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"Vagabundo" or "vagabunda"? Swearing and gender relations*

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"There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990:25)

Abstract:

This text aims to reflect about the act of cursing through the adjective "vagabundo" in Brazilian's culture, when it is applied for a man ("vagabundo") or for a woman ("vagabunda"). It's pointed out, from the way opened by Wittgenstein (1991), in the philosophy of ordinary language, how the sense of this adjective is its uses. It acquires many different nuances of sense with its correlation with the sex of the subject offended. When it is applied for a man, the adjective acquires the sense of sloth, not productivity, passiveness, devaluated traces in the so called masculine "essence". In the other hand, when the adjective is applied for a woman, the word acquires a sexual sense, indicating for an activity which is socially undesirable for her. Through these discussions we pointed out how the speaking is not neuter (Irigaray, 1985; 1990), it exercises control way and system reproduction through the power microphysics.

Keywords: swearing; gender relations; language

In the history of Western thought, the idea that language had the function of representing the world has become increasingly established. That is, it had a merely speculative nature (Rorty, 1994). In the last century we observed a turnaround (linguistic turn) in this way of understanding: especially with Wittgenstein (1991), in the second phase of his thought. According to this author, speaking a language is similar to playing a game, accepting its rules and, mainly, adopting a way of life.

Several debates about language have been occurring since Wittgenstein. Among them, there are those dedicated to the values present in language, such as those related to gender issues. In this sense, Luce Irigaray is an important author. One of her great contributions was the demonstration of how the French language is marked by hierarchical interpretations of gender (Irigaray, 1985, 1990).

The present study is partially within this scope. Partially – because we seek to reflect about gender issues related to the use of certain words in our culture. On the other hand, we do not consider the gender of the word, but its use when assigned to people of different sexes^[1]. Plagiarizing Freud (1983), when he defined the hysterical symptom as an opera prince disguised as a beggar (according to him, a fundamental point to the beginning of psychoanalytical thought), we will analyze swearing (and the act of swearing using certain words) as a touchstone to open important reflections about the structures of our society. We intend to go further than the linguistic plan, as said by Wittgenstein, starting from this plan and reflecting about our way of life. In other words, from the daily and ordinary practice of people (swearing alone or swearing someone else, only mentally, among others), it is necessary to rethink this practice, denaturalize it, and observe what in this practice can lead us to further questionings.

Swearing as an act

Swearing is a speech act that occurs when an individual pronounces certain words intending to offend (or cause offense to) another person. Generally, it has a cathartic effect on the person who says it and a perlocutionary effect on the receiver (the person feels hurt, humiliated, angry, among other possibilities). This is the definition of cathartic effect: "release of restrained tensions or emotions, comparable to an abreaction" (Houaiss & Villar, 2001:651). It is an attempt to morally degrade the other.

The concept of perlocutionary act was developed by Austin (1990) when studying speech acts. This author points out a distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. The locutionary acts consist of a phonetic act (production of noises), phatic act (the act of uttering certain words in a certain inflexion) and rhetic act (act of uttering such words with a certain more-or-less definite sense and reference). Regarding the illocutionary, it refers to the uttering of expressions that, when pronounced, performs an act. For example: the expression "you are married", when pronounced by a priest and the pre-requirements for the happiness of this act are met (among others, that the couple is not already married to other people), performs the act of getting married.

In relation to the perlocutionary acts, Austin says that we could translate them, although with some problem, for the expression "for saying something, did something". In his words (Austin, 1991:89-90):

There is another sense (C) in which the performance of a locutionary act, and therefore an illocutionary act, may also represent the performance of another kind of act. Saying something frequently, or even regularly, will produce effects or consequences about the feelings, thoughts or actions of the listener, or of the speaker, or of other people. And this may be done with the purpose, intention or objective of producing such

effects. Therefore, considering this we can say that, in such case, the speaker performed an act that can be described by a merely oblique reference (Ca) or even without any references (Cb) to the locutionary or illocutionary act. We will denominate the execution of this kind of act as the execution of a perlocutionary act or perlocution.

Understanding the act of swearing as a perlocutionary act implies in the context and intonation of the swearing by the speaker, since the same word may have non-offensive effects when pronounced in different intonations and situations. An example of this is the use, by adolescents, of words usually used as insults, but that may present other meanings, such as marking their identification with a certain group of friends: "How are you doing, you faggot? Are you alright, bro?" "Everything is good, you jerk!" [\[21\]](#). Here, the intonation is not aggressive, but humorous and inciting. Therefore, it is important to highlight certain aspects that facilitate the offensive effect. Among these, we emphasize the importance of the prosody (intonation).

According to Fónagy (1983), the speech, as phonation, presents psycho-instinctual basis. Therefore, the sound would be the gestural character of the instinctual content present in the intonation. In the intonation, a transition from the body gesture to a dramatic-oral mini-performance occurs in the phonatory system plan. In other words, there is an specific engendering of the relations between the glottis, the vocal folds and the larynx in order to make the intonation possible. The latter would be the prime vehicle for the transmission of emotional messages. Thus, Fónagy (1983) describes the oppressive "battle" that takes place in the phonatory system when we pronounce expressions permeated with anger, or the sweetness and harmony tenderness is present. Therefore, the gesture is incorporated to the spoken language. As previously mentioned, swearing is doing, both in an instinctual sense (the catharsis, the anal-sadistic "evacuation" of the speaker,

therefore an offensive, aggressive inflexion), and a social sense, because it implies in the execution of a moral offense to another person.

In addition to the intention of the speaker and the effect on the listener, it is important to emphasize the selection of certain terms in the fulfillment of the conditions for the execution of the swearing act. In other words, the choice of the words is not random, but accurate and resulting from the cultural and historical process of society. As an offensive expression, it must mark territories interdicted to the social individuals. This evidences its value potentially degrading in relation to the moral of the other. Moreover, the word presents a certain privileged sense in the current use by people, a kind of literalization, losing its polysemic and polyphonic nature^[3]. The distinction between sense and meaning presented by Frege (1978) can be enlightening. According to this author, sense is the way in which a certain object is presented to us; and meaning, in turn, points to the reference of the concept. The example provided for the understanding of this distinction is the difference between the Morning Star or Evening Star (two senses) and the planet Venus (same meaning).

In the case of swearings, this difference is essential for the understanding of the choice of the expressions: the swearing act is not executed with the referent (or meaning), but with the sense! A clarifying example is the difference between "bitch" and "woman who provides sex for money". According to Aranha (2002:293), "bitch" is a "classical Brazilian insult, component of a series of highly offensive popular expressions. It refers to the woman who charges money for her sexual skills." However, if a person, intending to offend his/her interlocutor, says "You are a woman who provides sex for money!", the result would be risible, ironic, and not offensive. Therefore, the sense (as understood by Frege) is essential here: it points out an active attitude in relation

to sexuality, which is an undesirable position for women in our culture. Thus, the choice of the expression/word is an essential part to understand the act of swearing, pointing to a history of social relations in which the gender category is evident and essential.

The swearwords: the research

As said by Araripe (1999:23), "the perception, over time, does not distinguish the social prejudice latent in the emotional content of these words, derivatives, this prejudice and this emotion, of an unresolved conflict in each formation of social stratification". In other words, to understand the degrading effect of the terms used in swearing, it is necessary not only to study the history of such terms, but also the situations to which they remain connected through social conditionings (even though unconsciously). For those who still believe that swearwords are mere words (without any political, social and psychological consequences), we would like to mention Depeche (2008:211-212):

"We frequently hear the appeaser argument that 'it is just an expression'. Why would an expression, a cliché, be more harmless than any other assertion? It is quite the opposite, because the reiterations of a same image naturalize it in the mind of the receiver. They leave an impression that relieves its impact due to the fact that they are familiar (...)
The force of habit! "

Thus, swearing can be considered a symptom of the society in which it appears (in our case, capitalist patriarchy), and shows, precisely for the offensive nature, that it contains the rules and values proclaimed by such society. Moreover, the act of swearing is a speech act that not only repeats the values, but reaffirms them. In other words, regardless the consciousness of the

speaker when pronouncing them, swearwords convey a practice based on the values assigned to the different genders. Here, with Bordo (1997), we can affirm that the practice comes prior to the belief.

But why did we choose the word "vagabundo" as a privileged swear word in the present article?

In a recent study conducted by us [\[4\]](#), we observed, in a group of 375 middle-class adults from Brasilia interviewed (men and women), that the worst swear word considered by women, related to her sex, present active sexual nature ("bitch", "whore", "hooker", "tramp", for example, while for men, the worst swear word related to the male sex would be related to a passive sexual behavior ("queer", "fagot", "cuckold", etc.). Among men, swear words related to self-investment character traits ("tramp", "loser", "beggar", etc.) came in second (37,8%). Such character traits are almost always related to the idea of productivity and social recognition (money as a form of recognition). On the other hand, in second place (10,94%), we found the relational character swearing (such as "bastard" and "selfish") as the worst swearing assigned to women by themselves.

The charts below point out the expressivity of these data:

Chart 1 – Worst swearing assigned to a woman, according to themselves

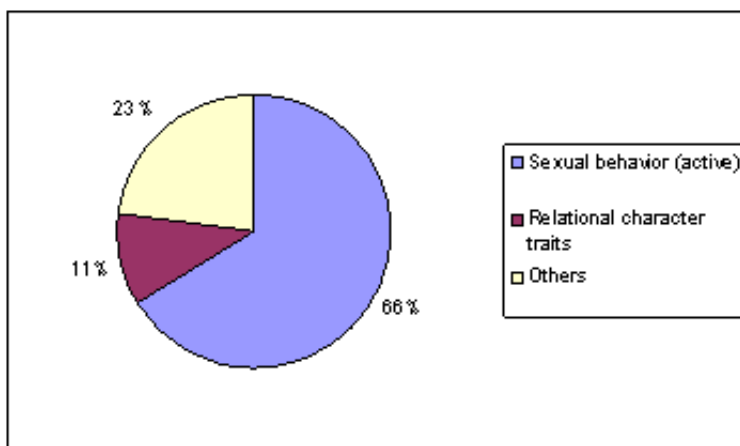
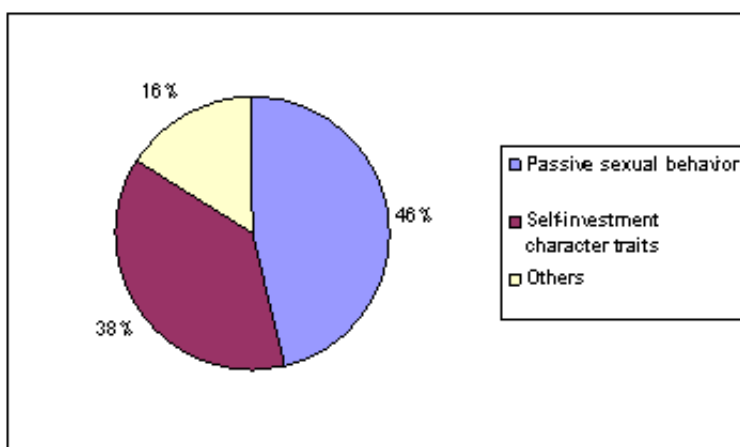


Chart 2 – Worst swearing assigned to a man, according to themselves



We observed the expressiveness of the frequency of sexual nature swearing in relation to women (almost 70% of the answers), which added to relational character traits account for 77,14% of the answers. In relation to the answers of men, we found a high incidence of swearing related to sexual behavior ("passive") and self-investment character traits, accounting for 84,4% of the answers.

The term "vagabundo" was privileged in the frequency of both the groups as one of the worst insults assigned to both men and women. However, when assigned to a woman, the term takes on active sexual connotations; while when assigned to a man, it takes self-investment traits connotations, in the sense of the productivity mentioned above. Thus, the term "vagabundo" is an important amalgam of gender values present not only in our

language, but also in its uses (and what this fact opens in relation to our lives).

This ambiguity of the term (that gives it such different meanings), depending on the sex of the person to whom it is directed, is what makes it so productive. That is, from the banality of its daily use, whether in the streets, whether in soap operas, we found the possibility to go further and reconsider, through its problematization, the way of life of which it belongs to.

"Vagabunda" and "Selfish"

The use of the term "vagabundo", in its female sense, seems to indicate that, despite the apparent changes, the social structures and their values remain deeply patriarchal. The swearing, as a speech act, not only reproduces this system, but also consolidates and renews it in the daily life, establishing itself as a microphysics of power that tells women what is interdicted to them (freely and actively exercise their desire) and, on the other hand, what is desirable to them (sexual abstinence). As said by Perrot (2003), both the body and the desire of women should be silenced.

In this sense, becoming a mother would be a reasonable escape from the desire, because, differently from men, the female "nature" is supposed to be modest. Her sphere is established, above all, in the intimacy, house and relationships. Thus, the antithesis of "vagabunda" would be a "family woman". However, within this space (household-related), total sexual abstinence is not only interdicted, but also represents a sign of illness:

"(...) until the nineteenth century, the speeches of the Brazilian doctors about sex revolved around two central and interposed themes: '(...) prostitution, conceived as a space of sick sexuality, as a place of perversions; and marriage, conceived as

hygienic institution and the only recognized space of healthy sexuality (Maia, 2008:64-65). "

Psychiatry, as a part of medicine in the nineteenth century, has significantly contributed in the affirmation of this scenario of bourgeois sanitation of behaviors:

"The women who stayed in society were not less observed from the psychiatric perspective, but suffered a distinct and punitive supervision (...). The cultural rules of society have created an image where the women were idealized as home angels, guardians of virtues. Moralists and physicians formulated the rules and their anatomical target, considering them especially suitable for motherhood and household duties ." (Garcia, 1995: 57).

Those women who infringed such rules, either in relation to the assertion of activity of their desire or in the search for professional emancipation, were at serious risk of being considered as mentally insane or immoral. As said by Perrot (2003:21), "this supports the sociocultural construction of femininity (...) made of restraint and discretion, sweetness, passivity, submission (always say yes, never say no), decency, silence. These are the cardinal virtues of women". Oftentimes, it refers to the transformation and the constitution of "role woman" (Zanello, 2007), that is, the woman who is responsible for taking care of the family and house, her real "essence"[\[5\]](#):

"Even in countries with considerable sexual equality, certain traits and activities are still commonly assigned to women (...) Good behavior, exemplariness, kindness, care for ill people, elders and children, abstinence and purity of heart, among others, are considered as female characteristics. If at

first glance these traits seem to be positive, a closer examination shows how such qualities assigned to them eventually oppress them, leading them to submission. Given this condition, women are relegated to a second-class position, becoming a non-subject and reaching the status of object" (Silva, 2008).

According to West & Zimmerman (2002), "housework" refers not only to a function designated as "female work", but that the "engagement in it" for women, and the "non-execution" for men, represent the design and exposure of their "nature" of woman and of man. To these authors, the gender is a practice in the gerund: the doing gender.

Therefore, the swearword "vagabunda" is an amalgam of a tradition that made history and that is inserted into our daily practices, in the invisibility of social control that, as pointed out by Foucault (2006), has ceased to be a repressive power to be a constitutive power. Otherwise, why would the term "vagabunda" be so offensive?

According to Guimarães (2008), the binomial whore/family woman points to "what is made of, said and expected from women in patriarchal societies"; what "always involves, in some way, some kind of control, translated into violence and exhortation, praise and censure" (Guimarães, 2008: 40).

Moreover, as pointed out, in second place as the swearings considered by woman as being the most offensive ones in relation to themselves, we found the relational character trait swearings, that is, those that hurt the so-called female "essence" related to the care for others, marked by abnegation, kindness and giving. The values assigned to women as being "naturally" theirs, as mentioned above, are related to the care for the other.

Or, in the words of Bordo (1997: 25):

On the one hand, our culture still widely advertises domestic conceptions of femininity, the ideological moorings for a rigorously dualistic sexual division of labor that cast the woman as the chief emotional and physical nurturer. The rules of the formation of femininity require women to learn how to feed other people instead of themselves, and to consider as greedy and excessive any wish for self-feeding and care for themselves. Thus, women are required to develop a kind of emotional economy completely devoted to others.

Here, the dyad "sexual abstinence" and "kindness/availability and care" appeared in a reverse manner, as a place potentially developed to morally offend women and, in addition, as maintenance of the social construction of the female "essence".

Lastly, the fact that a refined dictionary such as the Houaiss & Villar (2001) presents the term "vagabundo" only in its daily and masculine use; for its feminine use, its definition would be "formiga-de-ferrão" (*Pachycondyla striata*, a species of ants)! In the masculine acception, we found the definition that appeared in a significant part of the survey and that we will approach later: "who lives as a gadabout, wandering, straying, loafing; who lives in idleness, a loafer, a gadder; who acts dishonestly or without seriousness, a picaroon, a vagabond, a rotter (...)" (Houaiss & Villar, 2001:2821). However, Aranha (2002:349) in his mini-dictionary about insults, gives this definition for the term "vagabunda":

"[...]the feminine word for "vagabundo" is synonyms with "piranha". There is a clear tendency to identify as a sexual promiscuous person the woman who does not work. If she dedicated herself to an occupation, she certainly would not have so

much time to copulate. This is suggested by the synonymy between "vadia", "vagabunda" and "piranha".

It is also important to approach this connection between the "no work" of women and its association to an active sex life. Does it refer to any work? A paid, public work? Or the work related to care for the other, for the children, husband, home, and the so-called relational character traits? A hypothesis to be considered is that the sex allowed and encouraged for women takes (has taken) place within the institution of marriage, with procreation purposes, assuring the "true" attributions of women, that is, motherhood and care for the others. The lack of a husband, children... represent a danger that can (could) lead to debauchery! (sex only for pleasure?)

Therefore, considering the fact that these categories are within the same matrix, we emphasize the interrelation between them, or, as stated by Swain (2007:207):

"Mother and wife, family, domesticated sex, morality, private space, reproduction of the social; prostitute, public woman, liberation of addiction and debauchery latent in women: these categories, present in the image of femininity, are based on the premises of heterosexuality and in the institutional matrices of the patriarchy. Thus, women would only realize their being in the unavoidable meeting with the masculine, that would give them a progeny and satisfy their desire. "

"Vagabundo" and "viadinho"

The term "vagabundo", in its male use, also specifies what is desirable for men (and the value through which the totality of his person will be judged): production, activity, personal income.

The values represented here would be related to individualization, autonomy, singularity (Bordo, 1997), but also to performance, productivity, financial and professional success as equivalent to the success of this process of individualization (that is, a man is considered successful if he works hard to produce and accumulate, and he is recognized for that). The swearings also indicate what is interdicted to them: resignation to this standard of productivity.

As said by Matos (2003), in relation to the patriarchal society, "men should be able to face the competitiveness of the public world, while women should remain focused on the private sphere, with motherhood as the focal point of femininity" (Matos, 2003:123).

The male "essence" would be established, among other aspects, on the idea of virility in the labor exercise, whose top prize would be the status of success granted, today, by money. The term "vagabundo", as well as others related to self-investment character traits, point out the contrariety of the virility expected in the male productivity so that a man can be recognized and valued as such. Therefore, they emphasize the collapse of the ideas of power/success, productivity, income and efficiency.

Thus, the affirmation of capitalism is connected to the definition of the traditional masculinity: physical strength and honor have been substituted by success, money and a valued job.

The male is considered as the provider for the family needs. Even in cases when the woman has a paid job and contributes to the household income, the man should have the highest income in order to release himself from his chief function. Thus, whether as the only provider for the family needs or as the main one, he is not allowed to fail (Saffiotti, 1987: 24).

In addition to the self-investment character traits, and

with a slightly more expressive frequency, we found the swearwords with content related to passive sexual behavior.

According to Garcia (1995), in the counterpart of the bourgeois hygienization of behaviors, man came to be considered as the exact opposite of woman. Physical and intellectual strength were dominant in his emotional profile. Shaped by such male and virile qualities, men should be less inclined to love than women are. Their real inclination was towards the desire of purely sensual pleasure (Garcia, 1995: 71-72).

In this sense, Azize & Araújo (2003) point out how the representation of man was increasingly attached to the representation of masculinity in our culture. Work-related virility is reflected in sexual virility, and work-related metaphors are commonly used by men to refer to sexual potency. The use of the word "performance" to describe the sexual act is an example of this:

"The construction of masculinity goes beyond the fact of being born a man or not; what really matters is the 'excellence of performance'. The excellence of performance expected from every "real man" has a specificity: it is not just a matter of achieving a virile standard assumed as dominant, but of appearing, showing, speaking, demonstrating such situation ." (Azize & Araújo, 2003: 141)

According to Chacham & Maia (2008), denominations in relation to the male and female genitalia are among the ways by which the assertion of male virility appears in the language:

"In relation to the male body, the language related to the penis refers to the strength and superiority of the male genitalia, as well as its function as an instrument connected to activity, violence and

violation ("pau, caralho, cacete, pica, ferro, vara"). In relation to the female body, the language points to an imperfect, inferior and passive anatomy, object of violence and paradoxically, at the same time, a place of danger in itself ("buraco, gruta, racha, boca mijada"). "(Chacham & Maia, 2008): 81)

Thus, virility is asserted both in the labor life and in sexual life: evidences of masculinity. Therefore, calling a man a "vagabundo" casts doubt on his masculinity, taking into account that his virility is tested.

According to Badinter (1992), being a man is a construction that occurs in the imperative: the expression commonly said to boys, "be a man!", points out that virility would not be something "natural". In this sense, being a man would imply a function that appears not to be required from women, considering that no one says to a girl "be a woman!" Virility should be evidenced, constructed, "developed":

"Obligations, tests, competitions, these words evidence a real task to be performed in order to become a man (...) Thus, the man is a kind of artifact, and as such, he is always in danger of failing. Manufacturing defects, failure in the virile machine, in other words a loser man." (Badinter, 1992: 15).

According to Badinter (1992), masculinity is constructed, in the patriarchal society, as being identified with heterosexuality. That is, "as we continue to define the gender by the sexual behavior and masculinity by opposition to femininity, it is undeniable that homophobia, as well as misogyny, play an important role in the sense of masculine identity" (p. 172). Homophobia, present in the insults related to male sexual

behavior, is related to "hatred of female characteristics" (Badinter, 1992:172). Thus, male sexual virility appears to be built on the assertion of a denial of femininity, in the avoidance of anything, in a more negative than positive way: being a man, in this sense, is not to be sweet, not to be effeminate, not to be submissive... Sexual swearwords point to a sense of passivity, related to "being a woman" in the gender representations. Therefore, the sexual swearword considered as the most offensive in this case ("viadinho") is the one that points to a proximity, or any experience that may approximate him to being a mere "woman".

Thus, the notion of virility would be eminently relational, constructed in relation and for other men and against femininity, in a kind of fear of femininity. It is in this sense that virility should be permanently evidenced, while femininity is related to failure, impotency and vulnerability.

Despite the high frequency of answers related to sexual behavior among men, we observed a curious difference in comparison to the frequency of insults related to sexual behavior for women. Among women, this frequency was much higher, suggesting that the control of female sexuality is still much more effective.

In conclusion, the term "vagabund@" and its use in the everyday language, present in the swearing act, both in its male and female use, evidences important values that subsist in our culture concerning gender relations. It also points out (due to the fact of being offensive) distinct spaces and behaviors that should be banished from the social sphere. The reflection on the use of this term shows that, despite the apparent openness, there still are hierarchies and attributions of social roles distinctly different and rigorous in relation to gender relations. That is, despite the plurality of constructive possibilities of masculinity and femininity, the reactionary character of the swearwords indicates how the structures of our society are still based on patriarchal

values. Thus, we emphasize the importance of a serious reflection on the swearwords, considering the fact that "the unquestioned language of social practices and symbolical references imprison us: it is necessary to create new languages that correspond to what Wittgenstein denominated as 'other ways of life'" (Amorós, 2008: 13).

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[1] The terms were maintained in the original in Portuguese in order to point out the identity of the term, and the only difference is the designation of gender (male "o" or female "a"), common in Latin languages, but that leads to distinct interpretations according to this designation.

[2] Example from the fieldwork conducted in the Project Philosophy in School. This project, of interdisciplinary bases (with the participation of student-monitors from the graduation in Philosophy, Psychology and Pedagogy) aimed to induce the activity of thinking (philosophize with) in children of elementary school of schools of the periphery of the Federal District. I have participated in 1999 and 2000 and my experience is described in the article Porto Jr & Zanello, 1999.

[3] Many swearwords are dead metaphors, literalized by the use. Lakoff & Johnson (1986) consider the dead metaphors as the most prevailing ones, considering the fact that they structure our way of seeing, feeling and experiencing the world. See Zanello, 2007.

[4] Zanello & Gomes, 2008. These data are part of a research carried out from 2007 to 2010, with individuals of distinct social classes and ages in Brasília. We applied questionnaires containing 8 questions about the worst swearwords given to men and women (and in what situation) and the best compliments (in

what situation). The data were subjected to a pragmatic and a content analysis. They will soon be published in the book *Xingamentos: Entre a Ofensa e a Erótica* (Swearwords: Between the Insult and the Erotic).

[5] In this sense, an interesting datum was surveyed by the study of the Perseu Abramo Foundation (Venturi & al, 2004), in 2001, with 2502 Brazilian women: 96% of the interviewees pointed out themselves as the main responsible for the household chores (care for the house, children, elders and sick people). What could be a mere statistical datum, receives a new interpretation in the light of the interpretations of gender relations.

*"Vagabundo/vagabunda" could be translated, in an approximate manner, as "lazy/whore". However, considering the fact that in Latin languages the gender of the adjectives is, generally, defined by the termination "o" for men, and "a" for women, we decided to keep the term in Portuguese.



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