

## The exchange of words and the exchange of things: politics and language in the Brazilian Congress\*

**Luiz Eduardo Abreu**

Lecturer on the Master's Program in Law at the Brasília University Centre (UniCEUB). E-mail: <luizeabreu@yahoo.com.br>

### ABSTRACT

Since Lévi-Strauss, anthropologists have been trained to see the exchange relationship identified by Mauss in *The Gift* as a form of communication. Linguistics, reasoned Lévi-Strauss, holds the key to our understanding of society. This paper develops this anthropological interest in language by pursuing an altogether different approach. Applying Wittgenstein's idea that the meaning of a word is set by its use in actual situations (actual language games), the paper describes the rules for the language games played by politicians in the Brazilian Congress. The most striking of these rules is that politics should be understood as the exchange of material and immaterial things, following the same patterns of gift exchange explored by Mauss. Arguing that, at least in some contexts, the word itself is part of such exchanges, the paper aims to provide an ethnographical investigation of politics as the relationship between the exchange of words and the exchange of things.

**Keywords:** Language, Politics, Exchange, Power, Brazilian Congress.

### Introduction

The story is well-known — or at least was at the time. The telephones of the Minister of Communications, Mendonça de Barros, were tapped (and tapped illegally, at that) during the privatization process of the public telephone companies. When these conversations reached the public, the illegal nature of the recordings did nothing to stem the political fallout. On the 6<sup>th</sup> November 1998, the minister was summoned to explain himself to the Senate, where his political survival depended on his capacity to convince the senators of his innocence, or so it was said. And his fate was sealed with this rebuke by Senator Pedro Simon: ‘*Your Excellency is mistaken in saying: “I want you to condemn me for my actions, not my words.” Words, in politics, are important... I tell you from the bottom of my heart, were I Your Excellency, I would resign. Were I Your Excellency, I would be noble and sacrifice myself to help the President.*’<sup>1</sup>

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As an ethnographic fact revealing the role of language within this social field, the senator's speech presents the political dilemma in its most striking form: words are both treacherous and inevitable. The politician knows perfectly well that events could have led to completely different outcomes and that today's words may be tomorrow's facts. But I am getting ahead of myself here. Before investigating the workings of political language, I must address a less exciting but more fundamental question: how the Senator's insight regarding the foundational role of language within politics can be related to anthropological practice and theory?

As far as this text is concerned, the relation between language and anthropology must be understood in the light of two grounding principles. First, the relation between the anthropologist and a native's language — itself a scope of limitations and possibilities — is a fundamental issue for any ethnographic work, an issue born of ethnographic practice itself. Still, theoretical concerns or ethnographic experience can both, at times, explicitly direct one's attentions towards language. My point here is: language is central to this study only because the concerns addressed throughout it are already present in the 'empirical wisdom' of Brazilian congressional politics.

The second principle is that congressional players themselves view politics as a type of exchange-relation that exhibits all the aspects of the gift described by Mauss's classic, *The Gift* (Mauss 1968). These aspects are the operation of institutional relations under a personal register, the social imbalance inherent to giving and the apparent disinterest that goes hand-in-hand with the expectation of future retribution — even when only due to social hypocrisy and deceit. In anthropology, exchange is first associated to language by Lévi-Strauss's 1968 reading of *The Gift*. Arguing that society is based on the exchange of words, women and things, and that exchange is a form of communication, Lévi-Strauss suggested that language itself provides the paradigm for comprehending both exchange and society. My research at the Brazilian Congress picks up on Lévi-Strauss' insight, though approaching it from a slightly different perspective.

### **Preliminary sociological considerations**

It has long been observed that Brazilian political players perceive their relations as an exchange of gifts. The phenomenon, in fact, has been widely discussed by authors of various theoretical affiliations (see Abreu 1993, 1999; Bezerra 1999; Lanna 1995; Leal 1997; Palmeira 1996 etc.). In this regard, the Brazilian Congress only reflects the wider social reality of which it is a part. There is, therefore, no need to develop the topic in depth here — we will return to it repeatedly throughout the text. The association of politics with language, on the other hand, may present a number of difficulties — especially for a gaze, such as ours, 'trained' to approach the political by means of the concept of power. These preliminary ethnographic comments will thus discuss the issue of language.

Like everything in this world, language is linked to a division which, generated by the social environment, establishes two distinct 'realities.' On the one hand, we find that which political theory recognizes as 'institutional'. These are the norms which structure the workings of political agencies such as the Senate, the House and Congress entire, norms which are established by the Constitution, by internal rules of procedure and by various conventions, resolutions and laws. To such legislation, I would add the arguments used to speak about or from these institutions.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, we find that which players say and believe is 'in fact' happening: the world of exchanges, deals and interests which hides behind closed doors, the world 'behind the scenes'.

The idea of approaching the Brazilian social system as a chiasm where two heterogenic, mutually exclusive categories persistently oppose each other is not new. There are similarities

— a ‘family resemblance,’ if you will — between the Congress data and DaMatta’s juxtaposition of ‘personal ethics’ to ‘bureaucratic ethics’ (1997). I will, however, give preference to the formula proposed by Luiz Tarlei de Aragão (1990:62). He argues that we face ‘a society, or a social system, that has historically proven its incapacity to interconnect and encapsulate its differences and totalize the social world’. In that which concerns Congress, this implies the absence of a framework capable of unifying its rules and the everyday practices through which it reproduces itself — ‘precisely because the social system has experienced this ontogenetic separation between domination (authority, law) and ownership (immanence, practice)’ (Aragão 1990:62). My objective, however, is to analyse this distinction not in Brazilian society at large, but rather in its repercussions for our theme: the language of politics.

Language is central to politics in both its visible, public aspect and in its backstage activities. This was the meaning behind the Senator’s chastisement of Mendonça de Barros. When the latter asked to be condemned for his actions and not his words, he was ultimately attempting to place himself beyond politics, since *within politics* the distinction between words and actions would make no sense. Likewise, the statutory procedures all belong to language: it is only by being read aloud that reports, requests, bills, appeals and proposals not only come into effect but also become effective and produce institutional results. The word (understood here in the broadest sense) remains present even when apparently absent. This is the case in electronic voting sessions by the Floor, when the pressing of a button replaces the traditional ‘I vote for the proposal, Mr. President’ for another, electronic, declaration. Indeed, a ‘member of parliament’ is someone who is entitled to speak and whose words can produce specific effects, as determined by the rules of procedure.

Language is equally constitutive to those activities outside institutional regulation. Various passages of Brazilian political folklore express this ethnographic fact colourfully, such as the saying that ‘talks that last less than four hours just aren’t politics’. This centrality of the word to backstage politics is also evidenced by a well-known narrative regarding Tancredo Neves, a former congressman and president-elect who died in 1985, shortly before being sworn in. On one occasion, a journalist asked the veteran politician whether he found congressional activities — namely, the solemn and ‘ritualized’ regulatory procedures — tedious. Neves replied that Congress is a ‘centre of creativity’ and provided the following example:

Now and again I invent a rumour and let it loose in the entrance lobby when I arrive. Then I go quickly to my office and later to the Floor. Know what happens? I rediscover my rumour not only vastly improved, but sometimes also accompanied by one or two cubs. Brand new little new rumours... (cited in Couto 1995:34).

The most visible aspect of the phenomenon is the radical distinction that the social environment generates between the language used in regulated contexts and its behind-the-scenes counterpart. The two forms differ completely in their vocabulary, posture and ‘intimacy.’ Wherever words are subject to institutional record or public scrutiny is considered a possibility, certain conventions need be followed. For instance: the rules of procedure should be employed along with the required honorifics of ‘Your Excellency’ and ‘noble colleague’. Arguments, for their part, must be based on appeals to consensus, to majority rule, to legality, to national interest and personal disinterest. Floor sessions provide a paradigmatic example of this regulated register, with the institutional results being contingent on the correct use of this vocabulary. The backstage register, for its part, imposes an entirely different set of conventions. Here, an endless series of negotiations, exchanges and arguments takes place away from the public eye; and conversations are colloquial, open and frequently involve slang and swearing. These opposing registers therefore constitute, effectively and analytically, two distinct languages that produce unlike effects, follow unlike sets of rules and are applicable and *make sense* in unlike social contexts.

From the sociological viewpoint, one mustn't treat these languages separately. Paraphrasing Durkheim, whoever chooses one as 'the reality' and consigns the other to irrelevance is ultimately opposing abstractions — especially as social reality emerges from the difficult and conflictive relation between them. The sociological perspective, however, must consider how the two languages are perceived and developed within social experience of congressional players, an experience that contradicts the methodological principle above. The ethnographical fact is that the two languages are antagonistic to the extent that each, in its own way, denies the relevance of the other.

The way 'procedural language' (an imprecise but economic expression) denies the relevance of politics as a 'conversation' derives from its dependence upon and similarity to juridical language. For example: an approved 'proposition' — procedurally, anything submitted to the House or Senate for deliberation — becomes part of that juridical system which both allows propositions to produce effects and limits their effectiveness. This is why the Constitutional and Judiciary Committee must give prior approval to *any* law bill (statutes or supplementary laws) and Constitutional Amendment before it can be sent to the Floor or enacted as law. The committee verifies the 'constitutional, legal, juridical, regulatory and technical legislative aspects of bills, amendments or alternative bills subject to the appraisal of the House or its committees,' as well as the 'admissibility of Constitutional amendment proposals' (art. 32 of the House Rules — likewise with the Senate).

Procedural language, however, also denies its backstage counterpart in more subtle manners. For the very constitution of public institutions results from their being formulated by juridical norms, expressed in legal language, as is the case with administrative law. Representatives' activities are also constitutionally constrained by 'parliamentary decorum' (on this, see Teixeira 1998). Moreover, the House approved, through Resolution No. 25 of 2001, its Code of Ethics and Parliamentary Decorum, which 'establishes the ethical principles and basic rules of decorum.' Duties include 'processing all the propositions submitted for appraisal and vote on the basis of the public interest' and 'exercising the mandate with dignity and respect for public matters and the popular will, acting with good faith, zeal and probity'. Whatever fails to fit into 'regulatory language' is, in short, relegated to illegitimacy, illegality or — at best — irrelevance. To anticipate the argument developed in this text, I would suggest that regulatory language denies exchange, personal relations and contingency; in other words, it denies what, at least for the participants of this world, really takes place. In a sense, it denies politics itself.

For players who live and breathe politics daily, the core of 'the political' resides in the backstage events. 'All creativity and real politics takes place behind the scenes,' I've been told various times. This does not mean that the rules of procedure are irrelevant or can be ignored. On the contrary: those representatives or senators who know them well have a substantial advantage in relation to those who do not. Here, using the rules is equivalent to possessing technical know-how, a know-how whose importance resides in its capacity to generate desired effects and maintain one's backstage influence. In this sense, rules are used to impose obstacles and 'sell' solutions, to defend or even gain political ground. Insofar as the use of internal regulations depends on a 'reality' found elsewhere, this behind-the-scenes language denies any referentiality to 'regulatory language;' it denies the very possibility that the latter circumscribe or subjugate the political world.

The ethnographic fact we must address is the following: the incompatibility between the rules of regulatory language and those of its backstage counterpart results in a relation of reciprocal negation. And by such negation, this specific social environment manifests what Aragão (1990) describes as the 'ontogenetic separation' between authority and law, on one hand, and immanence and practice, on the other. In the institution's day-to-day, the distinction between the two languages is often far from clear, as there are various grey areas and intermediate zones where they mix with more or less cathartic consequences. Sociologically, this may have been the hidden 'reason' for Mendonça de Barros' political downfall, a reason summarized by

Senator Pedro Simon's intervention. The minister's words, which *should have remained backstage* where they might have been 'normal,' entered the public world of 'regulatory language.' This is no trite matter. Words *had to* return to their proper places. The confusion of the two languages *had to be dispelled*. The distinction between them *had to be* re-established. And only a *sacrifice* (the minister's public execration) could achieve that. However, the point here is not that 'social reality' corresponds in its entirety to the dual classification above, which is far from exhaustive. The point is rather that this distinction informs how political players produce and conceptualize their world and their experience within it.

This 'divided world' casts a veil of secrecy upon backstage politics. By pushing this, the real political, into the shadows, it covers it in secrecy — a secrecy reflected by various levels of social reality, including its morphology; there is, for example, a *place* for the secret. Some House leaders possess small windowless offices with acoustic muffling, called 'confessionals.' (Senators' offices also have acoustic protection.) Most importantly, the secret — the words spoken to a chosen few, words others must not hear — is interwoven with the category of power. "The power of the leader is the confessional secrets that he possesses," once said a former leader and president of the House.

The representative enters the leader's office and 'confesses', saying exactly what he needs and why. Here, it would make no sense for him to say 'my electoral base needs such and such.' Rather, he openly states his demands: 'if I don't get funds for this bridge, I won't get re-elected,' or 'I'm broke from the campaign and need to make the president of such-and-such.' The role of the leader is to mediate these requests, 'negotiate them' with the Administration. On one hand, he knows the needs and interests of his political group; on the other, he uses his party's political clout to obtain benefits from the Administration and meet his group's 'demands.' The leader is therefore a very particular node in this system of exchanges to the extent that he organizes *within one and the same system* the exchanges of words, of things and of words for things. In these cases, a secret is a secret *because* it belongs to the 'closed regime' of the circulation of words and things. Concealing dangers and pratfalls, this regime is marked by the perpetual re-enactment of a drama of uncertainty: Can I trust what they tell me? Can I reveal this secret? Can I use these words? Still, this closed regime should not be considered in isolation: its reality lies in the relation it maintains with another, *open* regime of word-circulation that also operates backstage. We glimpsed this open regime of rumour, anonymous comment and established knowledge that 'everyone knows' in Tancredo Neves' anecdote above.

The ethnographic problem is that the two systems oppose each other. Keeping a secret means keeping certain words from circulating in the open circuit. And the issue becomes the relation between the opposing backstage systems — a relation we can perceive in the light of an ethnographic observation. In politics, one exchanges not only things and words, but also silence; since all are privy to the potentially compromising secrets of others, all depend on their other's silence. From its player's point of view, politics is also an exchange of silence for silence — or for other things. As any, this rule — however — can be broken. Sometimes, secrets become public deliberately or by accident. (In the case of minister's wire tap, for example, the relevant questions would be: Who broke the unwritten rule? Who gave the tapes to the press?). Exposing a secret, however, is not dangerous only for those compromised by it. To break the rule of silence is always also to put oneself in danger.

On the other hand, words are also exchanged and put into circulation. Among the words exchanged, some describe — or purport to describe — what is hidden in secrecy. For 'native' wisdom believes the secret to contain the reasons and meanings of other's actions: it is what *needs* to be known but is in many cases difficult, if not impossible, to discover. And since politics *is* the exchange of words, what one says about what is happening, about other people's reasons and motives, is never a disinterested attempt to describe reality. Quite the opposite: to interpret, 'discover' or 'divulge' the intentions of others is *to do* politics, as Tancredo Neves

acknowledges in his aphorism. We can therefore summarize the relation between the exchange of secrets and words with an aporia: to have power means to keep secrets, to do politics means to exchange words.

This presents a problem: it is impossible to describe what is concealed by silence, what remains within the closed circuit of exchanged words. Since some words are not meant for us to hear, an anthropologist can only record their most *accessible* exchanges. As a result, that dimension most important and fundamental *for Congressional players* eludes, by definition, the objective possibilities of data collection. The difficulty can only be solved methodologically. My solution to this dilemma is implicit in the preliminary considerations above. And it is based on the factual claim that words have uses in the regulatory and backstage registers alike. This is to say: they are instruments and tools — an observation already found in Malinowski (1930).

The narrative (to avoid the term ‘description’) below results from Wittgenstein’s principle that the meaning of a word is, in most cases, its use in a ‘language game’ — in the concrete, quotidian human practices with which language is interwoven. From this perspective, the use of words is subject to rules and mastering a language becomes much like mastering a technique (Wittgenstein 1995: paragraphs 7, 11, 22, 23, 43, 150, 206, 219 etc.; Winch 1958:30-32). While the observation that words have uses is banal, the idea that meaning is equivalent to usage is not. It subverts the traditional relation between language’s representational function (considered foundational and hence primary) and its use in concrete contexts (understood as derivative and therefore secondary) (Saussure 1995). This, in turn, will impel us to adopt new forms of ethnographic description and review the concepts through which we habitually perceive the phenomenon.

### **An ethnographic example**

The events below integrate what, in broader and therefore inappropriate terms, we could call the ‘negotiation’<sup>3</sup> of the Congressional Staff Positions and Salaries Plan. Congressional staff is divided into various categories, which are not always on amicable terms — in a long history of latent conflicts that sometimes become explicit and public. Various reasons may make specific groups politically more important than others: senatorial chiefs of staff (career civil servants unlike those in the House) have a privileged access to Senators’ intimacy, whereas legislative aids are notorious for their procedural and technical knowledge. The importance of both is evident: the plan’s approval required both support on the Floor and its being made legally viable. To complicate things, every deal depended on the way a given category viewed deals made with others. And this understanding itself depended on the category’s prejudices, on how it viewed its position in relation to others — a perception that, for its part, varied according to situation, category and context. Since any category could jeopardize everything, agreements had to be struck on a case-by-case basis. Failed attempts were followed by interminable talks, meetings and caucuses. During this ‘negotiation,’ a dual ‘arrangement’ was reached: re-classifying low-ranking civil servants under higher categories and increasing the value of some payments (pay-checks are comprised by a number of different payments and bonuses, only one of which is described as ‘salary’). The plan was approved by Senate Resolution No. 07 of April 4<sup>th</sup> 2002 and confirmed by law 10,863 of April 29<sup>th</sup> 2004.<sup>4</sup> In the House, it had been approved by Resolution No. 28 of 1998, but was ‘reorganized’ by Congressional Steering Committee Act No. 110 of March 21<sup>st</sup> 2002. And this was just part of the story.

For those involved, including employees, it was not enough to please all staff categories and convince the Congressional Steering Committee and Congress itself. In practice, drafting the resolutions and implementing the plan amounted to two very different things. The plan’s implementation required committing public funds controlled by the Administration. The problem was that public funds are not just an economic *quantity*, but a political *quality*. Furthermore, the funds allocated by the plan would be committed for subsequent years,

meaning they would not be available for other uses, such as building a bridge. More importantly, public institutions' movements are determined by the actions of various agents who occupy a wide range of positions. Some of these positions may appear marginal to a decision's institutional 'pathway' or the agencies involved with its implementation. In Elias's terms (2001), the plan set in motion a system of reciprocal dependencies – dependencies which do not result from the intentions of particular individuals but rather emerge from a social configuration, that is, a complex system of relations.

My narrative focuses on three moments of this long 'negotiation'. The first begins with a meeting to discuss the plan held by the Secretary of Planning, Martus Tavares, and the House and Senate Presidents, Aécio Neves (PSDB–MG<sup>†</sup>) and Rames Tebet (PMDB–MG<sup>‡</sup>), respectively. I have no idea what the three talked about. What I did record were comments where House employees emphasized the following dialogue: 'I'm really annoyed. I'm fed up with the subject. This is what is possible,' the Minister allegedly said. The Senate President, they claimed with a touch of irony, stuttered and the President of the House was said to have retorted: 'It's the law. The Administration has to comply. It's your duty.'

Obviously, one cannot know for certain whether the dialogue really occurred —much less if it occurred exactly as reported. In such cases, it is very much part of the game to spread one's own version, to put words to a specific use (suggesting that a given player is powerful or influential, exposing a political difference, telling a story, benefiting someone, spreading a rumour and so on). Regardless, it is not relevant to my argument whether the dialogue corresponds exactly to what was actually said; my interest lies in asking why this conversation stirred the imagination and comments of civil servants and politicians.

First, we must remember that the dialogue was perceived and interpreted (by the staff at least) as a clear and unequivocal sign of support by the House President — meaning, in effect, *institutional* support. Second, we must bear in mind that the Plan affected all employees of House and Senate alike (with the exception of individual representatives' office staff, as we shall see). Could these considerations, together, explain the enthusiasm shown by employees? Intuitively, one can imagine that a plan benefiting so many people would stir such a flurry and that employees would rather perceive Neves' intervention as a sign that the plan was to be implemented. Approaching the comments above as an explanation, however, will not suffice us. For they operate at an analytic level that emphasizes players' interests and thus fail to account for the role played by language — that is, the use of words and its rules. As far as a sociology of language is concerned, the political world is a protean environment where all things change, where today's words may be soon replaced by others, where keeping a promise depends on how events and other's words pan out. The words of Aécio Neves, however, here appeared to play an opposite role: *to establish a rule, to organize and to decide*. Likewise, the Senate President's stuttering was much more than a prosaic or folkloric detail. It was an intrinsic part of the story. Stuttering represents the political dilemma in its most dramatic version: to be out of words when words are needed the most.

In reality, Aécio Neves used a very simple trick: he imposed regulatory language to the backstage. He quite deliberately 'confused', broke the rules governing these different language games. As a result, the impression was that what political players consider the 'natural' order of things had been turned upside-down. For once, it was the law that appeared to determine events behind the scenes and not the opposite. Of course, three points are worth making. The first is that the trick would not have had the same effect if just anyone had tried it. Some words only some can say; inversely, players must say the right words at the right time in order to preserve their capacity to play a certain role. The second point is that the inversion might not have been effective in another context. In this case, an institutional conflict emerged as the Administration

<sup>†</sup> [TN] PSDB-MG: Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (Minas Gerais State).

<sup>‡</sup> [TN] PMDB-MG: Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (Minas Gerais State).

dug in to give as little as possible and the Legislative demanded that its autonomy be recognized. Finally, we must remember that a great deal of attention was focused on the plan. Given other players, different circumstances and less attention, the same words could have been perceived as a sign of ignorance regarding the rules of the game, a motive for ridicule. This in no way means that the plan was implemented because of this dialogue. But the episode certainly strengthened House President Neves, something a comment repeated by both staff and politicians ascertained: ‘The president “beat” the minister.’

One must be somewhat cautious in interpreting the player-beats-player type of expression. Granted: those participating in this world perceive such expressions in terms of the concept of ‘power’ (a discussion which shall soon be revisited). My narrative follows another direction, though. Beyond the judgement these victory-claims express, I am interested in the uses to which they are put. And, from this perspective, retelling the story did not imply describing ‘something that happened.’ Quite on the contrary, it implied allying oneself with the House President, deriding the minister, claiming that the Senate President was irrelevant or all of the above — to cite the more obvious possibilities. In other more specific contexts not directly related to the plan’s implementation, the story could have had different uses. To repeat is, in short, to put to use.

The second moment of my narrative begins with a series of media reports spearheaded by the *Folha de São Paulo* and published as of mid-June 2001 (Sucursal de Brasília 2001b; Vaz 2001a, 2001b; Vaz & Vila-Nova 2001; Vila-Nova 2001). The subject was not new: the appointment of representatives’ office staff. During the campaign that led to the 2001 election of a new Congressional Steering Committee, one promise was an increase in office funds. In April, Severino Cavalcanti (PPB-PE<sup>§</sup>) — who was, as the Committee’s first secretary, responsible for internal management — submitted a formal proposal for the increase (Sucursal de Brasília 2001a). Approved in May (Sucursal de Brasília 2001c, 2001d), the proposal did not expand the quota of 30 employees per office. It did, however, improve staff salaries. Staffers are paid according to a list of categories and the increase allowed both staff reclassifications and that representatives double an employee’s category-based salary. The devil, as always, was in the details.

The confusion was due to the report’s comprehensiveness. The *Folha* revealed employees’ names, the increases they received and the offices they staffed. Things became awkward: monthly salaries soared from R\$ 300 to R\$ 5,000; representatives hired each other’s wives, relatives and so on. One report announced that the Civil Legislative Servants’ Union (Sindilegis) had ‘serious indications that these staff salary increases are, in actual fact, swelling Congress member’s personal budget’ (Nascimento cited in Vaz & Vila-Nova 2001:A4). One staffer supposedly told the Union that he gave ‘the entire salary to the representative except for the meal coupons and the over-time put in after 7.00pm’ (Vaz & Vila-Nova 2001:A4). But who leaked the information to the press? This is where the story becomes interesting.

Paradoxical as this may seem, the *imbroglio* resulted from the success obtained by Sindilegis president Ezequiel Nascimento in his campaign for the Positions and Salaries Plan. Overall, civil servants and non-career staffers both credited him with the successful negotiation. But one must again to the details. The Union represents all active and retired employees of the Senate, House and Federal Court of Auditors. In the House, there are three types of employees, established according to the nature of their contracts: statutory employees are qualified civil servants, Special Posts are filled by political appointees, and parliamentary aids are chosen by Congresspersons as office staffers. Regulating the federal civil service, Law 8112/90 applies to the first two, but not to parliamentary aids. Prior to the 1988 Constitution, these were hired under the terms of the Labour Laws’ Consolidation Act (CLT). This, however, became illegal with the new Constitution and aids are no longer protected by any legal regime. They can, for

<sup>§</sup> [TN] PPB-PE: Partido Progressista Brasileiro (Pernambuco State).



example, be dismissed at any time without justification, and the sacking of pregnant employees is not unheard of (Painel 2001).

The political problem for Nascimento was that parliamentary aids were paid according to the 'salary' component of statutory pay-checks — a component which, complemented by various bonuses and gratifications, represented a small part of statutory employee's real income. Since the Administration had imposed a ban on wage increases for civil servants, the Positions and Salaries Plan made no specific changes to the 'salaries' component. Unlike statutory employees and political appointees, aids were — in short — up to benefit nothing from the plan. Still, they were not only members of *Sindilegis*, but had a sizeable electoral clout. By feeding details to the press, the Union sought to pressure the House to alter aids' employment status. Almost identically worded, two reports read: 'for the president of *Sindilegis*, the distortions in office raises and appointments results from the precariousness of the legal regime under which these employees are hired' (Vaz 2001a:A8; Vaz & Vila-Nova 2001:A4). But things did not come out as planned. Words and discourse contain 'powers and dangers that can be scarcely imagined' (Foucault 1996:8).

The information could have come from no place other than the management of the House. Again, the problem lies in the details. At the end of May and beginning of June, House President Neves discharged its general director, Ademar Sabino. Rumoured to know even the most harmless remarks made about him, Sabino held the post with an iron hand for 18 years — or so they said. The new general director, Sérgio Sampaio, had just replaced him when the *Folha* published its first piece on the subject. In other words, important and sensitive information 'leaked' to the press precisely when the new management settled in. This prompted the following remark: 'How did it end up on the front pages? The previous director wouldn't have let this happen.'

As with Neves' 'beating' of Minister Tavares, this was no disinterested query, but rather a political position whose most evident use was to demean Neves. A few observations are here in order. The president's role is not merely to bring proposals to the Floor or decide on points of order. He is also strategic in his capacity to help 'build the majority' which approves or defeats proposals. This role is, of course, derived from the prerogatives granted him by the rules of procedure. Still, the president cannot merely impose his will when interpreting rulings, administrative procedures or the legislative process. His decisions can be challenged by appeals, especially in polemical cases, and require majority support to hold. The rule of the House is majority rule. And this leads to the paradox of the presidency: while the president *can*, what he can depends on others.

The publication of reports made things seem to have escaped the control of President Neves. If he couldn't even order the daily affairs of the House, how would he help to build a majority? How would his words establish rules, organize exchanges, decide? Aécio Neves was known to have higher-flying political ambitions: after various rumours about a Presidential bid, he was elected governor of Minas Gerais in 2002. The stakes behind the press reports were, in short, quite high. And here the third 'moment' of the story begins. Neves probed the bureaucracy to discover who had leaked the information to the press. No one, however, would say 'I did it'. The one who did so was the president of *Sindilegis*: 'Tell him I did it.'

Assuming responsibility for this kind of action is far from trivial. To protect the House's employees, Nascimento had to take a stance. But this in turn led to new developments. Whenever the agent behind such an embarrassing leak is explicitly identified (which is not always possible), there is also an adversary to fight, someone against whom responses can be targeted. Depending on the context, forces involved and strategies used, responses can perpetuate the conflict, open a cycle of exchanges or both. Under the 'native' perspective, the 'response' came quickly. And it came as a rumour: 'On account of those reports, Neves said he's not going to implement the plan anymore. It's all Nascimento's fault.'

Here, the circulation of words assumes characteristics similar to the antagonistic exchange systems described by ethnographers. One such system is the Kula, where the importance of circulating objects depends on how many times they are given and given again. The longer an object circulates, the more valuable it becomes and the more 'greatness' it confers to its original owner<sup>5</sup> — as if the object gained supplementary symbolic 'quantities' from each exchange (Abreu 1997). Likewise, the circulating words of politics gain supplementary symbolic quantities that produce three effects: (a) their origin loses importance; (b) remarks are understood more and more as given truths, as things 'everyone knows;' (c) words continually change. Within this open circuit, words acquire a materiality of their own, an autonomy in relation to their referents, that is, an autonomy of the signifier from the signified. Metaphorically, it is like a buzz that spreads through the corridors and changes as it goes; by the time it is perceived, the hum has altered the political landscape and the horizon within which action acquires meaning. It is the world of rumour and anonymous information — the 'centre of creativity' to which Tancredo Neves referred.

The evident difference between Kula and rumour resides in the fact that, in the case of the prior, it is necessary to keep track of the path followed by an object. We can, however, hypothesize the existence of a similar phenomenon in the closed circuit of circulating words, insofar as it is sometimes necessary to keep track of who said what. (At this stage of my research, it is impossible to ethnographically test the hypothesis.) This is not so in the open circuit of circulating words, where the path words follow is normally irrelevant. Here, what matters is the credibility of a remark, credibility unrelated to the remark's origin but rather attached to its successive exchange: repetition *generates* authority.

Presuming the information I collected was reliable, the rumour originated in the office of House President Neves (which appears probable) and was spread by his chief of staff (which can not be known for certain). This, however, is of little importance. Irrespective of who first spread the story, Union President Nascimento faced a dilemma similar to that just faced by Neves: his political future as a key player seemed to be under threat, as that of any Union President who jeopardizes a pay rise for his base. As in the two previous moments of this narrative, the employees used the remark to assume a political stance and criticize a leaders' actions. Such rumours spread very quickly, especially when they affect so many people. The Union's telephones soon began to ring — as did Nascimento's. The consequences were immediately 'visible' to anyone familiar with this world. The Union President then approached a Steering Committee member and a party leader, to whom he said: 'If Neves doesn't implement the plan, I'll publish this other news article. I've nothing to lose.'

In this kind of impasse, one approaches a specific interlocutor to whom one is close or with whom one has a better chance of 'success'. This, in turn, sets in motion the closed system of circulating words — a system which, unlike the other, is named and personalized. Some things must not be said directly: intermediaries are required and may, for their part, approach other intermediaries. Depending on the specific context, such networks may vary. There is, however, always a precedence, a hierarchy to be respected — even when it varies according to circumstances. Actually, this precedence is the most visible aspect of a domination-system implicit in our discussion on party leaders. Unfortunately, we haven't the time to develop this subject further.

However, we need note that this system possesses characteristics similar to those Bourdieu (1980) examined elsewhere: it is a system that, in a way and at times, negates itself *as domination*. This can be seen in the apparent 'disinterest' that accompanies the expectation of future retribution and in the personal relations within which political alliances and subordination embed and conceal themselves. From this viewpoint, the role of the closed circuit of circulating words seems clear — as Foucault would say:

[...] in every society, the production of discourse is simultaneously controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose function is to conjure its powers and dangers, dominate its random events, and circumvent its heavy and terrifying materiality. (Foucault 1996:9).

Foucault's insight fits our example perfectly: it was necessary to return words to their proper place, to reinstate their institutional character. I am not sure what happened after Nascimento approached the secretary and the leader. I don't know who spoke to whom or what was said. What I do know is that the buzz intensified throughout the corridors. By the end of the day, Neves declared: 'Yes, I'm going to implement the plan.' He also added that he'd never said otherwise. The mess, it appeared, had resulted from a misunderstanding that was resolved the next day, when the House and Union presidents met one-on-one. 'We are now the oldest of childhood friends,' Nascimento said upon leaving the meeting. 'Neves told me that, from now on, we'll speak face-to-face without intermediaries.' Again, rumour had it that 'the Union President challenged the House President and won.' But this did not mean that Nascimento felt victory was deserved. He may have confided to someone close to him: 'I was ready for war and he treated me as though we were old friends. That disarmed me.'

As before, we must examine the use of words and its implications. From a general, abstract perspective, treating the case as a misunderstanding amounts to claiming that others misused words, that their words lack content or referentiality. More specifically, this 'assertion' illustrates how asymmetry is approached in Brazilian politics. When one accepts a provocation, publicly and explicitly acknowledging a conflict, one implicitly attributes an equal status to one's adversary — an attribution that interests those at a lower level and should be avoided by those in a superior position. This reveals the purpose behind the strategies adopted by House President Neves: using intermediaries to establish Nascimento's lower position, resorting to circumlocutions and metaphoric formulas and denying any critical or conflictive intent behind the use of certain words.<sup>6</sup> For those involved, it was 'evident' from the outset that the two players — the House and Union presidents — were not on the same plane; they were separated by an *institutional* precedence that appeared to have been somehow 'weakened' by all the confusion.

By reducing everything to a misunderstanding where others used words poorly, House President Neves denied not only the conflict itself but also the blurring of respective hierarchical positions. This allowed him to resolve the stalemate through a relational act based on the language of personal relations typical to Brazilian sociability: the use of courtesy, friendly gestures and — what is somewhat different — cordialities. (For studies regarding the role of personalism in nature of Brazilian sociability, see DaMatta 1997 and Buarque de Holanda 2002. For an ethnography emphasizing the importance of personal relations in Brazilian Congressional politics, see Bezerra 1999). Given the hierarchical asymmetry between him and Nascimento, the House president's courtesy and cordiality, along with his promise to maintain them from then on, already *meant* a giving. The Union president was left with few alternatives. Perpetuating the conflict would have been a bad idea. Resolving it, however, was to accept asymmetry and precedence — an acceptance never explicated but implicit in the very belief that 'we are now the oldest of childhood friends' was something worth saying. His precedence reinstated, the House President reendowed himself the enunciation of order: his words again organized and decided — or at least for the moment, of course.

In fact, the second news report that Nascimento threatened to leak was published some time later, but with no compromising details — this time the devil was kept in the box. After a while, I asked how the plan was going. 'It was inevitable, they had to implement it,' I was told.

## **Distrusting words**

In a context such as this, what is the ‘nature’ of words, of language? Perhaps the problem would be best approached through the perspective of those who participate in this world. In other words, the safest path is — yet again — ethnography. My starting point, in this case, would be the advice I received from a well-known, prize-winning reporter — advice he himself perceived as a favour, more precisely as a retribution for something I once did which he understood as a gift. ‘Always keep your own innocence in mind,’ he said. The counsel synthesized what, experience told him, would ensure my felicitous insertion in this world, what I had to keep in mind at all times. This single phrase, he explained, contained two separate warnings: (a) one is always only aware of a part of what is happening, (b) one can never know the entirety of others’ intentions. And he added: ‘We are all, to some extent, innocent.’ — And yourself? ‘Me too.’

More than just a reporter’s political savvy, the statement above expresses a political ‘wisdom’ which, embedded in experience, derives from a *practice*: one must distrust, always distrust. Experientially, this distrust reflects a contradiction resulting from the objective conditions of this social world (to use Marx’s concept somewhat freely). Politicians need to know what they can never be sure of, for certainty hides within the secret, within what remains unknown. Their only option is to speak. Since no commentary can resolve the objective contradiction they live within, politicians can only re-elaborate it continually within discourse, meaning they can only speak and speak again. They are correct in this intuitive sociology: speaking about politics is doing politics and saying the truth is not the most important doing.

The ethnographic fact is that the reality within which politicians act is built upon what makes sense in a specific context. It is this reality that interests them: *what people say it is, is*. This reminds me of Don Quixote. More precisely, it reminds me of how Foucault describes the change the hidalgo undergoes between the first book (which describes his misadventures) and the second, in which characters who read the first recognize him as its hero. Like our politicians in their own ‘literature,’ ‘in the interstice between these two volumes and only through their power’,

Don Quixote assumed his own reality. A reality that he owes entirely to language and that remains completely interior to words. The truth [of Quixote and of those that live in the world of politics according to its rules] does not reside in the relation between words and the world, but in this tenuous and constant relation that verbal marks weave among themselves (Foucault 1985:63).

In other words, Brazilian politics institutes a distance between words and things. Players experience the distance as distrust and a form of action, but it also reflects an epistemology and a *Weltanschauung*<sup>7</sup>. Here, words do not describe reality, but rather conceal it; their kinship with things should not be taken too seriously. In addition, people are insincere and their words fail to represent what they actually intend, think or feel. Still, the relation to the discourse of others is tortuous: though deceptive, discourse also hints to what is hidden. In this ‘ontogenetic separation’ between words and things celebrated by politics, the sociological perspective inverts the maxims of players’ experience: distrust does not result from the secret; rather, distrusting comes from the ‘nature’ of language. If the secret did not exist, it would have to be invented.

## **Power and exchange**

The path is odd: we approach the political universe by taking language as a starting point, but end up with power and exchange. While the pre-eminence of exchange may be more ‘evident,’ we were never far from power: most of the phenomena described above are understood in the

political field through the concept of power. A question thereby arises: what is the relation between power and exchange, presuming there is any? Once again, our investigation must ask how political players perceive power and exchange. And the ethnographic fact is the disequilibrium and asymmetry on the basis of which they are treated.

On one hand, politicians use the category of power to reflect on their experience power. They go, in fact, so far as to reduce one to the other. 'Politics is the struggle for power,' they say. Hours on end are spent trying to disclose the nature of this mysterious entity, as if the 'essence' of power were a secret capable of opening the doors to the paradise of achieved ambitions — a secret which, once disclosed, uncovered, exposed, could be appropriated, dominated and put to use. Exchange, on the other hand, does not generate large doubts, nor does it seem to entail any larger metaphysical questions. It is self-evident and, unlike power, not a subject for reflection. This is curious if, as I argue, exchange performs a central role in politics.

The same asymmetry can be seen in how the literature conceives power and exchange. The importance of 'power' does not require much exemplification: it is used by numerous social and human sciences as a category central to 'the political.' I do not mean by this that academics and players share the same attitude towards power, but that both privilege it to elaborate the meaning of the political world. Exchange, for its part, is perceived differently. When using the category, academic discourse normally adopts a tone of moral condemnation. In part, this is because exchange has long been embedded in concepts such as '*coronelismo*' (a term comparable to the English "cronyism") and its twin brother '*clientelismo*' (comparable to "pork and barrel"). Here, exchange is perceived as the residue of a distant, archaic past whose destiny is to disappear at the hands of social evolution — a prognosis that contains unequal doses of hope, ideology and academic analysis. Curiously, in this aspect, the literature — or part of it — merely repeats, with academic sophistication, the commonsense condemnation of the so-called 'Law of Saint Francis': 'by giving, we receive.' Consequently, the real dimension of exchange is concealed even as its centrality is highlighted.

Approaches that acknowledge the centrality of exchange are, for their part, often criticized for the conservative emphasis they give to the idea of 'order,' for how they underplay the potentially conflictive and chaotic nature of politics. The critique underlying intuition is, I believe, powerful and pertinent. However, *it does not apply to the present work*. Exchange is not a tool I use to explain politics, but a 'native' category. If order is emphasized, which I believe it is, such emphasis is an objective necessity of this social environment and not the unintended result of my analytic instruments (a hypothesis that deserves more evidence than I can provide here). Though not referring specifically to exchange, Moore (1983:50) emphasized the existence of processes people employ to fight indetermination, to fix social reality and render it predictable.

The ethnography above calls for the revision of power's perceived predominance. Here, to discover the meaning of 'power' is not to unveil its 'being-in-itself' or 'essence.' Instead, the ethnography shows the meaning of 'power', that is, its various uses and the rules that govern them. From this perspective, what one sees is 'power' being used in various contexts, each with its own rules. And so the question 'what is power?' has as many answers as there are contexts for the word's use. For example, bureaucrats say that having power is controlling the purse, giving orders or — sometimes — even being able to leave early and arrive late. Politicians may define power in numerous ways, such as influencing others or having the capacity to transform reality into what appeared impossible, that is, to exercise a supreme will capable of subjecting everything and everyone. Power can mean only visibility or distinction. It might signify the capacity to represent the whole, to embody this role, or the experience of having the world revolve around oneself. Sometimes, having power is to speak; at others, it is to remain silent. A powerful player may be the 'owner' of the idea, of 'the party' or 'of the Congressional mandate'. Reporters have power, and their negotiations with politicians can be viewed as a relation between powers.

The ethnographical collection above finds no essence or common, shared feature allowing us to say: 'so this is power.' Nevertheless, such uses are doubtless linked by 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail', in what Wittgenstein calls 'family resemblances' (1995: paragraphs 65 to 67). I do not deny the existence of strength, violence, brutality (sometimes disguised by 'generous' words), command and obedience, the conquest of territories or the defeat of enemies. I simply argue that the concept of power may not be the best way of grasping the concreteness of these and other related phenomena.

Exchange, in turn, is a practice immediately linked to social experience. Its role is to set in motion, within a given system, things and people that would otherwise have no relation whatsoever. It thereby goes against the empirical boundaries of singular things by allowing them to have uses that exceed the circumstances for which they were originally designed.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, exchange mustn't be reduced to that which circulates or to those who circulate it: any attempt to define it thus profoundly misunderstands its role. The question 'what is exchange?' makes no sense, since it amounts to saying: 'I do not know the rules or master the technique needed to make sense of this social reality.'

My point is that the expressions 'this is power' and 'this is exchange' represent two different attitudes found in the Brazilian Congress. The former attempts to unveil the 'essence' of power so as to possess it; the latter claims that people and things have a certain kind of relationship — better yet, it places people and things in relation. Sociologically, it is as if reflecting on power could overcome the aforementioned 'ontogenetic separation' and lend the word its content, bind it to the thing, make reference happen. Exchange plays an opposite role. It dissociates words from things by giving them other functions and variable uses. This is why it can place words, things and people in relation, a relation which is often most unusual. The opposition between these two attitudes allows us, I believe, to conceive power and exchange not on the basis of their 'intrinsic,' substantive 'characteristics', but rather in terms of their mutual relationship within this ethnographic context.

Finally, a few provisional remarks about how this ethnography dialogues with anthropological theory on exchange. My point is that Brazilian Congressional politics reverses the theoretical relation between precedence and exchange. Most ethnography has it that, in traditional societies, the rule establishing precedence precedes the act of exchange, whether prescriptive or preferential. For exchange to occur, in other words, it is required that some rule establish what is valuable and worth exchanging, with whom one must exchange or with whom *it would be preferable* to exchange (Abreu 1997). In the Brazilian Congress, however, no such rule exists.

Again, this results from 'objective' social conditions. Be it men, women, things, jobs, funds, favours, rites, ceremonies, words, information, dinners, receptions, advice, services, displays of affection or any other thing, the value of what circulates depends on contingencies, on chance and on the conditions — objective, imagined or even idealized — of each situation. No rule establishes what is valuable and with whom one must or should exchange. On the contrary, various contexts, calculations (mistaken or not), ambitions and strategies regulate what is important, valuable or even essential and with whom to exchange. Precedence thereby varies according to political context. It is not the rule of precedence that organizes exchange, but rather exchanges, perceived within each context as 'necessary,' that establish precedence. This, in sum, is the peculiarity of this system when compared to others traditionally described by anthropologists: the word itself is an element of exchange — a possibility to which Lévi-Strauss drew attention, but never analyzed ethnologically.

We can therefore suggest a formula, provisional at best, to approach Brazilian Congressional politics: in some contexts, words organize or disorganize the exchange of things; in others, they determine it; in others still, they are exchanged themselves. At this point, we still need to

develop techniques capable of ethnographically describing the word as a gift — a need that, incidentally, explains the experimental nature of this text. Likewise, various phenomena revealed by the ethnography— and considered ‘normal’ in Congressional politics — would have no place in classical anthropology except as ‘deviations.’ These are: receiving a gift despite not knowing what an equivalent counter-gift could be; being led by changing context to forswear oneself; and participating in systems of ‘generalized exchange’ without prescriptive or preferential rules.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Transcript of the November 19<sup>th</sup> 1998, Senate session. My italics.

<sup>2</sup> There are obvious differences between the juridical norms and the institutional arguments. But, for the purposes of our discussion, they can be placed in the same category insofar as both are opposed to backstage language, as we shall see.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it would be more interesting to use the term ‘micro-negotiations’ employed by Latour & Woolgar (1986). In *Laboratory Life*, they show how scientific ‘facts’ are created by a series of micro-negotiations that lack any immediately perceptible global direction. The authors also show how the unpredictable outcome of these negotiations make ‘scientific’ propositions change daily (see Abreu 1994). Either way, the terms ‘negotiation’ and even ‘micro-negotiation’ seem unsatisfactory to me for two reasons: (a) they underplay the importance of language which, as I propose, ultimately operating as a somewhat autonomous mechanism; (b) they encompass phenomena that require separate ethnographic treatment.

<sup>4</sup> Normally, a Senate resolution does not need to be ‘confirmed’ by a statutory law. The idea is that a law that can be vetoed by the President cannot rule on topics internal to another power. However, constitutional amendment 19 of 1998 modified one of the items of article 52 which, according to some interpretations, ‘leads to the understanding’ that a law would be necessary. Amid the doubts, the law was approved.

<sup>5</sup> ‘As soon as the owner of a *kitoum* [the name given to objects prior to their entry into the Kula circuit] gives it to his first partner, it is the name of the partner that ‘rises,’ while that of the first owner “descends.” However, the more the object is exchanged, the more the name of the former “increases”.’ (Godelier 1996:128). Hence, the objective of the ‘game’ is not to recover an equivalent *kitoum* as quickly as possible. The original owner’s interest is to launch it as far away and for as long as possible, so as to elevate, amplify and magnify his name.

<sup>6</sup> Rationalization is compatible with the properties of hierarchical ideological systems, that is, systems based on precedence and, therefore, on belonging; to this end, it suffices to compare them with modern egalitarian ideological systems, in which subjects are thought of as individuals: autonomous, equal and free (see Dumont 1975:16-31; 1985:263-277).

<sup>7</sup> The specificity of this *Weltanschauung* becomes clear when compared to the way in which other groups relate to language. Here I am following Crapanzano, whose work provides both an inspiration and a parameter for comparison. In fact, Crapanzano works with the idea of an axiology of values and the corresponding commitment of individuals to an ethics present in language (Crapanzano 2000).

<sup>8</sup> I believe the lesson is already present in the French Sociological School. Exchange theory is not based on the conceptualization of what exchange is, but on a set of relations that set in motion people, material and symbolic wealth (see Abreu 2001). It is interesting to observe the

difficulty faced in using western categories to outline the phenomenon; in this sense, we can note how the idea, present in Mauss, that exchange mixes people and things, on one hand, and categories of interest and disinterest, on the other, has been developed towards its very impossibility (Derrida 1997; criticized in different ways by Bernasconi 1997; Bourdieu 1997), as an empty practice (Gasché 1997), and through an emphasis on disinterest (for example, Godbout 1999).

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