

Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

Paper 109

The circulation of violence in discourse

by

Daniel Silva[©]

(University of Rio de Janeiro)

dnsfortal@gmail.com

© September 2014

The Circulation of Violence in Discourse

Daniel Silva

University of Rio de Janeiro

Abstract

This paper examines two hypotheses concerning the relationship between language and violence. (1) Language does not merely represent violence, but enacts its own type of violence. (2) The use of violent language participates in the demarcation of political and subjective viability in the public sphere. I argue that these hypotheses are true to the extent that discourse circulates. I elaborate on two models of discourse circulation: *iterability*, a concept that Jacques Derrida proposed and that Judith Butler borrows in her understanding of the performativity of hate speech, and *communicability*, an anthropological concept devised by Charles Briggs to envision the complex infectious character of modern discourses. This paper also looks at the communicability of violent discourse in Brazilian contemporary political life.

1. Introduction

What is the relationship between violence and language? This is a fundamental question that Teresa Caldeira (2000) asks of anthropology and consequently of herself in her ethnographic study of violence and the political construction of segregation in the city of Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Both violence and fear have increased in the city in the past two decades. “Fear and violence,” says Caldeira (2000: 19), “difficult things to make sense of, cause discourse to proliferate and circulate”. The narration of crime – or “talk of crime”, as she has coined the phrase – is a simplistic, essentialized and repetitive strategy that citizens of Sao Paulo resort to in order to cope with “the arbitrary and unusual nature of violence” (id. *ibid.*). In this approach of violence and language, violence disrupts and language seeks to counteract disruption (p.34). Violence and language, however, relate to one another in such a dialectical way that one cannot state that narration solely heals or counters disruption. On the contrary, the talk of crime causes violence to circulate even more. It also creates stereotypes and undermines public security policies. Language heals, but also wounds.

As Caldeira states:

The repetition of stories (...) only serves to reinforce people’s feelings of danger, insecurity and turmoil. Thus the talk of crime feeds a circle in which fear is both dealt with and reproduced, and violence is both counteracted and magnified (p.19).

In terms of Austin’s (1962) linguistic philosophy, the talk of crime is performative. It also participates in the segregation of the city. When entering that circular and repetitive field of narration, middle class citizens ultimately delineate the

domain of wellbeing inside the city. Beyond the limits of this domain lie the criminals and outlaws; and all those excluded by the logic that talk of crime creates.

I would like to start from these two major nuances of Caldeira's ethnographic work – namely that this mode of narration is at once performative and political – so as to formulate the problem that this paper addresses. I will reword these two aspects as the following two hypotheses: One - That language does not merely represent violence; it enacts its own type of violence. Two - That the use of violent language participates in the demarcation of political and subjective viability in the public sphere. I will argue that these hypotheses are true to the extent that *discourse circulates*. Violent discourse projects communicable cartographies (Briggs, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2011), which map how discourse should travel across multiple dimensions of social life. While traveling, it naturalizes social relations, confers certain subject positions and demarcates the domain of modernity and political viability in unequal cities such as Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, where I undertake fieldwork. As a counterpoint to this, these communicable constructions also project paths in which subjects can reject violence, seek to counter the injurious effects of speech and, in a word, make violent discourse miss the target.

How does violent discourse come to be construed as the only possible representation of certain subjects? How do words ambiguously wound someone and accord him/her a certain social existence? What is the role of convention in this violent process? What are the limits of our vulnerability to violent language? All these questions invite us to look at the pragmatics and metapragmatics of violent discourse. Charles Briggs reminds us that the circulation of words is accompanied by representations of the movement of discourse. But the metapragmatics of violent discourse isn't usually made visible. I will argue with Bourdieu that the symbolic aspects of violence are very often dismissed as *not being violence at all*. Bourdieu writes that symbolic violence is “the gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such” (Bourdieu, 1977: 192). I believe that shedding light on these often-disguised representations will help us track the communicable constructions of violent facts.

In what follows, I first examine the notion of linguistic violence in the Western tradition of signification. Then I explain that, within the Western tradition of language thought, the very idea of violence in language turns out to be odd or illogical. I will argue that unless we abandon the main premise of that tradition – namely, that language mirrors the world –, linguistic violence and its performative and communicable character will not make sense. Finally, I offer an analysis of the mediation of linguistic violence in Brazil.

2. Language is violence

In 2004, a member of the Sao Paulo Motorway Drivers Union killed the union's leader, Oswaldo Cruz Júnior. Defendant José Benedito de Souza explained in court that Oswaldo Júnior had repeatedly addressed him in humiliating terms. *Folha de S. Paulo*, Brazil's leading newspaper, quoted the defendant's explanation of his brutal reaction: “Whenever he saw me, he would tease me, calling me a flat head, saying that I came to Sao Paulo only to make money” (*Folha de S. Paulo*, 22 January, 2004).

In terms of José Souza's justification, the violent physical act was triggered by an utterance. The words that the president uttered, we may infer, consisted in a prior

non-physical act, more precisely an offensive speech act. Schematically, we could represent the sequence of acts as follows:

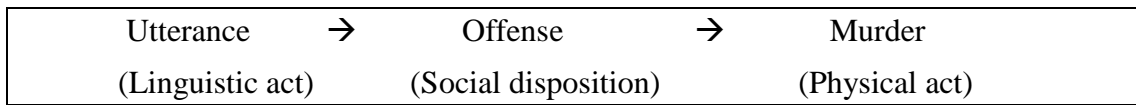


Figure 1 – Temporality of events involved in the crime

This diagram could be considered a representation of the temporality of events involved in the crime. I chose to name the offense a social ‘disposition’ in the sense of Wittgenstein’s (1958:63) explanation of our relation to interpretation: to interpret utterances in our everyday life is not a ‘mental’ process but rather an abiding-condition. Whether this disposition is primarily social or psychological goes beyond my purposes in this paper. Let us rather focus our attention on the two extremities of the figure. Could we consider the union leader’s utterance an act? Further, can an utterance trigger other types of acts, non-linguistic ones as well? Our long-lasting tradition of linguistic thinking, whose foundations lie in Ancient Greece, would answer ‘no’. That tradition for many years considered – and some contemporary schools still do – that language only represents the world. This intellectual legacy claims that the sentences of a language should be considered as being either true or false. In other words, language mirrors the world, which can be done either in a true or false way. The roots of this legacy are firmly embedded in the work of Plato and Aristotle. In both Plato’s *Sophist* and Aristotle’s *On Interpretation*, one reads that the main function of language is to represent the world.

In his narration of the conversation between the Visitor from the city of Elea and the mathematician Theaetetus, Plato lays the foundations of what would become one of the cornerstones of the Philosophy of Language and Linguistics, the idea that language *is* about reality. In other words, Plato is here formulating an ideology of language (Silverstein, 1979) that conceives language as a mirror of the world – an ontology whose machinery (or ‘quality’, as we will see in the dialogue) works through propositions that are either true or false. Let us see below an excerpt in which Plato touches right at the heart of how realism perceives the proposition:

Visitor: Whenever there’s speech it has to be about something. It’s impossible for it not to be about something.

Theaetetus: Yes.

Visitor: And speech also has to have some particular quality.

Theaetetus: Of course.

Visitor: Now let’s turn our attention to ourselves.

Theaetetus: Alright.

Visitor: I’ll produce some speech by putting a thing together with an action by means of a noun and a verb. You have to tell me what it’s about.

Theaetetus: I’ll do it as well as I can.

Visitor: “Theaetetus sits.” That’s not a long piece of speech, is it?

Theaetetus: No, not too long.

Visitor: Your job is to tell me what it's about, what it's of.

Theaetetus: Clearly it's about me, of me.

Visitor: Then what about this one?

Theaetetus: What one?

Visitor: "Theaetetus (to whom I'm now talking) flies."

Theaetetus: No one would ever deny that it's of me and about me.

Visitor: We also say that each piece of speech has to have some particular quality.

Theaetetus: Yes.

Visitor: What quality should we say each one of these has?

Theaetetus: The second one is false, I suppose, and the other one is true.

Visitor: And the true one says things that are as they are, about you.

Theaetetus: Of course.

Visitor: And the false one says things differently from as they are.

Theaetetus: Yes.

Visitor: So it says things that are not, but that they are.

Theaetetus: I suppose so.

Visitor: But they're different things that are from the things that are about you – since we said that concerning each thing many beings are and many are not.

(Plato, 1997 [360 BC]: 262e – 263b)

This dialogue, whose focus is the nature of language, presents the visitor as someone who considers that speech is all about being. Speech *does not do*; it rather *is* – or *is not* – about something in the world. The *raison d'être* of speech – and of language in general – is its ontological function of representation, of being about something. "It has to be about something," says the visitor. And the mode of representation (or 'quality') is accomplished in accordance with truth conditions. This representivist view of language will find a logical formulation in Aristotle's philosophy. Plato's disciple will define which sentences have logical vocation to be propositions, a gesture that entails, by logical necessity, excluding from the domain of philosophy sentences that do not describe the true or the false:

Every sentence has meaning, not as being the natural means by which a physical faculty is realized, but, as we have said, by convention. Yet every sentence is not a proposition; only such are propositions as have in them either truth or falsity. Thus a prayer is a sentence, but is neither true nor false.

Let us therefore dismiss all other types of sentence but the proposition, for this last concerns our present inquiry, whereas the investigation of the others belongs rather to the study of rhetoric or of poetry.

(Aristotle, 4.16 b33)

Relegated to the domain of rhetoric or poetry, the sentences that do not represent the world (either truly or falsely) have therefore no cognitive value, not to mention political value – note that Plato, Aristotle’s master, had proposed that poets be banned from the Republic, for they did not talk about things as they are but in terms of metaphors. The diagram above describing the temporality of the crime, according to which both violent utterance and event do not represent states of affairs but are rather the performance of certain acts, would be, in terms of this classical view, illogical. In the Aristotelian view, “the declarative proposition aims at the real, only in such intentionality propositions have meaning” (Giannotti, 2011: 91). The main function of language would be to mirror the world. Consequently, it would be absurd to think of language as an action that is capable of inciting other actions. Non-representativist possibilities such as ‘language acts on X’ or ‘language causes Y’ would not be part of the domain of knowledge – they would at the most belong in the discourse embellishments of rhetoric or poetry.

However, Figure 1 makes sense socially. It also entails obtaining some knowledge about an aspect of reality. The classification of acts in that temporal representation of the crime follows Austin’s original approach to language in philosophy. The English philosopher undertakes a true attack on the classic view by claiming that utterances that do not pertain to the field of true and false are not “a type of nonsense” (Austin, 1962:4). Performative utterances do not describe things in the world but rather perform things. Such utterances don’t work according to vericonditional semantics: a performative has no previous referent in the world; it enacts or performs the social existence of the referent at the scene of utterance. Let’s take one of Austin’s examples. In the Christian heterosexual world, a man and a woman are considered married after the priest utters the formula “I hereby declare you husband and wife.” There is no married couple as such prior to the enunciation of these words. The performative utterance at stake performs, as it were, a social magic.

Austin died prematurely, and did not fully propose a theory of performativity. The interpretation of his innovative thinking, radically critical of the metaphysical tradition, has influenced many fields, beyond linguistic pragmatics and philosophy of language. Some disputes over the interpretation of speech acts became famous in the history of ideas, the one between Derrida (1977) and Searle (1977) certainly being one of the most heated. In this sense, I believe that it is relevant to bear in mind which interpretation of Austin is at stake if one wants to dig into questions of performativity. Rajagopalan (2000) points out at least two major interpretations of the English philosopher’s doctrine of performative utterances: the received version, which is largely the outcome of Searle’s (1969) intervention, and the alternative or deconstructive reading, represented mostly by Derrida (1977)’s and Felman (1980)’s interventions. For the understandings of violence that I embrace in this paper, I will state from the outset that the latter will be more fruitful. I will present the reasons for that in the following section.

3. Violent language and iterability

I argued in the introduction that language wounds as long as it circulates. The idea of iterability is an understanding of the circulation of signs in society. Derrida (1977) formulated the notion of iterability in his critical reading of Austin. John

Searle (1977), himself a student of Austin, did not accept that iterability is what makes speech acts work (or fail to work). According to the general theory of speech acts that Searle proposes, the speech act is the realization in language of the speaker's intention to perform a deed:

(Speech acts) are capable of communicating from speakers to hearers an infinite number of contents. (...) [H]earers are able to understand this infinite number of possible communications simply by recognizing the intentions of the speakers in the performance of the speech acts (Searle, 1977:208).

The reading of Derrida denies precisely that intention occupies an important role in the management of performative meaning. Derrida puns with the Latin word *iter* ('again'), which probably comes from the Sanskrit word *itara* ('other'), and thereby claims that iterability is "the working out of the logic that ties repetition to alterity" (p.180). He claims that iterability is the condition of possibility of performative language. In order to signify, every sign must be able to be repeated, to be put between quotation marks and to be placed in another context. In other words, inasmuch as it repeats a prior context, the sign breaches this very original condition once it is taken to another context. Thus iterability is the open-ended process according to which speech acts both repeat iterable or ritual formulae and, at the same time, disrupt those ritualistic conditions. Furthermore, speakers don't utter speech acts as the visible signs of inward or spiritual intentions. They rather do things with words according to social and pragmatic rules. With regard to intentions, Derrida writes that "the intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and to its content. The iteration structuring it *a priori* introduces into it a *dehiscence* and a cleft which are essential" (p.192, italics added). It is notable that in medicine "dehiscence" is the *spontaneous* bursting of surgical stitches, a visual metaphor for this general and constitutive principle of performative signification.

A performative succeeds or fails to succeed to the extent that it repeats a ritualized scene. The illocutionary act brings about what it names at the very moment of naming, but this moment, as Butler (1997:3) reminds us, is "never merely a single moment". More precisely, the iterable "moment" when the performative works is a "condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance" (id. *ibid*).

Butler proposes the idea of resignification as a broader political understanding of iterability. She draws from her reading of Derrida the idea that injurious words extract their power to wound from the iterability or circulation of speech. An injurious utterance works as long as it cites previous injurious conditions that exceed the moment of utterance itself. The speech act cites previous conventional acts and incites others, forming a "ritual chain of resignifications whose origin and end remain unfixed and unfixable" (Butler, 1997:14). While traveling from one context to another (thus, as a condition of possibility, breaking out of its original context), injury allows for the possibility of resignification, i.e., an affirmative "talking back" to the original injurious meanings of utterances. Resignification itself can become conventional, as testified by the current affirmative use that gay, lesbian and some heterosexual people make of 'queer', a word that had previously been used negatively to demean non-straight subjects.

Butler points out that, beyond the fundamental gap between one citation and another, there are other disjunctions in speech that offer "linguistic survival" and agency to the subject who is violently addressed. Since the speaker is not a sovereign

individual who fully controls the course of her speech acting (i.e., its illocution) and its effects (i.e., its perlocution), then the intentions, meanings and deeds of the subject's speech do not always come together or travel in the same direction (see also Santos, this volume). The fact that violence has to be cited in testimony and that, in psychoanalysis, trauma has to be repeated to be cured suggests that the disjunctions between instances of utterances can open up a space for "future reuse" that goes against prior injurious aims.

An instance of such disjunction has recently been seen in various Brazilian cities, where feminist groups expressed their dissatisfaction with how the police have been treating raped women. The protests were called "Marchas das Vadias," or Whores' Marches. At police stations, many women, when pressing charges against rape, had been reproached for walking alone in empty spaces of university campuses or for wearing "whore-like" clothes. The feminist groups employed the same terms that the police had used to wound, but the original and official circulation of those terms had been undone. The marches not only enabled the resignification of the word "whore", but also invited the girls to wear the so-called whore-like outfits that the police said the raped women had been wearing.

In terms of Butler's philosophy, the same terms that inflict injury are those that enable resignification, agency and linguistic survival. The same phenomenon – circulation – is the enabler of both injury and subject formation (on affirmative grounds). The guarantee that the latter will prevail over the former cannot be established in anticipation (as Habermas's (1987) model suggests), but only through a "concrete struggle of translation" in the chain of significations. What the "Marchas das Vadias" members did was to decontextualize an originally offensive term and then recontextualize it "through acts of public misappropriation" (Butler, 1997:100). This struggle for circulation or translation, according to Butler, "constitutes the basis of an ironic hopefulness that the conventional relation between word and wound might become tenuous and even broken over time" (ibid.).

4. Violent language and communicability

Both Butler and Derrida offer us interesting ways to look at the pragmatics of violent discourse. We can draw from their theories that violent words are not mere representation of some pre-existing violence in the world; they are rather pragmatic acts that work (or fail to work) as long as they circulate. But I believe there is more to be done. We need a theory that equips us with a good pragmatic *and* metapragmatic view of violent discourse. The idea that violent acts usually acquire a thematic and formulaic form of their own (Malkki, 1995) suggests that violence also revolves around itself. For instance, in 2003, Ana Laura Gamboggi was doing fieldwork in the cities of Tabuleiro do Norte and Jaguaribe, in a region in the backlands of Ceará, Brazil, known for its political violence and high homicide rate (Gamboggi, 2010:23). She recounts that the gunman José Roberto dos Santos Nogueira, known as Chico Orelha (Ear Jack), had just killed a broadcast journalist. The police then started to chase him in the region. The gunman had received this nickname, Chico Orelha or Ear Jack, because he used to cut off his victims' ears after the murders, which made people even more scarred of him. His girlfriend was arrested in a nearby city and he began to threaten the police by calling the prison and telling them that he would kill more people. The circulation of news and rumors about Chico Orelha, his threats to the police and the police searches in the city enacted a feeling of fear and turmoil in the region that led to the imposition of a curfew. It seems that the pragmatics of

violence here goes hand in hand with a certain metapragmatics of violence: Orelha's pragmatic act of killing someone was usually followed by the metapragmatic act of signing the victim's body. The pragmatic act of watching or reading the news was accompanied by multiple projections of imminent crimes, as attested to by the rumors and imposed curfew. I will argue in this section that the anthropological concept of communicability (Briggs, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2011) is an efficient analytic tool to deal with the complex pragmatics and metapragmatics of violent discourse.

As Bauman and Briggs (2003) claim, ever since John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1959 [1690]), in order to be a proper modern subject, one must speak in certain ways. This is a modernist language ideology and its best scientific formulation was probably Saussure's in the classes he taught in Geneva. According to Saussure, individuals speak an individual, heterogeneous and non-systematic '*parole*', and as such are the masters of their own personal form of speech. In addition however, they also and foremost participate in the '*langue*', which is an abstract, homogenous and systematic (or collective) field that ultimately enables modern languages and societies to be pure and unified. In Locke's terms, subjects must have some abstract knowledge of the world and, based upon that knowledge, make their individual choices. And that would be accomplished through language (or Saussure's *langue*) – a domain that Locke rendered purified of its contextual contingencies.

It is important to note that both Locke and Saussure offer models of how discourse should circulate. As Bauman and Briggs (2003:59) comment, "Locke's regime of decontextualization seemed to free some individuals from their social circumstances and from the chains of tradition and render them cosmopolitan subjects, able to speak to and for the world, for 'man.'" Therefore discourse would flow seamlessly from the mind of one (male) individual to another, in a disembodied and decontextualized fashion. As a result of Locke's language purification, "linguistic forms were (in theory) stripped of all ties to material and social worlds," therefore "how individuals spoke seemed to spring from deep within the self, to depend solely on the way they had disciplined their minds, not on the wealth they possessed" (ibid.). This view dismisses all contextual features that constrain the enunciation and flow of discourse. Saussure's famous representation of the speaking circuit (Figure 2) is an instantiation of this view.



Figure 2 – The speaking circuit (Saussure, 1983 [1916]: 11)

Saussure presents us with two men communicating to one another. The circulation of discourse in this circuit begins "in the brain of one individual, for instance A, where facts of consciousness which we shall call concepts are associated

with representations of linguistic signs or sound patterns by means of which they may be expressed” (Saussure, 1983 [1916]: 11-12). Leaving the brain, discourse, in a pure physiological process, is transmitted to “the organs of phonation,” which in turn send “sound waves (...) from A’s mouth to B’s ear.” The circuit then unequivocally “continues in B in the opposite order.”

Locke’s and Saussure’s modernist projections of the movement of discourse, in which information travels linearly in a disembodied and decontextualized way from the brain of one individual to another, is part and parcel of the process that Charles Briggs calls ‘communicability’. The term puns with the everyday definition of the term – i.e., being able to communicate to others – but also with the biomedical concept. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a communicable disease is one which is “able to be transmitted from one sufferer to another,” it is “contagious or infectious”. As Briggs (2007a: 556) defines, communicability refers to the infectious character of texts – “the way texts and ideologies find audiences and locate them socially/politically.” As is the case with the modern language ideologies in question, texts project the way information should flow and modes of interpreting the world. Certain viewpoints are mapped as possible, necessary and natural while others are denied or erased. Briggs locates communicability in particular social fields (Bourdieu, 1993). “Communicable cartographies,” he writes, “create positions that confer different degrees of access, agency and power, recruit people to occupy them, and invite them to construct practices of self-making in their terms” (Briggs, 2007a: 556).

Communicable cartographies are also temporal and spatial projections of how discourse should travel. Although these cartographies are modes of interpellation (Althusser, 1971) based on “material and institutional inequalities,” a response to communicable maps can subvert their own logic. Briggs (2007a: 556) adds:

As they receive a text, people can accept the communicable cartography it projects, accept it but reject the manner in which it seeks to position them, treat it critically or parodically, or invoke alternative cartographies.

Communicability works in the complex interplay between the pragmatics and metapragmatics of discourse. Silverstein (1993) argues that every sign is itself a pragmatic sign to the extent that its use “indexes a context or a circumstance.” And the comprehension of signs as indexical objects is modeled or regimented by the metapragmatics of discourse. To use the term that Gumperz (1982) coins, the discourse in interaction offers “contextual clues:” speech and writing signal how the segments of discourse should be understood, which way the subjects should follow, when to take a turn, when to end the conversation etc. Silverstein comments that, “[w]ithout a metapragmatic function in play with whatever pragmatic function(s) there may be in discursive interaction, there is no possibility of interactional coherence” (1993:36-37). Without a metapragmatic function there would be no structure of interactional text on which actors could base themselves – a structure “in which indexical origins or centerings are relatable one to another as aggregated contributions to some segmentable, accomplishable event(s)” (ibid.).

In the following section, I will describe the ethnographic study I have been conducting in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. Linguistics students Debora Ferrol and Frederico Alt, together with myself, are studying the communicable construction of violence in discourses about *Nordestinos* or Northeasterners in Brazil. This term is commonly used to describe Brazilians who have emigrated from the northeastern part of the country – Brazil’s poorest geographic region – to the two wealthiest cities in

the country, Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, which are in the south. In her study of the circulation of violence in the city of Sao Paulo, Caldeira (2000:31) states that “bias against *Nordestinos* exists everywhere”. When it comes to the ways in which the talk of crime circulates in some neighborhoods, *Nordestinos* are often said to be the poor new migrants – not the same as the European migrants who came before – who have “infested the neighborhood” with crime. In the essentialist categorizations of the talk of crime, the term *Nordestinos* refers to people who are “characterized as ignorant, lazy, dirty, promiscuous, immoral. In a word, they are criminals” (ibid.). Thus, the word *Nordestino*, which originally referred to someone who was born in or came from the Nordeste, has become a derogatory term, employed either to discriminate against certain subjects or to hurt them. As I have argued elsewhere (Silva, 2012), the term *Nordestino* draws from its iterability the force of an injurious word. I want to elaborate here on the open-ended future of the iterability of this word by analyzing a lawsuit against the Sao Paulo law student Mayara Petruso, who in 2010 posted on her Twitter and Facebook profiles a series of hateful statements against *Nordestinos*.

5. Using language to wound

In 2010 the Brazilian Order of Attorneys (OAB), Pernambuco section (one of the nine states of the *Nordeste*), filed a lawsuit against Mayara Petruso, a law student from Sao Paulo. Mayara was accused of the crimes of racism and public incitation to murder¹. Shortly after it was announced that Dilma Rousseff was elected president of Brazil, Mayara posted many messages on her *Twitter* and *Facebook* profiles expressing hate against those who had elected the left-wing candidate. Here is an image of Mayara’s Twitter account:

¹ In Brazil, racism is a crime that may be committed either through material acts or through language (see Santos, this volume). The crime is not subject to bail and is imprescriptible (Article 5 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution, 1988). Verbal injury is also a crime in Brazilian law. This is when the prejudice is directed against a specific individual of a group (rather than the whole group, which would be considered racism), and it is typified in the Brazilian Penal Code, Article 140. The third paragraph of the law reads that the offender might be subjected to a prison sentence of up to one year if “the injury consists in employing elements referring to race, color, ethnicity, religion, geographic origin or the condition of disabled or elderly people” (text rewritten in the Law n. 10741/2003).



Figure 3 –Mayara Petruso’s Twitter (deleted after lawsuit)

The highlighted post reads: “a *Nordestino* isn’t a human being, do Sao Paulo a favor, drown a *Nordestino*”. The violent utterance in question is based on a pragmatic implication, namely that the *Nordestinos* was the social group that elected the candidate of the Workers’ Party. As is the case with most prejudices, this implication has no accurate basis, since it was not the vote of the northeastern region that actually tipped the election in favor of Dilma (the right-wing candidate José Serra, from the Social Democratic party, PSDB, was her opponent in the run-off). If one were to subtract the votes of the *Nordeste* from the final numbers, Dilma would still have won – mainly because the states of Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro, the second and third most populous states after Sao Paulo, voted massively in her favor.

Since we are dealing with circulation here, it is important to note that Mayara’s was not the only hateful utterance at that time. A huge amount of injurious words flowed on the Internet. For instance, Twitter user Fer Leoni declared: “For shitty voters, a shitty president,” Merlin Lipe wrote: “People say that all Brazilians are equal. I disagree. I don’t want to be and I’m not the same as the people from the *Nordeste*.” LC Gasparello’s Twitter account read: “Congrats voters, the North/Northeast elected a president and now the South/Southeast has to work to support this bunch of vagrants.” In the corporate media, one could read articles such as Leandro Nardoch’s, entitled “Yes, I am prejudiced,” in which the journalist stated: “the *Nordestinos*, the group that granted victory to the PT’s candidate in the elections” (*Folha de S. Paulo*, 11 November, 2010). On the day after the election, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, one of Brazil’s largest newspapers, published a map in which the colors of Brazil were painted according to the colors of the PT and the PSDB (red and blue, respectively). The northern parts of the country had a high concentration of red. The more one looked to the south, the more the map became blue.

The fact that Mayara uttered her injurious words within such a wide context of similar speech acts suggests that she was, in some sense, repeating a previous violent historicity. In an article entitled “In defense of the student Mayara,” the University of Sao Paulo law professor Janaina Paschoal stated that the originator of the rift between

North and South was the then president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva: “Our president is the one who insists on splitting Brazil into North and South. He is the one who persists in maintaining the divide between the rich and the poor” (*Folha de S. Paulo*, 12 November, 2010).

One may wonder whether the fact that violent utterances are always some form of repetition of a sinuous and blurred chain of speech acts exempts the speaker from responsibility for what is repeated. If the subject can never be really considered the origin of speech, what should we do then with violent words, which draw their injurious illocutionary force from repetition? The decision made by the Brazilian Order of Attorneys of Pernambuco (henceforth OAB/PE) reflects, in the practical world of affairs, how responsibility for injurious words may be treated. In a sort of pause in the flow of history, the institution decided that the lawsuit for racism should focus on Mayara rather than all the others who manifested themselves hatefully in the aftermath of the election because she was “the one who started everything,” as João Studart, an OAB/PE attorney who participated in the writing of the lawsuit, explained to me.² The violence of Mayara’s words – which “jokingly” invited the reader to kill a *Nordestino* – had to be combatted, and the structure of punishment by law seemed to be an effective way to do so.

To the extent that it held Mayara accountable for her utterance, the retrospective action of OAB/PE seemed to “stop history,” thereby turning the legal action into a warning for society. “People have the idea that the Internet, the profiles on Facebook etc., are environments of irresponsibility. But attitudes on these sites have both a wide reach and a deep hold, and must be held accountable,” João Studart told me. According to our reasoning here, “attitudes that have a wide reach and considerable strength” point to the infectious and performative character of violent discourse, a communicable movement that can be deterred or undone.

We should not lose sight of the fact that the violence in Mayara’s utterance was a mediated fact. A wide process of mediation surrounded the injurious speech acts in question. This process involved journalists, lawyers, university professors and civil society using speech and writing in different genres and from different sites. I believe that looking at mediation (rather than the media) is an interesting key to understanding the violence that emerged from those words. Below is a working definition of mediation in pragmatics and linguistic anthropology:

Social life has a mediated character whenever persons are linked to each other through speech and other perceivable signs in participation frameworks of communicative activity. Such links involve different thresholds of propinquity: Spoken utterances mediate relations among co-present communicators, print artifacts at greater remove in time and space, electronic technologies at varying degrees of mutual awareness, directness of contact, and possibilities of reciprocation. To speak of communicative mediation is to observe that communicative signs formulate a bridge or connection among those they link, mediating social relations through activities of uptake and response at different scales of social history (Agha, 2011:163).

Communicative or semiotic mediation is therefore the process that bridges or connects speakers, an attachment between people that is mediated by language whenever “persons are linked to each other through speech and other perceivable

² For privacy reasons, all informants’ names are fictitious.

signs.” And the violence in language, through specific pragmatic and metapragmatic mechanisms, disrupts or reconfigures this tie.

In order to understand the semiotic mediation of the linguistic violence that appeared in Mayara’s words, we interviewed journalists, lawyers and *Nordestinos* in the cities of Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Recife and Fortaleza. We also carried out participant observation in interactions amongst *Nordestinos* in Rio de Janeiro, and looked at how they positioned themselves *vis-à-vis* those words and their mediated and communicable character. This ethnographic incursion into houses, libraries, cafés, universities and the Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro centers for *Nordestino* traditions, was marked by moments of eloquent interactions, as was our conversation with the attorney who wrote Mayara’s *habeas corpus*. Some silences are also noticeable and noteworthy, such as the refusal of some people to comment on the case. For reasons of space, I will focus here on the attorneys’ interpretations.

In December 2011, undergraduate student Frederico Alt and myself met at a café in Rio de Janeiro to interview Pedro Costa, the lawyer who argued and won the ruling of *habeas corpus* that granted Mayara the right to respond to the accusations at liberty. Costa wore a dark suit and sat down at the table with us, on one of Rio’s hottest summer days. During the entire conversation, he tried to convince us of some of his thesis, which we will contrast to the ones of other law specialists further on. His first thesis is that Mayara wasn’t referring to *Nordestinos* but to Dilma’s voters:

We know what a signifier is, what a signified is and also what a linguistic sign is. Mayara used the word *Nordestino*. What did she want to say with *Nordestino*? Was she referring to a Brazilian citizen who was born in the *Nordeste*, one of those nine states? Or did she mean “voter of Dilma,” based on the stereotype that *Nordestinos* vote massively for the PT? Then that was a political criticism. She meant, “kill someone who voted for Dilma.” It is obvious that one can’t go out killing all the voters of Dilma in Brazil. What do we have there as ‘to kill’? Even “drown a *Nordestino*” allows for interpretations. Nietzsche used to say, “I like the man who wishes to perish.” Was he complimenting a suicidal person? No. He was complimenting the overcoming of oneself.

Pedro misrecognizes (Bourdieu, 1991) the prejudice against *Nordestinos* in Mayara’s words. This misrecognition is based on certain language ideologies. First, he resorts to Saussure’s theory of signs. Notice that the reference to “signified,” “signifier” and “linguistic sign” does not logically articulate or entertain the Saussurian theory with the thesis that he wants to support. It rather creates a pragmatic implication: Pedro knew that he was sitting down with two specialists in Linguistics and seemed to be trying to elicit a sense of shared knowledge. Notice that he uses the pronoun “we” to enact the idea of community. Thus, following the line of this language ideology, the notion that “language has signs” adds to the idea that “Nietzsche used metaphors” in order to pragmatically sustain the thesis that Mayara did not do what she did – that is to say, while she was cursing at *Nordestinos*, she was actually doing something else.

As I mentioned in the introduction, a common hypothesis in the study of violence and its symbolic forms is that violence tends to be misrecognized as such. For instance, Judith Butler says that no term wounds without a “*dissimulating* and accumulating historicity of force” (1997:51, emphasis added). Allen Feldman points out that the political violence in Northern Ireland produces subjects through specific

acts of (visual) violence. The violence of the military gaze in Northern Ireland intersects with masculinity and disguises its own conditions of production: the male gaze naturalizes the political construction of its “perceptual apparatus” and figures as “natural, unchanging, and ahistorical” (Feldman, 2000:62). Bourdieu (1977:192), in turn, defines symbolic violence as the “gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such.”

Linguistic violence is not based solely on misrecognition, however. As a communicable map, it depends on the interplay between pragmatic and metapragmatic constructions. This metapragmatic framing enables Pedro to aim at Mayara’s violent signs and attempt to legitimize them, both misrecognizing the crime of racism and engendering other violent signs in doing so. Let’s take a look at the following dialogue:

Daniel: Don’t you think that Mayara went beyond the limits though, I mean, when she said, “Do Sao Paulo a favor, drown a *Nordestino*”?

Pedro: Well, I believe that technically she was reflecting a general thought of many Brazilians. People say that a lot. They have always done that. Not only about *Nordestinos*. It is common to find on the Internet or painted on a wall things like, “Keep Salvador clean, kill a faggot everyday.”

Pedro’s reference to the “trivial” graffiti in cities such as Salvador is made as ‘mention’ instead of ‘use.’ We should recall, here, the distinction that Frege made between ‘mention’ and ‘use:’ when we employ a word “in the customary manner,” then we are *using* the word, and our aim is the “reference”; when we put the words between quotation marks, then we are mentioning, our aim is the intension of the word, its “sense” (Frege, 1952:77). When mentioned, the word “must (...) not be taken in the customary manner” (ibid.). However, when it comes to words that wound this distinction isn’t viable: the *mention* of a violent term ends up being a new instance of *use* of that term. In terms of a mathematical conception of language as Frege’s, it is possible to empty the word from its usual semantic content. Yet when the concept that language mirrors the world is abandoned, the very idea of “mention” turns out to be performative: mentioning a term can have different illocutional forces.

Both in the interview and in the *habeas corpus*, Pedro Costa resorts to the notion of intention, which he refers to by using the Latin word *animus*. The *habeas corpus* reads that Mayara’s intention was “the sole manifestation of *animus jocandi* (intention of joking).” This is one of Pedro’s main theses, namely that Mayara was in fact “playing,” and her “intention” was to joke. Although intention is a figure that *animates* many categories of penal law, there are moments in which the notion loses importance. This seems to be the reasoning of OAB/PE. João Studart told me, “stating that she did not intend to offend, that it was only a joke, is a very weak argument.” The notion of intention in theories of meaning usually works in terms of what Wittgenstein (1953) defined as “spiritualization.” When a theorist can’t – or doesn’t want to – explain the nature of an utterance from the concrete reality of verbal interaction, then he or she makes use of some inner and spiritual notion such as intention. Instead, João’s explanation gestures towards the concreteness of speech acts:

I believe that we have the right to freedom of speech, but only to the extent that this freedom isn’t an instrument of violation of human rights. At the moment that Mayara exercised her right to freedom of speech and at the same time

violated the right of human dignity of the *Nordestinos*, then that right of freedom of speech must be limited. No right within Brazilian constitution is absolute (...), she was enjoying her freedom of speech up to the moment when she violated human dignity. At that moment a crime was perpetrated, and it doesn't matter whether or not she meant it or had malicious intent. She committed a criminal act and must be penalized.

According to João, the limit of free speech is the point at which human dignity is violated. Mayara perpetrated a criminal act in language, and the act was beyond intention. It doesn't matter whether she had the intention to wound or not – the words on her Internet profiles enacted offenses to the dignity of *Nordestinos*. Therefore *words* rather than *intentions* guided the notion of accountability in the lawsuit.

Briggs (2007a:552) comments that some modern linguistic practices acquire seemingly magical powers of standing as “transparent (...) containers of beliefs, experiences, knowledge, and attitudes.” He has demonstrated that communicable maps enact a complicated process of mediation and naturalization. In social life, certain metapragmatic projections of discourse infect ways of seeing the world, and confer different degrees of agency and adherence to ideologies. This naturalizing process can be contested, though. This was precisely what the attorneys from the *Nordeste* did when they commented on the case to me. Santiago Lima, a lawyer in the city of Fortaleza, pointed to the fact that messages on the Internet “have a wider dissemination and amplitude than a comment with a friend or acquaintance. When you post a comment online, using new tools such as *Twitter* or *Facebook*, you're reaching a wide range of people.” He also drew my attention to the fact that “very few people questioned why that girl decided to make a distinction between two segments of Brazil. As if one of them were, say, inferior.” He pointed to the naturalized connections between the *Nordestinos* and “brute, rude people,” which for such a long time had lain “latent, hidden between the living room and the kitchen of Brazil's middle-class families” and now, with economic growth, were reaching the public sphere through the Internet and had to be questioned.

We can see Santiago's explanations as indicating that old communicable maps, which for a long time projected the *Nordestinos* as “brutes,” “dirty” and “criminals,” were now facing disjunctions in the terrain of law and public opinion. After all, as he pointed out, when law “takes care of crime, it means that society has found a way to repudiate it as infamous, incorrect, illicit, not welcome.” There is, according to him, a broader sociological background that has to be recalled when hate crimes such as Mayara's are committed. Thus what Mayara's defense claims to be “only words (...) people have always said that” – a naturalization of the infectious movements of discourse – is seen by the *Nordestino* attorneys as a map. A map that must either be re-drawn and penalized (as was the case with the lawsuit filed by OAB/PE), or be discussed as part of a broader sociological phenomenon, with criminal law being only the tip of an iceberg of social discontent.

6. Final Remarks

On May 17, 2012, Mayara Petruso was convicted of the crime of racism. As the former law student had never been charged of a crime before, Judge Monica Camargo converted the sentence of 17 months to community work. This was the first

conviction of an Internet hate crime in Brazil. As attorney Joao Moreira told me, this was an exemplary court decision in that it shall help circumscribe virtual environments as spaces of responsibility in Brazil.

In locating Mayara Petruso as “the author” of an invective within a diffuse flow of similar hateful slurs, the federal justice’s attribution of culpability to a single agent certainly had a pedagogical and performative character. That words wound and that the limits of free speech in Brazil are the right of human dignity were parameters that the sentence helped to disseminate.

Yet beyond the structure of accountability in law, we might infer from the circulation of hateful words – and from the sense of moral pain felt by many *Nordestinos* after Dilma Roussef’s 2010 presidential election – that linguistic violence and conflict are not “pragmatic failures,” but ways in which users deploy language non-cooperatively in order to cause offence, harm and pain. As we’ve discussed, modernist language ideologies in Linguistics have tended, however, to cast violence and conflict as marginal phenomena in language use. In one of the first pragmatics textbooks, Geoffrey Leech (1983:105) argues that “conflictive illocutions tend, thankfully, to be rather marginal to human linguistic behavior in normal circumstances.” I understand that querying other instantiations of such modernist ideology – as well as the multiple modes in which language is used to violate fundamental human rights to dignity and equality – is ultimately an emancipatory stance to avoid overlooking these rather normal yet violent ways of using language.

Daniel Silva teaches linguistic anthropology and pragmatic theory at the University of Rio de Janeiro (Unirio). He received his Doctorate in Linguistics from the State University of Campinas (Unicamp) in 2010. During 2007 and 2008, he did part of his doctorate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley. This chapter is part of an edited book on the relationships between language and violence.

7. References

- Agha, Asif. 2011. Meet mediatization. *Language & Communication* 31:163-170.
- Althusser, Louis. 1971. Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*, trans. B. Brewster, 127–86. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Aristotle. 1992. *On Interpretation*. In *The Complete Works*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Austin, John. 1962. *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bauman, Richard & Briggs, Charles. 2003. *Voices of Modernity*. Language ideologies and the politics of inequality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Transl. by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language & Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1993. *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable speech: a politics of the performative*. London: Routledge.
- Briggs, Charles. 2005. Communicability, racial discourse, and disease. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34, 269-291.
- Briggs, Charles. 2007a. Anthropology, interviewing, and communicability in contemporary social life. *Current Anthropology* 48 (4), 551-580.
- Briggs, Charles. 2007b. Mediating infanticide: Theorizing relations between narrative and violence. *Cultural Anthropology* 22 (3), 315-356.
- Briggs, Charles. 2011. On virtual epidemics and the mediatization of public health. *Language & Communication* 31:217-228.
- Caldeira, Teresa. 2000. *City of Walls. Crime, segregation and citizenship in Sao Paulo*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1977. Signature Event Context. Transl. by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman. *Glyph* 1:172-197.
- Feldman, Allen. 2000. *Formations of violence*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Felman, Shoshana. 1980. *Le Scandale du corps parlant. Don Juan avec Austin ou la seduction en deux langues*. Paris: Seuil.
- Frege, Gottlob. 1952. On sense and reference. In *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, Peter Geach and Max Black (eds), 56-78. London: Blackwell.
- Gamboggi, Ana Laura. 2010. *Lo que no se puede llevar en la maleta: Mudanza, memoria y museo en el nordeste brasileño*. México, DF: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana.
- Giannotti, José Arthur. 2011. *Lições de filosofia primeira*. Sao Paulo: Cia. Das Letras.
- Gumperz, John. 1982. *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1987. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Transl. Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Leech, Geoffrey. 1983. *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Locke, John. 1959 [1690]. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. New York: Dover.
- Malkki, Liisa. 1995. *Purity and exile: Violence, memory, and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.
- Plato. 1997 [360BC] "Sophist." In *Plato – Complete Works*, Cooper, John. (ed.), 235-293. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Rajagopalan, Kanavillil. 2000. On Searle (on Austin) on Language. *Language and Communication* 20:347-391.

- Saussure, Ferdinand .1983 [1916]. *Course in General Linguistics*. Transl. Roy Harris. Chicago: Open Court.
- Searle, John. 1969. *Speech acts: An essay in Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, John. 1977. Reiterating the Differences: a Reply to Derrida. *Glyph* 1: 198-208.
- Silva, Daniel. 2012. *Pragmática da violência: O Nordeste na mídia brasileira*. Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras.
- Silverstein, Michael. 1979. Language Structure and Linguistic Ideology. In *The Elements, a Parasession on Linguistic Units and Levels*, Paul Clyne, William Hanks and Carol Hofbauer (eds.), 193-247. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Silverstein, Michael. 1993. Metapragmatic Discourse and Metapragmatic Function. In *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*, Lucy, John (Ed.), 33-58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1958. *The Blue and Brown Books*. New York: Harper Perennial.