



## Violence in the network: discourses about Greta Thunberg in online comments

### *Violência em rede: discursos sobre Greta Thunberg em comentários on-line*

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**Abstract:** This text analyzes the production of violence in discourses about the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, which are materialized in online comments in the Uol website. Theoretically, the study is based on the discursive studies from the reflections of Michael Foucault. This is a descriptive-interpretative research, with a predominant qualitative approach. The *corpus* is constituted of eight online comments, produced from three news articles published in the Uol website about Thunberg, in december 2019. The analysis reveals that the discursive stance expressed in the comments violate Greta's figure and characterize her as inapt, intellectually delayed and easy to be manipulated by financial and political groups with obscure interests.

**Keywords:** Discourse; violence; Greta Thunberg; online comment.

**Resumo:** Este texto consiste em analisar a produção da violência em discursos sobre a ativista sueca Greta Thunberg, materializados em comentários *on-line* no *site* Uol. Teoricamente, o estudo embasa-se nos estudos discursivos advindos das reflexões de Michel Foucault. Quanto à metodologia, trata-se de uma pesquisa descritivo-interpretativa cuja abordagem é predominantemente qualitativa. O *corpus* abarca oito comentários *on-line*, produzidos a partir de três notícias publicadas no *site* Uol a respeito

de Thunberg, em dezembro de 2019. As análises apontam que os posicionamentos discursivos expressos nos comentários violentam a figura de Greta, caracterizando-a como sendo inapta, intelectualmente atrasada e manipulável por grupos financeiros e políticos com interesses obscuros.

**Palavras-chave:** Discurso; violência; Greta Thunberg; comentário *on-line*.

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## 1 Introduction

Greta Enman Thunberg is a young 17-year-old Swedish activist who has become known worldwide since she protested in front of the Swedish Parliament in August 2018 in favor of complying with the Paris Agreement, which provides for the reduction of carbon emissions into the atmosphere. By protesting during class time, Greta ended up encouraging the movement of several young people in various places around the world in a wave of protests materialized as school strikes, which became known as Fridays for Future. The international projection achieved by Greta made her win several awards by a number of institutions, and she was recognized as Person of the year 2019 by Times magazine. In addition, she spoke at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 25) in 2019, joined other young activists at the World Economic Forum (Davos, Switzerland) in January 2020, and, through online activism, especially from Twitter, has collected a legion of fans and aroused great disaffection.

Greta's emergence as an event in the global press and her protagonism around the issue has generated a number of reactions by political leaders. US President Donald Trump posted on his Twitter account in September 2019 that "She seems like a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future. So nice to see!" Considering Trump's rhetoric and his negationist position on global warming, the post is ironic. Greta refutes this sarcasm by changing her biography on Twitter and inserting the president's post as a description

on the social network.<sup>1</sup> The activist adopts a similar attitude when the Brazilian president calls her a “brat.” According to Bolsonaro, “It’s impressive that the press is giving space to a brat like that. A brat.” In doing so, Greta “retakes the negative qualification attributed to her, claiming it” (CHARAUDEAU, 2019, p. 467).

In the circle of attacks, we can also mention the speech of the US Secretary of the Treasury, Steven Mnuchin, when asked about Greta’s request for abandoning fossil fuels during the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. In the Secretary’s statement: “Who is she? The chief economist?” “After she goes and studies economics in college she can come back and explain that to us.”<sup>2</sup>

The three positions previously expressed are in line with a criticism of Greta’s emergence, framed by all kinds of speculation and conspiracy theories. Thus, the activist is built as a puppet of financial groups linked to the left-wing politics, and as someone who is unable to understand the countries’ most different issues worldwide, since she belongs to a developed country’ prestigious social class. When categorized as a “brat,” Greta’s discourse is delegitimized, if we take into account how the figure of children and youths was culturally constructed, that is, they are incapable subjects and depend on adults to have their voice validated. The paroxysm of these attacks can be observed in the misogynistic content of a commentary by Gustavo Negreiro, which is Natal/RN 96 FM radio personality. According to him, Greta “is in need of a man, either male or female. If she does not like men, let her take a woman.”<sup>3</sup>

For being diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome, the haters fiercely attack Greta and accuse her of being intellectually inept, mock her physical appearance, and stigmatize her struggle. In short, the young environmentalist is constantly rejected in digital media, thus amplifying

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/internacional/ultimas-noticias/2019/09/24/greta-thunberg-rebate-ironia-de-donald-trump-mudando-biografia-do-twitter.htm>. Access on: March 8, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://revistaforum.com.br/global/secretario-do-tesouro-de-trump-ataca-greta-thunberg-em-davos/>. Access on: March 8, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://revistaforum.com.br/brasil/radialista-ataca-ambientalista-greta-thunberg-de-16-anos-e-uma-histerica-e-precisa-de-homem-veja-video/>. Access on: March 8, 2020.

the scope of the virulence with which political leaders treat her. By means of an anonymous imagination embedded in the figure of the Internet user, the subjects, who are against the agenda defended by her, tend to use insult as a discursive strategy to oppose not only in terms of ideas, but mainly in the sense of an attack against Greta's moral integrity. As Sargentini (2017) reminds us, the insult serves to end the possibility of arguments, to finish the debate and to find justifications that the opponent is not able to understand and think properly, and therefore does not deserve to be heard. This is evident in the statement of Brazil's president, when he complains about the space that Greta is given by the press. In other words, the politician in focus, by means of his position, emphasizes that the activist is not worthy of attention and, by extension, the ideas she defends should not be shared.

When we think about the production of violence in discourses on Greta, it is worth thinking of the conditions of possibility that make statements contrary to the preservation of the environment erupt, considering that, apparently, there is a certain universal consensus on this issue. This supposes that it is necessary to trace, following Wenceslau, Antezana and Calmon (2012), how the environmental policies of the last 40 years have brought variation of knowledge that goes from the so-called survivalism – the thesis that humanity's demands need to be articulated to the finite character of natural resources – to the green radicalism, which bets on more structural changes in society and culture, involving not only the spread formula of sustainable development, but guidelines that seek to ensure environmental justice, the relation between gender and ecology (cultural ecofeminism), ecotheology (contemplative and cultural attitude and separation from Judeo-Christian regime), the green lifestyle, and eco-communitarianism, among other trends.

It is worth noting that a series of other discourses coexisted between survivalism and green radicalism, such as economic rationalism, marked by liberal capitalism, which, according to Wenceslau, Antezana and Calmon (2012), stands out for its interest in privatizing natural resources, inserting them in the interests of the market, since only then the environmental conservation would be successful, and the discourse of sustainability that, among its several lines, seeks to combine care for the environment with economic development. Public policies based on this discourse strive to show that the environment is intrinsically related

to economic and social systems. In this way, environmental development goes hand in hand with economic and social development. To a greater or lesser extent, all these discourses are in line with the most diverse international environmental agreements, pacts and conferences ever held, mainly by the United Nations (UN). It is not possible to avoid mentioning the Stockholm Conference, in 1972; Eco-92, held in Rio de Janeiro; Rio +10, in 2002, and Rio +20, in 2012, in addition to the role of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, an instrument created by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in order to synthesize and disseminate information on climate change and global warming.

These governmental strategies seem to build the effect of consensus addressed earlier, considering that various sectors of society take the environmental agenda as a truth from which there is no escape. Socio-environmental responsibility in companies' and corporations' functioning (SOUZA; VALADÃO JÚNIOR; MEDEIROS, 2017) results from this, for example, in addition to the performance of multiple social organizations, such as NGOs, cooperatives, unions and associations in environmental preservation. Moreover, the education field is also affected by this scenario, if we think of the number of projects, methodologies and studies that defend the school institution as a privileged instance in the process of environmental awareness and constitution of a responsibility for the environment. In other words, the environmental preservation discourse is heterogeneous and crosses the entire social body, through relations of knowledge-power (FOUCAULT, 2006) and control of biological processes on the planet.

In this sense, the excessive circulation of discourses on global warming in the media is a symptom of the outlined social context. Such discourses intensified through Al Gore's documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), which rekindles the debate that had previously been held, and with media visibility that came in handy. In other words, the environmental agenda is seasoned with an apocalyptic flavor: "If you love your planet...if you love your children...you need to see this film," says the trailer for this documentary. However, thinking with Foucault (2009) that the discourse is linked to desire and power, reactions to this discursive emergence did not take long to appear, as they were already

being rehearsed by certain social instances that feel threatened by the environment preservation discourse.

As an example, it is possible to mention the fossil fuel and thermoelectric industries, which, when demonized by climate science as responsible for global warming, create controversies that question the credibility of scientific knowledge and the real anthropogenic contribution to global warming. This denial of science is called agnotology by Proctor (2008), that is, the study of ignorance. In short, agnotology proposes to disseminate the doubt in relation to scientifically produced knowledge in order to distrust that knowledge, claiming that there would be interests of an obscure order in the production of this knowledge. To this extent, Oreskes and Conway (2010) emphasize that it is about “merchants of doubt,” who sow controversy in a disorderly manner, as they are not based on the scientific debate, but rather on a posture of denial of science.

This position is consistent with the tonic of discursive production present in the digital network, notably in the political debate field in Brazil, since the 2014 elections. Thus, it does not seem rash to anticipate that the discursive positions that deny climate change are linked to a network of other statements that seek to revisit history itself, particularly with regard to the Brazilian military regime, and to classify, under the aegis of a number of conspiracy theories, the press vehicles as being linked to the left-wing politics and “communism” and, with this, to fight the so-called “globalism” and “cultural Marxism.” With 2018 election Bolsonaro’s victory, the comments on these issues, previously limited to an individual will to truth, gained, so to speak, an institutional approval, given the regularities in the statements of the current government ministers (Education, Foreign Affairs and Environment, for example) on these ghosts that must be removed. According to Roque (2020), there is a historical moment in which science is put in check, due to personal convictions and lived experiences. Roque (2020) cites as an example a survey made by Wellcome Global Monitor, in 2018. The study shows that 23% of the Brazilian population is skeptical of science and technology, as they believe that science does not benefit them personally and neither the majority of society. Another important fact in this scenario of mistrust of scientific knowledge concerns the correlation between science and religion. Still according to the aforementioned survey, 75%

of respondents say that when science disagrees with religion, belief is based on the latter.

In more specific terms, it is understood that the conditions of possibility that guarantee the existence of violent statements about Greta Thunberg are closely related to the current Brazilian political situation, marked by aggressiveness, fake news and online virulence connected to the widest mechanisms of insult, defamation and anger, and, in the case of Greta, with traces of misogyny and intolerance to youth protagonism in the politics field.

Given the above, the purpose of this text is to analyze the production of violence in discourses on Greta Thunberg materialized as online comments on the Uol website. For this, we describe and interpret the enunciative positions of these comments and the relations of knowledge-power that, through the insult, seek to disqualify the activist's image and performance, producing truths about her. Online comments were chosen for being a space in which the subjects can express their reactions to the instances that are institutionally legitimate to enunciate and, in addition, given the illusion of anonymity that still persists in the network users' imagination, the comment would give the subjects the opportunity to show themselves without any remnants of politeness and modesty and attract support from other users when appearing as supposedly authentic and without disguises.

The study in question follows Foucault's investigative proposal, whose inflections constitute Foucauldian discursive studies, through basic concepts such as statement, discourse, discursive formation, discursive practice, knowledge, power, and truth. In this research, we seek to problematize the eruption of violent discourses on Greta Thunberg according to the archeogenaeological perspective of analysis, since the description and interpretation of the enunciative positions and the relations of knowledge and power comprise both the archaeological work of excavating the different layers of knowledge, and the genealogical work of understanding the functioning of power strategies through history.

Methodologically, a descriptive-interpretative approach of a qualitative nature is followed. To this end, two enunciative series were organized, with analysis of four comments in each. The organization of the enunciative series is based on the theoretical-methodological

perspective of Foucault (2010), according to which it is possible to group, distribute statements so that one can think about how certain objects of discourse are produced. In short, when it is assumed that statements about Greta Thunberg are objects of discourse, it is possible to find certain regularities which outline the thematic axes of the series.

For the rhetorical organization, the article is structured as follows: in addition to these introductory comments, the following section presents a discussion on Foucault's concepts that will be necessary for examining the corpus; then, the analytical treatment given to online comments is presented and, finally, the conclusive topic proposes to bring an effect of end for the reflections developed here.

## **2 Theoretical selection of Foucault's work**

Before entering into the discussion on Foucault's theory, some words about Foucauldian discursive studies are necessary. Thinking about the phenomena of discourse in the Language and Linguistics field under Foucault's perspective goes back to the pioneering Araraquara Discourse Analysis Study Group (GEADA), coordinated by Professor Maria do Rosário Gregolin, at the São Paulo State University (UNESP), in Araraquara, São Paulo, which for more than 20 years has developed a plurality of research and trained several professionals who work in different regions of the country. According to the information on the group's blog, the works developed "[...] aim to discuss the epistemological and theoretical-methodological bases of Discourse Analysis, with an emphasis on Michel Foucault's contributions" (GEADA, 2017, w.p.). An important fact for this line of study was the creation, in 2018, of the Working Group (GT) of Foucauldian Discursive Studies (EDF) in the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in Language and Linguistics (Anpoll).

After this brief presentation, the theoretical consideration starts, taking the comments of Sargentini (2019) as a compass, for whom the currentness of Foucault's thought does not come from a direct application of a theoretical-analytical model that, in theory, would be a completed and ready set to use, but mainly from the possibility of enlightening the ways of thinking, of questioning the present, in order to make visible what is visible. In the author's words, "[...] From a discourse perspective, it



encourages to seek the meanings in the statements effectively enunciated and not supposedly underlying and hidden” (SARGENTINI, 2019, p. 45). Thinking with Foucault results in questioning practices and discourses within things that were actually produced in a given social and historical circumstance.

Foucault’s archeology does not propose to trace the origin, tradition and evolution of knowledge through a psychologizing path or by returning to a transcendental subject and teleology; on the contrary, it is marked by its discontinuities, cuts, ruptures and transformations. The author makes a critique of traditional history that transforms the monuments of the past into documents which construct a certain objective truth detached from the historian’s subjectivity. According to the author’s statement: “[...] the story itself appears to be abandoning the irruption of events in favor of stable structures” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 6). To counteract this perspective, Foucault (2010) approaches the New History, considering that it tends to transform documents into monuments and, with this, shows that there is no transparency in such documents and that knowledge is historically built through breaks, series, cuts, and remnants. Thus, Foucault (2010) seeks in archeology to analyze the discourses as practices that emerge at certain moments in history through conditions of possibility that are not confused with a historian’s individual will, with a linear relation between cause and effect, but as a dispersion system related to the will to know and truths produced by power relations. Hence Foucault recognizes that “it might be said, to play on words a little, that in our time history aspires to the condition of archeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 8).

The discourse in Foucault (2010) is understood as a set of statements that come from the same discursive formation. It is a practice that constructs the objects of which it speaks and erupts as an event in a temporal dispersion “that enables it to be repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, utterly erased, and hidden, far from all view, in the dust of books ”(FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 28). According to the author, the analysis of the discursive field, postulates understanding the statement, considered the atom of the discourse, in the narrowness and singularity of its appearance, in the understanding of its conditions of existence, in the fixation of its limits, in the correlation established with others statements, whose relation may be one of adhesion and/or exclusion, of

memory and transformation. The question posed by Foucault (2010) to handle this task was expressed as follows: “what is this singular existence that comes to the surface in what is said and nowhere else?”

For this, it is important to highlight that, according to Foucault’s theoretical proposal, the statement is the elementary unit of the discourse and is different from other categories such as the sentence, the proposition and the speech act, due to the following characteristics: i) the statement does not submit to a canonical structure of the subject-link-predicate type nor is it anchored in grammatical elements that compose the sentence; ii) the statement does not fit the models of truth and/or false which outline the logical functioning of the propositions; iii) the statement does not show the intention of a speaking subject and/or the conditions for effecting or not a speech act. In the French author’s perspective the statement has to be conceived as a function that crosses different domains – among which it is possible to include the phrase, the proposition and the speech act –, and concerns the existence of signs.

The enunciative function is characterized by the following properties: i) referential – which is not constituted by things, facts or realities, “laws of possibility, rules of existence for the objects named, designated, or described within it, and for the relations that are affirmed or denied in it” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 103); ii) position of subject – the statement maintains a very singular position with the subject which enunciates; however, it is not about the empirical subject nor the author as a creative instance, but a position that needs to be assumed in the statement; iii) associated domain – relations of the statement with others already made and with those yet to be made in an adjacent field; iv) repeatable materiality – the statement needs to be registered within the scope of a material support, of a place, of a date, of a complex system of institutions that allows repetition, transcription, and circulation.

The enunciative analysis is supported by some principles, which are: i) principle of rarity – considering that not everything can be said, the statement has a rarity effect and the analysis wishes “to determine the principle according to only the ‘signifying’ groups that were enunciated could appear” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 135); ii) principle of externality – apprehending the statement in its own emergence in the place and at the moment in which it took place, without, therefore, incurring a search for a constitutive interiority, but thinking exteriority in a relative

rarity, in a gap similarity with discursive events that do not refer to an individual subject, to a collective consciousness, nor to a transcendental subjectivity; iii) accumulation – a principle that allows us to conceive the transformations of the statement over time, in view of the remnant, that is, the fact that the statements are preserved due to a series of techniques, material supports and statutory modalities and additivity, that is, “the type of grouping between successive statements are not always the same and they never proceed by a simple piling-up or juxtaposition of successive elements” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 140), as well as recurrence, defined as the characteristic of the statement of referring to previous elements in an enunciative field; iv) positivity – it is the principle at which we arrive when proceeding to all the principles previously listed. In carrying out the enunciative analysis, we deal with the description of the rules for the constitution of a discursive formation, understood by Foucault (2010) as a set of regularities of objects, thematic choices, concepts, types of statements that can be found in the dispersion regime to which the production of the discourses is submitted.

To describe the discursive formation, Foucault (2010) proposes to analyze the description of the discursive units, based on four elements, namely: the formation of objects, enunciative modalities, concepts, and strategies. For this study, the focus is on the formation of objects and enunciative modalities. Regarding the formation of objects, Foucault (2010) explains that it is necessary to investigate which regimes of existence enable the emergence of certain objects of discourse and what systems through which the objects of discourse can succeed and juxtapose themselves, in order to form an enunciative field. For this, the author postulates the delimitation of three methodological procedures: i) surfaces of emergence – pointing out where the objects of discourse can arise, to be analyzable, describable and localized according to certain degrees of rationalization and conceptual codes. ii) authorities of delimitation – the instance responsible for designating, naming and installing a given object of discourse; iii) grids of specification – systems that provide the classification, separation and grouping of objects of discourse.

Regarding the formation of enunciative modalities, Foucault (2010) asks about the following aspects: i) what is the status of the subject who speaks? – the focus is on questioning what legitimacy the subject has

to enunciate and have his/her discourse credible; ii) in which institutional places does the subject find support to legitimize the discourse? – when studying clinical discourse, Foucault (2010) defines spaces such as the hospital, private practice, laboratory, library and documentary field as places through which the medical professionals find legitimacy for their discourse and where they find their specific objects and application points; iii) what positions of the subject are defined in relation to the different domains or groups of objects? – the focus is on analyzing the variety of dispersions of enunciative positions, considering that the discourse is “[...] a space of exteriority in which a network of distinct sites is deployed” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 61).

The description of the units of discourse leads to the process of excavating the layers that compose knowledge. This is understood as everything that can be said within a discursive practice, whether with regard to singularities, conducts, deviations and positions on a given object, found within the scope of a discursive practice, that is, a set of anonymous and historical rules that define the conditions of existence of the enunciative function. In this way, knowledge is not restricted to the scientific field, since “[...] is to be found not only in demonstrations, it can also be found in fiction, reflexion, narrative accounts, institutional regulations, and political decisions” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 221).

The discussions carried out so far are situated in the so-called archaeology of knowledge. From now on, the interest turns to the genealogy of power, although we agree that knowledge and power have an inseparable relation in Foucault’s intellectual trajectory, because, according to the point of view of Machado (2017, p. 37), “the formation of domains of knowledge [occurs] based on power relations.” To that extent, the relative separation that we undertake aims only at questions of a didactic nature and organization of textual information. In this logic, it is convenient to think that, by means of a Nietzschean emphasis, Foucault’s thought rejects all forms of origin, tradition, and evolution. In this logic, there is detachment from the perspective that considers the order and continuity of historical facts, but, rather, the defense of discontinuity, divisions and singularities. According to Foucault (2008, p. 16), “[...] genealogy is not opposed to history like the haughty and profound view of the philosopher against the mole gaze of the scholar; on the contrary, it is opposed to the meta-historical unfolding of ideal

meanings and undefined teleologies.” In this way, when proposing a genealogy of power, the French thinker’s reflections do not propose to trace an origin for power, the point zero from which power would have emanated, but investigates the different practices that outline the exercise of power in the course of history. In doing so, Foucault (2006) understands power through relations that occur in a capillary manner and are considered productive, thus removing the power of analysis that situate it in the field of the State and domination, as the exercise of power runs through multiple circuits and, according to Foucault (2006), each one has, in some way, a certain power, and makes this power connect with a discontinuous and changing plot. Still for the author, power is not restricted to the replication of production relations, because, on the one hand, it encourages, disciplines, restrains, and, on the other, it stimulates, exercises and produces, leading the subjects to adhere to certain standards of conduct or be away from them. According to Foucault (2008, p. 148), the positivity of power is precisely to the fact that it does not only repress, exclude and censor, because if it were so, power would be fragile and “[...] if it is strong, it is because it produces positive effects in terms of desire and knowledge. Power, far from preventing knowledge, produces it.”

According to Foucault (1995), power designates relationships between partners, which means that power is exercised over free human beings, who have the possibility to resist. In the thinker’s words, there is no massive, diffuse, concentrated or distributed power, it is not in the order of consent or the transfer of rights, but “an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future” (FOUCAULT, 1995, p. 200). This freedom that Foucault (1995) talks about is what guarantees the possibility of different behaviors, varied reactions and multiple modes of behavior, that is, freedom is a condition of existence for the exercise of power relations. In addition, it generates possibilities of resistances, which coexist with the technologies of power, in a relation of contiguity and not exactly of confrontation and annulment. That is, power and resistance feedback and “the end of power was never assumed, on the contrary; as resistance is part of power, one who resists does not destroy or annul power but contributes to its recreation, displacement, re-establishment on new bases” (ALBUQUERQUE JÚNIOR, 2015, p. 212).

For Foucault (1995), the analysis of power relations presupposes the following points: i) the differentiation systems – which allow acting on the others' actions through certain mechanisms responsible for operating legal, traditional, statutory, linguistic and cultural distinctions, among others; ii) the types of objectives – the actions are guided by the pursuit of certain purposes, such as maintaining privileges, concentrating profits, exercising a function or profession; iii) instrumental modalities – refer to the fact that power can be exercised through a variety of instruments such as the threat of weapons, the word, economic disparities, surveillance systems, among others; iv) the forms of institutionalization – they are distributed among traditional devices, legal structures and instances of control and principles of regulation of power relations in a given social context; v) degrees of rationalization – adjusted procedures that guarantee the exercise of power that assure the effectiveness of the instruments and/or the function of any costs, whether economic or in terms of reaction arising from the possibilities of resistance.

These points are intrinsically articulated with the production of truth. According to Foucault (2008), the truth is far from being a concept of a transcendental and immanent nature; on the contrary, it is produced through relations of knowledge and power of each historical moment. Thus, “Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power” (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 12). Following Foucault's theorizations, it will be observed that there is a kind of general policy of truth in each era, defined based on the types of discourse that are considered true, the different mechanisms and instances that make it possible to differentiate true and false discourses, in addition to techniques and procedures responsible for obtaining the truth and the status of the subjects who have the legitimacy to attribute the truth to a given group of discourses.

In this perspective, Foucault (2009) speaks to us of the will to truth as a principle through which it is possible to distinguish the true of an era, based on procedures that aim to control the discourses existing in a given historical time. These are exclusion procedures, which, according to Foucault (2009), decant and separate true and false discourses, especially through institutional support, such as libraries and laboratories. In short, the will to truth exerts a kind of pressure and coercion on the varied discourses that circulate in society. At the time

of writing this text, the world experiences a pandemic arising from the new coronavirus (Covid-19) and the will to truth in medical knowledge seeks to exercise a power of coercion over the exponential amount of false news about the virus, its transmission and prophylaxis. Medical knowledge, institutionally constituted through health policies, strives to build a true discourse about the disease and, in doing so, delegitimizes the fake news discourse. Therefore, there are technologies of power “that create knowledge or enable the emergence of new knowledge in the relation with these techniques of power” (GALLO, 2013, p. 379), which are concerned with exercising a kind of control in the field of a truth-producing policy.

For Foucault (2002, p. 8), social practices can engender new “domains of knowledge that not only bring new objects, new concepts, and new techniques to light, but also give rise to totally new forms of subjects and subjects of knowledge.” This occurs from the functioning of relations of knowledge-power supported by regimes of truth, through which certain behaviors and subjectivities are built. When we think, for example, of the constitution of discourses about global warming, based especially on the knowledge of climatology, it is possible to glimpse the emergence of social behaviors aimed at caring for the environment, whether with regard to consumption habits, means of locomotion, protection of forests, or in terms of calling for a lifestyle connected to the climate issue. Therefore, vigilant subjectivities emerge in relation to caring for the planet, in view of the will to truth arising from the knowledge of climatology. In Foucault’s terms, there is the constitution of a subject of knowledge regarding the socio-environmental issue. For the author, “[...] the political and economic conditions of existence are not a veil or an obstacle for the subject of knowledge [connaissance] but the means by which subjects of knowledge are formed, and hence relations of truth” (FOUCAULT, 2002, p. 27). It will be seen below how Greta Thunberg’s emergence in the debate around the environment configures her as a subject crossed by relations of knowledge-power and by processes and struggles that determine knowledge possible forms and fields (FOUCAULT, 1999). However, it is worth emphasizing that Greta should not be imagined emerging as an empirical subject, although several online comment discourses attack the activist’s face, but it is important to think about the role that she occupies as a discursive subject, based on a position that is assumed in the political debate field.

### **3 Network violence: Greta Thunberg in the “everyday cholera court”**

Freire Filho (2014, p. 1) uses the expression “everyday cholera court” to characterize the Internet as a formidable archive of the most different emotions. The author argues that, from the most different web platforms, conflicting discourses on motivation, legitimacy and public demonstrations of fury appear. Freire Filho’s focuses on YouTube videos and comments. Despite the fact that this text does not analyze discourses from this platform, we consider the categorization of Freire Filho (2014) to be relevant, as this violent character spreads on other digital network spaces and provides necessary ingredients to analyze, according to the court metaphor, how discourses arising from these spaces are marked by the effects of accusation, defense, and condemnation. The excerpts chosen include statements that mainly use insult as a discursive strategy for the construction of discourses that generate verbal violence. For Charaudeau (2019, p. 446), verbal violence “comes from an act of language by using certain words, structures or expressions capable of psychologically injuring a person directly attacked or in a third-party position.” Insult and related terms such as injury and offense, according to Charaudeau (2019), materialize violence through verbal language.

Similarly, Burke and Porter (1997) emphasize that in every culture there are terms that can be potentially insulting and this will depend on characteristics that these terms assume when they are produced in specific situations. In this perspective, Charaudeau (2019) makes a very didactic overview about verbal violence and emphasizes the effect acquired by words in relation to the situation in which they are used and, in this perspective, there would be violent words that are not always insulting, and insult does not always occur through rude and violent words. In the first case, Charaudeau (2019) exemplifies that when a mother says to her son, in an affectionate tone “Come here, ugly face,” she, despite using violent terms, produces the sense of affection; in the second case, the author illustrates from constructions as “You always repeat the same thing!,” which, in spite of not containing rude terms, is insulting, since it characterizes the subject to whom it refers as incapable.

With this brief incursion in mind, let us move on to the analysis of online comments, produced due to the publication of the following news on the Uol website: “Greta says that Brazilian Indians were



murdered for trying to protect forests” (12/8/2019), “Bolsonaro calls Greta Thunberg a brat after activist talks about death of Indigenous people (12/10/2019) and “Greta Thunberg puts brat on Twitter profile after Bolsonaro’s statement” (12/10/2019). It is possible to note that the repeatable materiality of the news is linked to an enunciative web that encompasses Greta’s discourse on the murdered indigenous people in the state of Maranhão, the insult of Bolsonaro and Greta’s consequent reaction, in a two-day time span. To give an analytical treatment to the comments, they were divided into two sections. In the first, there is analysis of the comments that discursively build Greta as a manipulated figure, a puppet in the service of big businessmen with a left-wing political bias, and in the second, the disqualification of Greta from a bias that offends her in a more personal way, from physical aspects, that is, for her female condition, and for having Asperger’s Syndrome. Certainly, these two ways of making statements on Thunberg are intertwined; however, by making this division, the objective is to investigate the existence of discursive regularities which guide the analytical look.

The first comment section is below.

#### Comment 1

This girl seems to be an actress more than anything else, but a disturbed one. Poor thing. Manipulated by NGOs and governments, practiced phrases of impact as ... “have stolen my dreams.”<sup>4</sup>

#### Comment 2

One of the most depressing shows ever seen on that forum. In fact, she is pitiful, because she is unscrupulously manipulated by her parents and their equally unscrupulous “climate” business partners.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The choice was not to insert the names of the subjects who post comments, even knowing that those names are not always real. Comment available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/internacional/ultimas-noticias/2019/09/24/greta-thunberg-rebate-ironia-de-donald-trump-mudando-biografia-do-twitter.htm>. Access on: March 10, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/internacional/ultimas-noticias/2019/09/24/greta-thunberg-rebate-ironia-de-donald-trump-mudando-biografia-do-twitter.htm>. Access on: March 10, 2020.

### Comment 3

This Greta is a fraud, manufactured by interests that nobody knows! A spoiled brat, who has never accomplished anything in her life, the wealthy parents' daughter from a developed country, wanders around the world with an activist flag, lives a futile life, skilled in pointing out the world's issues, but unable to indicate an alternative solution, just empty speeches based on opinions that are not even hers! Lovely girl!!<sup>6</sup>

### Comment 4

I am really full of pity for this girl. Poor thing! I hope she never realizes she was transformed into (and used as!) a left-wing proselyte ... Otherwise, she will suffer a lot! So pitying! And what opportunistic parents she has ...<sup>7</sup>

According to Amossy (2014), when using pseudonyms, Internet users find fertile ground to insult, under the illusory existence of a mask that would protect them from possible regulatory sanctions. Following this logic, the positions expressed in the comments seek to undermine Greta Thunberg's performance, assuming that she is not responsible for what she does, thus causing effects of disgust ("one of the most depressing shows," "spoiled," "never accomplished anything in her life"), pity ("full of pity for this girl," "pitiful," "poor thing"), and irony ("Lovely girl"). These effects allow us to think about how Greta Thunberg is constituted as an object of discourse. As discussed in the previous topic, an object of discourse needs to have a surface of emergence and, in the case under analysis, this surface is expressed in the association between Greta's performance and a supposed financing by politicians who use her as a puppet. This results in the comment subject's discredit on the activist, who is considered, above all, a victim, since being young and inexperienced,

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<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/agencia-estado/2019/12/08/greta-thunberg-diz-que-indigenas-foram-assassinados-por-tentar-protoger-florestas.htm>. Access on: March 10, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/internacional/ultimas-noticias/2019/09/24/greta-thunberg-rebate-ironia-de-donald-trump-mudando-biografia-do-twitter.htm>. Access on: March 10, 2020

she is are manipulated by groups with disguised interests (“interests that nobody knows”), in common agreement with their parents. It is worth mentioning the frequency with which the figure of Greta is associated, through rumors, with billionaire George Soros, through the Open Society Foundations, created with the aim of supporting organizations and individuals that fight for freedom of expression, justice and equality.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in the first comment, there is a position according to which Greta only acts out, stages what was previously passed on to her (“practiced phrases of impact,” “opinions that are not even hers”), and while not being sincere, she lies and deceives. When referring to Greta’s participation in the Climate Summit, the subject of the second comment qualifies the episode as being “depressing” and retakes a fragment of Greta’s speech with a tone of mockery (“have stolen my dreams”); this position is also shared in the third comment, when it is stated that she is a “fraud,” as well as in the fourth comment, in which the enunciation subject asserts that Greta “was used.” Crossing these positions, the discourses signal that there is no rational elucidation that can explain Thunberg’s mediatisation other than her connection with institutions whose interests are mysterious. The third comment is incisive in explaining that Greta, as she lives in the comfort of a developed country, would not find support for her activism regarding the environment. That is, her speech should not be taken seriously, since she “has never accomplished anything in her life.” On this point, it is worth mentioning the example of a meme that circulated on digital social networks after Thunberg’s participation in the opening of the United Nations Climate Summit, in December 2019. The meme was shared on Twitter by Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro, at the time affiliated with the Social Liberal Party (PSL), and it is a photomontage in which the activist appears having a meal on a train and it is possible to see, through the window, malnourished African children. The photomontage was made from a picture of Greta on a train in Denmark, and trees are seen through the window. The effect arising from the photomontage is that the activist is hypocritical when stating that they “have stolen her dreams” at the UN event, since she maintains a comfortable life, while other children go hungry. If we think about the differentiation systems mentioned by Foucault (1995), we claim that the

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<sup>8</sup> Available at: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/newsroom/open-society-foundations-and-george-soros/pt>. Access on: March 10, 2020.

functioning of the truth from Thunberg does not fulfill the requirements of a distinction that would make her authorized to have her discourse qualified.

In this respect, Greta is discursively constituted as a subject to whom one should not listen, in accordance with Bolsonaro's statement, when he called her a "brat." Since it is a lie, the positions are dispersed in the formation of enunciative modalities, towards unmasking her, as in the third comment, or wishing that she never be aware of being used, as in the fourth comment. In any case, the activist is insulted for having her struggle discredited and being unworthy to occupy certain social and decision-making spaces of power, such as that of the Climate Summit and the World Economic Forum, and, then, the comments create certain truths about Greta and about environmentalism as a social and political practice. When they think differently from the environmental discourse, this radicalism understands the other as "sick people who need to be corrected as deviant individuals" (DUNKER, 2017, p. 279).

We saw, from the apprehension of the statements in its exteriority, the emergence of positions responsible for assuming knowledge of Greta Thunberg – she does not act voluntarily, given that she is commanded by others – and, with that, they incite certain power relations, as once fraud is detected, it is advisable to stay away. The position that enunciates also condemns, as highlighted in the allusion of the web as a court (FREIRE FILHO, 2014), Greta's attitudes and also the parents' attitudes, as these would be complicit with the situation. In other words, the power relations that involve parents and children are revisited in the discursive functioning of comments. In this sense, the fourth comment shows that the activist will suffer when she finds out that she was used by her own parents ("opportunistic parents"). These statements resonate with vestiges of a practice that excludes certain subjects from having their discourses accepted as true (FOUCAULT, 1995), due to not presenting a status that authorizes them to enunciate with credibility. In the case of Greta, there is the absence of maturity articulated with the bad faith of the parents, who induce their daughter to lie and deceive with a view to earning fame and money, through "unscrupulous partners." In the words of Foucault (1999, p. 28), "[...] the machinery by which the power relations give rise to a possible corpus of knowledge, and knowledge extends and reinforces the effects of this power."

In the second section of comments, the anti-Greta discourses fall on the physical appearance, being a woman and having Asperger's Syndrome.

#### Comment 5

I really doubt that she herself manages her social networks, since her intellect is limited. See that journalist's questions and as she did not have the text ready embarrassed she did not know how to answer the questions, she is a pathetic puppet of the progressives!<sup>9</sup>

#### Comment 6

This girl with serious psychological problems is being used to attack those who dare to challenge the left-wing globalists who want to impose the political correctness and subtract from Brazil a third of the country, internationalizing this piece for the benefit of the great powers [...]<sup>10</sup>

#### Comment 7

They haven't found a boyfriend for this unpleasant brat yet.<sup>11</sup>

#### Comment 8

The expression of hate that this moppet has when speaking says a lot about who she will become. Nobody imagines it but the anti-Christ may be a woman.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/meio-ambiente/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2019/12/10/greta-thunberg-poe-pirralha-no-perfil-do-twitter-apos-fala-de-bolsonaro.htm>. Access on: March 10, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/meio-ambiente/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2019/12/10/greta-thunberg-poe-pirralha-no-perfil-do-twitter-apos-fala-de-bolsonaro.htm>. Access on: March 10, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Available in at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/agencia-estado/2019/12/08/greta-thunberg-diz-que-indigenas-foram-assassinados-por-tentar-protoger-florestas.htm>. Access on: March 10, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/internacional/ultimas-noticias/2019/09/24/greta-thunberg-rebate-ironia-de-donald-trump-mudando-biografia-do-twitter.htm>. Access on: March 10, 2020.

The main terms used to refer to Greta in the comments are linked to the age issue (“brat,” “moppet”), and this aspect is repeatedly reinforced as an element that builds truths under which the activist is discursively constituted as inapt, through practices that interchange with gender relations. It was not enough to be “a girl” and, therefore, inadequate to deal with serious themes, as this is not the place culturally attributed to the female subject; there is also the construction of Greta as intellectually limited, in an implied reference to the activist having Asperger’s Syndrome (Comment 1), because she has serious psychological problems (Comment 3), hence she is manipulated by someone else. In other words, the activist, according to the positions present in the comments, in the referential of the statement, is characterized as an abnormal, pathological being, and whose dreadful appearance embodies a diabolical force (“the anti-Christ may be a woman”).

According to Safatle (2018, p. 293), “the pathological is designated from the normal, reason why it will normally be described as a disturbance, disorder, deficits in excess.” The enunciator, through knowledge, through the observation of Greta’s physiognomy (“expression of hate”) proves her non-imputability and her abnormal condition, reason why she is a sort of combat weapon against “those who dare to challenge the left-wing globalists,” according to the subject of Comment 6. In this direction, Greta would consist only of a piece of a more intricate power strategy, or, in the words of Comment 5, “pathetic puppet of the progressives!,” and she would be unable to manage her social networks, according to Comment 1, thus reinforcing the image of the activist as a kind of ventriloquist puppet with nefarious purposes.

Considered in this way, the struggle undertaken by Greta is conceived as an international domination plan, which deprives her importance and authenticity. According to the position stated in Comment 6, there is an implementation agenda for the “political correctness” and, in view of this, an internationalization project for the Amazon (“subtracting a third of the country”), from which it can be concluded that the environmental discourse is fallacious and hides its real interests. At the beginning of this text, it was discussed how the aversion to environmentalism and the existence of climatic negationism is anchored in a discursive practice that incites doubt and mistrust. In the enunciative rarity, this practice is present in the constitution of the position of

Comment 6, since, when unmasking Greta, the subject denounces a project of power of global proportions under a mask of good intentions towards the environmental cause. According to Roque (2020), this discursive position is a result of reasoning according to which, under the guise of green causes, there would be a plot to diminish citizens' freedom of purchase and, to an extent, a secret plot with the aim of establishing the communist regime worldwide.

It is not rash to affirm that the commentators' unrestricted support for the way Bolsonaro and Trump referred to Greta represent a will to truth aligned with the right-wing politics spectrum. And, taking into account how this polarization takes place in digital media, it is worth emphasizing that the conditions of existence of this enunciative function are linked in a prodigious manner to the institutional support for these statements. Let us consider, for example, the Brazilian president's negationist position in treating the main environment elements, such as the episode of the Amazon fires, in 2019. From the incisive doubt in relation to official data regarding the fires to accusations against members of non-governmental organizations as being responsible for the fires, what could be observed was the institutional approval for the voices that emerge in the hidden spaces of online comments. These voices find some support to offend Greta and any other activist, because the concern for the environment is unnecessary and cannot be genuine and disinterested, unless motivated by some personal and/or financial advantage.

Comment 7 is linked to the misogynistic statement that was discussed in the introduction to this text. Remembering it, radio personality Gustavo Negreiro stated that Greta would need "a man, either male or female." In the case of the comment discursive position, it is suggested that the young environmentalist's interest could be diverted if she got a boyfriend. Thus, she would forget the environmental activism, because it does not suit her, given that she is a teenage woman who should have another life goal. For Foucault (2010), this way of enunciating arises under the functioning of a delimitation instance that, in the case under study, safeguards certain spaces and places for the woman subject's performance, establishing and naming this subject as an object of discourse. When breaking the boundary of the private and the domain to which the woman should restrict herself, Greta is attacked ("unpleasant brat"), since she escapes the socio-historically established

rules, which involve gender (the fact of being a woman) and generation (the fact of being a teenager). Furthermore, the statement of Comment 7 is constructed by means of a remnant, insofar as it brings up statements preserved over time about the female subject, through a will to truth of patriarchal nature, through the principle of accumulation that resists despite all the feminine conquests of the last century and beginning of the twenty-first century, especially with regard to participation in politics space. It is precisely because she is in this space and “not playing with dolls,” as another comment will suggest, that Greta is offended.

The two sections of comments allow us to observe, following Charaudeau (2019), that not all offensive discourse uses words and/or expressions that reveal violent effects in themselves, but that it is possible to offend through the use of a priori non-violent terms. In this logic, in statements like “I am really full of pity for this girl” (Comment 4), “I really doubt that she herself manages her social networks” (Comment 5), there is no offensive connotation at first sight; however, they are statements that question Greta’s intellectual capacity and show a certain forced pity for the activist being a minor and, therefore, prove her incapability. These positions reveal the fact that if the activist is mentally incapable, and then forged within obtuse intentions, the young woman’s entire protagonism is discredited and the environmental discourse, in turn, is dismantled.

## 4 Conclusions

According to a piece of news that circulated on the BBC Brazil website in March 2020, a 19-year-old German girl named Naomi Seibt<sup>13</sup> presents herself as the voice of climate skeptics and, when approaching conservative groups in the USA, calls herself anti-Greta. According to the German, “[...] for years I was an environmental alarmist. I believed in all this narrative that climate change was destroying the planet [...] but, after doing some research, I decided that I already had my own solid view on the subject.” The fact of having agreed with the so-called “environmental alarmism” led Seibt to acquire a status of authority to disagree with such a point of view, which was transformed into “own

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<sup>13</sup> Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/internacional-51710095>. Access on: March 18, 2020.



solid view,” in order to suppose that the previous view, to some extent, had been imposed on her. The existence of an anti-Greta pole shows us a clash of truths about the environmental cause in a sort of dispute of narratives of the issue. Thus, either the urgency in solving environmental problems is affirmed, in the view in which Greta is based, or this alarmism is denied, according to Naomi’s perception.

This polarization finds an echo in the emergence of the discourses analyzed in this article, in the sense that the comments, when attacking Greta, demonstrate a certain disinterest in the green cause. To that extent, we have mainly investigated how comments produce violence around Greta’s image, examining enunciative positions, knowledge-power relations, and the constitution of truths about the Swedish activist. The subject positions of the studied statements are entangled, in a domain associated with other positions that, to a greater or lesser extent, reduce Greta Thunberg’s relevance and her environmental activism, present, for example, in the way in which certain governments treat her, notably the USA’s and Brazil’s presidents. In this enunciative chain, the activist is constituted as a deception produced by instances of power, in collusion with the young woman’s parents, with the aim of settling national authority and imposing a left-wing agenda.

Such positions refer to knowledge that aims at Greta as intellectually limited and, therefore, incompetent to act in a complex cause. This knowledge originates from the visible unpreparedness, observed through the activist’s performance at the opening of the UN Climate Summit, from the observation of her physiognomy, which denotes horrifying and abnormal effects, and from a complete mismatch of Greta within the discursive practice she tries to adopt. From these comments, we understand that this knowledge is linked to technologies of power, because, once Thunberg’s incapability is attested, it is necessary to ignore it, not to give due attention and, if possible, “to get a boyfriend” (Comment 7), so that, in this way, she may not interfere in themes that are not within her scope.

Considering the statement in its uniqueness and narrowness, it is possible to see how the insult is a strategy that ends up triggering the production of truths about Thunberg. The positions they enunciate substitute clarification, which unmasks fraud and, in this way, shows the true discourse to be considered. Aware of the fact that the truth belongs

to this world (FOUCAULT, 2008), we are led to question the practices and discourses that legitimize the truths of each era. In relation to Greta, we found, in the enunciative fabric of online comments, the production of a discourse that imposes itself as truth from the perspective of insult, by the defamation of the other as being an impostor and the reaffirmation of a discourse, produced without scientific knowledge, as being true, at a time when science is constantly put in check. This time, climatic negationism goes hand in hand with other types of historical-social revisionism (such as Flat Earth Theory, anti-vaccination movement, among others), and they register stances in digital and alternative media. In such a field, Greta Thunberg is a propitious target for virulence on the web, as she gathers social markers, for being a teenager, woman, and neurobiologically objectified by a disorder that distances her from the social rule established. Basically, the fight for the environmental cause ends up being ammunition whose target rests on the inadequacy of subjects like Greta in decision-making spaces of political power.

Finally, it is necessary to emphasize that this study is part of a broader research still under development, reason why many other points may be deepened in future analyzes, such as: i) the clash of truths between discourses in favor of and against Greta Thunberg and the way knowledge-power relations are demanded in this enunciative game; ii) the treatment that different media vehicles give to Greta Thunberg and Naomi Seibt, a priori conceived as antagonistic figures; iii) the problematization of Thunberg's emergence as a biopolitical strategy, especially in a perspective that can consider the management and control of life on the planet from the environmental discourse, and iv) the construction of the activist as a digital influencer and the diverse discourse of others young environmentalists who take her as a model to be followed. In short, these are concerns, groping and plans to perform research that considers the relationship between discourses, subjects and the current history.

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