THE SACRED AS A SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONCEPT: NOTES BETWEEN DURKHEIM AND SAUSSURE

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▪ ABSTRACT: The object of this article is to study the contribution of Émile Durkheim, in sociology, and Ferdinand de Saussure, in linguistics and ethnology, in the definition of the objects of study known as social facts and linguistic facts (respectively). More than just launching of objects of studies, based on the promotion of epistemological and scientific cut-outs, Durkheim and Saussure also based their theories on chronological and spatial bases, preferring synchrony to diachrony and returning to spatial/temporal zone more in line with the conjunctural movement. In addition, through the theoretical exposition we have tried to show the fact that without the definition of social facts, we would not have the basis for the study of linguistic facts. This not only brings social facts closer to linguistic facts, but also makes it possible to think of the scientific field as a theoretically relational field that can be understood via an empirical situation, through the concept of the sacred and its analysis in line with social reality.

▪ KEYWORDS: society; social facts; linguistic facts; sacred.

Introduction

This article has as object of study the contribution of Émile Durkheim, in sociology and Ferdinand de Saussure, in linguistics and ethnology, in the definition of the objects of studies known as social facts and linguistic facts (respectively).

Rather than launching objects of study based on the promotion of epistemological and scientific cut-outs, Durkheim and Saussure also ground their theories on chronological and spatial bases, preferring synchrony to diachrony, as a spatial/temporal zone consistent with the conjunctural movement. And even if they use historical chronologies, this is a resource that reinforces the importance of the facts of morality and language, because they are part of the process that walks stable, but always open to slow and gradual configurational changes (Elias, 2006).

Following this path of important definitions, we also point to a similarity between the two approaches: Durkheim's functionalism places social facts as external, coercive

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and general, a product of the collective conscious, acting in a stable way, despite oppositions and contradictions (Durkheim, 1982). In the same way, linguistic facts are seen by Saussure within his structuralism (which is still functional in objective terms), as having a social, homogeneous and stable character, directly linked to the language, with its symbolic unit (the sign), which disseminates a sound memorial detail that makes the speaker and the listener access a structure that can be understood (Saussure, 2016). This gives the two authors not only the position of founding theorists, but also the importance of constructing a theoretical composition still fluent despite the criticisms and positioned in the condition of classic texts, which are: Durkheim's *The rules of sociological method*, published in 1895, and the *Course in general linguistics* (compilation attributed to Saussure's notes and courses), published after his death by his students in 1916.

In addition to these issues, the first section of the article also addresses the relationship between the two authors, within the nuances of their theories and the possibilities of connection between them, as well as using an interpretation where the construction of linguistic facts would not be possible without the theoretical bases provided by the analysis of social facts. This is followed by a second section, which in turn addresses the applications of the authors' concepts and analyses in relation to a particular empirical phenomenon, which is the question of the sacred, approached from a social and religious point of view.

The relationship between *The rules of method* and the *Course of general linguistics*

The central point of this section is to show the reader how innovative the two texts mentioned here were for launching new sciences (at the transition from the 19th to the 20th century): *The rules of sociological method* and the *Course in general linguistics*, which is an amalgamation and revision of the cabinet writings left by Saussure, as well as notes from his students, organized by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. And beyond the distinct research intentions, the terms: "social facts" and "linguistic facts", have analogies between themselves that go back not only to the formation of subfields of knowledge, in the general field of culture, but the formation of two objects of study that share fundamental characteristics (Bourdieu, 2004).

So let us start by defining the common characteristics to the objects, bringing the quotes from the original texts into the debate. The first of these fundamental characteristics is the subject/object relationship. In Durkheim, this relationship is defined in terms of the objectivity of the researcher in showing the causes of the emergence of social facts, external to himself, being one of the most delicate characteristics of his theory. In this sense, social facts are things created from the interaction between people and social rules, which are born of customs and may come to constitute themselves as laws. According to Durkheim (1982, p. 40):

Thus yet another reason justifies the distinction we have established later between psychology proper — the science of the individual mind and sociology. Social facts differ not only in quality from psychical facts; they have a different substratum, they do not evolve in the same environment or depend on the same conditions. This does not mean that they are not in some sense psychical, since they all consist of ways of thinking and acting. But the states of the collective consciousness are of a different nature from the states of the individual consciousness; they are representations of another kind.

Durkheim moved on in his arguments, seeking to construct the fundamental characteristics of his object, arguing that although social facts are psychic and work in people's minds, their substratum (what is most essential to them), comes from the fact that they are the "social product" of a collective consciousness. This implies directing the meaning of the rules we obey: they are not born of the individual will and are randomly reproduced by the millions, they are in fact the product of a collective conviction, which gradually takes root even if produced by one person or more (as also seems to be the process of linguistic facts, as far as language production is concerned), reaching a different, properly social dimension, moving away from their initial producer(s).

As an example of what was said above we have the currency called "Real", which for Brazilians is much more than the representation of an economic policy expressed by the Itamar Franco government and its finance minister, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, which began in 1994 (Monteiro, 2000). This economic policy has created a common and general currency for Brazilians and it is through its use, with a coercive and regular character, that commercial exchanges take place with its degree of liquidity (and this is its functional side). After being in common use for about 28 years, this currency has consolidated itself beyond the economy and entered the collective consciousness of Brazilians. Someone unaware of this may want to try using the Euro to buy something at the bakery, but will not be able to because the difficulties of calculating value and exchange rates make it difficult to accept it in another social reality.

This is how Durkheim defines things that are properly social, as something that is created arbitrarily and by regularity becomes usual/normal. This very use makes them generalized, not just because of practice, but because they are "installed" in the collective consciousness (Durkheim, 1982).

Figure 1 – Physical representation of the economic policy
of the Real and the Euro in the form of currencies

They represent an economic policy.

A given valuation of a system of an exchange system.

A collective consciousness of their own.

Source: Author's elaboration.

As for Saussure, the construction of its object, i.e., the linguistic facts, is supported by the main characteristic of separating historical studies of language, diachronic studies, which are concerned with showing the development of a particular language structure over time, from synchronic studies, which focus on the structure of language in a defined time, and he opted for the synchronic question. Thus, even though there is room for comparison, Saussure's linguistic study sticks to a specific space and time in an attempt to understand how it works.[1]

In this way, linguistic facts act like social facts in integrative terms. But instead of linking the morality of social rule to the conduct of the average person in a society, they link the concepts to stable sound representations, in an artificial and arbitrary sense, forming links of psychic (and therefore also concrete) sense.

> The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound- image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. The sound-image is sensory, and if I happen to call it "material," it is only in that sense, and by way of opposing it to the other term of the association, the concept, which is generally more abstract (Saussure, 2016, p. 66).

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[1]   In sociology, Durkheim took the same approach, drawing attention to the study of "social species", separate from the generalist evolutionary view.

What's interesting is to realize the work that Saussure does in defining an object for linguistic science while affirming that this object is psychic and concrete, but not purely individual and psychological, because acoustic images, as well as moral rules, are shared within the collective conscious, which is why they have a degree of conventionality. Once again, we see the effort to construct objectivity. This effort is nothing more than giving the object of study an invariability, making it stable and possible for experimentation. That is why it is coherent to think that the acoustic image does not vary, because it has psychic and concrete validity, given its function, which is to allow the existence of a sound detail that allows us, through memory, to access a sense of understanding of what is said to us and to articulate this in a social way, as something generalized and stable (functional/structural).

This cannot be confused with pure abstraction, because the central characteristic of the research object, in this case, is actually the beacon of emerging science. This individual role of Saussure in the field of science, which we generically call the founding role, requires its agent to construct something that can present a degree of stability in the face of controversy, and more than that, generate possibilities for reflection and improvement, with the next steps taken around the founded object.

Figure 2 – The relationship between concept, sound image and sense of arbitrariness

Árvore (Portuguese — sign)
Tree (English — sign)

It represents a conventional - conceptual psychic image.
A given sharing of meaning, constructed by a sound radical.
A collective consciousness of its own.

Source: Author's elaboration.

What Saussure does for linguistics is to enable the understanding of the processes of forming the meaning of words, as something constructed and stabilized (opening up space for the field of study later called phonology). Here, the idea of the value of the object is extremely important, because its value is not assigned automatically or is in the sign by itself; on the contrary, it is something that is given to it by conventional use (social and regular, just as social facts are). That is why the sign "*Árvore*" and the sign "Tree" maintain a sound structure capable of referring us to their meaning. Whether it means a natural tree or a genealogical tree, this is no more important than the fact that there is a social structure that leads us to these meanings. Even sociologically, we can say that the moral structure allows us the same effect,

referring us to a limit of meanings, whether we consider tree as something natural (environmental preservation is important) or as something social (genealogically we have an institutional family affiliation, which defines roles and can be represented by a flowchart similar to branches of a tree).

After these brief considerations about some of the characteristics of social facts and linguistic facts, which in summary can be defined as the ability of these facts to be external objects, the product of social convention, having a beginning and an individual and collective development that is consolidated as a practice, we can also say that they are forms of representation, having as substrate the moral and sound elements seen in a synchronic way. For the more inattentive, this last characteristic will not appear as belonging to the two authors. This is because Durkheim's analysis is more commonly seen as diachronic-comparative, based on the reading of Meillet (1948), a disciple of Saussure who worked to unite the analyses of these two theorists:

> In his texts, Antoine Meillet emphasized the social and evolutionary nature of language. According to him: 'Because language is a social fact, it follows that linguistics is a social science, and the only variable element that can be used to account for linguistic variation is social change' (Meillet, 1921, *apud* Calvet, 2002, p. 16). As can be seen from this quote, from Meillet's point of view, any variation in language is strictly motivated by social factors. Meillet was a disciple of Saussure, but, inspired by the sociologist Durkheim, defined language as a social fact, emphasizing the evolutionary character of language, unlike Saussure, for whom synchrony prevails over diachrony (Coelho *et al.*, 2010, p. 15, our translation).

However, Durkheim himself, to whom Millet is affiliated, even placing Linguistics as a social science, does not define Sociology as a diachronic study, but a synchronic one, precisely to avoid the evolutionary tendency opened up by Albert Spencer to compare and classify cultures (Durkheim, 1982). This is why he was cautious about allowing comparative studies in order to reinforce differences and studies focused on the synchronic aspects of societies, which he called "social species". This also ties in with the observations made by Saussure himself, for whom synchronic analysis relates to the linguistic structure of a given people in defined time and space (Saussure, 2016).

Another important issue linking the 'theories of Durkheim and Saussure is the question of value. On the one hand, what we see in Durkheim is the defense of a moral value for social facts, which has its strength recognized by the social precisely because it is in the individual consciousnesses in a shared way, forming a different substrate, the collective consciousness. Saussure achieves the same effect by justifying the formation of a new substrate coming from the social, the difference being that he does not put this down to morality, but to the memorial possibility that people have

within culture and the use of language, to establish the recognition of sound details that enable the meaning of words. In either case, considering social and linguistic facts, morals or sound nuances, the value given by the social is so such that the possibilities of breaking these rules in a volatile way are excluded, since they can only be broken with a lot of effort and time, invalidating the hitherto consolidated assumptions of the objects in question.
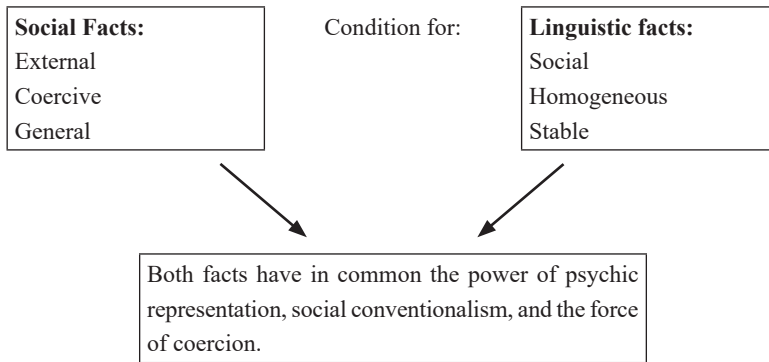
Regarding the characteristics of the two types of facts, we can also say that social facts are external, coercive and general, while linguistic facts are social, homogeneous and stable. Putting these two categorizations together, it is possible to say that the exteriority of the social fact consists in it being a construct that takes on autonomy as a collective rule, moving into the field of objectivity and not of subjectivity. This is consistent with the linguistic fact being social, the product of a convention,, and therefore also external and objective, not subject to change by the speakers, because change does not belong to individuals, just like in social facts.

There is the pair of coerciveness and homogeneity, which indicates that the force of social and linguistic facts cannot be altered without the social and linguistic order not being altered, being a maneuver liable to sanctions in the social case, resulting from the breaking of customs and laws. In the linguistic case, it causes repulsion and incomprehension, not allowing communication.

Finally, we have the pair generality and stability. As for social facts, they are general and stable because they are in the consciousness of the average population and this generates consolidation, because they change their nature. This process also occurs with linguistic facts, which consolidate the acoustic image as the structure of language, which closes the question of their social basis, also revealing that as a constitution, they are social facts and are within the analytical reach of 19th century academic France.

In this way, the elements that make up linguistic facts: the sign (as the smallest unit of the language), its meaning (a socially recognized concept linked to it, via collective conscious) and signifier (minimum sound structure that allows the speaker to recognize by memory, within a culture – giving meaning to communication), were consolidated through a set of social elements: collective conscious formed psychically and the social interaction responsible for the operationalization of meanings and minimum sound structures. That is, the construct is linguistic, the materials used are linguistic, but the "link" that unites them is sociological, because it does not only imply interaction, but the systematization of this interaction in the form of a body of theoretical knowledge.

Figure 3 – Schematics of social facts/linguistic facts

Social Facts:	Condition for:	Linguistic facts:
External		Social
Coercive		Homogeneous
General		Stable

Both facts have in common the power of psychic representation, social conventionalism, and the force of coercion.

Source: Author's elaboration.

We conclude this first section by pointing out the elements that in Durkheim and Saussure represent approximations and nuances, resorting to the analysis of their own theories. We will now move on to exemplify this first section by analyzing what is recognized in the West as "sacred", making use of the analysis of social and linguistic facts in relation to this object.

The concept of the sacred as a social and linguistic fact: combining Durkheim and Saussure

In order to form the theoretical and empirical application of the social fact and the linguistic fact, we will continue with notes on a concept that can make this demonstration and connection, which is the concept of sacred. This concept applies both to social issues, which show the formation of a collective consciousness that generates coercion and generality, without losing its position as a synchronic phenomenon, and to linguistic issues, as it aligns its general concept with social convention and allows for the verification of a sound nuance that gives it structure. But far from analyzing the concept of the sacred by separating the two authors, we will make our notes by relating the central aspects within a more fluid and interdisciplinary discussion.

In Durkheim's view, the sacred is every social norm that implies an acceptance by the average consciousness, with the connotation of something to be protected, respected or worshiped. It can apply to social rules or religious rites and forms a pair of oppositions between the individual and the collective (Durkheim, 1995). In Saussure's view, the sacred is a sign that behaves in a symbolic way (not establishing a direct cause and consequence relationship between word and meaning), therefore it is a word formed by social convention, subject at great cost to a given modification, which conceptually defines something to be protected, respected or worshiped, just as in the social fact (Arnemann, Santos, 2016). The difference lies in the fact that there is a sound structure,

beyond a moral condition, which allows the relationship between word and meaning to be made through acoustic memory (signifier).

In Durkheim (1995, p. 17–18) we have:

> All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, have the same common character: they suppose a classification of things, real or ideal, which men conceive, in two classes, in two opposite genders, generally designated by two distinct terms which the words 'profane' and 'sacred' translate quite well. The division of the world into two domains comprising one, all that is sacred, the other, all that is profane, such is the distinguishing feature of religious thought: beliefs, myths, gnomes, legends, are representations or systems of representations that express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers that are attributed to them, their history, their relations to each other and to profane things.

In Saussure (2016, p. 66) we have:

> The psychological character of our sound-images becomes apparent when we observe our own speech. Without moving our lips or tongue, we can talk to ourselves or recite mentally a selection of verse. Because we regard the words of our language as sound images, we must avoid speaking of the "phonemes" that make up the words. This term, which suggests vocal activity, is applicable to the spoken word only, to the realization of the inner image in discourse . We can avoid that misunderstanding by speaking of the sounds and syllables of a word provided we remember that the names refer to the sound-image.

Thus, the sacred acts in a moralizing and mnemonic way, using the collective consciousness, conventionality, morality and sound detail as means of social application. But that would not be enough to justify the permanence of the sacred as something lasting and stable, as a social and linguistic fact. That's why its degree of durability lies in a condition that allows both Durkheim and Saussure to defend stability rather than instability, which is the notion of morphology.

The way the sacred is constituted, either as a moral element or as a mnemonic sound nuance, shows more than the question of "substances of composition", it shows the social and linguistic form that provides an understanding of the functioning and structure of the sacred. As a properly social and religious phenomenon, the sacred has its variations in specific contexts, based on the composition of customs/myths/rites, and is underpinned by different cultures in different ways. Beyond this usual composition, it is also seen as something functional/structural, sometimes taking the concomitant position of a social and linguistic fact. In general terms, these considerations were made by Eliade (1987, p. 11),

> Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself as something wholly different from the profane. To designate *the act of the manifestation* of the sacred, we have proposed the term *hierophany*. It is a fitting term, because it does not imply anything further; it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, *i.e.*, *that something sacred shows itself to us*. It could be said that the history of religions – from the most primitive to the most highly developed – is constituted by a considerable number of hierophanies, by manifestations of sacred realities.

This made it possible to think of the sacred in two dimensions: a more subjective dimension that presents itself as revealing the sacred or hierophanic, operating through perceptions (Schutz, 2018). And an objective dimension, acting as a force or as forces that imply the presence of the sacred in a social way (Monteiro, 1986). This has already been a debate in the Social Sciences and has taken the following directions: discussion on the secularization of religious practices; emergence of the dimension of religiosity and spirituality and pluralization of spaces for the participation of the sacred (Berger, 1985; Hervieu-Leger, 2015; Simmel, 2011). Therefore, in view of these points, it is now time for a more detailed look at each one and how they are linked to social and linguistic facts.

In the midst of the debates of the 1970s, authors such as Berger (1985) and Hervieu-Leger (2015) pointed to the presence of secular forces invading the terrain of beliefs in the sacred, socially operating the desacralization of institutions and public spaces, spaces that had hitherto been influenced by religion, which messed with the routine of behaviors. This led to the belief that the future would then become a time when the sacred would no longer be institutionally monopolized and that its existence, at least in the West, would be linked to something very particular, a form of subjective experience, no more or less important than the sacredness of laws and ethics.

Thus, the bets in a decline of the religious sacred would allow for the offer of a secular sacred, maintaining social forms and making religious thought just one of many other forms of thought. This would guarantee its presence in the social morphology, as a social fact, placing it within a supposed objective/subjective perception, as well as in linguistic morphology, maintaining the limitations of the concept and the basic sound structure for its understanding. What we see is the proposition of a sacred that is now read not in functional and structural terms, but with "limited powers", socially and religiously.
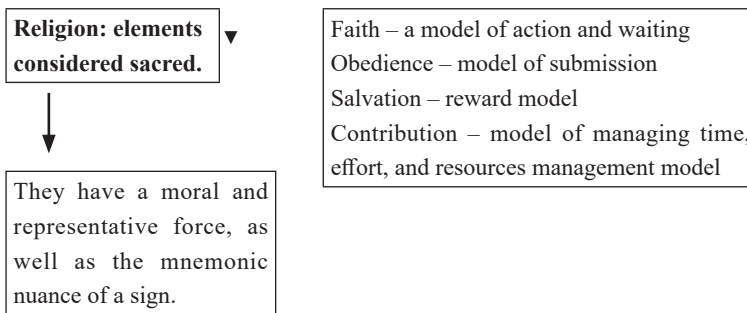
This would also imply the decline of traditional religious institutions, read from Europe as a heap of churches-museums, which are maintained on the basis of their historical and artistic constitution, but not properly religious (Simmel, 2011). However, when we look at the Latin American reality, this proposition is quite different. The model of developing countries has opened up fertile ground for the composition of the sacred as something objective/subjective, now proliferated by Pentecostal religions

which, as well as carrying a doctrinal scope, reveal themselves to be the guarantors of a religiosity willing to meet subjective demands, not subjective as such, but willing to accommodate indoctrination to a more fluid system of individual rewards.

This creates a series of analytical difficulties for scholars in social sciences, sciences of religion and language sciences, because amid a perception of fluidity (Baumann, 2001), there is at the same time a prevalence of a social stability in the so-called more traditional and conservative churches, to the detriment of subjectivities and the possibilities of multiple affiliations (Hervieu-Leger, 2015).

This social stability comes from the fact that the sacred as a religious element is internalized in consciences through its regulatory aspects: customs and doctrinal elements expressed in specific documents (such as professions of faith, regiments and statutes). Its linguistic stability, as a fact, comes from absorbing social force, expressing it through the meaning of some important signs such as: faith, obedience, salvation and contribution, for example. Generally speaking, the terms mentioned connect to social and linguistic facts as follows:

Figure 4 – Link between sacred elements and social and linguistic facts

Religion: elements considered sacred.	Faith – a model of action and waiting Obedience – model of submission Salvation – reward model Contribution – model of managing time, effort, and resources management model
They have a moral and representative force, as well as the mnemonic nuance of a sign.	

Source: Author's elaboration.

Another important issue is the definition that the social fact and the linguistic fact promote an interpretative tension in relation to the sacred corresponding to two important phenomena: spirituality and religiosity. Spirituality, which is commonly thrown into the subjective realm, is the one that has more fluidity (Bauman, 2001), approaching a freedom to use cultural references for the construction of transcendence or models of asceticism, to use an expression by Weber (2001) and Swedberg (2005). This phenomenon is similar to the issue of linguistic practices generating fluid possibilities of variation in relation to speech, managing to maintain a structurally comprehensible sense of arbitrary code within the scope of the sign. In the case of spirituality, these relations with the sacred take a variety of forms, including syncretic and hybrid ones, in the first case mixing references, in the second admitting the same reference with multiple interpretations.

This indicates that the continuous lines of behavior seek to micro sociologically imprint an interface between the subjective and the general rules that permeate the collective, as well as the bases of meaning that allow us to say that to be sacred, it has to be more than spiritual, it has to be something of the collective conscious, thus being anchored, worshiped, defended, even if not absolute. This indicates that the sacred, read from a social and linguistic point of view, has its scientific intention of showing the discussion around something objective and arbitrary, bringing with it the stable, but not immutable, social character, despite also being subjective, general, but at the same time contested.

Lastly, we leave the question of where the sacred operates and its alleged instability/stability. In terms of social and linguistic fact, geographical stability is what gives coherence, time of consonance and customary character to the social rules imposed and the ways in which a language is used, linking these phenomena not only to people, but to the places they inhabit.

Since the 1990s, we have seen in Latin America the proliferation of sacred sites, linked to religion, politics and national symbols, with the im of marking references of belief. This trend reaffirms the collective need for a place/culture of belonging and it is not difficult to imagine that this freedom of expression, experimentation and experience is reflected in social settings that are geographically located, but which are also spaces of interrelations. They are also places where social and linguistic facts are present, inserted at the same time in the performance of liturgies and roles.

This would then be a form of behavior that connects social life and notions of the sacred, while at the same time highlighting the presence of the theories of Durkheim and Saussure, as producers of explanatory tools of functions and structures that, according to them, form our social and linguistic reality.

Conclusion

What was presented in this article was a synthesis, sometimes particular, sometimes integrated between the main theories present in two works that reveal an effort to found emerging sciences in the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, namely: sociology and linguistics.

Its founders were Émile Durkheim and Ferdinand de Saussure (respectively), with the former compiling his own writings and the latter having his writings organized and complemented by his students, in the form of a general synthesis of his courses. However, the relevant thing to emphasize is that the most important work done here was to bring together these two authors and the bases of their theories on the social fact and the linguistic fact, showing that their characteristics are closer than it is apparent and that the notions of functionalism and structuralism on which they work are convergent. The problem is that Durkheim is commonly mistaken as a researcher focused on diachrony, while Saussure is considered a pure structuralist, when in fact

he absorbs the basis of functionalism in considering the linguistic fact as something social, structural and communicative.

The point is that this approximation between social fact and linguistic fact and its authors was made through auxiliary authors as in the case of Meillet (1948). This led to a more precise direction in terms of historical construction, but not in terms of theoretical construction, with second-hand interpretation always taking priority. What was done in our case is an attempt to connect these theories in a more fluid and direct way, so in addition to presenting the authors, we sought to place an object of study that could be the example of a social and linguistic fact, which is the question of the sacred as a social and religious phenomenon.

At first, this demonstrates our ability to provide examples that are consistent with the theory, without losing the empirical capacity and, at the same time, the ability to reinforce the fact that the contributions of Durkheim and Saussure continue to spark academic debate and raise hypotheses about the nuances of their arguments, as being valid details in the studies and observation of social and linguistic phenomena.

- *RESUMO: Este artigo tem como objeto de estudo a contribuição de Émile Durkheim, pela Sociologia e Ferdinand de Saussure, pela Linguística e a Etnologia, na definição dos objetos de estudo conhecidos como fatos sociais e fatos linguísticos (respectivamente). Mais que o lançamento de objetos de estudos, alicerçados na promoção de recortes epistemológicos e científicos, Durkheim e Saussure fundamentam suas teorias também em bases cronológicas e espaciais, preferindo a sincronia à diacronia e o retorno a uma zona espacial/temporal mais condizente com o movimento conjuntural. Além disso, através da exposição teórica buscamos mostrar o fato de que sem a definição dos fatos sociais, não teríamos a base para o estudo dos fatos linguísticos. Isto não apenas aproxima os fatos sociais dos fatos linguísticos, como também possibilita pensarmos o campo científico como um campo teoricamente relacional e passível de entendimento via uma situação empírica, através do conceito de sagrado e sua análise em consonância com a realidade social.*

- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Sociedade; fatos sociais; fatos linguísticos; sagrado.*

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