

# Who Is Odete Roitman's Killer? Speech and Power in Building Antagonist Characters

Bruno Gomes Pereira

Universidade Anhanguera de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

The objective of this article is to analyze how soap opera actions are constructed that recombine around the figures of soap opera villains, especially the antagonist Odete Roitman, from the soap opera *Vale Tudo* (1988), shown by Rede Globo de Televisão, at that time from 21:00 pm. The theoretical foundation is based on the assumptions of French discourse analysis (DA), due to its intrinsic interdisciplinarity. The methodology is of the documentary type and of the Qualitative Approach, through which it favors the analysis of the discursive sphere of the speeches of the referred character. The selected data reveal a nuanced villain who, despite being mocking, cowardly, and Machiavellian, also has moments of humanization, which bring her closer to the viewer.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, candies, soap opera

## Introduction

Never lose elegance. Not even with the head on the guillotine.  
(Branca Letícia de Barros Mota, 1997)

In a novel construction, fictional or otherwise, the antagonistic characters play a fundamental role in the composition of the plot, as preponderant elements for the actions to be re-signified and continued. In this sense, when taken in the context of telenovelas<sup>1</sup>, the presence of the aforementioned villain is paramount, while his actions extend to all cores of the plot.

The epigraph of this article summarizes, precisely, the superior behavior, typical of this type of characters, who, often, caricatured or not, bring with them meanings and characteristics that bring them closer to the public.

In this case, we are talking about the sayings of Branca Letícia de Barros Mota, an iconic villain, created by Manoel Carlos, in 1997, to move the plot of the telenovela *Por Amor*, broadcast by Rede Globo de Televisão at 21:00. Played by Susana Vieira, Branca's main characteristic was quick answers, capable of humiliating and belittling the spherical characters.

This conception serves as a grant for the understanding of another villain, the core of this work: Odete Roitman, considered by specialized critics as the greatest villain of all time in Brazilian television drama. Further descriptions regarding the above character will be presented in this article.

The theoretical foundation is based on the interdisciplinary conceptions of French discourse analysis (DA), which believes that the construction of meanings does not reside in the text itself, but mainly in the environment

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Bruno Gomes Pereira, Ph.D. in Ensino de Língua e Literatura, Universidade Anhanguera de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil.

<sup>1</sup> The telenovela is a discursive genre popularized by television media, which has received massive investment in Brazil since the 1950s.

that is proposed to it, which offers aids capable of constructing inferences (Martin & White, 2005; Maingueneau, 1997; Orlandi, 2000; 1999; 1996; Pêcheux, 1981).

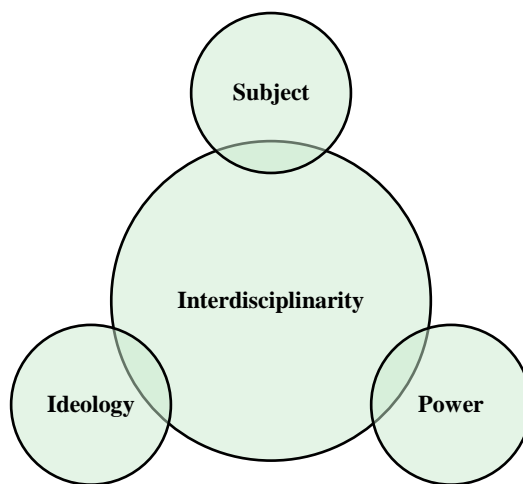
The type of research is documentary (Bortoni-Ricardo, 2008), since the speeches of the character Odete Roitman are seen as documentation of a post-military Brazil which invited discussion of topics, such as corruption and amorality. Therefore, this type of investigation becomes relevant, because in conjunction with the bibliographic research (Bortoni-Ricardo, 2008); it offers the reader the necessary tools for a more dynamic, and at the same time, denser reading of the subject.

It is hoped that this article can contribute to other researches, developed in different areas of human knowledge, keeping in mind their interdisciplinary character, which can delve into the intricacies of psychology, sociology, social sciences, and many others.

### **Power and Interdisciplinarity: Basic Precepts of French Discourse Analysis**

DA is a current of linguistic studies in which the conditions in which meanings are (re)constructed are problematized, considering an interdisciplinary conception among subject, ideology, and power (Martin & White, 2005; Maingueneau, 1997; Orlandi, 2000; 1999; 1996; Pêcheux, 1981). In this sense it is pertinent to understand that, although it is a current of linguistic studies, its presuppositions are not ends in themselves, which produces developments capable of dialoguing with different human conceptions.

Figure 1 illustrates the interdisciplinary movement proposed by the main points of DA.



*Figure 1. DA interdisciplinary movement (from the author).*

The figure proposed above is composed of four spheres which are joined through intersection zones which, in this approach, are called “dialogical zones”, so that the concept of language can be recovered as a dialogical and dialectical element, as presented (Bakhtin, 2006; 2003; 1984).

In the wider ambit, there is interdisciplinarity, which is precisely the philosophical precept that does not allow the referred work to be something restricted to a single ambit of knowledge. The other spheres, of smaller dimensions, are represented by the subject, by ideology, and by power which, in fact, constitute a trinity of theoretical-methodological, and why not say philosophical, conceptions which stimulate the process of recombination and reconstruction of DA more directly and effectively.

The interdisciplinarity referred to in this article is anchored in the studies of Fazenda (2003; 2002; 1995) and Fonseca (2014), when they state that no human knowledge is exhausted in itself. An effort is required on the part of the researcher, so that he understands that the assumptions that support a certain point of view can be challenged or remodeled by the insertion and collaboration of knowledge other than the scientific field. Therefore, the interdisciplinary movement resides in the areas of intersection between the knowledge which, whether regulated or not, contributes to the construction of the anatomy of the research problem.

At this point, it is worth emphasizing that the conception of the subject that is raised includes sociological, anthropological, and historical issues, as they become something inviting in the sense of rethinking the position of this subject in the enunciative process. In DA, the subject is the one who is immersed in social practices which, due to a conjuncture of factors, conform to what is proposed to him (Pasquotte-Vieira, 2014).

The idea of submission is supported by Hanks (2008), when he proposes that the subject receives various social forces which, in a coercive way, shape his behavior and his points of view. It is an anthropological vision that adds a lot, as the subject is understood not as the one who dominates the situation, but the one who suffers the consequences of a wider pragmatic sphere.

Ideology is linked to the implicit precepts of discourse. Everything that manifests itself linguistically permeates the sphere of intentionality, even if it is not verbalized (Hanks, 2008; Maingueneau, 1997). The ideologies of discourses are shaped by the need for enunciation which is constructed within a larger discursive sequence.

Therefore, it is valid to state that ideology is, in fact, an abstract instance of discourse in which conflicting thoughts are coupled and which often do not even reach the sphere of language (Hanks, 2008).

Power is, without a doubt, the domain that best characterizes post-21st century discursive studies. The concept of empowerment is being discussed in all fields of humanities and social sciences, bearing in mind that they are giving voice to groups that, until then, have remained on the margins.

The conception of power adopted here is consistent with what Bourdieu (1989) proposed, when he states that power is nothing more than a symbolic manifestation, which is not directly associated with money or any Marxist perspective, but rather in the idea of dominant and dominated.

Since it is something symbolic, it is not possible to identify it as an explicit process (Bourdieu, 1989; Brait, 2014; Blommaert, 2014; Gnerre, 1991). In fact, it is a set of social forces in which there is a subordinator (the one who holds the decision-making power) and a subordinate (the one who receives the subordinator's order and executes it). This one-sided mechanism is often present in various social spheres, mainly in corporate contexts, which are vehemently semiotized in television productions, personalized by antagonistic characters.

The French DA offers us a series of supports capable of allowing the construction of meanings of a certain interactive sphere. However, it must be taken into account that nothing happens in a vacuum and that all linguistic manifestations are characteristics of a wider context of utterance.

### **Who Is Odete Roitman's Killer?**

Odete de Almeida Roitman, or simply Odete Roitman, was the great villain of the telenovela *Vale Tudo*<sup>2</sup> written by Gilberto Braga and Agnaldo Silva, in 1988, and broadcast at 21:00 on Rede Globo de Televisão, in Brazil.

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<sup>2</sup> The telenovela referred to has gone down in history for having dealt, in a rather sleazy way, with the evils and corruptions of a post-military dictatorship Brazil.

The actress chosen for the role was none other than Beatriz Segall, a great star of cinema and theater and already with an extensive resume in TV. This would be his fourth collaboration with author Gilberto Braga.

For the screenwriter, Odete Roitman could only be experienced by Segall, considering that he was a very refined character, mocking and full of moral nuances, and for this reason, the actress would have lent a lot of herself in the composition of the character, and after Odete Roitman, Segall only received invitations to play rich and mean women.

Against the wishes of Globo's TV drama department director, Daniel Filho, Segall was cast in the role that would change her life forever, earn her all the awards for Best Soap Actress in 1988, and pass to TV history as the greatest villain of all time. Even so, Filho insisted that Segall had a masterful performance, but attributed the character's success to his own writing.

The anthological scene in which Odete Roitman is assassinated was aired and guaranteed Globo more than 80 listening points. The villain was killed and, due to the shots, had her body glued to the wall in a scene typical of American films, which revolutionized the television language of the country (Hamburger, 2011; Barbero & Rey, 2000).

Since that feat, the question that has stopped Brazil has been "Who killed Odete Roitman?". This question moved Brazil to the point of being compared to a World Cup final. High-value bets were made; at the same time the fact was being reported in newspapers around the world. Now already established in theater and cinema, Segall has also become a great lady of Brazilian television. Who killed the villain was Leila, a character played by Cássia Kis, who, moved by a moment of jealousy, accidentally killed Odete. It is worth mentioning that the character Leila was not included in the list of the most discussed suspects. For more information on Brazilian villains and their respective meaning effects, see the works of Pereira (2016), Brombert (2001), and Campbell (2005; 1990).

### Data Analysis and Discussion

Fragment 1 was extracted from a conversation between Odete Roitman and his family, in which he despised Brazil and mocked the national customs. Speeches like these were repeatedly semiotized throughout the soap opera, which became a kind of slang for the character.

Fragment 1
"Then I will leave very, very happy! I will do like the other. Shake off every last speck of dust so as not to take anything away from this sad land" (Odete Roitman, <i>Vale Tudo</i> , 1988).

From an ideological point of view, Odete Roitman materializes the indignation of people living abroad towards Brazilian customs. In this sense we can see the intertextuality (Maingueneau, 1997) between the act proposed by Odete and the action of a famous character in the history of Brazil.

Fragment 2 was extracted from a conversation between Odete Roitman and Maria de Fátima (Glória Pires). When he visits the climber, Odete makes fun of her apartment and, above all, snubs her habits which do not correspond to the standards of good manners to which the criminal was used.

Fragment 2
"To begin with, never bring a glass on a tray to a guest. You are the landlady, even in this sad little apartment. Whoever uses a tray is a waiter, my dear" (Odete Roitman, <i>Vale Tudo</i> , 1988).

In the fragment above the segregation of social classes is clear, still very latent in Brazil, but evident in the 1980s. With this, it is possible to understand that the antagonist in question is the materialization of arrogance, prejudice, and contempt for the economically favored minors, which is very close to the studies of Bueno (2001) and Caldeira (2000).

In the fragment below it is possible to see the behavior of a classic villain, who places himself in a subordinate position and the young woman, automatically, in a subordinate position.

Fragment 3
“All I have to do is reduce you to dust and regret being born. I will show you what happens to those who dare to challenge Odete Roitman. Good night, my dear!” (Odete Roitman, <i>Vale Tudo</i> , 1988).

Ideologically there is a character who finds support in evil to move the plot. The girl Odete refers to is Raquel (Regina Duarte) who, in addition to having a love affair with Ivan (Antônio Fagundes), had a weak entrepreneurial path.

After the threat, in a mocking tone, the construction “good night, mamma mia”, generates effects of meanings which, at the same time as suggesting the fragility of the protagonist to the detriment of the decision-making power of the antagonist, awakens in the spectator the curiosity of what could Odete Roitman do and, with this, develop the novelistic proposal of the plot.

### Conclusion

This article has addressed the relevance in the context of the fictional structuring of the character Odete Roitman, the antagonist of a famous Brazilian soap opera, who launched fads and changed the political thinking of a Brazil still suffering from the process of redemocratization.

DA was a theory of linguistic studies mobilized to understand the construction of meanings in the speeches of the aforementioned character, through which it was possible to save ideologies of power, overlapping of social classes, devaluation of Brazilian culture, as well as the contempt referred to externalization of actions that deviate from an ethical standard, within a political context.

It is foreseen that this work could unfold in others capable of making two issues even more complex: (a) the preponderance of this type of character compared to a novel construction; and (b) the intra- and extra-discursive construction which is not exhausted in the discourse itself, but finds reasons for its meaning in other linguistic strata.

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