

THE NEW BOUNDARIES OF THE SAYABLE IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE: THE LANGUAGE OF CONFLICT AS A CHALLENGE TO PLURALIST SOCIETIES

Ana Larissa Adorno Marciotto Oliveira -UFMG- CNPq

Tímea Drinóczi- UFMG- CNPq

Monique Vieira Miranda – UFMG- CNPq

Abstract

In recent years, verbal attacks, insults, and provocations targeting vulnerable groups can be considered a staple of authoritarian political discourse in several countries, e.g., Brazil, Germany, Austria, Italy, Thailand, Hungary, and the US, among others. Although the phenomenon can be identified in the rhetoric of leaders from other political affiliations, it has been considered more prominent in the far-right. With this in mind, in this paper, we seek to explore how creating deep disagreements and employing the language of conflict can work to gradually erode democracy and curtail rights in the name of a fictional majority. The phenomenon has been investigated through the lenses of different scholars; however, we take on a different perspective and rely on the contributions of the models of linguistic impoliteness to characterize, compare, and contrast the matter. When political leaders employ aggressive rhetoric, they also incite their supporters to do the same, particularly on social media, where a feeling of impunity is pervasive. On these occasions, the language of conflict can target vulnerable groups in flagrant attempts to challenge democracy and the rule of law, as has been the case with Brazil in recent years. As the practice affects social cohesion and fundamental rights, it can lead to deep disagreements that promote social retrogressions. While this practice might be global, regional, or national characteristics emerge. Certain target groups, for example, members of the judiciary, women, immigrants, and the LGBTQIA+ community, may be more or less commonly attacked. Based on our empirical data collection from

social media (e.g., YouTube), we examine topical posts and public speeches targeting members of these vulnerable groups. We focus on those who have become elected political leaders or hold influential positions, such as congresswomen Sâmia Bomfim and Erika Hilton, who received the Best Congressperson Award in 2023. We analyze extracts of the speeches of authoritarian leaders and/or their supporters in association with the verbal attacks employed to refer to them and the groups that they represent (particularly women and the LGBT+ community). Our findings reveal that the democratic decay in Brazil is discursively grounded in the first place. They also contribute to advancing research that revolves around the role that social media platforms play in promoting (and countering) democratic erosion.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this study, we analyze the recent verbal attacks lobbed on two Brazilian Congresswomen, Erika Hilton and Sâmia Bomfim, who were targeted by far-right leaders and their followers, both in public speeches and on social media. To do that, we base ourselves on the hypothesis that the models of impoliteness can offer a comprehensive perspective to address the issue of misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia and their repercussions for plurality and the integrity of democracy in Brazil. Since the beginning of the 21st century, creating deep disagreements and employing the language of conflict have worked to gradually erode democracy and curtail rights in several countries, e.g., Brazil, Germany, Austria, Italy, Thailand, Hungary, and the US, among others. Although the phenomenon can be identified in the rhetoric of leaders from other political affiliations, it has been considered more prevalent in the far-right since it functions as a staple in populist discourse.

As stated by other scholars, populism can be viewed from various perspectives: as a political program, movement, ideology, worldview, governing style, or rhetoric about legitimate authority and

where power should lie (Müller, 2016; Norris, 2020). In dividing the population into two categories – pure, moral, and victimized people versus a corrupt, malfunctioning elite – populist and illiberal leaders frame their doctrine on the grounds of fear and revenge (Müller, 2016; Norris, 2020). They also rely on the fabrication of a real or imaginary enemy, who serves as a “scapegoat”, luring the population into believing that totalitarian regimes can bring about stability and social protection.

Regarding terminology, we premise two clarifications. First, the term “populism” is used in this paper to refer to a type of discursive practice deeply marked by the language of conflict, which, in recent years, has been investigated through the lenses of different scholars. For instance, in Sociology and Anthropology (Sobieraj and Berry, 2011; Sobieraj, 2020; Wahlström et. al. 2021; Cesarino, 2020; 2022), Legal Studies (Meyer, 2021; Louault, 2022; Drinóczi and Bien-Kacala, 2022), Political Science (Berg, 2019; Weisskircher, 2020) and Discourse and Social Media studies (Borba, 2019; Oliveira and Carneiro, 2020; Oliveira and Miranda, 2022; Cesarino, 2020; Khail, 2022), among others. Secondly, from a discursive perspective, it must be said that, although there can be an array of different terminologies (“language of conflict”, “uncivil language”, “verbal offense”, “verbal aggression”, “digitally mediated language of aggression”, “hate speech”, among others), we employ “impoliteness” to refer to situations in which offense is mostly achieved through verbal behavior (Locher and Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 2011; Sifiandou, 2019, Culpeper, 2021, Oliveira, Drinóczi and Miranda, 2024).

Against this background, the following questions guide the study: 1. How have the attacks lobbed on Sâmia Bomfim and Erika Hilton in the public speeches of far-right leaders reverberated on social media? 2. What is the impact of these verbal attacks on democracy and the protection of vulnerable groups, i.e., women and LGBT+ people in Brazil? We will answer these questions against the following theoretical background, drawing on the Brazilian populist

rhetoric, authoritarian discourse in social media, and impoliteness in verbal behavior, especially towards women and LGBTQ+ people.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 POPULIST RHETORIC IN BRAZIL

In Brazil, the rise of populist rhetoric can be traced back to 2016, following the removal of leftist President Dilma Rousseff, an event widely perceived as a coup d'état (Lagunes, 2020; Meyer, 2021). Subsequently, from 2021 through 2022, President Bolsonaro and his supporters intensified their challenges to the legitimacy of the Brazilian electoral system and judiciary. Bolsonaro publicly hinted that he might reject the outcome of the 2022 presidential elections if he were to lose. The violent events in Brasília on January 8, 2023, during which an attempted coup occurred, underscored the repercussions of the populist and illiberal discourse embraced by the far right.

Despite recent history demonstrating that Brazil's 1988 Constitution offers robust support for a vibrant democracy, far-right politicians and their supporters persist in undermining its core principles. This is particularly evident when they employ verbal impoliteness and the language of conflict, primarily aimed at circumventing democratic norms, targeting vulnerable groups, and undermining fundamental rights in public speeches and online. In light of these factors, the subsequent sections explore how the dynamics of social media intersect with impolite rhetoric and the efforts to curtail rights.

2.2 SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AND AUTHORITARIAN DISCOURSE

It is not uncommon that political leaders worldwide regularly interact with the public through personal profiles on social media.

When it comes to populist and authoritarian leaders, however, the posting practice bears some distinctive features worth considering. As Sinha (2017) notes, the dynamics of social media in India, for example, create a strong tie between Narendra Modi and his followers, fostering the rapid reproduction of autocratic ideas in the country. Similarly, in the US, McIntosh and Mendonza-Denton (2020) show that Trump's rhetoric is centered on the figure of a "strongman", gifted with the power "to protect the people of goodwill". In Brazil, since 2016, Brazilian far-right has relied strongly on social media to claim its epistemic status, for instance, by promoting the narrative that the members of the judiciary system conspire against Bolsonaro. Far-right leaders also continuously perpetrate misogynistic and homophobic views online and in public speeches, as Cesarino (2020) also noted. As can be seen, although the rise of the far-right is a global phenomenon, local features emerge and are worth examining.

Regarding the online propagation of misogynist and homophobic views through the language, the phenomenon usually takes the shape of negative assertions, insults, and obscene language targeting women and the LGBT+ community even when these individuals have become elected political leaders. As the practice is rooted in the notion that vulnerable groups have deprived a fictional majority of their rights, it also tends to target anyone advocating for human rights protection (Cesarino, 2020, Khail, 2022, Borba, 2019; Silva, 2022; Caldas-Coulthard, 2022). Anti-gender politics, for example, are often combined with insults and aggressive rhetoric, used to retaliate against gender-inclusive policies (Berg, 2016). As for homophobia, enacting verbal impoliteness serves to reaffirm alleged common-sense ideas such as that people of the LGTB+ community are deviant and thus need to be insulted, ostracized, and punished.

2.3 VERBAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND LGBT+ PEOPLE

Drawing from the assumption that gender roles are social categories. Nonetheless, stereotyped views of men and women, which have affected the representation of women in several sectors of social life, reflecting ideological, political, and cultural bias, have long been cemented. One of these stereotypes is related to physical appearance and feminine beauty ideals, which often intersects with body shaming.

Broadly speaking, body shaming (BS) is a popular term used to refer to a negative type of social interaction, defined as “inappropriate negative statements and attitudes toward another person’s weight or size” or as an “action or practice of humiliating someone by making mocking or critical comments about their body shape or size” (Schlüter, 2021: 13). In ordinary language, general descriptions of BS state that it is a practice in which “people are—literally—put to shame because of their bodies” (FOCUS Online, 2018).

Based on a synthesis of existing descriptions, Schlüter (2021) defines BS as “an unrepeated action in which a person expresses unsolicited, mostly negative opinions or comments about the target’s body, which can take place in both social media and in the real world” (Schlüter, 2021: 13). As the term indicates, a negative reference to the target’s physical appearance is pivotal in characterizing the practice. Schlüter also adds that, in contrast to fat shaming (i.e., mockery or criticism about someone judged to be fat or overweight), BS does not solely target overweight individuals. As such, it can be seen as an umbrella-like term used to describe a form of body-specific verbal attack, usually expressed by the same perpetrator or group of perpetrators.

In the online environment, BS is also a tactic to vilify individuals and impede them from taking part in genuine discussions. Considering that BS often targets women (and LGBTQ+ people, Pew Research Center, 2021, 7-8), it can be interpreted as an expression of misogyny, i.e., a form of violence against women, a modern form of cyber aggression (Židová, Viera Kurincová, and Tomáš Turzák, 2022),

and in its fat shaming form, a hate crime (Polyzoidou 2024). Misogyny is closely linked to historical gender inequalities observed in Brazil and globally. BS thus represents a pervasive source of oppression against women and girls, reflecting widespread patriarchal beliefs and practices that affect, or even curtail, fundamental rights, such as human dignity, equality, and health, and jeopardize the moral, physical, and psychological well-being of women and girls (Cerolini, Vacca, Zegretti, Zagaria, and Lombardo, 2024).

Even though the law in any constitutional democracy protects women in power and girls and women in general and usually provides protection and equal rights to LGBTQ+ persons, its power is not at all omnipotent. The law has its dysfunctions and limitations. Consider, first, for instance, its conservative tendency and the existing inequalities in society, and, second, that even if it intends to promote changes in favor of women and LGBTQ+ people (against, e.g., patriarchy, sexism, and LGBTQ+-phobia), there might be social and psychological factors that present resistance towards these changes (Vago and Barkan, 2017: 4-24, 207-231). In Brazil, for instance, laws protect women, and LGBTQ+ people, including those in power²⁸⁰. In a democracy, due to the principle of accountability, public figures, women included, need to tolerate more criticism. Nevertheless, this criticism should be connected to their political activity and not, for instance, their appearance. And yet, the aggressive and authoritarian discourse that pushes, and might even transgress, the limits of the

280 In general, Criminal Code (crimes against honor; threats; defamation, racism, etc), Law on Racism (Lei 7716, de 5 de Janeiro de 1989), Marco Civil da Internet (Lei 12.965/2014 de 23 de abril de 2014), and the Law on domestic violence (Lei Maria da Penha), which, since 2020, covers online violence in these affairs too (Lei 11340 de 7 de Agosto de 2006). In particular, the Law 10446 (from 8 May 2002), which since 2018, rules on the investigation of crimes committed on the internet that disseminate misogynistic content, defined as those that propagate hatred or aversion towards women, and the Law on Political Violence against Women (Lei 14194 de 4 de Agosto de 2021), which defines this kind of political violence (any action, conduct or omission with the purpose of preventing, obstructing or restricting women's political rights) and stipulates that women's rights to political participation will be guaranteed, discrimination and unequal treatment based on sex or race will be prohibited in access to political representation bodies and in the exercise of public functions (Art. 2 and 3).

sayable is an existing and alarming phenomenon. Exactly for this reason and to facilitate answering the research question, in the next section, we lay the ground for the tenets of the Models of Impoliteness.

2.4 THE MODELS OF IMPOLITENESS

From the viewpoint of the models of impoliteness, a verbal insult can be defined as “a remark that puts someone down or ascribes a negative characteristic to them” (Haugh and Bousfield, 2012: 15). Insults are also characteristically applied to situations in which “the speaker casts the target into an undesirable category or as having negative attributes using a conventionally offensive expression within a non-serious or jocular frame” (Haugh and Bousfield, 2012: 15). They also function as a type of dysphemism, connected with “a word or phrase with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance” (Allan and BurrIDGE, 2006: 31). Regarding this matter, Culpeper (2010, 2011) has investigated how expressions of disdain, such as insults, can function as “impoliteness formulas” that convey negative implications and provoke negative emotions in both the recipient and observers. By portraying the addressee unfavorably, these formulas also categorize the target as inferior, deficient, or neglectable for their physical appearance, skills, character, behavior, beliefs, and/or familial and social relationships (Allan and BurrIDGE, 2006: 79). Insults are often deployed to debase women and LGBT+ people, even when they are elected politicians and influential figures, as Oliveira, Drinóczi and Miranda (2024) have shown. On these occasions, they are characterized as expressions involving linguistic content carrying sexist, homophobic, and transphobic remarks. They also have specific targets and are made up of conventionally offensive formulae, i.e., terms recognized as offensive by almost all speakers of a given language in practically all contexts of use (Culpeper, 2010).

On social media, interpersonal provocations are also considered a form of verbal attack, especially when they circulate through “the posting of incendiary comments with the intent of provoking others into conflict” (Hardaker, 2010: 224). Also defined as “aggressive, malicious behavior undertaken with the aim of annoying or goading others into retaliating” (Hardaker, 2010: 231), provocations occur through trolling behaviors, which often hijack the genuine debate and prompt users to become entangled in a series of intense attacks that avert the original discussion topic. As Hardaker (2010: 237) asserts, through the dynamics of trolling, provocateurs “exacerbate conflict for the purpose of their own amusement,” sometimes leading to a “flame war”. It is not uncommon that provocateurs antagonize perceived opponents and their associates through a type of “unmediated, outrageous, and shocking” verbal behavior (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020: 587), constructed to promote turmoil and create chaos.

Another first-rate practice present in the discourse of authoritarian leaders and their followers is the subversion of language and terminology to create enemies through a phenomenon known as “discursive capture.” The resource can be identified, for example, when, in the name of a supposed moral order, authoritarian leaders and their followers transform a transgressor into a victim, in a strategy also called “victim-perpetrator reversal,” employed to force a comparison between non-comparable agents or circumstances and thus manipulate public opinion in their interests. The discursive capture is characterized by the creation of false symmetries, constructed to give the impression of equality to contradictory arguments.

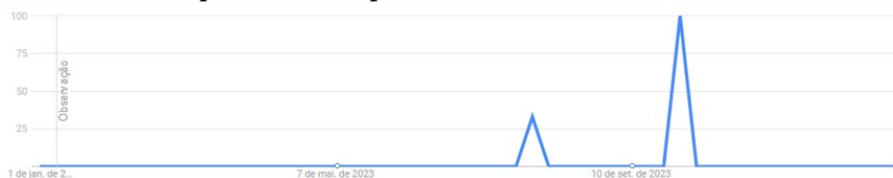
With the above in mind, the following section lays the groundwork for the study’s data collection and analysis methods.

3. METHODOLOGY OF DATA GATHERING

In this work, we present and discuss some extracts taken from public speeches and social media posts containing expressions of

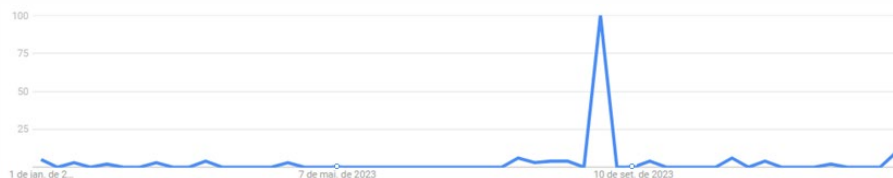
misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia, targeting two elected political leaders: Congresswoman Sãmia Bomfim (PSOL) and Érika Hilton (PSOL). These political leaders were re/elected in 2022, with terms starting in January 2023. To investigate the events with the most public repercussion on social media involving them, we monitored their names on Google Trends throughout 2023. Using this application tool, we could track when the searched terms peaked, indicating that their names had become mostly trendy. The graphs below display these findings, with 100 corresponding to the date the terms were most searched on Google:

Graph 1 – Peak of public interest in Sãmia Bomfim



Source: Google Trends online platform.

Graph 2 – Peak of public interest in Erika Hilton



Source: Google Trends online platform.

Following this initial search, we analyzed the public reaction to the four most watched videos about the episodes associated with Graphs 1 and 2 above. The first peak of public interest in Sãmia Bomfim, between October 1 and 5, 2023, was not considered for analysis because it involved the news revolving around the murder of her brother, which made the headlines in Brazil in the period. Since this particular event is unrelated to the present research, the second peak was chosen. This one occurred on August 8th 2023, and related

to Congressman Coronel Luciano Zucco (PL²⁸¹). Congressman Zucco addressed Sâmia Bomfim in Parliament by telling her to “calm herself down” and adding, “Are you nervous, *deputada*? Would you like a medicine or a hamburger?” Two videos with his address went viral on YouTube, with approximately 26.1 thousand views and 491 comments.

As for Erika Hilton, the footage dates back to August 30, th 2023, when she rebutted Congresswoman Coronel Fernanda (PL)²⁸², who had declared, in a public speech, that transwomen “deprived real women of their rights.” On YouTube, the two most popular pieces of footage of Erika Hilton’s reply garnered over 731 thousand views and attracted over 6,600 comments.

After this selection of episodes that reverberated widely on social media involving the two Congresswomen, we manually analyzed all 7,055 commentaries to single out the posts containing any marks of verbal impoliteness, for example, negative assertions, unpalatable questions, strong criticism, insults, and insinuations (Culpeper, 2010, 2011). The posts were extracted using Google’s API and then formatted into an Excel spreadsheet with a link to the original message, allowing their retrieval in case they were deleted after the data gathering. As can be seen, in this step, we have incorporated a mixed approach (Unger et al., 2016) to the data, including, for instance, visual components (e.g., emojis and links) of the posts under analysis. With this choice of methodology, we seek to determine whether/how the affordances of social media platforms facilitate the dissemination of misogynistic and homophobic views propagated in offline public statements made by far-right leaders and their supporters. It is also our interest to verify if/how these views connect to the installation of processes of authoritarianization in Brazil, which are centered around the debasement of vulnerable groups, among other characteristics.

As for ethical issues, we followed the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIr). We have also relied on previous

281 PL - The Liberal Party is a centre-right to right-wing political party in Brazil.

282 We are using the congresspeople ballot names.

research on social media, particularly the works of Zappavigna (2017) and Vásquez (2021), which centered around impoliteness research on different social media. We also appreciated that social media platforms are considered a public environment where users are aware of the wide propagation of their posts. Hence, the data collected was regarded as non-intrusive since it was obtained without the need to subscribe, enter a password, or pay a fee and can be used for various purposes, including academic research. Nonetheless, we have removed all marks of authorship from the posts from non-public figures in the interest of proportionality and anonymity, as the research has focused on the “content” and not the “author” of the posts.




4. ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POSTS

As mentioned earlier, the verbal attacks against Sâmia Bomfim and Erika Hilton were perpetrated by far-right political leaders during public speeches and went viral on social media, where they were reproduced or positively sanctioned by far-right followers. Due to space restrictions, we selected ten posts from each event in the order of their appearance in the thread. These posts are examined from the perspective of verbal impoliteness in association with the far-right leading discursive style about women and LGTB+ people in Brazil. Beyond seeking to establish the foundations for answering our research questions, the goal of this section is also to provide the reader with a vantage point of the genre-based attacks that lie at the heart of the collective effort to disparage women and LGTB+ people even when they occupy elected positions.

4.1 SÂMIA BOMFIM

As examples (1)-(10) show, the attacks targeting Sâmia Bomfim, perpetrated by Congressman Zucco in a public speech, encouraged

the supporters of the far-right to adopt similar verbal conduct when commenting on the footage on YouTube. BS and fat-shaming were the most salient forms of verbal aggression:

1. *MC Donalds ou Burger King?/ MC Donald's or Burger King?* challenging questions
2. *Mas quer hambúrguer ou pizza?/ But you wanna burger or pizza?* challenging question
3. *Vc deu uma emagrecida! Parece que tá só com 150kg agora!/
You lost weight! You only look 150 kg now* sarcasm
4. *Esses Hambúrgueres não passarão/These burgers won't pass* sarcasm
5. *Pelo tamanho... esse passarinho não voa... ROLA MORRO ABAIXO*  */Judging by the size.... This bird does not fly.... IT ROLLS DOWN THE HILLS*  sarcasm
6. *Seja mulher e assuma o que vc faz com outras pessoas, fica feio essa vitimização pois está tudo gravado, aliás se alguém oferecer um hambúrguer eu fico muito feliz/ Be a woman and take responsibility for what you do to others. It's embarrassing to play the victim because everything is recorded. By the way, if anyone offers me a burger I am very happy*  sarcasm/ /pointed criticism
7. *Sua fome insaciável em hambúrgueres está te deixando cada vez mais doida... Coma mais antes de ir as comissões da Câmara dos deputados. Fica a dica. Outra coisa... Emagreça, você parece uma Kombi. Abraço/ Your insatiable hunger for burgers is making you crazier with every insult... Eat more before going to the House committees. Just a tip. Another thing... Lose some weight, you look like a bus.* insults/sarcasm
8. *Parabéns Zucco, só disse verdades/ Congrats, Zucco, you only told the truth* sarcasm
9. *Pq vc não falam que ela não respeita ninguém e agride todos que pensam diferente?? / Why don't you mention that she doesn't respect anyone and attacks everyone who thinks differently??* challenging questions
10. *E ela é nervosa e gorda sim. Qual a inverdade nisso?/ And yes, she is angry and fat. What's untrue about that?* insults/unpalatable questions

Considering that BS and fat-shaming mostly target women, they can be seen as an expression of misogyny, i.e., a form of violence inflicted against them simply because they are who they are. In our data, the insinuations and provocations targeting Sâmia Bomfim were anchored in imaginary models of “beauty” and “sensuality”, as the term “fat”, used as an insult, shows. The offensive remarks were deployed to reaffirm widespread patriarchal beliefs that imperil basic rights and threaten the psychological integrity of women in general, as examples (3), (5), (7) and (10) indicate, with BS and fat shaming being deployed to ridicule her.

Beyond physical appearance, Sâmia Bomfim’s mental capacity was also disparaged, as examples (7) and (10) demonstrate. In these occurrences, she was negatively described as “crazy” and “angry”, implying that she was assessed as irrational, overly emotional, and easily agitated. The judgment also echoed Congressman Zucco’s remarks and helped forge a negative image of women in general, grounded on heteronormativity. They also suggest the presence of the “victim reversal” strategy (*Pq vc não falam que ela não respeita ninguém e agride todos que pensam diferente??/ Why don’t you mention that she doesn’t respect anyone and attacks everyone who thinks differently?*), in which the victim is turned into the perpetrator (Wodak et al., 2021), suggesting that Sâmia Bomfim deserved to be insulted and put to public blame.

Apart from blunt insults, sarcasm was also a salient feature in the posts analyzed, potentially used to fulfill the role of anticipating the evasion of guilt in case of a legal complaint. This tactic can be attested in examples (5) and (6), in which the “tears of joy emoji” is used to render a jocular tone to the exchanges, suggesting an attempt to legitimize verbal aggression as the standard course of events. Since bitterness is regarded as a salient feature of sarcastic expressions, often imparting strong criticism and unmitigated face attacks (Claridge, 2011), we can affirm that this resource is also found in the data, for instance, in (4), which echoes Bomfim’s tweet²⁸³ with a sarcastic

283 In a tweet following Zucco’s remark, Sâmia wrote “They will pass”, suggesting that her opponents would be distrusted.

tone. Sarcastic remarks also added an extra layer of complexity to impoliteness, as attested in (3), (4), (5), (6), (7) and (8). This happens because, although they can be interpreted as suggesting proximity in the in-group (the commentators), they also convey pointed criticism and negative evaluations (*Mas quer hambúrguer ou pizza?/ But you wanna burger or pizza?*), as Vasquez (2021) and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Bou-Franch (2019) suggest.

Among other resources used to enact impoliteness, challenging questions were proven to be pivotal in the data about Sâmia Bomfim, as examples (1), (2), (9) and (10) prove. These types of questions typically reflect contempt, knowledge asymmetry, and power imbalance. They also emanate from the epistemic role commonly assigned to speakers when they evaluate social behaviors through inquisitive verbal conduct (Raymond and Heritage, 2021; Tantucci, Culpeper and Wang, 2022). Since they are not genuine questions, they are often employed when one tries to push their beliefs and views onto their hearers/readers (*Mas quer hambúrguer ou pizza?/ But you wanna hamburger or pizza?*). As such, unpalatable questions operate as eliciting devices that ascribe a political orientation to the discussion.

4.2 ERIKA HILTON

The confrontation between Erika Hilton and Coronel Fernanda fueled potential far-right supporters to display harsh criticism when commenting on the footage on YouTube, as can be seen in Examples 1-10 below:

1. Tudo essa patifaria por falar a verdade, mulheres trans não possuem ovário, menstruação, órgãos originalmente femininos. E mulheres trans JAMAIS SERÃO mulher de verdade. E sim a sua aparência/ All this nonsense about telling the truth: trans women don't have ovaries, menstruation or organs that were originally female. And

trans women will NEVER BE real women. It's just their appearance
insult / pointed criticism/contempt

2. Não me representa sou mulher de verdade/You do not represent me I am a real woman pointed criticism/contempt

3. Pode falar bonito, mas vcs não são MULHERES BIOLÓGICAS, não adianta, vcs precisam lutar pelo espaço de vcs...o dia que vcs fizerem uma transvaginal e mostrar que vcs ovulam... aí sim. Ok?/ You can talk pretty, but you're not BIOLOGICAL WOMEN, it's no use, you need to fight for your space... the day you have a transvaginal scan and it shows that you ovulate... then yes. OK? pointed criticism/contempt.

4. Apenas mais uma lembrancinha tudo na vida tem um preço e não é?/ Just another reminder that everything in life comes at a price, doesn't it? pointed criticism/unpalatable tag question

5. *Kkkk cara a boca Erika, vc acha q quer respeito, mais ã respeita as mulheres/ Kkkk shut your mouth Erika, you think you want respect, but you don't respect women.* contempt/sarcasm/pointed criticism

6. Ela não é vítima do patriarcado. Ela é o patriarcado. Só voltou vestida de mulher para recuperar o que conquistamos/. She's not a victim of patriarchy. She is the patriarchy. She only came back dressed as a woman to take back what we had won. pointed criticism

7. Exatamente, mulher é mulher. Por mais que façam a transição, continuam sendo homem ou mulher/ Exactly, a woman is a woman. No matter how much they transition, they're still a man or a woman. pointed criticism

8. Mas mulher é uma coisa, mulher trans é outra/ But a woman is one thing, a trans woman is another. pointed criticism/contempt

9. Vcs, são uma vergonha / You're a disgrace... insult

10. Kkkkkkkkkkkkk me explica então, o que é ser mulher? / Explain to me then what it means to be a woman? sarcasm/unpalatable questions

As examples (1-10) attest, unlike Sâmia Bomfim, who was mostly attacked with insults associated with BS, the attacks on Erika Hilton took the shape of pointed criticism. As criticism tends to have a demoralizing effect, it is usually seen as a cause of emotional and

psychological distress for the targeted individual or group. Building on this foundation, Culpeper (2010, 2011) advocates that criticism is an expression of impoliteness.

More specifically, in our data, criticism reflects a type of negative assessment of Erika's speech in the video analysed, in which she rebuts Coronel Fernanda's alleged transphobic views. In the comments that negatively assess Erika Hilton's speech, she is mostly depicted as unable to represent "real" women, echoing Coronel Fernanda's remarks "*Não me representa sou mulher de verdade/You do not represent me I am a real woman*", as examples (1), (2), (3), (7) and (8) show. In examples (5) and (6), impoliteness resources like pointed criticisms and contempt are also deployed to frame Erik Hilton's verbal conduct as "patriarchal", in an attempt to discredit her as a transgender and to depict her as an "enemy of the real women".

As can be noted in the public reaction to Erika Hilton's video, several comments reflect and contribute to spreading misinformation as to the concepts of "sex" and "gender identity", which are deliberating and simplistically stated as equivalents, serving as a form of discursive capture of the terminology. As such, lobbing verbal attacks on trans people can also be seen as a successful strategy to please conservative sectors of society and gain voters. The process is effective because it helps create false asymmetries, constructed to give the impression of equality to contradictory arguments (e.g., the concepts of sex and gender), as examples (5) and (6), among others, attest.

Unpalatable questions were also distinct in some comments: (4) *Apenas mais uma lembrancinha tudo na vida tem um preço e não é?/ Just another reminder that everything in life comes at a price, doesn't it?*; and (10) *Kkkkkkkkkkkkk me explica então, o que é ser mulher? / Explain to me then what it means to be a woman?* These types of questions mirror negative judgments and align with Culpeper's framework of impoliteness since they are seen as a form of provocation that intensifies criticism.

Since anonymity tends to lead to reduced self-regulation and increased negative behaviors on social media, sarcasm and mockery play a significant role in amplifying the severity of criticism. In our data

about Erika Hilton, the occurrences of sarcasm were also noteworthy for at least two interesting reasons. On the one hand, sarcasm operated as a resource to “mock” Erika Hilton and disparage her for not being a “biological woman.” On the other hand, it was used to disguise verbal offense, serving as an anticipated strategy to circumvent blame in case of legal incidents. The offensive verbal behaviors identified in the data also seem to stem from prolonged and unresolved conflicts, which are characteristic of polarized societies like Brazil. From this angle, we can affirm that they also reflect how commenting on traditional views and prejudice, already present in many sectors of society, can become an effective strategy to please voters and gain supporters.

5. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

In the quantitative analysis, our findings show that 32.7% (2,035) contained verbal attacks in all of the commentaries analyzed, as detailed in Figure 1. Of all offensive comments on Sâmia Bomfim, 69% consisted of verbal attacks on the congresswoman’s associates or alleged supporters. As for Erika Hilton, the attacks on her associates or alleged supporters amounted to 30% of the respective analysed data.

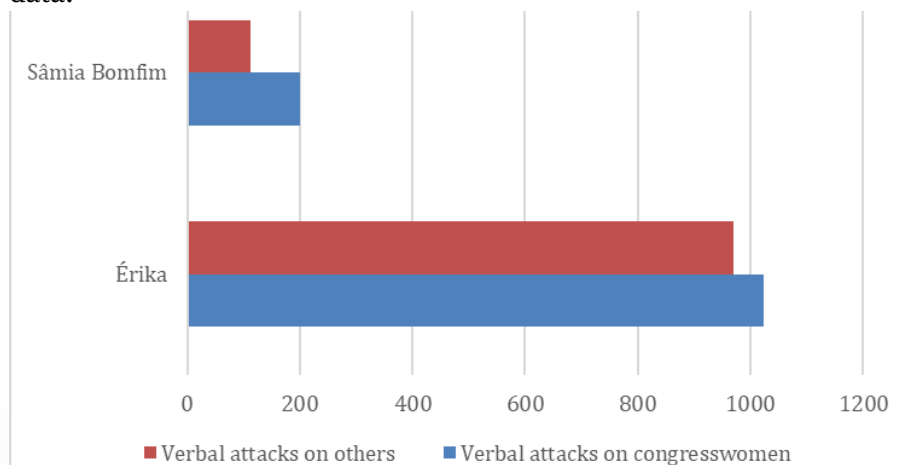


Figure 1 – Verbal attacks found in our data.

In the posts that did not contain verbal attacks directly targeting Sâmia Bomfim, other public figures, institutions, or political parties were attacked; for example, Luciano Zucco (the congressman who addressed her in Parliament), the channel that uploaded the video with her response to him (under the label ‘*mídia*’), and President Lula (whom she supports), as can be seen in Figure 2.

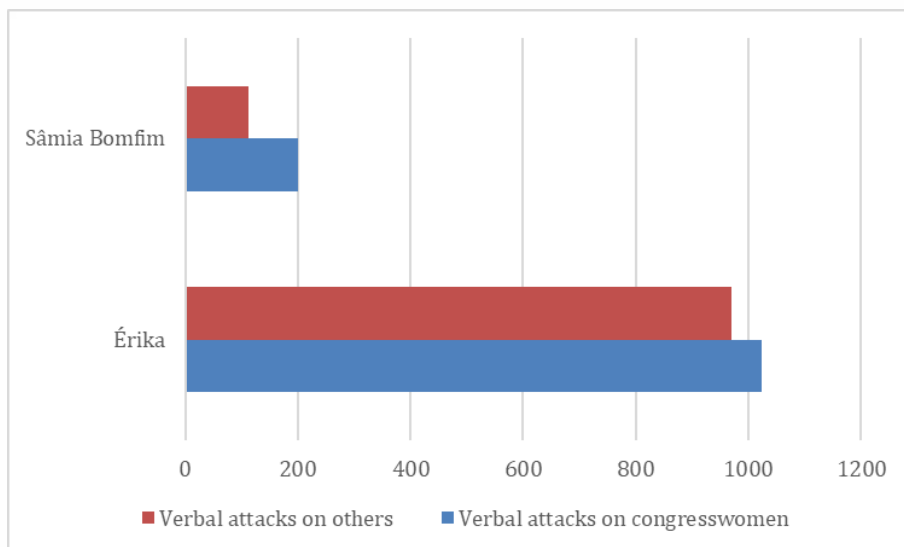


Figure 2 - Other frequently attacked political figures and entities in Sâmia Bomfim’s videos

Regarding Erika Hilton’s data, most attacks were directed to her, as shown in Figure 1. However, there was a slightly higher number of attacks towards others (14.5% of the total, corresponding to 970 commentaries), which could be distributed in an extensive list, reaching over thirty different targets. The most frequent ones are shown in Figure 3. Coronel Fernanda (who addressed Erika Hilton in Parliament) was the most retaliated figure in the comments about the video, followed by political affiliates of the former ex-president Bolsonaro (*bolsonaristas*), his political party (PL) and the far-right wing in general (*extrema direita*).

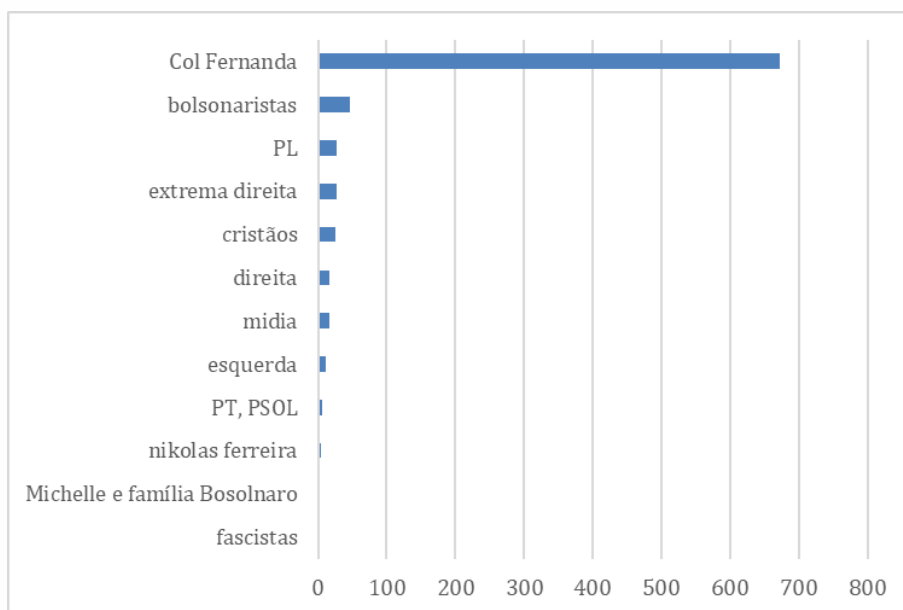


Figure 3 - Other frequently attacked political figures and entities in Erika Hilton's videos

As one can see, the verbal attacks perpetrated against Congresswomen Sâmia Bomfim and Erika Hilton in public speeches of far-right leaders encouraged their followers to reproduce the same type of verbal behavior on social media. At the same time, impoliteness was a distinctive posting practice in our data, availed of by supporters of all political spectrums, as can be seen in the figures above, which show that politicians from different affiliations were slammed. One of the reasons behind this process is that social practices are governed by linguistic rules of conduct that determine how interactants are compelled to act in relation to one another, which leads us to the concept of impoliteness reciprocity (Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021). The phenomenon involves routine exchanges and compliance, used to display social affiliation and collaboration among members of the in-group while also attacking perceived opponents. As such, when impoliteness takes the front seat, verbal attacks on those considered “beneath” can become a trend (cf. Oliveria, Drinóczi, and Miranda,

2024). This is the case with the posts that uttered misogynic and transphobic attacks on female political leaders and their associates or alleged supporters, and it is also what happens when the out-group retaliates in kind, as our findings show.

In short, our quantitative data indicates, on the one hand, that impoliteness was a resource to enhance bonds while helping disseminate ideas and feelings with the aid of social media affordances (Gibson, 1977; Scott, 2022; Graces-Conejos Blitvich, 2024). On the other hand, they make the case that the practice has a far-reaching propensity to forge inequality and exclusion and to redefine democracy in both conceptual and concrete terms, as it can profoundly undermine the core ideas of democratically funded, inclusive societies.

6. DISCUSSION

At this point, it is relevant to recall that although Sãmia Bomfim and Erika Hilton have gained much support online after the episodes we looked into in this paper, the verbal attacks on them stand out, particularly because, by going beyond the traditional limits of what is considered acceptable (or sayable) in the political arena, the continuous use of insinuations and pointed criticism against the physical appearance and morality of individuals hurt their public images. They also affect the integrity of the vulnerable groups they represent, affecting the societal tissue as a whole. As the verbal attacks were lobbed in public pronouncements, as well as widely disseminated on social media, the practice may suggest the advent of a “new wave” of impoliteness and dissemination of the language of conflict, which, in our view, is a symptom of the discursive corrosion of democracy in Brazil, as Oliveira et. al. (2024) also suggested. The phenomenon requires attention and further scrutiny since it affects the protection of rights and the quality of societal life. Moreover, considering that the attacks were perpetrated by political leaders in public speeches, they can be seen as a way to reproduce prejudice and misinformation

for electoral gains. For instance, on social media, such as YouTube, the verbal attacks were mostly anchored in imaginary models of “virtue” and “morality”, disseminating misconceptions about gender and sex. Deliberately used as synonyms, the confusion of these terms reverberates strongly in certain social groups and encourages continuous stigmatization.

7. FINAL REMARKS

This study addressed the dissemination of authoritarian discourse from multiple perspectives, combining recent research into linguistic impoliteness with the notion of democratic erosion. As such, the paper touches on the profound impact that the protection of vulnerable groups, e.g., women and the LGBTQA+ community, has on democracy and pluralism. It also described the different discursive resources that authoritarian leaders and their followers often deploy to demand space in the marketplace of ideas, mostly by offering arguments against democracy and the rule of law. As a way of example, when these leaders and their followers address their perceived rivals or refer to vulnerable groups, they tend to use a range of impolite formulae (Culpeper, 2010, 2011), which are constructed to demoralize, intimidate, and ostracize them. As has been mentioned earlier, we have made the case that the gradual erosion of democracy walks hand in hand with an increase in verbal impoliteness, which is used as a routinized strategy to threaten perceived opponents and deepen the gap between “us” and “them,” an essential feature of polarized scenarios.

REFERENCES

Ashe, Stephen D., et al., eds. *Researching the Far Right: Theory, Method and Practice*. Routledge, 2020.

Cerolini, Silvia, Mariacarolina Vacca, Anna Zegretti, Andrea Zagaria, and Caterina Lombardo. "Body Shaming and Internalized Weight Bias as Potential Precursors of Eating Disorders in Adolescents." *Frontiers in Psychology* 15 (2024). <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1356647/full>.

Cesarino, Letícia. "How Social Media Affords Populist Politics: Remarks on Liminality Based on the Brazilian Case." *Trabalhos em Linguística Aplicada* 29, no. 1 (2020): 404-427. <https://doi.org/10.1590/01031813686191620200410>.

Culpeper, Jonathan. "Conventionalized Impoliteness Formulae." *Journal of Pragmatics* 42, no. 12 (2010): 3232-3245.

Culpeper, Jonathan. *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Culpeper, Jonathan, and Claire Hardaker. "Impoliteness." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Linguistic (Im)Politeness*, edited by Jonathan Culpeper and Dániel Z. Kádár, 199-225. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Dimmock, Michael. "How Americans View Trust, Facts and Democracy Today." Pew Research Center, February 19, 2020. Accessed Month Day, Year. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/winter-2020/how-americans-view-trust-facts-and-democracy-today>.

Dreyfus, Simone, and Long Li. "Long Live Chairman Mao!!!! Your People Miss You!!!!: Development of the Involvement System

to Describe Social Positioning in Digitally Mediated Communication from China.” *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics* 12, no. 2 (2021): 74-88.

Drinóczi, Tímea, and Agnieszka Bień-Kacała. *Illiberal Constitutionalism in Poland and Hungary: The Deterioration of Democracy, Misuse of Human Rights and Abuse of the Rule of Law*. Routledge, 2022.

Ekström, Mats, and Bengt Johansson. “Talk Scandals.” *Media, Culture & Society* 30, no. 1 (2008): 61-79.

Fournier, Thomas. “From Rhetoric to Action, a Constitutional Analysis of Populism.” *German Law Journal* 20, no. 3 (2019): 362–381.

Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Pilar. “Pragmatics, (Im)Politeness, and Intergroup Communication: A Multilayered, Discursive Analysis of Cancel Culture.” Cambridge University Press, 2024.

Gibson, James J. “The Theory of Affordance.” In *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology*, edited by Robert Shaw and John Bransford, 67-82. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977.

Meyer, Emílio Peluso Neder. *Constitutional Erosion in Brazil*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

McIntosh, Janet, and Norma Mendoza-Denton. *Language in the Trump Era: Scandals and Emergencies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Oliveira, Ana Larissa Adorno, and Monique Vieira Miranda. “‘Calling a Spade, a Spade’: Impoliteness and Shame on Twitter.” *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics* 13, no. 2 (2022): 22-32.

Oliveira, Ana Larissa Adorno, Tímea Drinóczi, and Monique Vieira Miranda. “Far-Right Discourse on Brazilian Twitter: Has Shameless

Impoliteness Language Been Normalized on Twitter?” *Language and Politics* (2024).

Pew Research Center. “The State of Online Harassment.” January 2021. Accessed Month Day, Year. https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/01/PI_2021.01.13_Online-Harassment_FINAL-1.pdf.

Polyzoidou, Vasiliki. “The Crime of Fat Shaming.” In *Handbook on Cyber Hate*, edited by Anne Wagner and Sarah Marusek, 513-528. Law and Visual Jurisprudence, vol 13. Springer, Cham, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51248-3_20.

Silva, Janaína P., e Vera Karam de Chueiri. “Feminism for Future Brazilian Constitutionalism.” In *The Rights of Women in Comparative Constitutional Law*, editado por Irene Spigno, Valentina Rita Scotti, e Janaína Penalva da Silva, 137-156. Routledge, 2023.

Unger, Johann, Ruth Wodak, and Majid KhosraviNik. “Critical Discourse Studies and Social Media Data.” *Qualitative Research* 16, no. 3 (2016): 277-293.

Vago, Steven, and Steven E. Barkan. *Law and Society*. Routledge, 2017.

Wahlström, Mattias, Anton Törnberg, and Hans Ekbrand. “Dynamics of Violent and Dehumanizing Rhetoric in Far-Right Social Media.” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 11 (2021): 3290-3311.

Weisskircher, Manès. “The Strength of Far-Right AfD in Eastern Germany: The East-West Divide and the Multiple Causes Behind ‘Populism’.” *The Political Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (2020): 614-622.

Wodak, Ruth. “Normalization to the Right: Analyzing the Micro-Politics of the Far-Right.” In *Researching the Far Right*, edited by Stephen D. Ashe et al., 336-352. Routledge, 2020.

Wodak, Ruth. “The Radical Right and Antisemitism.” In *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, edited by Jens Rydgren, 61-85. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Wodak, Ruth. *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE, 2021.

Wodak, Ruth, Jonathan Culpeper, and Elena Semino. “Shameless Normalisation of Impoliteness: Berlusconi’s and Trump’s Press Conferences.” *Discourse & Society* 32, no. 3 (2021): 369–393.

Zappavigna, Michele. “Twitter.” In *Pragmatics of Social Media*, edited by Christian Hoffmann and Wolfram Bublitz, 201-224. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017.

Zhuravskaya, Ekaterina, Maria Petrova, and Ruben Enikolopov. “Political Effects of the Internet and Social Media.” *Annual Review of Economics* 12, no. 1 (2020): 415-438.

Zottola, Angela, and Rodrigo Borba. “‘Gender Ideology’ and the Discursive Infrastructure of a Transnational Conspiracy Theory.” In *Discourses of and about Conspiracy Theories*, 465-488. 2022.

Židová, Monika, Viera Kurincová, and Tomáš Turzák. “Body Shaming as a Modern Form of Cyber Aggression.” *Ad Alta: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 12, no. 2 (2022): 270-274.