

The Symbolology of Nicknames in the School Everyday Life

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ABSTRACT – The Symbolology of Nicknames in the School Everyday Life. This paper discusses the relevance of ways of looking at, questioning and shedding light on what assumes the everyday life as a methodological lever of the knowledge of school reality. With this goal, it is explored the symbolology of nicknames in different school contexts of Portugal and Brazil and the social circumstances which contribute to their production and circulation. It is necessary to see how names spin out meanings in the informal everyday language. The proposed methodology takes the words of everyday chatting as vehicles for understanding the underlying social relationships. **Keywords: Everyday Life. Language. Nicknames. Representations. Body.**

RESUMO – A Simbologia dos Apelidos na Vida Cotidiana Escolar. Neste artigo debate-se a relevância de alguns modos de olhar, questionar e desvendar que tomam a vida cotidiana como alavanca metodológica do conhecimento da realidade escolar. Tendo em vista este objetivo, explora-se a simbologia dos apelidos em diferentes contextos escolares de Portugal e do Brasil e as circunstâncias sociais que contribuem para a sua produção e circulação. Há que ver como os nomes rodopiam sentidos na linguagem cotidiana dos jovens. A metodologia proposta toma as palavras do linguajar cotidiano como veículos de entendimento das relações sociais que as sustentam.

Palavras-chave: Cotidiano. Linguagem. Apelidos. Representações. Corpo.

Introduction

Social life can reveal itself by means of seemingly harmless aspects of everyday life, like its everyday chatting. What is proposed in this paper is to assume the everyday life as a support of a methodology that can intersect dimensions of analysis that use to appear as conceptually opposing: on one hand, the ordinary and seemingly insignificant; on the other, the extraordinary and the significant. In this methodological perspective, the sociologically relevant can emerge from what is assumed as irrelevant, in the same way that the potentially significant can emerge from the seemingly insignificant. In this way, when assuring mediations between social structures, processes and interactions, the everyday life emerges as a probe of social revelation. The challenge is to recover to the center of the page of the theoretical debate of social sciences those everyday life cultural expressions that have been put aside. It is with this purpose, with a theoretical-methodological nature, that in this paper it is explored the *mundane reasons* (Pollner, 1987) that ground the linguistic creativity among young students. The nicknames, creating a communicative reality around this linguistic creativity, also are a way of access to the understanding of the school reality that welcomes this communicational acting. By the way, social life is constructed through the language (Shotter, 1993). Thus, the proposed methodology assumes everyday chatting words as means of understanding the social relations that support them, in the assumption that the shared meanings of the language, just like it happens in the student setting, do not only assign meaning to the everyday life, they also provide to us an opportunity of better knowing the school reality. In view of this goal and being the school a space of sociability and socialization, the symbolology of the nicknames was the study object in different school contexts from Portugal and Brazil, with the purpose of discovering how these nicknames emerge, how their symbolology is experienced by the youngsters and which is their relevance for the understanding of the school reality.

It is known that the personal names reveal the identity of those who are named (Alford, 1988; Finch, 2008; Vom Bruck; Bodenhorn, 2006), but little is known on what the nicknames can tell us about the social realities where they circulate. It is also known that - expressing affection, stigmas, ironies and experiences - the nicknames form identity identifiers, signaling, although metaphorically, who inhabits in them. However, unveiling the social circumstances that contribute for the production and circulation of the nicknames is even more challenging. It is only this way that we will be able to explore the relevance that they can have for the understanding of the social worlds that welcome them. The challenge that we face passes through the understanding of the relation of the youngsters with the lexicon of their social existence, taking the nicknames as a case study. The idealized forms of reality, as well as their social representations, happen through games established by the language. Being subjectivity artifacts, words create worlds of meaning when being knitted in the everyday interactions. But how to reach these meanings that are released from the everyday chatting?

And what can they tell us when they come loose from words in interaction contexts? The inquiry hypothesis that we pursue suggests that the *mundane reason* (Pollner, 1987) of the youngsters in the assignment of nicknames, emerging in the school context, constructs a linguistic reality that provides us with opportunities to question not only the youth identities, but also the school reality itself.

The Questioning of School Reality the Everyday Life Perspective

Everyday life, we use to say, is what happens every day (Highmore, 2001; 2004). By the way, everyday life would be impossible without routines. However, the routine crosses with the rupture, the ordinary with the extraordinary (Certeau, 1984; Pais, 2002; Sandywell, 2004; Moran, 2005). The productive and reproductive activities form a process of dialectics between routine rhythms and creative actions in the everyday life (May, 2011). Even the time that works as a catalyzer to the social spontaneity, and despite its trend to restrain, cannot survive without its vivifying force. The time out of step between the appearance and the disappearance of the rhythms of the everyday life is a time tilled by the contingencies of life. The youngsters explore this restless time of everyday life in an irreverent form, despite being inserted in an institution, the school, whose functioning obeys to normative prescriptions. Indeed, the school is one of the social spaces most strongly submitted to the force of routines: schedules, study programs, pedagogical practices, evaluation systems. However, the school also is lived everyday as a space of creative sociabilities. The nicknames that the youngsters circulate among themselves, including the ones they aim to the teachers, are a well-known example of their capacity to caricature the severity of the school everyday life. In their everyday chatting, the youngsters exceed the literal meanings of the words, resignifying them, crossing their normative or traditional use. Keeping the signifier forms of the words used by them, they assign new meanings to them, whose decoding is only possible when interviewing those who, with complicity, are part of the universe of nicknames production and circulation. What is intended in this input is, precisely, to uncover the shared meanings of these linguistic underworlds.

This paper, centered on the symbolic meaning of nicknames, continues a research line that I have followed with enthusiasm since the past 1990s. It all started when, in schools from Lisbon and the outskirts, I noticed that the youngsters identified themselves by group nicknames: *marrões*, *graxas*, *bacanas* and *baldas* (Pais, 2003). Although belonging to the same student universe, they recognized themselves as different. The *marrões* [bookworms] were considered the most studious for always walking with their *head* or *horns* buried into the books; the *graxas* [ass kissers] were seen as the ones who were more helpful and obedient to the teachers, always with the eraser in their hands, in the expectation to acquire their teachers' affection; the *bacanas* [cool guys] were the most open to sociability, inside or outside of the school; the *baldas*¹ [quitters], also nicknamed as *tourists*, were assigned this way

for only walking with the books, often skipping classes, since they preferred the sociability of the streets or the cafeterias. What I discovered then was that these *naming* provided valuable clues on the evaluations that the youngsters made of the school life. In an ethnomethodological approach (Handel, 1982; Garfinkel, 1984; Coulon, 1995), such naming covered a reality only disclosable when we see that it can be found in them student types that are associated to school trajectories that are indissociable from the social condition of the youngsters and the way how they position themselves in front of the education system. *Marrões* and *graxas*, predominantly coming from the executive and traditional petite bourgeoisie, were the ones that tended the most to the fulfilment of the formal rules of the school. However, while the importance assigned to the school certification seemed like corollary of the will or the desire to learn to the former (*marrões*), the formal rules of the school were frequently respected in a cynic way by the latter (*graxas*). What interested to them was the acquisition of a school diploma, instrumentally appreciated to move up in life, an expectation of social mobility shared with the *marrões*. The *bacanas* felt well in the school for it being a stage of sociability that extended out of the school walls. Although their hedonist behaviors, they could have a good or reasonable school performance, as they were generically the holders of major cultural capitals, given their social background (high classes and intellectual petite bourgeoisie). Finally, the *aldas* tended to boycott the formal rules of the education system, giving little or no importance to the school certification. When they circulated through the school sporadically, before they had failed at school due to bad attendance, their attitudes oscillated between the apathy and the indiscipline, being sometimes protagonists of a school counterculture. Among the *aldas* there was an overrepresentation of youngsters from the blue-collar class, even though there were middle-class youngsters, enjoying night outs and drug consumption. In short, what I found was that the naming that the youngster gave among themselves evidenced school cultures that resulted from complex challenge and negotiation processes, of resistance and accommodation, processes not unrelated to social mobility projects.

In the present paper, following the same methodological perspective that takes the everyday chatting as knowledge lever, the symbolic meanings of the nicknames between youngsters attending high schools in Portugal and Brazil (Ceará state) is explored. The study samples followed, in both countries, similar criteria of constitution, having been chosen schools from different social settings and students attending the three last grades of high school. The inventory of nicknames was carried through in the classroom by means of a questionnaire distributed to the students, who filled them out themselves to warrant anonymity, and took an average of 15 minutes. For that, it was agreed with the teachers of some courses the exemption of about 15 minutes of their lessons so that the students could fill out the questionnaires. Before, however, we assured having the necessary institutional authorizations for the accomplishment of the research. In Portugal, authorization was requested to the Ministry of Education, being the Directive Boards of the three selected public schools aware: one in the outskirts of Lisbon,

attended by students with a low social condition, some of them with an African background; another one in the city of Porto, a school attended by middle- and high-class youngsters; and the third school was located in a rural space, in the Alentejo region, south of Lisbon. In Brazil, the authorization was requested to the Directive Board of the selected schools: two schools, one private and the other one public, in the city of Fortaleza; the third school was located in one of the major tourist regions of the metropolitan region of Fortaleza, in the coast of Ceará state, less than 50 km from the capital. In Portugal, the field work was concluded in July 2009, having been questioned 126 students; in Brazil (Ceará), the field work was concluded in June 2010, having been interviewed 132 students². In both cases, the age *mode* - that is, the value with the highest frequency of registers - was centered in the age group from 15 to 17 years. The applied questionnaire was identical in all schools. It was asked the nicknames that they had received, but also other people's, that is, those the youngsters knew that were assigned to the colleagues, as well as to the school teachers and staff, even when they did not know them or pretended not to know. In the nicknames inquiry, it was gathered information on the carrier of the nickname (sex and age); the origin of the nickname (circumstances from which it emerged, contingencies of its production, when it occurred, who assigned it); and finally, how did the nickname carrier coexisted with it, the same in relation to the colleagues, teachers and school staff. It was also surveyed the nicknames of friends, neighbors or people from the neighborhood where the youngsters lived, although, in this paper, the latter were only circumstantially called for analysis, as what most interests us are the nicknames in circulation in the school. Those youngsters who were users of *chats*, *Facebook* and other internet social networks were also requested to inform us their *nicknames*.

The lack of knowledge of the school reality starts, quite often, by being unaware of the knowledge that the students have of this reality. The ordinary language conceals a wealth of *types* of pre-constructed characteristics that contain unexplored contents. Indeed, in the analysis of the nicknames it was highlighted the *indexicality* of the language, the contingent aspects of their statement, their social contexts of use (Garfinkel, 1984). Considering that the nicknames bring carry multiple meanings (literal, allegoric, tropological, analogical), their meaning was looked for next to those that are called by them. These *native* explanations were crucial for the analytical understanding of the nicknames. We will see that some youngsters react negatively to the nicknames; others resign to them; and a wide majority identify with them, in an amused way. In any of these cases, what we will evidence is that the nicknames can be narrative claims and also be interpreted as biographical objects (Hoskins, 1998), that ethnographically account for the school experiences.

From a methodological point of view, we keep looking for paths despised by forms of knowledge oblivious to the movements that everyday bring rhythm to the constants, variances and circumstances of social life. It is in this sense that we step to the side of those methodologies that confuse what they measure with the measure itself and what

they see with the way they see. A step to the side, but also a step forward, when considering that everyday life is a fabric of *arts de faire*³ and not only a set of mere secondary effects of structural causes. In these arts of doing, we find the creative acts that occur in the underworlds of the youngsters' language, as it happens with nicknames. In which way do the nicknames make possible the production of a space of game whose results can be inscribed in an analytical and classificatory board of identities and subjectivities? In what extent do the nicknames interfere with the construction of the identities, or are a reflex of them? How are these identities experienced in the school space?

The Symbolology of the Nicknames in the School Space

The nicknames exist because they circulate as a word of mouth, being part of identification processes. These coin identities in simple acts of naming, helping to construct relational identities. Taking the totality of the surveyed nicknames, it was evidenced that in the six Brazilian and Portuguese schools that formed the study sample, as a whole, more than 70% fall into the categories of *behavioral* and *physical/anatomical* nicknames, to which we will come back later. With an even significant frequency, around 20%, we found nicknames *derived from a personal name*. In this case are the affectionate forms of naming that result from the abbreviation of the personal name or the diminutive ones. For instance: *Mila*, from Camila; *Gel*, from Flamel; *Chiquim*, from Francisco (in Brazil); *Tiguihas*, from Tiago; *Xaninha*, from Alexandra; or *Pipinha*, from Filipa (in Portugal). All the youngsters coexist well with this type of nicknames that correspond to the affectionate forms of treatment. There are those who defend that the loss of affection is a characteristic of the *post-modern society*, it is argued that nowadays it is only through the word that we try to capture the ineffable experience of the other (McLaren, 1995). But, as we see, the words also come to the other with affection. In their way, they evoke the nature of the relations that found the sociability. However, not all the linguistic nicknames please the youngsters who carry them. Some feel bothered, as it is the case of *Maíconha* whose personal name sounds like *maconha* [marijuana]; of a *Fatal* whose family name is Vital; or a *Mée...* [sounding like a sheep], derived from Mércia.

There are nicknames due to occasional circumstances. A young woman is *Vaquinha* [Little Cow] because she danced mimicking a cow; another one is *Braguilhas* [Fly] because once he forgot to close his pants' fly. Nicknames of this sort fulfill an integrative function, as they correspond to a punitive naming of behaviors that, for uncommon, generate laughs. Which is the meaning of laughing when someone dances like a cow or walks around with his fly open or with different shoes? This laugh is an appeal to the rules of the social game, a denunciation of behaviors that infringe social codes. Those who laugh at somebody for having infringed these codes are punishing the other one with one of the most severe forms of humiliation: the fine of the ridicule.

Considering the six schools of the study sample, only in the school located in the most rural region, in Alentejo, Portugal, *inherited* nick-

names were surveyed. These nicknames, having a generational transmission, are quite frequent in the rural environment. This happens with *Azeitonas* [Olives] (because he belongs to the *Azeitonas* family), *Pop* (*his father was a paper recycler, he became Pop*) or *Cabrita* [Doeling] (*So?! Her father is Cabra [Doe] ... she became Cabrita!*). It has been given a great emphasis to the theses of reflexivity (Beck; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) in the sociological literature, underlining the capacity of the individuals to run a course for their own lives; sometimes it is like the social structures had stopped exerting their influence. In fact, each one is free to give the name of their choice to their children. However, what the nicknames show to us is that they are social emanations ingrained in contexts of the everyday life. The naming acts are not generated outside of these contexts. If in some cases they can symbolize a celebratory subjectivism is due exactly to the fact that they celebrate sociabilities and relational bonds. This means that the nicknames represent much more than what the individuality of the people who carry them. They represent, over all, the social places of their production.

Among the youth, school is one of these social places of nicknames production. The most usual ones in it, as already mentioned, are the *behavioral* and the *physicall/anatomical* ones. The large majority of the youngsters tend to coexist well with these types of nicknames, although some of them are humorous and caricatural. This is what happens with young Brazilians who gained the nickname of *Lula Molusco* [Squidward Tentacles] (*due to the round eyeglasses that give him an intellectual and boring air*); *Papudim*⁴ (*he says bullshit like a drunk*); *Pipoca* [Popcorn] (*she becomes stressed really easily*). *Risadinha* [Chuckles] (*for laughing all the time*); *Treme-Treme* [Shaky] (*for the cell phone vibrating when everybody is in silence*); *Kichata* [How boring] (*because she is boring*); *Loura Burra* [Stupid Blonde] (*she is really stupid*); *Preguiça* [Laziness] (*he is lazy to study*). Another nickname, *Menina do Gueto* [Ghetto Girl], due to her different chatting, surveyed in the Fortaleza private school, has a socially segregation nature when designating somebody who comes to the school with a different way of speaking. The seeming acceptance of the nickname by the one who carries it can, in this case, correspond to a concern from the nicknamed with not accenting her discrimination.

Among the ill-accepted behavioral nicknames are: *Histérica* [Hysterical] (*she freaks out when she finds something*); *Amiga fura olho* [Back Stabbing Friend] (*because she tries to steal the boyfriends*); *Chiclete* [Chewing Gum] (*because she sticks to the boys*); *Nerd* (*because she is intelligent*). The statement of discomfort caused by this last nickname indicates some hostility against the students who are highlighted for being intellectually gifted. In the researched classes in Portugal, almost all the youngsters coexist well with *behavioral* nicknames: *Presidente* [President] (*he speaks too much*); *Sacerdote* [Priest] (*he looks like a priest*); *Execussivo* [Execussive] (*he cannot say 'executive'*); *Duajoras* [Two hurs] (*he cannot say 'duas horas' [two hours] well*); *Torresmos* [Pork Rind] (*he is heavy on the Rs*); *Pitbull* (*he rebels easily*); *Soltem a parede* [Free the wall] (*he is always going against the walls*); *Deus Grego* [Greek god] (*he thinks that he knows everything*); *Estalinhos* [Little Finger Cracks] (*likes to have the fingers cracked*); *Sabichona* [Know-it-all] (*she is always study-*

ing); *Brunão* [Big Bruno] (*he is the master and the protector of the class*); *Bananas* (*he steals bananas from the school canteen*). The nickname is always a resource for the recognition of the other, yet by means of metaphorizing and symbolic productions (Olson, 1997). Without the recognition of the other, there would not also be a place for identification processes. One student is *Kinder* [Kinder Surprise] because it is known that he likes chocolate, *Chocapic* [cereal brand] because he likes cereals or *Bolachas* [Cookies] because he is always eating them. As we see, the behavioral nicknames are plentiful among the youngsters, appearing in the scope of everyday events or experiences, intersubjectively experienced (Prus, 1996).

While some nicknames explore behavior eccentricities, others are fixed in physical details. In fact, in the study universe, the most frequent nicknames are the *physical* (or *anatomical*) ones. The social is inscribed in the body of the youngsters in the way how they are nicknamed, from morphologic configurations released from disclosed appearances. Therefore, for being social, the body is significant (Csordas, 1994). When assuming, assigning and, over all, circulating the nicknames, the youngsters construct bonds of identity through the way how they call themselves within the group and how they recognize themselves through naming acts. We are in front of a nominal identities production whose nature leads to tangible realities, to a large extent of look nature. Examining some *physical* (or *anatomical*) nicknames, we evidence that the look of the nicknamed one can be assumed by the general appearance. Young women who are short are called *Piki* [Shorty], *Canina* [Canine], *Salsicha* [Sausage] or *Porta-chaves* [Keyholder]. In contrast with what could be assumed, the derogatory nicknames are not always rejected, be it according or not to the reality that they intend to portray. We found a young man who *loves* being called *Picolino* [Little One] for being short, *and he does not like to be called in another way*. If the appearance makes a volumetric impression, one can receive the nicknames of *Balofo* [Tubby] or *Bolinhas* [Little Balls]. The caricature explores physical or psychological traits, sometimes accenting the exaggeration, the deformation, the disproportion - transforming the caricatured one into a representation of the caricature, an image cruelly forged in the forge of the caricature itself, even when disguised in irony. In the school in the outskirts of Lisbon, having dark skin was the rationale for a young man being called *Marroquino* [Moroccan], while another one was the *Cigano* [Gypsy].

For sure the bodies dialogue without needing words, as their value is found, since the beginning, as dependent from an aesthetic appearance. However, the words help to accent this appearance as a social marker and differentiator. The codes of aesthetic perception and evaluation create and recreate true taxonomies by means of unique forms of naming that, by itself, disclose an appreciated type (*El Pibe* [Maradona's nickname], *because he looks like Maradona*) or an unappreciated stereotype (*Gordo* [Fat Guy] because *he is all fat*) as a means of identification. The bodies are not only the place through which one experiences the world, they are also windows through which one is looked at and classified. For this reason, in the school space the youngsters tend to give

importance to their corporal image. In this sense, and because the body has converted into an object of fights and disputes, one can speak of the use of the corporal image as a hierarchizing instrument. The nicknames make vivid the conscience of the youngsters on the fact that the bodies are subjected to scrutiny, to permanent contemplation, evaluation and control. In other words, the nicknames develop a corporal conscience among the youngsters, leading them to assume themselves as corporeal beings, whose identity passes necessarily through the corporal size and shape.

The *physical* nicknames can also explore semantic tropisms in which the totality of the appearance is replaced by the part. In linguistics, there is a well-known style figure, the *synecdoche*, which accounts for the ruse: a word is used to express a meaning that is part of another meaning of the same word or, in other words, the name of the whole is used to refer to the part, or the name of the part is used to allude to the whole. From head to toes, the body is a metonymic source. A young man is nicknamed *Cabeção* [Big Head] for having a big head, while another one is known as *Capuchinho Vermelho* [Little Red Riding Hood] for blushing easily. The teeth also raise labels, as it happens with a young man called *Castor* [Beaver] and another one known as *Dentes de Mula* [Mule Teeth] (*he had buckteeth*). The latter appealed to dental treatment to correct the dental problem, as the nickname caused a *complex* to him. The treatment was successful, but the nickname did not abandon him. In fact, the nicknames set an image in such a way that they survive to the change of the image itself. This happens while there is a territory through which they can circulate. How do they circulate? Through naming as a word of mouth. Sometimes it can be generated a tension between the desired identity and the assigned identity that the nickname brings back permanently. When functioning as verbal caricatures, the nicknames can also strengthen certain stigmas. As we have said, we are in front of rhetoric figures that amplify the details, miniaturizing the whole that tends to be depleted in these same details.

The *physical* (or *anatomical*) nicknames that circulate among the young Brazilians from Ceará drag a trait of distinctiveness in relation to the Portuguese youngsters. They are nicknames that relate specific characteristics or traits of the nicknamed ones with environmental realities, mainly from the fauna and the flora. Seemingly, they do not feel bothered for being compared to plants or to animals, as the colleagues, and themselves, claim to coexist well with these nicknames. For instance: *Cabelo de Cuia* [Bowl Cut] (for having the head shaped like a *mate* gourd); *Mulher Quiabo* [Okra Woman] (*she's really thin*); *Chagas* (for having contracted Chagas disease)⁵; *Mané Mago*⁶ (*he's really thin*); *Cara de Morcego* [Bat Face] (for having big ears); *Boneco de Olinda* [Olinda Dummies]⁷ (*he's really tall*). Some youngsters, however, do not feel comfortable with such nicknames. For instance: *Sapo-Boi* [Horned Frog] (*he's wide like an ox and short like a frog*); *Esqueleto do Amazonas* [Amazon Skeleton] (*she's really thin*); *Cuscuzeira* [Couscous Pot]⁸ (*she's fat with thin legs*); *Panelada da Babalu*⁹ (*she's fat*).

Some nicknames cause discriminatory effects, having a racial nature. Surprisingly, they are generally well accepted by the nicknamed

ones, according to their colleagues. In Portugal, nicknames like *Nesquik* (*her skin color looks like Nesquik's*); *Blackinho* (Little Blackie); *Preto* [Black] (*due to my ethnicity*) or *Monhé* (*she looks like a female from India*). In Brazil, these nicknames, much more frequent, also tend to be well accepted and, again, some of them look related with the local fauna and flora, or even with the gastronomy. For instance: *Tapioca*¹⁰ (*she's white and her face is pockmarked*); *Bribe*¹¹ (for being really white). However, some racial nicknames are experienced with nuisance. Among the young Brazilians we have the example of a young man nicknamed *Bomba* [Bomb] (*he's black*), and another one *Sem Sangue* [Bloodless] (*he's really white*). Among the Portuguese there is a young woman nicknamed *Chamuças*¹² (for having Indian background) and another one called *Big Mamma* (*she is black, big and fat*); another young man, from the outskirts of Lisbon, gained the nickname of *Cigano* [Gypsy] without belonging to the ethnicity. The nickname was given by neighbors when they discovered that the police entered into his house, due to suspicion of being a drug dealer. In this, as in other nicknames, there is a *flash*, an image, an idea of referent. Its mere assignment takes it to a complex world of social representations, stereotypes, stigmatization processes that exceed the limits of the individuality.

The same happens with discriminatory *physical or behavioral* nicknames, of sexual referents. Even so, if any of these nicknames are bothering for those who carry them, in other cases there is an acceptance expressed by the nicknamed themselves and confirmed by their schoolmates. Among the sexualized physical nicknames, the butt appears as the most invoked referent among the young Brazilians, having the young women as a target. Some of them do not care, as it is the case of one whose nickname is simply *Bunda* [Butt] or another one known as *Tia Turbina* [Aunt Turbine]¹³; others, on their turn, stand against nicknames like *Bunda Seca* [Dry Butt] (*her butt has no volume at all*); *Tanajura*¹⁴ [Atta] (*for having a big butt*) or *Mulher Melancia* [Watermelon Woman] (*because of her butt*). Among other well accepted behavioral nicknames of sexual nature are: *Laleska* (*he is homosexual, gay*); *Farofa*¹⁵ [Stuffing] (*everybody inserts the sausage*); *Gillette* [Razor Blade] (*he cuts with both sides; bisexual*). Among the young Portuguese woman, the prevalence of the butt opens place to the breasts: *Happy Boobs* (*she is happy, and Joel likes her breasts*); *Sweet Boobs* (*for having sweet breasts*); *XL* (Extra-large) or *Maxi Boobs* (ditto). Concerning to nicknames with sexually-oriented meanings, the most recurrent ones portray the success or the self-flattery of some male youngsters in relation to their female colleagues, like *Kido Delas* [Girls Dear] or *American Playboy* (*because he is a lover boy, come bué gaja [he fucks with a lot of girls] and he speaks English very well*). Few Portuguese youngsters reject the nicknames of sexual nature, even when they are *palavrões*¹⁶ [dirty words], as it happens with the nickname *Pilas* [Dicks] (*his face looks like a pila [dick]*), *Sexopata* [Sexopath] or *Frango* [Chicken] (*he's gay*). The nuisance appears in a young male nicknamed Cocks (*he was caught several times in a classroom batendo punheta [masturbating]*). The young women are not very aimed at. One is called *Chichola Pilada* [Hairless Chichola] (*it was when she shaved her vagina for the first time*), but she does not care;

another one is *Crica* [Pussy] (for being considered *sexually perverted*) and she does not care either.

Signals of subjective identities, the nicknames end up being collective, incorporating social relations, ways of being and doing, that happen in the stage of the everyday life, including the school. Some youngsters acquire such a big identification with the nicknames that they end up using them in the internet social networks. Besides heteronymic nicknames, they also use the derivatives of personal names and others invented by themselves. In this case are the *Nicknames* that suggest the identification with media idols: *Tokiodependente* [Tokyo-dependent (for liking Tokyo Hotels) or *Lady Gaga*; the joining to musical or cultural styles: *Srt^a Rocks* [Miss Rocks] (*she likes rock*); *Punk-vab* [*v* for *vermelho* [red], *a* for *azul* [blue] and *b* for *branco* [white]] (red, blue and white punk); *Good Wood* (skateboard brand); the claim of a soccer team affiliation: *Vozão* (a soccer team from Ceará); the claim of a symbolic value that can be shown as a sensual, erotic or sexual attractive (Martin, 2005): *Garota Rebelde* [Rebellious girl] (*because I like it and am quite rebel*); *Xoxoteiro* [Sex Addict] (for liking having many sexual relationships); *Africanqueen* (*I am a little dark and from Cape Verde*); *Big Cock* (for having a big penis); *Tah Gatinha* [Cute Girl] (for being cute); *Miss Sorriso* [Miss Smile] (for being always smiling). A significant data of this categorizing is the strong identification that many youngsters have with their nicknames, even when they are derogatory, to the point of preferring them instead of their personal names. Why do they accept, with more or less conformism, bothering nicknames that brazenly reveal what, so many times, one tries to hide? For stimulating a feeling of belonging? When discussing the integrative function of the nicknames, Koury (2006) suggests that they can have a meaning similar to the one reported by Mauss when dealing with the *potlatch destruction* (Mauss, 1973). That is, the derogatory nicknames would end up *destroying* its stigmatizing side, promoting a movement of *resocialization and individuation*.

No matter what, the assuming of the nicknames, since they are projected in the internet social networks, suggests a reflexivity between the names that are earned and the exhibition of the gain as a constituent factor of a subjectivity (Adams, 2003). The youth identities are developed through successive redefinitions that express *subjective reflexivities* (Melucci, 1996). Although some nicknames can cause a violation of the identity, others assure, on the opposite, impulses of identitarian reincarnation. But there is a distinction between the rejected nicknames and the adopted ones. The coexistence with the former is problematic and they only persist by dictates of a circulation transformed in a habit. In relation to the latter, the receivers themselves contribute for the reinforcement of their dissemination, mainly when they assume them in the internet social networks. In this case, there is a coincidence between the adjudicated identity and the assumed identity. In contrast, no rejected nickname is used as a *nickname*. In the internet social networks, the youngsters try to construct an identity that reconciles the inherited names (acquired identity) with those that they wish to have

(desired identity) and with the projections they wait that the others direct to them (assigned identities).

Concerning the nicknames with affectionate nature given to the teachers, they are aware of around 10% of the total of the sample. Recurring often to diminutives, they are more recurrent in Brazil than in Portugal: *Rafinha* (from Rafaela); *Pessoinha* [Little Person] (*his family name is Pessoa and since he is short...*); *Pinheirinho* [Little Pine Tree] (*his family name is Pinheiro [Pine Tree] and he is short*); *Vovó* [Grandma] (for her age); *Plantinha* [Little Plant] (for teaching botany); *Gracinha* [Cute] (*she expresses her feelings, she is really cool*). Considering that, among the young students, the meaning of the nicknames emerges from everyday contexts of school sociability, of shared forms of looking and feeling the world, the nicknames given to the teachers are significant of the relation between one and the others. Appealing to ironic and sarcastic naming that daringly fight for spaces of school formality and seriousness, the nicknames given to the teachers, which they are mostly unaware of, are grouped in two major categories: the *physical* and the *behavioral*. The former appears anchored to physiognomic attributes. In Brazil we find naming like: *Gordim* (Little Fat Man); *Nariz de Tucana* [Toucan Nose] (*for her big nose*); *Beirão* [Big Lip]; *Bolo Fofo* [Sponge Cake] (*because she is fat*); *Gafanhoto* [Grasshopper] (*he is quite ugly*); *Mosquito da Dengue* [Dengue Mosquito] (*he's thin and tall and is always disturbing*); *Cabelo de Vassoura* [Broom Straw] (*she has a bad hair*); *Pinguim* [Penguin] (*because he walks with the arms, quite shrunk*). In this category, there are also nicknames of sexual nature: *Sexy* (*he says that he's really hot*); *Espermatozóide* [Spermatozoon] (*his head is big, and he is quite thin*); *Robôcope Gay* [Gay Robocop] (*he is gay*). The situation is not different in Portugal; almost all the physical resources of the teachers are used to create quizzical and humorous nicknames: *Árvore de Natal* [Christmas Tree] (*she uses necklaces that look like Christmas ornaments*); *Bulldog* (*he looks like a dog*); *Tutancâmon* [Tutankhamun] (*he looks like a mummy*); *Amazônia* [Amazon] (*she is big and hairy*); *Couve-roxa* [Red Cabbage] (*the hair looks like it*); *Colgate* (*for having a very bad breath*); *Bigodes* [Mustaches] (*the female teacher has a mustache*); *Câmera de Filmar* [Videocamera] (*she has crooked eyes and we don't know where she looks at*). As in Brazil, nicknames with sexual nature also appear in this category: *Toda Boa* [All Good] (*she is a good and sexy teacher*); *Borracho* (*the female continúa¹⁷ [usher] said that the stor¹⁸ is a pombinho [drunk male]*); *Gostoso* [Hot Guy] (*he has quite a pretty body*); *Tusas¹⁹* [Wood] (*his dick was hard during the classes*). This way, we see that the corporal image is inscribed in a discursive production that qualifies it with irony or mockery. For such reason, in the nicknames twinkle semantic codes that unbundle distinct classes of symbolic identities. Probably, the nicknames aimed to the teachers signal distances in relation to the formal power of the school. However, they are inscribed, over all, in an ethics of amusement.

Concerning the *behavioral* nicknames, they are often nurtured by metaphors that run into the court of the flaw to make of it an amused fact, funnier when one guesses how bothered the teachers would be if some time they find the ambushes of the nicknames that are given to

them. Some behavioral nicknames aimed to the teachers do not signal a healthful climate in the relationships. Some examples from Brazil: *Cão* [Dog] (*the teacher is a devil*); *Mazelada* [Flawed] (*for being bad*); *Cobra* [Snake] (ditto); *Terrorista* [Terrorist] (*he likes other people's disaster and conveys fear*); *Sujeira* [Dirt] (*the teacher is stupid in the classroom*); *Vei Lambão*²⁰ [Disgusting Old Man] (*because he is a boring old man*). The performance of the teachers passes through the evaluation bolter. One teacher gained the nickname of *Aurélio*²¹ for knowing the meaning of many words: *he looks like a dictionary!* On the other hand, a female teacher has the nickname of *Cagece*²² [Acronym in Portuguese for the Ceará Water and Sewage Company] because *she only says bullshit*. Some teachers also gain nicknames of sexual nature, as *Samanta* [Samantha] (*he plays like a woman*). In the Portuguese schools, just like in the Brazilian ones, the nicknames that the youngsters give to their teachers evidence an enormous capacity of scrutiny of behaviors and attitudes. The evaluation dimensions are several. *Authoritarianism: Ditador* [Dictator] (*he is much like a military regimen*); *Respectability: Generala* [Female General] (*she demands and gets respect*); *Seniority: Dinossauro* [Dinosaur] (*she is old in the school*); *Antipathy: Bull Dog* (*she is bad and ugly, that frown says everything*); *Irritability: Dinamite* [Dynamite] (*she is explosive*); *Bureaucratism: Folhas* [Paper sheets] (*his life are the sheets of paper*); *Dynamism: Sornas* [Napping] (*the lessons are big droughts*); *Conjugalidade: Divorciada* [Divorced Woman] (*she divorced 4 times*); *Image: Pepe Jeans* (*she only uses this brand*); *Hygiene: Sovaquinho* [Little Armpit] (*he sweats a lot in the armpit*); *Sexual orientations: Lésbica* [Lesbian] (*she has a site to admit that she is lesbian*); *Harassment: Piroca* [Cock] (*He looks a lot to the boys*).

The school staff do not escape either to the scrutiny of an attentive evaluation centered on their affection or antipathy. In Brazil, on one hand we have, for instance, *Tampinha* [Little Bottle Lid] (*for being short*); on the other the *Cururu Inchado* [Swollen Cane Toad] (*his cheeks swell when he's angry*). The *anatomical* nicknames are also frequent: *Pernas de Alicates* [Pliers Legs] (*his legs are crooked*); *Rinoceronte* [Rhino] (*she is fat*). The sexual sensitivities also are collated: *Cleitinho* [Little Cleiton] (*he has a female manner*), along with other behavioral traits, like hyperactivity (*Elétrica* [Electric]); *Moleza* (Sleepy); or availability (*Tia da Merenda* [School Meal Aunt]). In Portugal, the nicknames to the staff include ceremonious addressing forms (*Miss Alberta* [Open Miss]), but the affective ones are more frequent: *Tio Vitó* [Uncle Vitó] (*he is the greatest; great complicity*); *Vó Deolinda* [Grandma Deolinda] (*grandma from the heart*); *Nanda* (*the best employee, my mother*). The offensive nicknames also gain evidence: *Velha* [Old Woman] (*because she is old*); *Trombalanzanas* [Fool] (*she is mentally retarded*); *Boca de Macaca* [Monkey Mouth] (*she has a monkey mouth*); *Bufas* [Bufas] (*always huffing with the mouth*). Other nicknames accent the zeal, the antipathy or the excesses in the fulfilment of the function: *Caça Ursos* [Bear Hunter] (*is always watching the school*); *Coxa* [Limping] (*runs after us and cannot catch us*); *Cruela* [Cruella] (*she is very cruel*); *Bem-disposta* [Good Mood] (*she is always in a bad mood*); *Cona-mole* [Pussy] (*a doorman who is quite rigid*); *Bruxa* [Witch] (*she's quite rude*). Finally, there are nicknames revealing sexual

attitudes or orientations: *Pedófilo* [Pedophile] (*he has pedophile acts*); *Putinha* [Little Bitch] (*she comes to school quite well dressed and walks on the boys*).

Conclusions

We observed that seemingly insignificant ethnographic findings, as it is the case of the nicknames that circulate in the schools, can be potentially revealing of the social weave that are everyday woven in them. Notwithstanding the customized nature of the nicknames, it was noticed that the naming of the difference does not necessarily mean a group exclusion; on the opposite, it usually warrants the recognition of an inclusion of social nature. The nickname is only distinctive in the extent that there is a social recognition of this distinctiveness. That is, the nickname only makes sense given its relational existence. In opposition to personal names, whose assignment results from some arbitrariness, the nicknames evoke more the singularity of their carriers, but not only that. They also convoke situational circumstances that, in the school space, bridge the interactive and the discursive. As any good, the language has a value in the extent that we cannot name without representing. For its communicative nature, the language is materialized as mediation between individual and social.

The nicknames reveal themselves as precious instruments of gauging the way how the youth identities are constructed in a school context. In my first research on nicknames, in schools of the metropolitan region of Lisbon (Pais, 2003) in the 1990s, I evidenced that group nicknames had a relevance that however was blurred. Due to a strong democratization of the access to public schools, the social heterogeneity and the projects of social mobility made nicknames (*marrões*, *graxas*, *bacanas* and *baldas*) to be born, closely associated with the social condition of the young students, to the value assigned to the school certification, to the fulfilment of the school rules, to their projects of life. On the other hand, the nicknames surveyed in the study sample of the present research, both in Portugal and in Brazil, are centered almost exclusively on the individuals and not in the groups anymore, with exception of group naming that persist in signaling soccer teams affiliations or joining to certain musical sorts or youth styles (punks, gothics, surfers etc.). Variables of sociocultural nature also explain that *inherited* nicknames, only detected in a Portuguese school, are a specificity of rural contexts. The confrontation of the nicknames surveyed in the Portuguese and the Brazilian schools, even though placing in evidence a strong parallelism of the personal motivations that mobilize the youngsters from both countries for the creation of the nicknames, allowed to observe significant sociocultural differences. In Brazil, the *physical* or *anatomical* nicknames are much more highlighted in environmental realities, harvesting inspiration from them. Concerning the *physical sexualized* nicknames directed to young women, while in Brazil the *butt* appears as the most invoked referent, in Portugal the nicknames are more stimulated by *breasts*. Other nicknames of *behavioral* nature, beyond signaling some tensions concerning the acceptance of

different sexual orientations, signal hidden faces of the school reality, as the use of classrooms for the practice of masturbation as well as subtle manifestations of sexual harassment.

We saw that most of the nicknames is strongly accepted among the nicknamed youngsters, what is not to found odd in the case of those that have a hypochoristic nature, when shortening affectively the personal names, in one affectionate syncope, as it frequently happens in Brazil. However, around 20% of the surveyed nicknames are not well accepted by the youngsters who carry them. In relation to discriminatory nicknames, mainly of racial or sexual nature, we cannot nor should devalue their effects. They are socially punitive, everyday accenting the force of stereotypes transformed into stigma, prejudicially denounced daily. In these cases, we can speak of a linguistic bullying, as such nicknames accent the differences in a negative discriminatory form. In the Fortaleza private school, we could recall the nickname given to a young woman (*Menina do Gueto*) due to her distinct chatting. In fact, in private schools, given their supposed greater social homogeneity, the differences are less tolerated, that is, the nicknames tend to penalize them more than in the public schools, what also happens with sexual bullying (Duncan, 1999). In this sense, the nicknames can also be an interesting didactic and educative resource. Focal groups involving teachers and students, having as an object of reflection the symbolic meanings of the nicknames - either those appearing in the school context or those that can be surveyed at community level (neighborhood networks, sports groups, firefighters, social collectivities, elderly homes etc.) - can be precious instruments of reflection, in the classrooms themselves, to discuss the values of coexistence, respect and tolerance; the role of the nicknames and other forms of communication in the social interactions; the strength of the words as creative acts; their semantic potentialities and ramifications of meaning; etc.

By the way, one of the goals of this research was also to know the school culture as a field where the creative acts of the language abound. When approaching the school bullying, Olweus (1993) questions himself on what we know and what can we do. When considering a reflection on the nicknames, what I question is what we can do to know what we are unaware of. What I suggested was an attentive look to the school life from its everyday chatting. The nicknames are creative acts raised by the critical observation of behavioral attitudes and physiognomic traits of actors with whom we interact every day. This creativity explores playfully the multiples senses that are releases from the words. The creativity passes by the capacity to connect the disconnected. The associations are the essence of the imaginative world. For this reason, the nicknames often appeal to metaphors and metonymy, operating transferring of meaning, as it happens when somebody is named appealing to names that are used to name other realities.

In relation to discriminatory nicknames of racial or sexual nature, they occur both in Brazilian and Portuguese classes. In Brazil, however, the mixture of races results in that the nicknames with racial nature are more numerous and are diversified, strengthening the theses that

advocate for the emergence of *whiteness* as a symbol increasingly more visible time of racial identity (Frankenberg, 1993; Fishkin, 1995; Preston 2007; Macmullan, 2009; Giroux, 1999). When Giroux advocates for a *pedagogy and politics of whiteness* - what assumes that the school is considered, and overall lived, as a space of criticism and dialogue - it is bluntly that he points the strategy: *the teachers can start such dialogue with what the students already know*, that is, questioning them on the racial and cultural differences that they feel in their everyday life, since early in the school space. The nicknames allow to reach this goal in a non-intrusive way, contrarily to what happens in other approaches to racism. In this extent, the nicknames are precious instruments of revelation of construction processes of cultural identities. At the same time, they allow us to question the homogeneity of the social representations that, in a stereotyped way, appear often associated with these identities. The discriminations that the nicknames yield not always are of negative sense. On the other hand, nicknames of racial nature, seemingly well accepted by the youngsters who carry them, can be lived with discomfort, although in a camouflaged way. In any way, notwithstanding the tensions and contradictions that the practice of any *pedagogy of whiteness* can originate, they are themselves a condition of possibility to surpass feelings of guilt or silencing of historical legacies of oppression (Giroux, 1999). When Giroux laments the absence of research on *whiteness* that allow the students to critically question the construction of their own identities, or when he suggests that the educators problematize the *whiteness* from a new language of ethnicity, I question myself whether the debate of these questions could not be livened up and be stimulated from the everyday language of the youngsters itself.

There are personal motivations that mobilize the youngsters to create nicknames. In a great part of the cases, the lexical creation appears associated to amusement, but this is also used as a denunciation instrument referring to what happens in the school. When the youngsters from the poor outskirts of Lisbon had nicknamed a pavilion of their school as *Siberia*, they had serious reasons for the choice. In their school they felt exiled and frozen during the coldest periods of class. That is, the youngsters use the language to define the school space with a sense of humor, even when it is not very welcoming. By the way, there would be no humor without language. In short, it is important to unveil the linguistic resources to which the youngsters appeal to weave the meaning of the school everyday life. It is this challenge that the *ethnomethodology* has always faced (Garfinkel, 1984; 2006). Although centered on the individuals, the nicknames are visible and sonorous marks of shared meanings, of worlds of belonging. They dress individual identities, but what is found is that the social is mirrored in the individual.

We have also seen that the nicknames assure a distinct otherness in the school space. Some nicknames given to the teachers signal generational discontinuities, as it is the case of an old teacher who received the nickname of *Máquina de Escrever* [Typewriter] for not knowing how to use the computer to write the statements of the tests. Other nicknames can be interpreted as a counterpower creator of burlesque representations, when accenting behavioral lapses on the part of those who

should not have them. For instance, a teacher gained the nickname of *Boa Tade* [Good Aftenoön] for not being able to pronounce the *r*. Another one is called *Cunas*, because instead of saying *colunas* [columns], he says *cunas* [colms]. We are in front of naming that, for their orthophonic effect, are re-appropriated with undisguised mockery, inverting the hierarchy and deference relations that, in principle, reign, or should reign, in the classroom. The school routines are symbolically subverted. The students transform the teacher from *accredited* in a *discreditable* character (Goffman, 1990). In this case that, the nicknames have a persuasion force that is also a manifestation of power (or counterpower) that is exerted every day. In the same way that the images mean and evoke the nicknames, they use the words to create a symbolic power in naming acts that correspond to a reinvention of the everyday life (Certeau, 1984).

The survey of the teachers' nicknames shows clearly that the capacity to name can be both product and expression of disputes that cross the school order. In it, the teacher has the gift of the word, the capacity to elaborate classificatory terminologies of the world, in the scope of disciplines taught by him. The students, on their turn, become involved in the same performative game, through naming that, in some cases, end up ridiculing the power of those who have the legitimacy to name and to call names, in a conventional basis: checking attendance lists or calling randomly this or that student to answer to a certain question. Some nicknames given to the teachers suggest a burlesque power of representation, operating through linguistic and extralinguistic variables. When nicknaming colleagues, teachers and staff, the youngsters make of this a recreated space, everyday reinvented, where a communicative production is stimulated, in which the syntax is corrupted in a game that integrates dimensions of the being, the seeming and the pleasure. The nicknames play with the formal, but they are not disentailed of it. Why? Because they are anchored to the everyday reality that is lived in the school. There is no game that is exempted from the marks of the society where it is played.

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Notes

- 1 Expression used in Portugal to call people who escape to their responsibilities.
- 2 The survey of the nicknames was possible thanks to the valuable contribution of university or recently graduated students. In Brazil, I had the dedicated contribution of Pedrita Viana, from the Social Sciences undergraduate course of Universidade Federal do Ceará. I owe to Pedrita the learning concerning the Ceará state slang that appears in some nicknames surveyed in Ceará. In Portugal, I had the participation of a large team from the Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, involved in a project coordinated by me on *Youth Sexuality and Affection* (Pais, 2012): Ana Caetano, Ana Corte Real, Ana Mafalda Falcão, Barbara Duque, Jorge Vieira, Pedro Puga and Emanuel Cameira. I thank to all of them for their dedicated collaboration.

The Symbolology of Nicknames in the School Everyday Life

- 3 The expression is from de Certeau (1984), being the title, in the original edition, one of his most renowned books: *L'Invention du Quotidien: arts de faire*.
- 4 Ceará slang to call people who drink daily.
- 5 An illness that results from an infection caused by a protozoan, being transmitted by an insect that is known in Brazil as *Barbeiro* [Barber]. It is a common illness in Latin America.
- 6 It is an insect that looks like a grasshopper, being long and thin.
- 7 Giant dolls that parade in the carnival of Olinda, in Pernambuco state.
- 8 It is the pot where couscous, a type of corn cake, is cooked.
- 9 *Panelada*: it is part of the Brazilian northeastern gastronomy. A dish made with goat innards. Similar to *Tripas à moda do Porto* (city of the north of Portugal).
- 10 Brazilian delicacy of indigenous origin, prepared with the extracted starch of cassava.
- 11 Corruption of viper. Expression used in the north-east of Brazil to call lizards or squamous reptiles.
- 12 Gastronomic specialty (*pastry*) of Indian origin.
- 13 Character from the animation film *Robots* (2005).
- 14 It is an ant that is very harmful to the plantations. It has a big butt.
- 15 Salty culinary side dish, whose main ingredient is the cassava flour. It can be added bacon, sausage etc.
- 16 On the meaning of *palavrões* [dirty words] in social life, see Pais (2015).
- 17 In Portugal, *contínua* [female usher] or *contínuo* [male usher], refers to an auxiliary employee who works as school support (support to the teachers, guarding etc.) - a type of monitor.
- 18 In Portugal, the high school youngsters shorten *mister doctor* for *stor* (it is slang, equivalent to *sor* from Brazil, which comes from *professor*).
- 19 Bad language, also used as slang, that means erection, sexual desire. *Tusa* is a corruption of *tesão* [lust].
- 20 In Ceará, the word *vei* means old and *lambão* means boring, disgusting.
- 21 Aurélio: Novo Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa, originally launched in Brazil in the 1970s by Aurélio Buarque de Holanda Ferreira.
- 22 CAGECE: *Companhia de Água e Esgoto do Ceará* [Ceará Water and Sewage Company].

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