

### *Barbarus ad portas: the verbal aggression in comments on the social network Facebook*

*Barbarus ad portas: a agressividade verbal em comentários na rede social  
Facebook*

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## **BARBARUS AD PORTAS: THE VERBAL AGGRESSION IN COMMENTS ON THE SOCIAL NETWORK FACEBOOK**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper discusses the problematic of the representation of refugee migrants in Europe, Portugal, and in Latin America, Brazil. Focusing on verbal violence on the web, the work analyzes comments from Facebook users, highlighting the *ad hominem* argument as a strategy to denigrate the image of the refugees, the paper notes two forms of materialization of this argument: personal direct attack and indirect personal attack. The verbal strategies that allow disqualify refugee migrants and represent them negatively. The theoretical framework is a tributary of discourse analysis in dialogue with rhetoric represented by Amossy (1999, 2014b) among others, complemented by studies on interaction in social networks (Castells, 2013), and verbal violence (Culpeper, 2008; Bousfield, 2008), in particular verbal violence in internet and social networks (Castells, 2013; Rodeghiero, 2012). The discursive-pragmatic analysis was carried out in a *corpus* of messages on Facebook, collected between July and August 2017, about the migratory crisis in Europe, and collected in August 2018, about the immigration of Venezuelans to Brazil. The study allows us to prove that, in a era when social networks disseminate and spread, through the written word, the free opinions of those who previously did not have achievement to the public expression of their opinion, devaluing and aggressive strategies dominate comments on social networks and transmit positions that aim to exclude the migrant, considered as disturbing an established order.

### **KEYWORDS**

verbal violence; *ad hominem* argument; social networks; Facebook; migrants; refugees

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## **BARBARUS AD PORTAS: A AGRESSIVIDADE VERBAL EM COMENTÁRIOS NA REDE SOCIAL FACEBOOK**

### **RESUMO**

O presente artigo discute a problemática da representação de migrantes refugiados na Europa, Portugal, e na América Latina, Brasil. Focalizando a violência verbal na web, neste estudo pretende-se analisar comentários de usuários do Facebook, destacando o argumento *ad hominem* como estratégia para macular a imagem dos migrantes refugiados, o trabalho observa duas formas de materialização desse argumento: o ataque pessoal direto e o ataque pessoal indireto. São analisadas as estratégias verbais que permitem desqualificar migrantes refugiados e representá-los negativamente. O quadro teórico é tributário da análise do discurso em diálogo com a retórica, representada pelas pesquisas de Amossy (1999, 2014b), entre outros, complementando-se em estudos sobre interações em redes sociais (Castells, 2013), e sobre violência

verbal (Culpeper, 2008; Bousfield, 2008), em particular a violência verbal na internet e nas redes sociais (Castells, 2013; Rodeghiero, 2012). A análise discursiva-pragmática foi efetuada num *corpus* de mensagens no Facebook, recolhidas entre julho e agosto de 2017, sobre a crise migratória na Europa, e recolhidas em agosto de 2018, sobre a imigração de venezuelanos para o Brasil. O estudo permite-nos comprovar que, numa era em que as redes sociais disseminam e contagiam, através da palavra escrita, as opiniões livres de todos os que anteriormente não tinham acesso à expressão pública da sua opinião, as estratégias desvalorizadoras e agressivas dominam os comentários nas redes sociais e veiculam posicionamentos que visam excluir o migrante, considerado como perturbador de uma ordem estabelecida.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

violência verbal; argumento *ad hominem*; redes sociais; Facebook; migrantes; refugiados

## INTRODUCTION

*In memoriam* Professor Lésmer Montecino (1956-2017),  
Professor at the Pontifical University of Santiago do Chile

Those who advance facing the sea  
And bury, in it, like a sharp knife  
The black bow of their boats  
They live on little bread and moonlight  
Sophia de Mello Breyner (2015, p. 406)

The frenzied pace of changes resulting from technological innovations, particularly in the field of electronic communication, is a phenomenon that has such high repercussion and extent that it is important to come to ontological and reflective questions about the suitability and effectiveness of different media and to rethink and redefine the role and the status they can assume within the reflection on emerging social problems.

Social networks, such as Facebook, emphasize network interaction and sociability. Its users enjoy an open, free context to build interpersonal relationships, through spaces for discursive exhibition (Develotte, 2006) and discursive production, which enable the continuous expression of individual comments, including the expression of opinions that arouse controversy, through demonstrations and acts of verbal violence.

We will begin with a *corpus* of Facebook messages about the migratory crisis in Europe, collected between July and August 2017, and about the immigration of Venezuelans to Brazil, collected in August 2018, to perform a discursive-pragmatic analysis of the devaluing and aggressive strategies included in comments.

In Europe, the migration crisis has deepened terribly since 2015. The number of refugees and migrants has grown exponentially, due to conflicts in the Middle East and Africa and the civil war in Syria, as well as the fragile, weak quality of life in some non-European countries, which has provoked numerous discussions, particularly in media

contexts. Likewise, in Brazil, the migratory flow of Venezuelans arising from the serious crisis that the country has been going through grew uncontrollably in 2018, giving rise to a great diversity of positions regarding the issue. Bearing that in mind, our analysis focuses on comments that appear on Facebook addressing the aforementioned migration movements. Our analyzes are guided by the following questions:

1. what are the discursive strategies that produce social exclusion?
2. is it an ideologically marked speech or is it preferentially a pious speech, trying to create an atmosphere of compassion, recurrently summoning emotions through dramatic periphrases?
3. how is the polarization processed and on what basis is it supported?

The study has the objective of reflecting on verbal aggression in comments on the social network Facebook. To this end, we will seek to identify discursive strategies that devalue and tarnish the image of refugees/migrants; to describe the polarization in public opinion and the reasons underlying the different position takings; to analyze whether the characteristics of the social network – distancing, asynchrony, social masks, and others – condition the construction of a derogatory, contentious, bellicose, violent ethos.

Therefore, our theoretical framework will rely on the Discourse Analysis represented by the research by Maingueneau (2002) and Amossy (1999, 2014b), among others; as a complement, the study will be based on studies on interactions in social networks (Castells, 2013) and also in the panoply of reflections on courtesy and verbal violence (Culpeper 2008; Boufield, 2008), among which we highlight those that focus on verbal violence on the internet and on social networks, from different theoretical perspectives (Castells, 2013; Rodeghiero, 2012).

Likewise, our analyzes will focus on the discourse as a social practice, as a form and action that is in close relationship with the social structure, thus corroborating the assumptions of van Dijk (2008), who highlights that the social environment constructs the discourse and is simultaneously constructed by it, in a reciprocal relationship between social situations and the set of discourses that are enunciated, invariably aiming to gain visibility, domination, manipulation, and more power.

### **MIGRATING: REALITY AND STRANGENESS**

In the animal kingdom, all beings migrate when conditions are adverse, when their survival is threatened either because the climate is unfavorable because it does not rain or it rains too much, or because they lack food, or because they are expelled by other beings because they are victims of power abuse. The fact is that whenever animals perceive a risk to their survival and the continuity of the species, they seek alternative places to live. Human beings do not have this characteristic. Since the beginning of human history, there have been migratory movements. If it is true that men move to other places, in search of better living conditions, it is also true that foreigners are always welcomed with suspicion by those who are in their lands and may feel threatened by the arrival of the unknown. That is how it has been.

As Paulo Sande (n.d.) rightly recalls, by shouting *Barbarus ad portas*, the romans signaled the imminent arrival, in Rome, of the barbarian peoples, whom they regarded as uncivilized peoples. And the Roman civilization shrunk in part because it was unable to face those whom they called “barbarians” and those who even lived within the borders of the Roman Empire as de facto citizens of Rome.

History is, as witnessed, ancient and it is being repeated in the middle of the 21st century, when we witness the swelling of this migratory process, worsened mainly by the Syrian tragedy and the Venezuelan crisis, which mirrors that the refugees from these countries are, in the eyes of many Europeans and Brazilians, encouraged by more or less xenophobic movements, rather similar to the barbarians, because they ostracize through language and through acts, they invent and exaggerate the risks of welcoming these peoples, they create false myths, without realizing that we have a moral obligation to welcome and integrate refugees *ad portas*.

We recall the allegory of the cave by Plato, who, more than two thousand years ago, showed us that citizens construct reality based on the shadows that are projected at the bottom of the cave. The so-called shadows of a reality that actually happens outside this cave; even though the individuals live with their backs turned to it.

Although the topic “migrants and refugees” is a theme with increasing social, political, and media importance, the construction of discourses is often based, as in the allegory, on perceptions, spread, nowadays, by hyper-mediation. And, in this field of hypermediatization of phenomena, it is important to underline that we passively absorb certain representations, without being able to unveil the underlying aggressiveness or violence. Essentially, two factors preside: the trivialization and the discursive construction of images that are not necessarily compatible with daily reality.

As we have already highlighted, the migration crisis in Europe has worsened in recent years. The number of refugees has exponentially increased due to conflicts in the Middle East, namely the civil war in Syria, which has prompted many people to seek refuge in Europe. Refugees arriving in Europe represent a small percentage of the four million Syrians who have fled to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq, making Syria the largest source of refugees in the entire world and the worst humanitarian crisis in more than four decades.

In Brazil, the migratory flow of Venezuelans was practically insignificant until the year 2010, when, with the worsening of the economic crisis in Venezuela, a significant number of Venezuelans began to seek asylum in Brazil, a movement that was strengthened in 2018, with the worsening of the crisis. The immigrants settle mainly in Roraima, a Brazilian state that borders Venezuela. The state of Roraima is a poor region of the country, and Venezuelans also arrive in very precarious conditions. The issue became critical, motivating the Brazilian government to create a group to deal with refugees in Roraima. Despite these actions, the reactions of Brazilians consist, above all, of repudiating their neighbors.

In the subsequent section, we will address the representations of migrants by the media, seeking to highlight the different images that are constructed regarding these groups of subjects.

## REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MIGRANTS

An initial approach will focus on the term chosen to designate the migrant population: refugees or migrants?

The designation “refugee” refers to a person who has left their country for safety or survival reasons, while the designation “migrant” indicates a person who participates in a migration process.

The same acceptations are corroborated in the platform Apoio aos Refugiados [Support for Refugees], which states that:

the condition of refugee is inevitably associated with a situation of life or death and/or deprivation of freedom and total insecurity. The extreme degree of threats leads populations to flight from their natural spaces as an act of survival, to escape armed conflicts, ethnic or political persecutions that literally destroy any prospect for life. In most cases, the existence of urgent, structured assistance is the only option for survival for these populations.<sup>1</sup>

The Brazilian branch of the UN Refugee Agency presents a similar definition:

they are people who are outside their country of origin due to well-founded fears of persecution related to issues of race, religion, nationality, belonging to a particular social group or political opinion, as well as the serious and widespread violation of human rights and armed conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Geneva Convention, which dates back to 1951 and is part of the International Humanitarian Law, a refugee is a person who, reasonably fearing being persecuted as a result of activity carried out in the State of their nationality or where they habitually live in favor of democracy, social and national liberation, peace between peoples, freedom and the rights of the human person or due to their race, religion, nationality, political convictions or belonging to a given social group, is outside their country of nationality and is not able or, because of that fear, does not want to ask for protection from that country, or a stateless person who, being outside the country where they habitually lived, for the same reasons, is not able or does not want to return to it. We find both expressions indifferently, even though we can also witness the use of some periphrases: “survivors of hell”, “victims of terror”.

Migrant, refugee, exiles... The differences are sometimes subtle and the acceptations are not limited to the definitions set by dictionaries or glossaries, taking on other meanings in the course of social developments. Although there is a wide variety of acceptations in international literature dedicated to the theme of refugees and migrants, from different perspectives and in quite diverse fields (in the scope of the Human and Social Sciences, namely Sociology and Anthropology, but also Political Sciences, International Relations, and Law), it is important to clarify the meaning we consider in this study.

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.refugiados.pt/>

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.acnur.org/portugues/quem-ajudamos/refugiados/>

We know that in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948)<sup>3</sup>, the fundamental rights for all people, regardless of sex, color, race, language, religion, or opinion, were stated for the first time, thus implying the commitment of States to internationally guarantee and respect these rights. This process of elevating human rights to an international level led to the creation of International Humanitarian Law to regulate the protection of the human person in cases of war conflicts and International Refugee Law. This Convention, together with the Protocol of Amendment to the 1967 Convention, is the main source regarding refugees in international law.

In the light of Article 1 of the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951),

refugees are persons who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable or, owing to such fears, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country. (UN, 1951)<sup>4</sup>

Later, in 1984, the Cartagena Declaration was developed, contributing to the expansion of the rights of refugees, as well as the definition of the UN international regime, by covering, in the concept of refugees, people who left their countries because their life, safety or freedom were threatened as a result of widespread violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights, or other circumstances that seriously disturbed public order (Cartagena Declaration, 1984)<sup>5</sup>.

It is important to reiterate that the recognition of the refugee is based on the assumption that they are a human being in a situation of vulnerability, and that is the reason that motivates them to migrate. As stated by Chelotti and Cruz (2016, p. 8),

what forces them to migrate – and, therefore, to abandon their country, their culture, their home, and their own identity – is not the hope of a better life, but the massive violation of their rights, the well-founded fear of persecution, and the urgent need to save their own and their families' lives.

Therefore, we agree with the designation by Michel Agier (2002), who argues that refugees are far from being migrants, because, unlike the latter, the former had no option, did not voluntarily plan their departure and resumption of life elsewhere. Their places of belonging and identity – individual or collective –, their daily life, were destroyed, making escaping the only possible option. Moreover,

the term migrant generally includes all cases in which the decision to migrate is freely made by the individual in question, due to 'personal convenience'

<sup>3</sup> Available at <https://www.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Declaracao-Universal-dos-Direitos-Humanos.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Available at [http://www.acnur.org/t3/fileadmin/Documentos/portugues/BDL/Convencao\\_relativa\\_ao\\_Estatuto\\_dos\\_Refugiados.pdf](http://www.acnur.org/t3/fileadmin/Documentos/portugues/BDL/Convencao_relativa_ao_Estatuto_dos_Refugiados.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Available at [http://www.acnur.org/t3/fileadmin/Documentos/portugues/BD\\_Legal/Instrumentos\\_Internacionais/Declaracao\\_de\\_Cartagena.pdf?view](http://www.acnur.org/t3/fileadmin/Documentos/portugues/BD_Legal/Instrumentos_Internacionais/Declaracao_de_Cartagena.pdf?view)

and without the intervention of external factors that compel them to do so. Consequently, this term applies to people and family members who move to another country or region in order to improve their and their families' material and social conditions and possibilities, without this mandatory abandonment of the country in the genesis.<sup>6</sup>

Social Anthropology critically analyzes this stereotype of the refugee as a mere recipient of aid, reinforcing the need for a standpoint that integrates not only assistance measures and survival and life strategies in the hosting country but also the possibilities of penetration into the host context and society, without confining refugees to the status of passive people. These integration practices, defended by Blinder and Jelena (2005), of new representations and humanitarian intervention aim to soften the distance between us and them (the refugees), in a more humanist approach, also upheld by Agier:

refugees cease to be refugees, not when they return to their homes, but when they fight as such for their bodies, health, socialization: they cease to be the victims that the humanitarian scene entails to become the subjects of a democratic scene that they improvise where they are. (Agier, 2006, p. 213)

In this study, despite being aware of overlapping areas between the two terms, although we note that this distinction is at the center of the political and sociological debate that is guided by a need to construct a broader notion of the concept of “refugee”, we will consider, following Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Loescher, Long and Sigona (2014), as well as Oliveira, Peixoto and Góes (2017), that many migrants, apparently voluntary and proactive, are forced to leave their countries due to situations of severe economic need, extreme deprivation or increasing environmental degradation, while many refugees, apparently forced and reactive, voluntarily give up their country of origin due to the lack of conditions. As these authors underline (Oliveira et al., 2017, p. 77):

it is thus clear, as Triandafyllidou (2017, p. 4) also highlights, that current concepts fail because they do not meet the multiplicity of realities that exist on the ground and that lead people who need protection not to apply for asylum and economic migrants to request regularization under that statute.

And, besides, that the distinction between “migrants” and “refugees” is becoming increasingly unclear, making it difficult to analyze and regulate these movements (Oliveira et al., 2017, p. 97).

It is important to note that the example that presides over the title of our paper, *Barbarus ad portas*, prohibits any denial, given its autonomous use, regardless of the proposition, that is, to be a simple expression, a qualifier projected onto the face of the other that configures an act of discourse with an overtly agonistic intention, by qualifying the intruder as a barbarian who is naturally understood as derogatory.

<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from Glossário sobre Migração - Organização Internacional para as Migrações, available at <https://www.acm.gov.pt/documents/10181/65144/Gloss%C3%A1rio.pdf/b66532b2-8eb6-497d-b24d-6a92dadfee7b>



In the following section, we present some reflections on the social network Facebook and its status in the controversies.

### THE CONTEXT OF THE SOCIAL NETWORK FACEBOOK

The frenzied pace of changes resulting from technological innovations, the rapid transition of electronic media, the digital revolution are a phenomenon that has such high repercussion and extent that, as stated in the Introduction of this paper, it is important to come to ontological and reflective questions about the suitability and effectiveness of different media and to rethink and redefine the role and the status they can assume in our social daily life.

Some objectives are inherent to the social network Facebook: sharing information, influencing others; staying informed; seeking moments of entertainment; speaking about social issues; participating in activist movements, beyond the notorious issues of marketing and trade.

This social network contributes to the fading of the public/private dichotomy. It becomes a mediatized platform for staging, a space for sharing opinions, revelations, and exposure of daily life, which aims to construct a media identity where visibility and exposure interpenetrate (Carvalho, Prior & Morais, 2015, p. 17). Other specificities of the network corroborate this growing expansion of controversy and aggression, given that there is a perennialization of writing; it is more difficult to erase the messages. On the other hand, there undoubtedly is a greater visibility, since they can be disseminated and read by a vast number of people and the permanence of content on the web can aggravate and enhance aggressiveness in the virtual space, contributing to the recurrence and trivialization of the phenomenon.

As Amossy (2014a) notes, 21st century society is fond of spectacle; the network Facebook is, in the author's words, the public square of today, where individuals show themselves to each other, where ideas are discussed and polemics develop, often bitterly. In social networks, according to Cabral and Lima (2017), interactions happen more in the order of conflict than of harmony; in fact, Amossy (2014a) asserts that digital media privilege controversy. In reality, in the case of Facebook spaces that are constituted and exclusively dedicated to the expression of public opinion, of a socio-political nature, there is often a strong, close dynamism, with continuous posts, promoting the defense of values and protagonists who are registered and vehemently attacking the ideas of those who oppose them and mainly of those who are in power or the most fragile and excluded, with no right of reply.

Regarding the positions adopted on the network, including those that are aggressive, Cabral, Marquesi and Seara (2015) must be remembered; the authors show that users, protecting themselves with the machine and with the possibility of assuming identities that enable anonymity, end up stating their points of view more spontaneously, often allowing themselves to be aggressive. Cabral (2013) also notes that the easy accessibility of the network gives people a sense of closeness that allows the use of a more relaxed

language, with less personal control. The fact is that people expose themselves and expose their views on Facebook, and their aggressiveness also becomes more visible. We also verify that when aggressive and offensive comments spread on the net, they are underestimated given the network's volatility, given the growing trivialization that leads to a level of negligence in the face of these social facts. Nonetheless, violent manifestations seem to multiply since one user's violence can encourage others to be equally violent.

We will thus show the operability of two categories: one, defended by Develotte (2006), which was called a "discursive exhibition space". Even though the author described it to discuss the educational system and the interactions that occur in it, we believe that it is operational for the analysis that we develop here. Therefore we use the notion of discursive exhibition spaces, described as the set of statements to which a certain group of people is exposed and which determines and conditions subsequent discursive production.

It is actually due to a given discursive exhibition space that a new discourse is produced by the enunciator, who is evidently an individual subject but mainly an actor who is socially framed or situated. The specific fact of the social network, in which the subjects are exposed and in which there is a list of previous comments that constitute the discursive space where further comments will be integrated and adjusted, enhances this discursive chain, of constant exhibition.

It is also important to underline that some of the specificities of social networks corroborate the growing expansion of the phenomenon since it is more difficult to delete virtual messages, there is a greater visibility, and they can be spread and read by a wide group of people, while the content remains on the web, which may aggravate and enhance aggressiveness in the virtual space, confirming the recurrence and social trivialization of the phenomenon. Thus, when authors devalue the image of migrants, they do it to win over the audience, to attract people with similar thoughts that help construct a pejorative image. In a cascading movement, aggressive comments seem to attract new manifestations of aggression, expanding this type of behavior. The so-called cyber intimidators resort to a violent discursive practice, present not only in derogatory lexical choices but mainly in offensive directive acts.

The aggressive virtual environment generates almost-collective violence, according to Rodeghiero (2012, p. 52), more dangerous than physical violence in person, as seen in the following statement by the author: "it is true that a weapon of great power can, through a single soldier, kill several people at the same time, but collective violence generates the feeling and projection of increased violence". While Castells (2013) finds that social networks are used to establish a fraternal atmosphere in favor of the fight for social and political issues, in defense of the rights of citizens who demands honesty and democracy, in which violence happens as an instrument of fight or of oppression by dictatorial powers, in our *corpus*, in social networks, we collect expressions that denounce verbal aggression and violence based on discursive strategies that negatively present the image of migrants, as we will show in our analyzes.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our study is undertaken within the fields of Rhetoric, interactive discourse analysis, ethnomethodologist inspiration and, also, Linguistic Pragmatics, based on two assumptions: the conception of language is radically dialogic and socio-historical; the concept of discursive *ethos*, as defined by Maingueneau (2002), Charaudeau (1996, 2005), Amossy (1999, 2014b).

In the space “social network”, apostrophes are naturally associated with an argumentative objective, insofar as, on the one hand, they participate in the construction of the negative image of the addressee that the addresser wishes to construct in their own discourse; on the other, they also aim at attachment from the auditorium and simultaneously at the disqualification of the opponent, through two opposing strategies: the first is persuasion and the second is the stigmatization of the opponent. In this context, according to Cabral and Lima (2017, p. 89), “verbal violence then takes on an important role as a strategy of polemic discourse, since, by attacking the opponent, we are, in some way, disqualifying them”.

Bousfield (2008, p. 132) defines that verbal aggression is a face-threatening act (FTA), an intentional, free, conflicting face-threatening act that was produced on purpose. In turn, Culpeper (2008, p. 36) underlines the intention of causing damage to the face. In fact, when there is an intention of disqualifying the interlocutor, violence seems to be an effective strategy and as such, as stated by Cabral and Lima (2017), it needs to be linguistically marked, for example, with the use of a pejorative qualifier.

Terkourafi (2008, p. 70), however, defends that verbal rudeness and aggressiveness occur when the expression used is unconventional in relation to the context in which it occurs; it attacks the recipient’s face, but no intent to attack the face is attributed to the speaker by the listener.

The concepts that we alluded to earlier allow us to reinforce that subjects can perform threatening acts, whether intentionally or not, and place the context of interaction and negotiation and the enunciative framework at the center as important parameters to analyze injurious acts.

In the case of insults, they naturally presuppose a situation of interlocution, dominated by agonistic positions, aiming to establish a dysphoric interactional environment, so we are faced with explicit indications of referential saturation of the recipient, whose specificity consists of having a critical, derogatory intention.

An insult, according to the dictionary, is a “word, attitude, or gesture that has the power of attacking someone’s dignity or honor” (Houaiss & Villar, 2001, p. 1629). Based on the definition, it is clear that the insult materializes through language; it is, therefore, a verbal act. It is necessary, however, to consider that, in addition to attacking the addressee’s face, according to Cabral and Albert (2017, p. 278), “this act slips into the social domain”. The authors resort to the dictionary to justify their reasoning, stating that the insult shows “aversion or contempt for the values, capacity, intelligence, or rights of others” (Houaiss & Villar, 2001, p. 1629). That is why Kerbrat-Orecchini (2014, p. 47) says that “politeness never has a place in wars, where what matters first and foremost

is attacking the opponent to win. This is also the case of the metaphorical wars that are the debates”.

It is impossible to ignore that insults feature an underlying argumentative intention that is supported by the stigmatization device of the listener, who, in turn, has two models in its genesis: the collaboration with their peers and the devaluation of others. The interpellation of the other through pejorative axiological statements consists of blocking the step “X is a Y”, where X represents the addressee and Y represents the predication made about them, a predicative structure that allows the refutation (of the type, negative structure “X is not a Y”). Injurious expressions convey the concrete existence, the unquestionable referencing and the co-statement that is constructed prevents any discussion, insofar as it simultaneously updates the assessment and its confirmation or ratification.

According to Rosier and Ernotte (2000, p. 12), it is an argumentative strategy (*mépris énonciatif*) that aims, on the one hand, to stigmatize the interlocutor, to position them as an ideologically distant other, simultaneously establishing group collaboration with their peers. In confluence with this line of thought, van Dijk (1998, p. 43) states that good deeds are generally attributed to ourselves and our allies and bad deeds are ascribed to others (or their supporters) or, with a simple inversion of this thesis: our bad actions are mitigated and minimized, while good actions are praised. van Dijk (1998) designates this situation by the ideological square in which the “us” corresponds to the enunciator of the message and “them”, the “others”, are the ones who ideologically position themselves in an opposite way. This argumentative strategy, which consists of positively describing the endogroup (enunciator, also theoretically referred to as “us”) and negatively describing the exogroup (object or social actor represented in the discourse, or “them”) – is called by van Dijk (2005, p. 195) “ideological square”.

Traditionally, an *argumentum ad hominem* is present, in its strict sense, which implies the temporary adoption by the addresser of a *doxa* that they perceive as incompatible with the *doxa* of the universal auditorium, a virtual auditorium that is ideally receptive to the rational argumentation.

The problem is that the daily use of *ad hominem* refers to an attack on the other and not to an adjustment to the addressee’s specific beliefs. In the *argumentum ad hominem*, the intrinsic merits of the opponent’s point of view or doubt are not discussed, but the opponent is outright disqualified. This strategy is essentially aimed at the audience (in the case of the social network, this notion of “auditorium” is important, given its rapid repercussion) and not at the opponent. The disqualification of the other, on Facebook, is often part of a rhetorical game for the auditorium, that is, the other users with whom a point of view to be reinforced is shared. According to Amossy (2014a), the disqualification of the other in their person delegitimizes them since it leads them to discredit.

There are two variations of *ad hominem* arguments:

1. direct personal attack: addressed to any aspect of the person: their competence, their honorability, their character. It is intended to attack the opponent’s ethics, regarding them as dishonest, not righteous, and untrustworthy. It shows that someone who is incapable or a liar cannot hold correct or credible positions. The negative characteristics of the other are always highlighted;

2. indirect personal attack: it is the one in which the impartiality of the person presenting the argument is put under suspicion. A characteristic of the opponent is presented: political affiliation, religious belief, ethnicity, political alliances of any nature. By highlighting this attribute, there is an intention of showing that someone is biased, has obscure, prejudiced personal motivations and partial points of view. An indirect personal attack is, for example, to imply that the other has nothing to say about a given subject because they had no personal experience in the area.

Our analyses will focus on these two categories of strategies, as we will explain in the following section.

### ATTACK ON MIGRANTS ON FACEBOOK

Although we all know that freedom of expression is a right of citizenship, we are sometimes perplexed by the countless injurious, defamatory, and *ad hominem* attacks we witness, mainly in an era when social networks disseminate and spread, through the written word, the free opinions of all those who previously had no access to the public expression of their opinion.

We chose the social network Facebook as it is a relevant field for investigation in several areas, under different perspectives; it may reveal many particularities of perceptions and behaviors of individuals, regarding themselves and their social relationships. Dabrowska (2013, p. 142) highlights that Facebook offers several advantages for research:

the social network, and specifically Facebook, shares a number of advantages with the electronic registers, notably those of large quantities of easily accessible data, a considerable degree of informality in the language, the possibility of manipulating the subjects in order to explore various aspects of language use and (...) access to social information about post authors through their profile data. (Dabrowska, 2013, p. 142)

We collected a set of comments on migrants from Portuguese and Brazilian users on Facebook. The Brazilian *corpus* was collected in a public group on Facebook<sup>7</sup> with 139.166 members. In turn, the Portuguese *corpus* was also collected on the social network Facebook<sup>8</sup>, in a group which comprises 87.123 members. Considering the questions that presided over the development of the research, 196 pages were visited over the months and posts and comments whose discursive strategies manifested polarization, aggression, and social exclusion were selected, collected, and anonymized.

Based on the definition of insult that we presented in the previous section and on the assumptions by de Rosier and Ernotte (2000, p. 3), we consider that the insult happens verbally as a typically linguistic form that nominally calls into question the other, presupposing a discursive configuration and a specific situation of enunciation that seeks to disgrace the dignity or honor of the insulted person. From this perspective and given that an insult is manifestly an act threatening the other's face (FTA), we understand that

<sup>7</sup> Available at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/388027014733332/about/>

<sup>8</sup> Available at <https://facebook.com/groups/23145777899645/about>

the insult, as a verbal strategy, makes use of verbal violence (Auger, Fracchiola, Moïse & Schutz-Romain, 2008, p. 639), as the authors highlight:

the insult is an interlocutive speech act. It carries an emotional, even instinctual, force, and sees the other in the desire to belittle and deny them. It plays an eminently perlocutionary role (“because I call you fat, you’re going to feel that way”). This functioning is made possible due to linguistic effects.

We can state, based on the aforementioned authors, that the insult implies an addressee. Therefore, it has an important pragmatic and interactional function, corresponding to the form of treatment, geared towards the other, to whom a negative judgment is attributed, linguistically expressed by pejorative axiological terms. The insults and other marks of aggressiveness in the analysis that we develop here do not happen in face-to-face or dialogical contexts, but in a specific situation of enunciation, which is commonly referred to as delocutive speech: they are uttered or written and addressed to an absent person, which, as we have previously shown, is more complex and more aggressive, because these statements would possibly not be uttered in person.

This is combined with the importance of the public, which, in the case of social networks, has a long reach and is enormously important, given that the pragmatic meaning stems from the enunciative relationship; in this context, the presence of others in the identification of the underlying speech act frequently raises more interlocutors, as happens in cases of acts such as defamation, provocation, humiliation, which aim to stigmatize and exclude the other.

It is clear that, on the one hand, the migrant population is discursively regarded as strange and numerous and as a cause of social disturbance (“illegal, intruder, terrorist, barbaric”), with an accusation constructed based on a derogatory image; on the other hand, in contrast, those who welcome migrants are encouraged, proliferating an inclusive, markedly humanistic, discourse.

Let us now analyze some of the comments on migrants on the social network Facebook. As defined in the previous section, our categories of analysis are: direct personal attack and indirect personal attack. We will use PC and BC when referring to the Portuguese *corpus* and to the Brazilian *corpus*, both collected from Facebook pages, on the dates mentioned in parentheses at the end (*italics added*).

PC<sub>1</sub> – I think we shouldn’t welcome them. *They* come here and do not respect *our* rules!

PC<sub>2</sub> – *They* only want to go to rich countries!

PC<sub>3</sub> – I am not a racist, but all *Muslims* are terrorists, they are *animals* that we cannot trust!

PC4 – Arab countries can have *them*!

PC5 – Because I don't fucking care about *their* suffering!

PC6 – *We don't* want *parasites* here

PC7 – Out with the *intruders*!

PC8 – Besides, they are all *terrorists*!

PC9 – Out with these *illegal people, criminals*, go back to your countries.

PC10 – We don't want to live in the *jungle*.

PC11 – I am not a racist, but... all Muslims are terrorists, they are *animals* whom we cannot trust! Arab countries can have *them*! Because I don't fucking care about their suffering!

PC12 – Unfortunately, the Portuguese are happy with soccer and tours of the chambers, while *these people* take advantage of the opportunity to swipe everything that moves!

(August 22, 2017)

BC1 – There are already many problems here, and yet *these people from outside* still come to bring more *problems*, the government really must forbid *these people* from entering here.

BC2 – Not to mention *diseases* that have been eradicated here for years, they are *here*, all back.

BC3 – Our own problems are not enough for us, we have to cope with those of *neighbors* who are *slaves to dictators*, we are not to blame if, in *their* countries, there are no men of unblemished character, like Sérgio Moro and his companions in battle.

BC4 – It's past time to insert morale into this country. Most of *these people* who are arriving are coming to vote for these shitty communists who have been appearing around here. They are *all* receiving their voter IDs. Why vote for these shitty things.

BC5 – Send *this thug* to their countries because Brazil is filled with thugs BRAZIL.

BC6 – we welcome them and *they* come here to make a mess. the Brazilians are right, expel them. and those who don't like it can take *these foreign troublemakers* into their own homes

BC7 – *This gang of Venezuelan troublemakers*, do they think this is a lawless country? Send *this riffraff* back to Venezuela, because this is not Malboro country [a lawless land]! Close the border urgently! It's the only solution!

BC8 – *They* say they are experiencing difficulties in their country, but how are we here, in ours? And they also started committing crimes? We do not have too many problems here? Let *them* stay there.

BC9 – We have to send *this People* back to Venezuela! Who told you to vote for Communists?

BC10 – Surely, *they are robbing* Brazilians, there are already many *thieves* here, we don't need to import *anymore*!

(August 18, 2018)

As we can see in these examples, the construction of a certain dichotomy is evident: *we/them*, whether explicit through the use of pronouns, or implicit in the verbal construction in Portuguese.

The image of the migrant population that arrives in Europe or in the neighboring country, in the case of Brazil, is discursively constructed as strange and numerous and as a cause of social disturbance, of problems ("*these people from outside* still come to bring more *problems*"), building up, on the one hand, a derogatory image, and, on the other, an image of victimization, in contrast, as it appears that the other is not accepted out of fear, out of intolerance. To this end, commenters resort to the use of lexicon in the field of aggressiveness, especially violent, exacerbated adjectives, which ostracize the other ("illegal, parasites; terrorists, criminals, thugs, troublemakers, riffraff, slaves to dictators"), and to the repeated use of the accusatory denial of eliminating the other ("we *don't* want parasites, we are not to blame, we don't need to import any *more*"); or exclusion markers ("out with the intruders, Send *this riffraff* back to Venezuela, Let *them* stay there") that demarcate a personal and geographical territory that does not allow for invasion.

The use of foul words and expressions reinforces the negative charge that the several messages are imbued with ("I don't fucking care, for these shitty communists") and simultaneously reinforces this hostility.



In European Portuguese, the expression “a gente” (which can be translated as “we”) takes on, in some contexts, a derogatory trait. In example PC12, it testifies to the contempt that is conveyed in the statement, in which, in addition to criticizing the inactivity of the people who welcome migrants, accuses the other of stealing (“rapar”, in Portuguese, which can be translated as “swipe”).

Depreciation, which constitutes a direct attack, in delocutive speech, denounces an uncompromising position, aired, unfiltered, by the use of the term “animals”, as well as by the use of metaphors from the animal domain to describe the other whom is not welcome. Another metaphor refers to the “jungle” a term that is used to describe overcrowded camps, with no living conditions, in which migrants pile up. In the Brazilian case, the migrant is sometimes associated with the semantic field of crime (“thug, they are robbing, thieves”) and sometimes linked to the field of health, such as those who bring diseases and, therefore, represent a threat to the local population (“diseases that have been eradicated here for years for years here, they are *here*, all back”). They are, therefore, *ad hominem* arguments, in the sense proposed by Amossy (2014b), since the projected images outright disqualify the other, which reinforces what was stated by Seara and Manole:

the negative classifications, the follow up and repetition that empower the critique, highlight a verbal aggression that instead of strengthening ties, degrade the other by marking and destroying their image, by increasing the rupture and encouraging the non construction of social ties. (Seara & Manole, 2016, p. 316)

In fact, this strategy, at the service of constructing a xenophobic and intolerant *ethos*, is aimed at the audience. It should be noted that, in the case of the social network, this notion of “auditorium” is important, given its rapid repercussion. The *ad hominem* argument does not aim at the opponent in a dispute, but at the target of the discussion itself, or its theme, that is, migrants. The user who posts the comment does so, most times, to their peers, in order to reinforce a collective *ethos*, or, according to Terkourafi (2008), their own image. It can therefore be said that it is a rhetorical strategy that aims to reinforce the image of oneself before the group they belong to, since, on Facebook, according to Cabral and Lima (2017), people establish relationships due to common interests, because they share the same points of view. Thus, the migrant is attacked to reinforce the collective *ethos*, the image identified by the group, which, in the case of our analyses, is xenophobic and intolerant.

The criticisms expressed by indirect attacks are less frequent, but also aggressively effective, insofar as, instead of addressing insults to migrants, the political class is made responsible, whether due to their inactivity or to their ideals of welcoming and inclusion. In the following examples, this denunciation is notorious. It is expressed either through direct criticism (PC15, BC11, BC12), through irony (PC16, BC12), or through the rhetorical question (PC16 and PC17), always threatening the other’s face, even though they are in

a hierarchically superior position, which mirrors the provocative register, of instigation and affront.

PC15 – The use of the so-called “refugee crisis” raises, in our governing political class, substantial doses of *hypocrisy and a tremendous lack of respect for the Portuguese*. They put the people to sleep with *their small talk*, talk about European values and solidarity while *throwing the Portuguese into deep misery*. But beyond the “refugee crisis”, there is a well-defined agenda for European governments, of which Portugal is a part. It is an agenda that is typical of the times, with unclear objectives for society, in which the debate is a taboo, under penalty of being accused of Islamophobia.

(August 18, 2017)

PC16 – *These are the minds of our governing political class. Repopulating Portugal with Muslim immigrants..., but why aren't the same opportunities given to the Portuguese!?* Wouldn't it be much more logical!?

(July 26 PNR Partido Nacional Renovador [National Renewal Party])

PC17 – *Where are those stupid people who welcome refugees? How stupid are the Portuguese! THEY WILL ONLY OPEN THEIR EYES WHEN A BOMB GOES OFF*

(July 12, 2017)

BC11 – Since *the government left its legs open* [lost control] we have to take control of the situation

BC12 – Either keep the Fatherland free or die for Brazil, we are only helping those who come here to turn it into a madhouse *we need to put it in order or we will suffer the consequences of this government who left its legs open* [lost control].

BC13 – *Misgovernment leads to this*. Congratulations, Brazilian people

(August 18, 2018)

Evidencing an uncompromising and superior position, they express themselves through directive acts, giving orders to government officials and insulting them (PC18, BC14, BC15, BC16):

PC18 – *Stop being stupid*, welcoming refugees is welcoming Terrorists.....  
*Open your eyes.....you are really stupid.....*

CB14 – *We have to close*, really! *Go fight there*, in their country they didn't put the guy there

BC15 – *We can't let* these people come into here no.

BC16 – *It's past time to forbid* more people from entering to be unemployed in the country.

(August 26, 2017)

Returning to the proposed guiding thread, *ab initio*, we can conclude that the discursive strategies that produce social exclusion are similar in the collected *corpora*, in Portuguese and in Brazil.

There is a polarization of opinions, in which enunciators in social media vehemently express their contestation and the non-acceptance of the entry of migrants, citing social, religious, ethnic, and political reasons. The indomitable positions happen, as was demonstrated, mainly by direct, insulting, aggressive attacks, using a violent lexicon and the reiteration of denials of interdiction and blocking; irony, disqualification, discredit, derogatory and vexatious expressions, and acts of repudiation prevail, demonstrating that it is an ideologically marked discourse.

This analysis also allows us to prove that, in an era when social networks disseminate and spread, through the written word, the free opinions of all those who previously did not have access to the public expression of their opinion, we are witnessing the formation of opinions carried out more directly and aggressively, with the underlying intention to exclude the other, the migrant who comes to disturb the established order. These strategies serve an argumentative purpose that consists of the rejection of the other because they are different, but they also aim to influence a vast number of readers of the social network and to reaffirm the belonging to a certain ideological group.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As we highlighted in our analyzes, the messages on Facebook pages that we analyzed in this study constitute manipulative work, in which vexing expressions, acts of repudiation and insults and, concomitantly, the constant call for migrants to be expelled – expressed through two strategies of *argumentum ad hominem* – prevail. The Facebook messages intentionally carry the purpose of tarnishing the image of migrants based on strategies that serve an argumentative purpose that consists, on the one hand, of influencing a vast number of readers of the social network and of demonstrating belonging to a certain group, aligning with its collective ideological *ethos*, and, on the other, of

forming negative judgments regarding migrants and those who defend them, whose face is threatened by discourteous and even insulting acts.

The argumentative strategies that attack the face are imbued with a controversial nature, reinforcing an image that they are not worthy of respect, constructing, in a broader way, the discredit of people who are already on their own, in a situation of weakness and even giving way to a political blaming of those responsible.

At the end of this paper, we return to the saying by Montecino, who inspired this study: “the researcher finds himself facing his research object as a scholar who seeks knowledge and as an ideological subject who seeks to make sense of that knowledge” (Montecino, 2010, p. 250).

Translation: Sara Luiza Hoff

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