay as a genre. However, none of these studies focuses on the structure of essays as a genre or their linguistic characteristics, which is the reason why this paper is convenient and opportune.

In the English Major at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), literature courses are offered, and writing assignments, among other activities, are commonly included. These assignments may entail the creation of lesson plans, reviews, or essays as requested by the professor. Once, there was an assignment that required writing an essay on a selected book from 19th Century North American Literature. However, the instructions for its completion were not thoroughly detailed since the professor sought a straightforward text rather than a formal essay, despite the directive being to write an essay in English.

For this reason, it is important to demonstrate how a certain community uses language to communicate with the academic scientific world through essays. Also, it is indispensable to review the literature in order to map studies about the essay genre. Therefore, a critical analysis of the genre in the light of the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) is necessary, which is where the genre-based approach gains support. Similarly, it is important to do a Critical Discourse Analysis, using the rich text features approach.

The general objective of this research is to analyze the rhetorical structure of the essay genre. In order to achieve this aim, it is important to accomplish the specific objectives, that are: a) to interview the invited professors and to analyze the answers, in order to identify how professors of the English Major at UFSM understand the genre “essay”; b) to provide a definition of “essay”, based on the professors’ answers and previous literature; and c) to identify the relevance of essays in the English Major context.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Firstly, it is necessary to assemble a brief differentiation between Traditional Grammar (TG) and Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), which have different approaches to understanding and describing language (SANTOS, 2016). It is important to do that because for those who are not familiar with the Languages field, the SFG are not much known.

The TG primarily focuses on syntax rules and grammatical structure, establishing norms on how language should be used and conducting a static analysis of sentences and words without broadly considering context or communicative function. On the other hand, the SFG (HALLIDAY, 2004) centers on the function of language, analyzing how linguistic choices are shaped by intended meaning and communicative function. It considers the role structures play in fulfilling social functions. Moreover, it seeks to describe how language is used in real contexts and how linguistic structures contribute to effective communication. Analysis in SFG is much more dynamic, considering context and communicative function; it examines how linguistic choices vary in different communication situations and for different purposes. Additionally, SFG recognizes the importance of multimodality, not only considering the structure of words and sentences but also integrating non-verbal elements such as intonation, gestures, visual context, and considering linguistic variation and pragmatic adequacy.

That said, it is important to demonstrate the close relation between SFG and Critical Genre Analysis (CGA), as both approaches focus on the social function of language. They are interested in how language is used to accomplish specific functions in social contexts, considering not only linguistic structures but also the social, political, and ideological implications of discursive genres (MOTTA-ROTH, 2008).

Likewise, there is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which is a theoretical and methodological approach that focuses on analyzing how discourse is used to construct meanings and perpetuate power relations. It examines how language is employed to influence how people think, act, and perceive the world around them. Mainly, CDA is not limited to the analysis of linguistic structure alone but also takes into account the social, political, and cultural context in which discourse occurs (FAIRCLOUGH, 2003).

Another approach called “rich text features analysis” is crucial here, once this analyzes the ways specific features of language contribute to the interpretation of texts in their various contexts (BARTON, 2004). It arises from CDA and it seeks specific attributes within a text or a collection of texts that align with contextual conventions of meaning and

importance. Rich features are delineated as those characteristics that indicate the relationship between a text and its context. The correlation between a feature and its contextual value represents a convention of language use. In this approach, the primary emphasis of analysis is on the connection between structure and function.

Starting from the premise that essay is a textual genre, essayists can reflect and perpetuate power relations and specific ideologies. Thus, CDA examines how linguistic choices made in essays contribute to these dynamics.

The history of the essay as a genre is relatively recent; it began with Montaigne in the 16th Century. Before that, the early essayists (when they were not called that yet) began to express their ideas in prose when it was common to do so in poetry. Montaigne considered his publications as just his literary “attempts” (SILVA; SILVA, 2010).

Adorno emerged in the 1950s, advocating for a genre that was considered “bastard”. The author defended the essay as a genre, possessing form. For Adorno (1986), the essay genre is defined by the close connection between thought and language, serving as a means to express philosophical ideas - a convergence of expression and philosophy.

Examining those five articles found in Google Scholar about essays, it is important to summarize here the content of each of them, in order to understand the authors’ opinion about the different functions of this genre.

The first one, “*A Inscrição do Ensaio nos Gêneros Literários*” (SILVA; SILVA, 2010), focuses on demonstrating that, currently, the essay has deserved reflections on its usefulness and continuity, aiming to recognize its contribution in the vast production contemporary.

The origin of the word “ensaio” can serve to introduce its concept. Etymologically, “*ensaio*” (from French “*essai*”) means a test, an experiment, an attempt. In Latin, “*exagium*” refers to the act of weighing, meditating, examining one's own mind. These meanings denote a comprehensive character, much more connected to the author's nature than to a typical structure, as is the case with other genres. (SILVA; SILVA, 2010, p. 4) (translated by the author)

The second one, “*Artigo e Ensaio Científicos: dois gêneros e uma só forma? Gêneros Textuais, Acontecimento e Memória*” (PENA, 2006), discusses the constitution of two genres (scientific article and scientific essay), addressing their similarities, their differences and their points of intersection, in order to better characterize them.

The third one, “*Comunicação e pensamento compreensivo: o ensaio como forma de expressão do conhecimento científico*” (CARRARO; KÜNSCH, 2012), critically deals with

the dominant mode of production of scientific discourses. It assumes the essay itself as a genre that derives its strength from a cognitive attitude fed by the sign of understanding.

The fourth one, “*O que pode a escrita etnográfica? Incursões sobre o gênero ensaio e suas potencialidades*” (SEVAIO; SILVA, 2021), reflects on the implications of the stylistic choices of certain authors with different traditions. It is considered that the essayist as a creator brings effects necessary for the anthropological discipline.

The last one, “*O ensaio como gênero textual*” (PAVIANI, 2009), studies the most common characteristics of the essay textual genre considered under the historical and systematic points of view and clarifies some aspects in consecrated authors.

3 METHODOLOGY

The methodology could be classified as qualitative research, analyzing the general concepts about genres and essays, and conducting a brief study about SFG, CGA and CDA and how their perspectives can affect the referred genre.

Furthermore, considering the fact that this genre is widely consumed in the Literature field and that the present research is being implemented in the English Major at UFSM, three professors (professor A, B and C) from the Department of Modern and Foreign Languages (*Departamento de Letras Estrangeiras e Modernas - DLEM*) were invited to participate in the interviews. These three professors teach Literature at UFSM and, at the time the research was conducted, there were only them working in this field.

Ten questions were designed. They are:

Chart 1 - Questions for the interview

1) How would you define the essay as a genre?
2) Can you identify any specific characteristics of the essay?
3) Do you consume this type of content? If yes, how frequently?
4) Can you recall any famous essay that made a lasting impression on you?
5) Do you often explore essays in the classroom with your students?

6) Do you consider it essential to write an essay in the English Major course? If yes, what is the reason behind it?
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7) Have you ever written an essay?

8) In general, what do you believe is important for writing a good essay?

9) More specifically, what requirements would a student need to write a good essay for your assignment?

Source: designed by the author

The final question was about their evaluation criteria, considering the essay production. However, it was adapted for each interviewee, keeping in mind the classroom context of each one. This customization was feasible because who designed the questions was their student and is the author of this paper. Similarly, the majority of the questions remained unchanged, as they pertained to the same dominant subject for all participants. The respondents answered the questionnaire via email; two of them replied in Portuguese and one in English.

Based on the answers, it was possible to move to the final stage, which is to make a comparative analysis of the data gathered from the Literature professors' answers. This analysis aims to identify similarities and differences, aligning these findings with the concepts initially explored in the study. The objective is to establish a pattern in the production of essays and potentially outline any rhetorical strategies employed, if present. The findings will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the essay genre within academic settings, specifically within the English Major at UFSM.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Considering the interviews conducted and outlined in the last sections, certain questions and their corresponding answers will be emphasized due to their relevance to this current study. Three distinct responses were gathered for each question, attributed to the three interviewees: professors A, B, and C.

With regard to the concept of the genre, the first question was: "How would you define the essay as a genre?". Professor A said that he would define it as a genre of personal

expression. According to professor B, the essay is a short form of composition, with the purpose to present the writer's critical view on a specific topic. Similarly, professor C affirmed that the essay is an "attempt", a writing task in which the author deals with subjects, problems, concepts or ideas in a speculative way, in a position of open reflection.

Silva and Silva (2010) define the essay from its content, which means: "the essay is a brief non-fictional composition that often addresses a specific subject from a personal point of view." (SILVA; SILVA, 2010, p. 4) (translated and highlighted by the author of this paper).

Weinberg (2007) explains the essay as a prose text that expresses ideas, a form of interpretative writing that reflects on the world, providing a unique perspective and inviting the reader to consider new viewpoints. Its distinctive characteristic is the expression from a self that reflects and experiences the world, thus inviting the reader to engage diverse perceptions of reality.

About its characteristics, the professors' opinions differ in some ways. Professor A mentions two main qualities, the lack of a rigidity of form and an attempt at individual expression. Professor B focuses on the length, the specificity of the topic and, sometimes, the use of the first person. Professor C adds that the essay involves an open reflection by the essayist, which is not to be confused with opinion; for him, the essay presupposes a "non-dogmatic" approach.

The latter utterance is aligned with Silva and Silva (2010) work: "Free, digressive, the essay is more than a prose theme in a limited space created by subjectivity. One of its characteristics is persuasion, which includes a wide range of convincing strategies" (SILVA; SILVA, 2010, p. 7-8). For them, a distinctive characteristic of the essay is the interdisciplinarity.

Regarding the study of essays with students, Professor A acknowledged working with certain texts by George Orwell. Professor B engaged students with Virginia Woolf's "How Should One Read a Book?". Professor C neither confirmed nor denied using essays in his classes. However, he mentioned the possibility of occasionally incorporating essays because "a significant portion of literary theory and criticism has adopted the essay genre".

In respect of the importance of writing an essay in the Literature course, professor A said it could be good as long as the students are interested. Professor B mentioned that she considers it important, but more towards the end of the course. According to her, to be prepared to write a good essay, the essayist needs to have read a substantial amount of materials on the topic. She also emphasizes that it is a good exercise in critical thinking, although she notes that her new students are not very interested in developing this skill in

literature. Otherwise, Professor C thinks it would be interesting for students to be familiar with the genre, and that an “attempt” at reflection by them could be a step towards it. However, for him, the production of a proper essay without erudition, without prior knowledge, would be challenging; the reflection would become loose opinion.

Regarding the requirements they consider important for writing a good essay, Professor A said it would be to effectively communicate something important, with objectivity, clarity, and consistent writing. Professor B believes that the aspiring essayist should present their critical thinking on a specific subject through the effective use of language and in a succinct manner, while demonstrating extensive knowledge of the topic. They have to write with cohesion and coherence, develop clearly the ideas in the argumentation, and conclude, summarizing previous themes while presenting how significant their view is. Finally, according to Professor C, students should have knowledge of the subject and intellectual independence, to the extent possible; for this, they should study the subject in great detail and build the essay as exploratory, with a genuine reflective tension. He added: “to essay is to attempt, but the attempts must be grounded in knowledge, on a solid foundation”.

5 CONCLUSION

From all presented, it could be inferred that the essay in the English Major at UFSM possesses an informal tone making the assignment of building its rhetorical moves difficult. Also it is subjective, not just with authors’ opinions, but with their vast knowledge about the theme and - maybe - containing the process of thinking in these themes, convincing their readers.

It could be defined as a genre of non-fictional prose that reflects the unique viewpoint of an author/interpreter committed to exploring a topic. Positioned between the poetic and didactic styles, the essay sets itself apart from other genres through its distinctive structure, characterized by formal flexibility and subjectivity.

With regard to the interviews, as articulated by the professors and supported by Silva and Silva (2010) and Weinberg (2007), the essay is a form of personal expression, a brief non-fictional composition that often addresses specific subjects from a personal point of view, and a prose text that expresses ideas, respectively. It has formal flexibility, individual expression, openness to reflection, and a non-dogmatic approach.

The discussion on the importance of teaching and writing essays in literature courses reveals varying perspectives. Professor A emphasizes student interest and effective communication, professor B underscores the significance of critical thinking, extensive knowledge, and the ability to present ideas cohesively, while professor C advocates for familiarity with the genre, intellectual independence, and a foundation of solid knowledge, although he understands that students would not be able to produce a proper essay.

In conclusion, the insights gathered from the interviews with Professors A, B, and C provide a nuanced understanding of the essay genre within the context of literature from English Major at UFSM. Navigating through the definition, characteristics, importance, and requirements, it is possible to conclude that the essay is not extensively studied or produced, perhaps due to its subjective form, students' lack of interest, or a limited understanding of this genre.

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