

## **The Imagetic dimension of Verbal Language: Expression Effects on Letter X, from Ovid's *Heroides***

**Beatriz Torres**

Attending Masters Degree in Linguistics  
São Paulo State University (UNESP)  
Brazil

**Giovanna Longo**

Professor and Phd in Linguistics  
São Paulo State University (UNESP)  
Brazil

### **Abstract**

The reading of the poetics, which allows comprehending the text as an artistic and cultural object unique of significance, requires recognizing the language sensitive dimension. The following paper presents a brief reading example of verses taken from Letter X, within the Ovid's *Heroides*, in which the analysis of an inversion expedient reveals significance elevated at maximum level.

**Keywords:** reading; figurativity; iconicity

### **Resumo**

A leitura do poético, que permite tomar o texto como objeto artístico e cultural único de significação, requer que se percorra um caminho de reconhecimento da dimensão sensível da linguagem. O presente artigo traz um breve exemplo de leitura expressiva de versos tomados da Carta X, das *Heroides*, de Ovídio, em que a análise do recurso do hipérbato revela uma significação elevada ao máximo grau.

**Palavras-chave:** leitura; figurativização; iconização

*The images creation is the general resource observed in all artistic literature.*<sup>1</sup>(THAMOS, 2014, p.163).

### **Introduction**

The Saussure's Linguistics allowed us to comprehend that the human language is an essentially cultural phenomenon, typical of a socially organized community, with values common to determined world perspectives. Thus, we understand that the culture knowledge is the main source of legitimacy for language study. For verbal language specialists that dedicate themselves to an ancient language as Latin, is fundamental to recognize the written registers, bequeathed by the ancient romans, as meaning objects unique in their manner of expressing that civilization culture.

The temporal distance that parts the classic Latin culture from the current days should not impede us to recognize the Latin texts were produced by natural speakers with exceptional competence, to whom to live consisted in communicating and expressing in Latin (LIMA e THAMOS, 2005, p.126). This comprehension of the texts written by legitimate speakers as cultural objects unique of significance, which means, in their human density, is guarantee by the natural language conception of Latin, as system capable of express with maximum efficiency the culture of a people (LOPES, 1976, p.24).

Considering that "The recognition of the language sensitive dimension is a path for reading the classic text as a cultural and artistic object" (TORRES & LONGO, 2016, p.42), this paper presents a brief reading example of selected passages from Letter X, within Ovid's *Heroides*, in which the expressive resources explored by the poet reveal a kind of figurative emphasis.

---

<sup>1</sup>All foreign languages quotations have been translated by the authors of this paper.

### **Reading Conceptions**

Bearing in mind this inseparable relation between language, society and culture (BENVENISTE, 1971, p.27), it becomes clear that, for reading a text, master the language grammatical rules is not enough. The language theory allows to affirm that “While from the linguistic point of view a text is an act of speaking, material and individual, from the semiotics point of view, a text is also a structure, a language which, as relations network, is capable of formalize meanings [...]. Is for this reason that it is possible to recognize in texts other significations, which transcend the linguistic sign.” (LONGO, 2012, p. 220).

Therefore, the effective reading of a text requires, beyond the linguist knowledge, also those provided by other areas, as the Poetics, the Stylistics, the Rhetorics, the Discourse Theories, etc., so that it becomes possible to recognize the diverse significations which transcend the linguistic sign. These are the knowledge’s that enable the capacity of recognizing in the text the expressive resources that contribute to make it an artistic and cultural object unique of significance.

The classic Latin text reading, one of the principal aims for those who dedicate themselves to this language study, cannot relinquish a procedure less common for those who are dedicate to modern languages texts reading. As explains Longo (2012, p.219): “The Latin reading dynamics requires, inevitably, as first step a metalinguistic exercise (which for lack of a preciser denomination is called “translation” – and here will be called “reference translation”). It is because it is not possible to read Latin in Latin, at least not with that desirable fluency with which are read the modern languages texts. However, this “first reading” exercise only allows a superficial comprehension [...] of the text.”

For verbal language specialists, more than that about what the text refers to, it interests us *how* the text says what it says (LONGO, 2011, p.222) and, thinking about literary texts, this question becomes even more evident. As artistic manifestations, these texts take the language as an end in itself, not as a simple way of communication: it revealed in it “the set towards the message itself, focus on the message for its own sake” (JAKOBSON, 1960, p. 136) – this is the esthetic labor with the word.

Thus, done that first met linguistic exercise indispensable to any Latin original reading, the studious must go back to the classic text in order to, once understood the superficial matters, recognize and comprehend the expressive resources that contribute to identify it as a unique sign.

### **The Poetic Reading**

Starting from the assumption elucidated by Thamos (2014, p. 168) that “the artistic manifestation is tied to a concrete or particular representation of what is essentially abstract or general”, we present ahead a brief reading example of some Ovid’s verses<sup>2</sup>, taken from the selected text, in which the language formal arrangement turns up truly expressive.

Ovid (*Publius Ovidius Naso*) was the most versatile roman poet of the August time (CARDOSO, 2011, p.80). Born in 43 b.C. and dead in 17 or 18 a.C., Ovid has lived during the denominated classic period of Latin Literature, he was contemporary with great poets – as Horace, Propertius and Tibullus – and had the privilege of having his talent recognized still in life. As describes Conte (1999, p.342-3), “[Ovid’s poetic language] revealed [...] in the terse and elegant stile, in the music flow of the verse (he brings the elegiac couplet to perfection, creating the standard towards which so many imitators in later centuries would strive), and in the richness and boldness of expression, this last characteristic brilliantly cultivated and refined during the years he attended the rhetorical schools. The pleasing aestheticism and sceptical elegance of his poetry are also the expression of a taste that turns literature into an ornament of life.”

The work *Heroides*, or *Heroidum Epistulae*, written approximately between 20 and 16 b.C., is one of the youngest productions within the huge work that the roman poet has bequeathed. Written in elegiac couplets, and composed of twenty-one letters attributed mostly to famous Greco-roman mythology female characters, this work has as main theme the amorous suffering.

---

<sup>2</sup>In conjunction with a reference translation. Understood as a first reading practice, its function is merely instrumental, what means that it aims only to allow the comprehension of the Latin text superficial matters. Stem from a metalinguistic exercise, sought transpose the lexical and morphosyntactic components from Latin to English, in order to allow a first comprehension of the classic text and, subsequently, the reading of the original version and its analyses.

The Letter X, *Ariadne to Theseus*, is written by the youth at the Naxos Island just after finding herself all alone, abandoned by the Athenian hero. As the myth tells, Theseus had promised her his love and had assured they would be together, when Ariadne, betraying her own father and homeland, helped him to escape from the labyrinth, after he had killed the Minotaur in Crete. She, therefore, leaves the paternal land with the beloved, but, at a stop during a trip, whose final destiny was Athens, he waits her to follow asleep and leave. Confused and indignant at finding herself alone in the island, the king Minos's daughter writes a letter full of conflicting emotions. Are from this letter the verses selected to compose the object of this analysis.

*Nunc huc, nunc illuc et utroque sine ordine, curro;  
Altapuellarestartatharenapedes.*<sup>3</sup>

(OVÍDIO, *Her. X*, 19-20)

These verses compose an initial excerpt of the letter that reveals an afflicted and disturbed Ariadne, who tries to understand the reason of being alone and seeks a way to reverse the situation. The despair, as an essentially abstract feeling, is represented in concrete actions, as the described above (Ariadne running from one side to another, without order). Besides, the verse 40 seems to suggest with the concrete image of the sand that retains the heroine's feet her suffering and the inevitability of her destiny.

Is interesting to notice that in any moment the poet affirms the youth is desperate, in these terms, but stem from the actions succession, which evokes images, there is no doubt about it for the readers. The expressivity that the imagetic confer to the Ovid's verses can be better notice with the recognition of a discursive construction that Semiotics Theory defines as figuration.

The figuration exists when "a theme (abstract discourse) is converted into figures (figurative discourse)" (THAMOS, 2003, p.103) and it is considered the first level of procedures that explore the figurativity of language that, according to Bertrand (2000, p.154), refers to its capacity of "produce and restore partially analogous signification to our most concrete perceptive experiences".

Another verse in which becomes evident the figurativity exploration inherent to the poetic discourse, as artistic manifestation of verbal language, is this:

*iactatae late signa dedere manus,*<sup>4</sup>

(OVÍDIO, *Her. X*, 40)

Again, the heroine despair is coated of a concrete representation: the hands image, and its excessive swing, giving signals in the hope of Theseus see and sympathize with it to come back and pick her up. All these images succession corroborates the heroine suffering and the readers comprehension of its dimension.

Further on, from the verse 133, Ariadne build her final appeal to Theseus, since her goal was to persuade him to come back and pick her up. For achieving it, is presented a descriptive sequence that function as a great argument which "appeals for the mercy, showing someone pitiful" (FIORIN, 2015, p.225). There is a detailed description about her terminal state of destruction and ruin, for which Theseus is blamed. The following couplet composes this excerpt:

*Has tibi langendolugubriapectoralassas*

*infelix tendo trans freta longa manus;*<sup>5</sup>

(OVÍDIO, *Her. X*, 145-146)

In the transcribed verses, new images coat the suffering theme, as the action of the tired youth hands beating on the bereaved chest. However, in these verses the exploration of language figurativity overcome the figuration. Ariadne offers to Theseus her **tired hands** (*has lassas manus*) **from the other side of the vast sea** (*transfreta longa*), evoking this concrete image (of the ocean) to highlight the huge distance to which he had confined her in that Island. Then, in formal arrangement of the language, an inversion cause a stir. According to Lausberg (2004, p.205), *inversion* "is the separation of two words that syntactically are in intimate connection, through the interposition of a sentence member [...] which do not belong directly to that place".

<sup>3</sup>Now here, now there and for both sides I run, without order;/the deep sand retained [my] girlish feet. (*Reference translation*)

<sup>4</sup>[my] widely agitated hands gave signals (*Reference translation*)

<sup>5</sup>These tired hands, beating on the bereaved chest, I unfortunate offer to you, from the other side of the vast sea (*Reference translation*)

It is important to note that the demonstrative pronoun *has*, declined in plural feminine accusative, refers to the noun *manus*, also declined in plural feminine accusative. Although, despite forming a syntagma, these two elements are separated through the interposition of other elements pertained to other syntagmas. It is also important to emphasize that is a long separation since one of the terms initiates the couplet and the other one appears only in the end of the second verse, closing it.

This distanced placement of the terms in question, besides creating in the reader-listener an expectation that is just solved at the end of the couplet with the *manus* noun presence – announced already cataphorically by the *has* pronoun, and also by the *lassas* adjective –, is expressive as far as manifests, in the poetic text materiality, the distance emphasized by Ariadne (at *trans freta longa*) for moan and claim Theseus mercy.

The heroine hands (*manus*) are textually – or spatial and temporally – placed distanced of the reader-listener that, since the first term of the couplet, is invited to expect for a feminine noun declined in plural accusative that should appear. The expressive meaning effect that the referred terms placement confer to the verses mentioned can be better apprehended with the recognition of the figurativity maximum procedure, denominated by theory *iconicity*. This procedure refers to discursive constructions “in which the figures already installed receive a particular coating so thorough that would have the power to transform them in world’s images, provoking a referential illusion.” (THAMOS, 2003, pp.103-104).

Resuming the fundamental notion of the sign arbitrariness, the term referential illusion designates an “images creation expedient more typical of the poetry” (THAMOS, 2003, p.114). In this maximum figurativity stage, the imageticis founded in the *substance* and, stem from the expression materiality, creates meaning effects that refer to the sensitive world we know, as is observed at the ovidian couplet.

Indeed, when iconicity is discussed, the phonic materiality tends to receive major spotlight. According to Thamos (2003, p.116), “Alliterations and assonances are the most common iconicity resource verified in poetic texts”. However, the same specialist indicates that “valuing the position relation between terms, in the verse, the spatiality starts to insinuate itself within the poetry temporal domain”.

We know that the terms placement in the sentence, in the verse in matter of poetry, is aesthetically explored in literary texts of the most various languages. The terms prevailing placement, of the daily talk for example, contrasts with possible and aesthetically marked rearrangements that compose in expressive mode the artistic word manifestations.

In Latin language, would not be different. In fact, due to declension, the mobility of Latin terms in the verse is even greater when compared to other modern languages as English, in which the syntactic comprehension requires a more rigorous ordination between the sentence terms. Therefore, enjoying this greater mobility, as systemic possibility, the Latin poet does not hesitate to explore this resource at maximum level.

The inversion of the 145 e 146 ovidian verses assumes an iconic configuration, which “addresses more directly to the senses and is settled in an assumption of realistic representation taken as by the producer as by the receptor of the figurative discourse” (THAMOS, 2003, pp.114-115). Thus, the significance placement of the mentioned terms creates a referential illusion effect that, in the material spatiality of the poetic text, concretize the distance theme evoked at the verses.

Let us return to the previous examples, which in fact were not selected randomly. A more attentive reading of the verse 20 (*altapuella restardatharenapedes*), presented previously, leads us to recognize that this *referential illusion* effect created from the significance placement of terms in verse is not single in Ovid’s poem. Differently of happens in the 145 and 146 verses, is not the separation of syntactic related terms that confers material concreteness to an abstract theme, but the placement of the term *pedes*, in the end of the verse, in relation to the placement of term *harena*.

In this verse, which succeeds that one in which Ariadne affirms running from one side to another without order, the king Mino’s daughter describes the sand image (*harena*) to retain, or delay, your feet (*pedes*). Note that the textual disposal of the term *pedes* at the verse last position, only after the term *harena*, in penultimate position, also provokes the *referential illusion* effect. It is as if, in the poetic text materiality, the sand (*harena*) retained Ariadne’s feet (*pedes*). These are textually retained in relation to the *harena* until the verse last position, and this textually retaining action is also observed in relation to the adjective regarding to each term, that announce them cataphorically: note that the adjective regarding to *harena* (*alta*) comes before, or retains, the adjective regarding to *pedes* (*puellares*).

That way, the terms placement in the verse assumes, one more time, an iconic configuration in which the imagetis founded in the *substance*. The retention theme is concretized in the poetic text materiality, creating a meaning effect, which refers to the sensitive world we know.

Nonetheless, is worth highlighting that the terms placement aesthetically explored in the verse does not always lead to iconicity, as affirms Thamos (2017, p.19), “although the iconicity can be founded in the base of an impressive figure of speech as the inversion [...], is comprehended that the simple employment of the figure by itself does not guarantee the text to achieve such concreteness effect”, on the contrary. This is a maximum level procedure in terms of figurativity and identifiable only in essentially contextual readings. The verse 40, for example, transcribed previously, also presents an aesthetically marked placement of terms, again by inversion – separation between the terms *iactatae* and *manus*. However, note that this distanced disposal between *iactatae* and *manus* does not assume an iconic configuration, as the language figurative dimension does not achieve the poetic text materiality.

### Final Considerations

With these brief analyzed examples, it can be observed that, despite Ovid had been traditionally treated as an excessive rhetoric poet, the figures of speech employed by him produce “an meaning effect that overcome a lot the significant value conventionally related to them” (THAMOS, 2017, p.19).

The Latin texts reading in the light of the concepts provided by Linguistics and Semiotics allows the systemic comprehension of the ancient romans language and, mainly, of its inextricable relation with the culture to which belongs. Allied to that, the modern language theories apparatus, as the Semiotics, plays a fundamental part to the reading passage from the linguistic to the textual. Compose the effective reading of the poetic texts the expressive resources apprehension, which constitute the *how the text says what it says*, which characterizes it as an artistic object unique in significance. After all, “When an expression plan does not only convey a substance (how happens in informative texts) but recreates it (how happens in poetic texts), new meanings are added by the expression to the substance” (FIORIN, 2014, p.45). Recognize these meanings is, therefore, fundamental to the Ovid’s poetry reader, as far as they constitute it as an artistic sign, unique to the culture to which belongs.

### References

- BERTRAND, D. (2000). Précis de sémiotique littéraire. Paris: Nathan, coll. « Fac. Linguistique».
- BENVENISTE, É. (1971). Problems in general linguistics. University of Miami Press.
- CARDOSO, Z. de A. (2003). A literatura Latina. (2nd ed.). São Paulo: Martins Fontes.
- CONTE, Gian Biagio. (1999). Latin Literature: a history. Translated by Joseph B. Solodow. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- FIORIN, J. L. (2014). Elementos de análise do discurso. (13 ed.). São Paulo: Contexto.
- JAKOBSON, R. (1960). Linguistics and Poetics. Style in Language, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- LAUSBERG, H. (2004). Elementos de retórica literária. (3rd.ed.). Translated by R. M. Rosado Fernandes. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.
- LIMA, A. D. e THAMOS, M. (2005). Verso é pra cantar: e agora, Virgílio? Alfa: linguistic journal (UNESP), v. 49(2), 125-132.
- LONGO, G. (2012). Semiótica e Estudos Clássicos: o texto latino como objeto de significação. In AMARANTES, J. e LAGES, L. (Org.), Mosaico Clássico: variações acerca do mundo antigo (pp.219-230). Salvador: UFBA.
- LONGO, G. Ensino de Latim: reflexão e método. (2011). 248f. PhD thesis. Faculdade de Ciências e Letras, Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP), Araraquara.
- LOPES, E. (1976). Fundamentos da Linguística contemporânea. São Paulo: Cultrix. OVIDE. (2005). Héroides. (5e édition). Texte établi par H. Bornecque et traduit par M. Prévost. Revue et corrigée et augmentée par Danielle Porte. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. (1959). Course in general linguistics. New York: Philosophical Library.
- THAMOS, M. (2017). Cobras retóricas, horror poético: efeitos de expressão e a morte de Laocoonte na Eneida. Revista *Acta Scientiarum*, Maringá, v. 39, n.1, 13-22.
- THAMOS, M. (2014). A palavra artística: um enigma concreto. Revista *Alere*, Tangará da Serra, v. 10, n.02, 157-177.
- THAMOS, M. (2003). Figuratividade na poesia. Itinerários, Araraquara, special n., 101-118.
- TORRES, B. & LONGO, G. (2016). Ariadne a Teseu: um estudo da persuasão na Carta X das Heroides, de Ovídio. *Rónai: Revista de Estudos Clássicos e Tradutórios*, UFJF, Juiz de Fora, v.4, n. 2, 34-43.