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ARTIGO

## “BAD WORD IS WHAT DOESN'T EXISTS ON GOD BODY”: A STUDY OF CHILDHOOD OBSCENE

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper discuss the obscene childhood, one of childhood culture expression, consisting on different jokes, riddles, rhymes, drawings shared between children pair groups, that adults understands being obscene. In the dialogue with academic production about the theme on childhood folklore, sociology of childhood and psycholinguist studies, the research consisted on an observation on classroom daily life of a group of children between 6 and 7 years old in a private school. It was possible to identify that the theme did not take place on school daily life, only being developed in a schooling situation, conducted by the teacher. On that occasion, using adults' fragments, children tried to understand bad words meanings, uses and the causes of its interdiction. It was possible to identify the singularity of the group perspective, related to their socio-cultural background.

**Keywords:** childhood culture, childhood folklore, obscene childhood.

### “PALAVRÃO É O QUE NÃO TEM NO CORPO DE DEUS”: Um estudo do obsceno infantil

**RESUMO:** Este artigo contempla o chamado obsceno infantil, um conjunto de brincadeiras, rimas, desenhos, palavras e gestos compartilhados pelas crianças que pode ser qualificado como obsceno, constituindo uma das expressões da cultura infantil. A partir do levantamento da produção bibliográfica sobre a temática, no campo do folclore infantil, da sociologia da infância e de estudos psicolinguísticos, busca-se apreender as manifestações do obsceno infantil, através de observação, em uma sala de aula, de crianças entre 6 e 7 anos, numa escola particular de classe média urbana. Nesse contexto, verificou-se uma presença rarefeita do obsceno infantil, expresso num diálogo desenvolvido pelas crianças e mediado pela professora, sobre os significados do palavrão, analisado neste trabalho. O diálogo demonstrou que, a partir de seus fragmentos, as crianças buscaram compreender o que define o palavrão, seus usos e as razões de sua interdição. Evidenciou-se também a singularidade do olhar das crianças observadas sobre o tema, definida pelo pertencimento sociocultural desse grupo.

**Palavras-chave:** cultura infantil, folclore infantil, obsceno infantil.

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## **"PALABROTAS ES LO QUE NO HAY EN EL CUERPO DE DIOS": Un estudio de lo obsceno infantil**

**RESÚMEN:** Este artículo contempla lo que llamamos obsceno infantil, un conjunto de juegos, rimas, dibujos, palabras y gestos compartidos por los niños, que se pueden catalogar como obscenos, constituyendo una de las expresiones de la cultura infantil. A partir de un levantamiento de la producción bibliográfica sobre el tema, en el ámbito del folclore infantil, de la sociología infantil y de los estudios psicolingüísticos, buscamos aprehender sus manifestaciones, a través de la observación en una clase de niños entre 6 y 7 años de un colegio privado de clase media urbana. Ha sido rara la presencia de lo obsceno infantil, expresado en un diálogo, desarrollado por los niños y mediado por la maestra, sobre los significados de las palabrotas, analizado en este artículo. El diálogo demostró que, a partir de los fragmentos, los niños buscaron entender lo que define una palabrota, sus usos y las razones de su prohibición. También ha sido evidente la singularidad de los niños observados teniendo en cuenta el grupo sociocultural a que pertenecen.

**Palabras clave:** cultura infantil, folclore infantil, obsceno infantil.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a consistent production of original interdisciplinary research on children, configuring the field of “new childhood studies” (QVROUTRUP, 2009). Such production has addressed several subjects, such as spaces and strategies of children’s participation in social life, the cultural production of and for the child, the uniqueness of its languages, and inter- and intragenerational relations.

It may be observed that while some subjects have gained visibility, enriching our knowledge about childhood, other manifestations of childhood remain unexplored. Despite efforts to value children’s multiple languages, the study of the “clandestine” expressions of young subjects remains incomplete, especially when eschatological manifestations are taken as expressions of bad taste or vulgarity (FACTOR, 2001), and despite being easily observed in jokes, rhymes, music, and graphic games, they have not yet been addressed in so-called new childhood studies.

Such expressions were analysed by the French folklorist Gaignebet (2002), who called them “children’s obscene folklore”, that is, “a certain number of texts, speeches, and gestures shared within children’s societies, which can be qualified as obscene, [...] because they offend modesty and decency” (GAIGNEBET, 2002, p. 32).

At the same time veiled and evident, the existence of children’s obscene folklore is obvious: Even those who do not live with children can access it through memory. We know it exists, but we also know that it does not easily appear publicly. Due to social repression, the obscene is hidden by the veil of oblivion. In children’s folklore, it is manifested through resources such as language games, gestures, and slang that express its presence/absence, as exemplified by the rhyme well-known by Brazilian children: “vaca amarela, pulou da janela, quem falar primeiro come tudo dela” (yellow cow jumped out of the window; whoever speaks first eats all of it.).

Therefore, it is necessary to give visibility to this silenced children’s expression which, as the etymology of the word “obscene” suggests<sup>3</sup>, lies behind social life. In this text, we investigate the children’s obscene, seeking to rescue its manifestations. To this end, we will historically situate the emergence of the prohibition of demonstrations seen as obscene and subsequent historical changes. Second, we will retrieve the references to the children’s obscene in folkloric and psycholinguistic studies. Later we will present a case study of the subject, conducted with urban middle-class children from a private school in Belo Horizonte/Brazil (CARVALHO, 2013). In this study, we sought to retrieve the expressions and understand children’s questions about the children’s obscene. Finally, we will analyse the causes of the low incidence of these manifestations. It was observed that the children did not know

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<sup>3</sup> Having an obscure etymology, the word seems to come from the Latin *obscenus*, referring to “bad omens”. However, some dictionaries (see, for example: Breal and Bailly, s/d.) suppose that the *obscaenus* variation indicates that there is an intermediary between the Greek and the Latin model, referring to *scena obs-cena*, “off scene”.

expressions of the children's obscene, focusing on a markedly educated dialogue about the meanings of swear words. We suggest that the socio-cultural background of these children and the methodological strategies focused on the observation at school explain the small presence of the obscene, pointing the direction for further studies of the subject.

## THE CHILDREN'S OBSCENE AND THE CONSPIRACY OF ADULTS' SILENCE...

The prohibition of the children's obscene is a historical phenomenon, as Norbert Elias states in his study on the European civilising process (Elias, 2011). For this author, one of the cultural elements that would characterise the historical construction of Modernity and Civilisation (understood by him as an expression of European culture) would be the separation between the child and the adult world, in which some manifestations of culture are forbidden to children.

Elias' (2011) hypothesis is based on the analysis of the so-called treatises of civility, especially the work *On Civility in Children* of Erasmus of Rotterdam, published in 1531. This important treatise on civility was aimed at educating the parents of the elites about early childhood education. In this work, he sought to establish behaviours proper to children, as distinct from those of adults. Among others, he states: 'A child with good education should not smear the tongue with obscene words, nor pay attention to them. The name of the things that tarnish the eyes also contaminate the mouth' (ROTERDÃ, 1978, p. 102).

For Elias (2011), Erasmus' treatise on civility, which was widely disseminated and reproduced in subsequent centuries, is indicative of the emergence of the distinction and separation between the child and the adult world, especially in terms of sexuality and language.

In the nineteenth century, the radical character of this separation and prohibition of cultural elements to subjects of young age was systematically reaffirmed. For Elias, this would be one of the traits of the civilising ideology typical of European countries consolidated at the time. In his words: "The fear and shame with which the sexual area of instinctive life, like many others, is surrounded since the early years, the 'conspiracy of silence' observed in social discourse on these issues, is practically complete" (ELIAS, 2011, p. 176). Accordingly, the representation of the child as being naive and pure was considered the ideal for the formation of a civilised adult in that historical period.

This question is also discussed by Ariès (2006, p. 74), who states in a peremptory way: "[...] one of the unwritten laws of our contemporary morality, the most imperious and respected of all, is that, in front of children, adults should abstain from any allusion, especially the joking ones, to sexual matters". For the historian, this prohibition was not present in mediaeval European societies, where the habits of playing with children's sexuality and enjoying linguistic freedom in dealing with the subject were a tradition that is still reality in Muslim societies. Ariès (2006) emphasises the historical and cultural character of the prohibition of these jokes and language games, relating it to the emergence of the great

“moral reform” in Europe from the 17th and 18th centuries on.

This reform, of Christian and later secular origin, would have developed through the action of educators and moralists, reaffirming the image of the child as being innocent and prudish, and thus to be protected from the adult sexualised world through the prohibition of access to such manifestations.

However, the separation between the child and the adult world, as well as the prohibition of the “obscene”, was more an obsession of adults than a reality. Peter Gay (1988), in analysing the characteristic prohibitions by Victorian society, points out how incomplete the prohibitions of that era were. As the author states, children and young people shared information about sexuality and language games considered obscene by a society that, while preaching modesty, was lavish in the dissemination of such content. In his words (GAY, 1988, p. 243): “[...] whatever walls the anxious educators and mothers tried to build between the child and the world, the world remained very close to the child”.

In this context, Freud (1977), a perceptive analyst of the contradictions of bourgeois morality, draws attention to children’s jokes, considering them an expression of the presence of an “obscene” language among children, calling it the children’s comic. The author states that the children’s comic is characterised by a false naivety, because many times children represent themselves as naive to enjoy a freedom that otherwise would not be allowed to them. Freud (1977, p. 253) indicates an identity proper to the children’s comic: “certain motives for pleasure in children seem to be lost to us adults” (Freud,) Although reluctant to deepen the issue, he affirms that: “those things are comic which are not proper for an adult” (FREUD, 1977, p. 255).

In addition to being incomplete, the project of prohibiting obscenity for children is not linear. Elias (2011) observes throughout the twentieth century there was a loosening of the prohibitions and separations between the child and the adult world, despite which certain subjects continue to be targets of this “conspiracy of silence”, configuring themselves as taboos. Agreeing with Elias, Sohn (2008) observes a liberation of the word, the gestures and the suspension of taboos since the beginning of the twentieth century. For Sohn (2008, p. 113), however, until the 1960s “self-censorship flourished, and although using ciphered languages, they were transparent”.

According to Factor (2001), the profound cultural and behavioural changes experienced in western societies since the 1960s<sup>4</sup> have resulted in a relaxation of customs and social prohibitions (especially regarding the use and exposure of the body), which has had repercussions on the relationship between adults and children, especially impacting children’s literature<sup>5</sup>. In the cultural productions directed towards children may be observed the emergence of works such as books and films addressing issues previously forbidden, among which is the so-called children’s obscene, weakening the conspiracy of silence referred to by Elias (2011). Authors and editors of books aimed at children, previously reluctant

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of this subject, see: Vincent (2004, p. 137-282).

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of the impact on children’s literature and cultural production for children, see: Heywood (2018).

and fearful of adult resistance, began to publish works with eschatological and sexual references. This trend is present today in several titles, with the subject also being addressed in films and television productions.

This does not imply the absence of prohibitions and taboos within the children's world. These prohibitions are often implicit and subjective, such as silence in adult conversation in the presence of children. They can also be explicit and objective, as in the Indicative Classification in Brazil (BRASIL, 2011), which establishes precise criteria defining the ages at which cultural products may be accessed. Three contents are vetoed for children in this normative text: drugs, sex, and violence.

Whether cultural productions for children contain previously forbidden subjects, these are almost absent in the production of new studies of childhood. Studies on the subject have systematically focused on expressions of what Corsaro (2011) calls "children's culture", such as play, rhymes, games, stories, and visual production, disregarding the manifestations of the obscene. However, this manifestation is addressed by studies of folklore and language, which we will analyse below<sup>6</sup>.

## THE OBSCENE IN CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE AND PSYCHOLINGUISTIC STUDIES

The study of children's manifestations in the field of folklore has its own identity: children's folklore. In 1977, a session dedicated to the subject was created by the *American Folklore Society* (see: <https://childrensfolklore.org/>)<sup>7</sup>, which publishes the journal *Children's Folklore Review*. Such production resulted in *Children's Folklore: A Handbook* (TUCKER, 2012), which historicises and systematises the field.

In fact, studies of children have been conducted since the creation of the term "folklore" in 1846 by Ambrose Merton (pseudonym of William John Thoms), which is understood as the study of peoples' literature and heritage. The creator of the term used examples of traditional children's customs to illustrate the concept (FACTOR, 2001).

From an evolutionary perspective characteristic of the nineteenth century, which associated children with "primitive peoples" or with the illiterate layers of society, the collection of children's cultural heritage marked studies in the field. William Wells Newell published his *Games and Songs of American Children* in 1883, followed by the publication in England of the classic work, *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1894, 1898) by Lady Alice Bertle Gomme. This work recorded about 800 children's games in two volumes, mostly collected through interviews with adults from the higher layers of society. In none of these games was there any reference to what we have defined as obscene.

Still within the studies of children's folklore, Alexander Chamberlain (1896, p. 25 *apud*

<sup>6</sup> Psychoanalysis has a long tradition in developing studies on the subject. However, given the specificity and complexity of its theoretical framework, this perspective will not be considered here.

<sup>7</sup> For the most important productions in the field, see: *Bibliography: Essential texts for children's folklore studies*. At: <https://www.afsnet.org/page/BiblioChildren>.



TUCKER, 2012, p. 45) published *The Child and Childhood in Folk-Thought* in 1896, reporting that while collecting children's expressions, he did not find a single manifestation of obscene language or rhyme.

Few studies were conducted in the first half of the 20th century. Factor (2001) observed a theoretical and methodological change in the field of children's folklore, from an evolutionist bias focused on the production inventory to a perspective based on the observation of children, emphasising the transmission and learning processes characteristic of this generational group in the interactions between peers.

We highlight the paradigmatic study of Opies and Opies (1959), *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, which had a profound impact not only in the field of folklore but in anthropology, being considered one of the first studies in the anthropology of childhood. The authors conducted a rigorous survey of children's games and leisure. However, they do not mention jokes or language games with obscene expressions. Although the authors had initially included a significant repertoire on the subject, this content was removed from the final version as required by Oxford (SUTTON-SMITH, 1978).

Tucker (2012), in his historiographical survey of children's folklore, points to the construction from the 1960s of a representation of the *taboo-breaking child*, when the so-called children's obscene gained prominence in studies of the field. For the author, it was only after the relaxation of the customs experienced in that historical period that it was possible to talk about the subject without threatening potential readers (TUCKER, 2012).

Thus, in 1968, Gershon Legman from a psychoanalytic perspective published the study *Rationale of the Dirty Joke*, including eschatological and sexual expressions of children. Among other materials, Legman (1968) used the unpublished data collected by the Opies and Opies (1959), who provided them to the author (SUTTON-SMITH, 1978). This work presents not only the expressions of children's obscene but categorises them according to manifestations of sexuality: eschatology, manipulation, masturbation, and sexual acts.

Tucker (2012) considers the publication in 1974 of the doctoral thesis of the folklorist Claude Gaignebet, *Le folklore obscene des enfants*, to be the first systematic study in the field to contemplate the obscene child<sup>8</sup>. Gaignebet (1974) initially intended to develop a psychogenetic study based on Piagetian references. However, from the analysis of literary works, manuscripts, and interviews with children and adults, he noted that these studies referred to an oral tradition present in France since the sixteenth century (especially in Rabelais)<sup>9</sup>. Thus, contemporary manifestations of the children's obscene would be expressions of a popular culture of oral transmission.

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<sup>8</sup>Gaignebet's thesis was supervised by the sociologist Roger Bastide at Sorbonne University (with psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan as evaluator). It is worth remembering that Robert was previously part of the group of young intellectuals (among them Levi Strauss and Fernand Braudel) who worked in training in human sciences at the University of São Paulo in the 1920s shortly after its establishment. During his stay in Brazil, he supervised the monograph of Florestan Fernandes, *As Trocinhas do Bom Retiro*, in 1936. Bastide remained in the country until the 1950s, when he returned to France.

<sup>9</sup> On the relations between adult obscene oral literature and children's obscene oral literature, see Carvalho (2020).



There are still prohibitions in the treatment of the subject. Sullivan (2008-2009) reveals that, as editor of the journal *Children's Folklore Review*, he was criticised for having published an article about the obscene (which made him fear losing his academic position at a university). For the editor, this reveals that children are still represented as being pure and innocent by studies of the field. The tensions surrounding the children's obscene are also present in cultural production for children. Buckingham (2018) comments on the conviction of authors of a publication directed at children and young people in England in 1972 for indecent exposure and dissemination of pornography<sup>10</sup>.

Psycholinguistic studies have also addressed children's obscene, but they focused on the evolution of the understanding and use of swear words or linguistic taboos (ORSI, 2011). Winslow (1969 *apud* JAY; JAY, 2013) observed that children use swear words from the time they acquire language, even without mastering their meanings. For this researcher, children offensively use profanity, ridiculing the names of colleagues, ethnic-racial belonging, and appearance.

In 1978, the psychologist Sutton-Smith, as part of a project that analysed children's narratives, published a brief article in which he studied 25 texts with obscene manifestations by children from 5 to 11 years of age, all written by boys (among 150 texts written by boys and girls). The author analysed the different expressions of the obscene, trying to evaluate whether in the texts of older children there was a complexity of narratives and a more indirect reference to obscene situations or expressions as a result of greater control and sexual repression. The author considered that in narrative terms, writings would acquire greater density and complexity as children grow up, with a change in the use of obscene expressions along with the development of the child's emotional language leading to greater restraint in the use of taboo terms.

Sullivan (2008-2009) analyses what he calls children's oral poetry, focusing on the expressions of obscenity present in "children's speech". For the author, the child discovers through the exchange of rhymes and language games on the subject something that distances them from the adult world. From a developmental perspective, he observes that references to coprophilia (Interest in faeces) are characteristic of young children. As the subject of body excretion gains prominence, the body becomes an object of children's obscene, moving to the genital areas and the understanding of sexuality. However, unlike the manifestations of obscene in adolescents, children have no intention of being erotic. For Sullivan (2008-2009), the desire for independence from the adult world and the construction of a secret language aimed at understanding sexuality would be characteristic of the expressions of the obscene among children.

Jay and Jay (2013) have been researching the subject since the 1990s. In their most recent study, they conducted a quantitative and comparative investigation of the use of swear words by children

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<sup>10</sup>In Brazil, the publication of the book *The Boy and the Boy's Chick* (1975) by Wander Piroli provoked not only praise for the realistic treatment of the child, but also criticism of the title, which actually referred to the relationship between the boy and a small chicken. (The criticism was because, in Brazil, *chick* refers both to a small chicken and the male sexual organ.)

and adults. The authors observed differences in gender and age, with underage children using swear words differently. As they grow up, their understanding and use of swear words becomes similar to those of adults as a result of social interactions. The use of swear words by girls, in turn, tends to decrease with age, also as a result of repressive interactions with adults.

Studies of children's folklore in Brazil also do not address this subject. In his three works on children's folklore, *Folclore e grupos infantis* (1942), *Educação e cultura infantil* (1943), and *As "trocinhas" do Bom Retiro* (1944), Florestan Fernandes (2004a, 2004b, 2004c) considers a specific framework for the analysis of folklore. For Florestan (2004b, 2004c), children's groups constitute an initiation group, providing the basis for the process of socialisation and transmission in which folkloric expressions would be especially present. However, the author does not address the obscene, only briefly mentions two versions of catching games among the children researched in the neighborhood of Bom Retiro – (FERNANDES, 2004c, p 306). This is one of the versions:

- After I say something, you say shit?
- I do
- I caught a wall
- Wallshit.
- I caught a house.
- Houseshit
- I caught a tank.
- Tankshit
- [...]
- I caught an eye.
- Eyeshit

Later, Veríssimo de Melo (1985) published the work *Folclore infantil*, in which he surveyed and categorised the folklore repertoire. Although he did not include the obscene in his categorisation, he shily and apologetically states:

If it is so important to cite in our studies as many variants of a single region as possible, as Professor Karle Krohn recommended, then allow us to finish these notes with a variant so ugly, but so alive in the mouth of children and kids of the city. – The bird is flitting; the cat is shitting... And you are licking it! (answers the offended one) – And you, berk, are eating it! (MELO, 1985, p. 123).

It is striking how the subject has been addressed by relatively few studies conducted by folklorists, psycholinguists, and scholars of children's literature, but is absent from the field of "new childhood studies". We were unable to find any study in English that addressed this subject, which reveals a continuous lack of interest in the treatment of this subject.

In the Brazilian context, Antonio Luis Silva published in 1991 a study of the use of swear words among children in the local soccer stadium in the city of Catingueira/Paraíba. Silva (2014) conducted an ethnographic investigation in dialogue with childhood studies, understanding that in the intergenerational relations on the soccer field, by using swear words children built an interpretative

reproduction of adult male culture and its manifestations. At the same time, he observed that the use of swear words by children was different from that of adults. For example, among children, the maternal reference was a taboo.

It is interesting to note that children who master the linguistic and social skills of obscene folklore are usually the leaders of their groups (GAIGNEBET, 2002; FERNANDES, 2004), giving this oral literature, apparently marginalised and marginalising, an integrative function, comprising a linguistic identity mark of the group (PEREA, 2011). Valuable peer-to-peer knowledge is not always valued in relationships with adults in the family and at school, which shows the uniqueness of peer-to-peer relationships in children's culture.

Certainly, the methodological difficulties in the development of research on the subject constitute a challenge. With this question in mind, we conducted an empirical investigation of the manifestations of the obscene among children in dialogue with the references of new studies of childhood, psycholinguistics, and anthropology. In this sense, like Silva (2014), we believe that these manifestations are an expression of an interpretative reproduction of adult culture, in which children try to give meaning to the obscene by reproducing it. We understand that thematic and structural recurrences are not passively assimilated, but, on the contrary, are actively interpreted by them. Based on this perspective, we assume that children not only reproduce structures and subjects (Johnny went to school, Johnny took a message, the parrot who says swear words, etc.), but they also create and reinterpret them.

From this understanding, some questions arose: how do children share the children's obscene in contexts of peer-to-peer interactions? What are their manifestations? What meanings are attributed to expressions considered obscene?

### **“A SWEAR WORD IS...”: CHILDREN’S INVESTIGATIONS OF THE OBSCENE**

Faced with these questions, the definition of methodological strategies was a challenge we faced in developing this empirical study, and the results were dependent on the choice of social group and place of observation.

Given the difficulty in the empirical treatment of the subject, we chose to observe interactions among middle-class children belonging to the intellectual, customarily liberal layers of society<sup>11</sup>. The next step was to define the school as our fieldwork space, considering that such urban middle-class children interact more frequently with their peers in education institutions than in other social spaces<sup>12</sup>. Observation was carried out in a school that serves families from the intellectual middle-

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<sup>11</sup> We evaluated it as more difficult to obtain authorisation to conduct the study from parents of the popular classes in public schools, given the greater religiosity observed in this group. See, among other studies on religiosity and traditionalism in the customs of urban popular layers, Yaccoub (2011).

<sup>12</sup> Among others, see: Lansky, Gouvea, and Gomes (2014); Carvalho (2018).

class sectors of society, characterised by a critical perspective on so-called traditional education, and that commonly define themselves as alternative and politicised<sup>13</sup>. This school was chosen to the extent that we imagined that the subject would have a lower impact on moral values in a school with this profile, the same choice made by Sutton-Smith (1978) in his study conducted in the United States. Another factor that contributed to the choice of the social group and the school was the previous approach of one of the researchers, who had worked there before.

In addition to observations in the classroom, we sought to rescue possible manifestations of the children's obscene produced by children at school, such as graffiti written in bathrooms or on desks. We also sought to expand the empirical data, conducting oral interviews with eight male and female adults from this same social group in order to retrieve the memory of the children's obscene in their experiences. However, in this article we will only address the study conducted with children.

We sought to perceive the strategies and sharing of the children's obscene through the peer group. The fieldwork was conducted throughout the second half of 2012, with a class corresponding to the first year of the first cycle, totalling 18 students aged between 6 and 7 years. Of the children, only 2 were girls and 16 were boys, forming a predominantly male group. The children came from families with few children, with almost half (eight) being only children.

The children's interactions were observed from the moment they entered the school, including classes with the leading teacher, extra-class classes, lunchtime, and recreation. We did not find a single record of children's obscene manifestations at school, thus confirming the hypothesis of a weak incidence of children's obscene in its folkloric form, expressed through jokes and graphite (Beltrão, 1980, p. 221), in bathrooms and school desks. On contrary, we observed that the children's obscene was shared through a well-educated and collective investigation mediated by the teacher about uses and meanings of swear words.

The definition of the socio-cultural context to be investigated certainly impacted the results. From the beginning, we asked if we would find the children's obscene manifestations, especially in the folkloric form, among middle-class children subjected to strong family control in daily life and who had a restricted coexistence with children outside the school space, especially from other social groups, as revealed by interviews with the teacher and informal contact with parents. Thus, we now analyse one of the events we collected in field research when the question was raised.

This is the first meeting of one of the researchers with the class. They were all sitting in a circle, an activity that is part of their daily routine. The researcher was very skilfully introduced to the students by the teacher as someone who would learn from the children. It is also important to note that at this time, the consent forms had not been distributed and that therefore the children did not yet know the topic of the research. It seems that the subject arose spontaneously since the teacher reported that

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<sup>13</sup> See: Nogueira (1995).

there was no mention of the subject before the arrival of the researcher. We will present the whole dialogue, but, given its extent, we have chosen to present it in two distinct but sequential parts in order to favour analysis<sup>14</sup>:

Luiz: Lili, the so-and-so is saying swear words.  
 Lili: What swear word?  
 Luiz: He said, “get off my back”.  
 André: Swear word is *bohy shit*.  
 Lili: Is “get off my back” a swear word? What’s a swear word?  
 Luiz: It’s something we say and our friend doesn’t like.  
 Carlos: It’s a big word<sup>15</sup>.  
 Lili: Big like *otorhinolaryngologist*? The word that Laurinha [the coordinator] told us the other day?  
 Guilherme: It’s an ugly word!  
 Marcelo: Because it’s like *fucking shit*.  
 Leo: Swearing is like pineapple... One person doesn’t know, but the other person knows.  
 Lili: What do you mean?  
 Leo: It’s one thing one person knows what it means, and the other doesn’t.  
 Lili: And how do you know if a word is a swear word or not?  
 Marcelo: If it’s a word like *arse* or *fuck you*, it’s a dirty word.

Socially the use of swear words is tabooed, which seems to be perceived by children. The term evokes in its etymology its ambiguous character. According to Augras (1989 *apud* ORSI, 2011, p. 335), the word taboo is attributed to the English navigator James Cook (1728-1779) as the term for the behaviour called *Tapu* of the native inhabitants of the Tonga Islands, which designated both what was sacred and what was prohibited. This dimension is also present in Western societies, as stated by Rodrigues (2006). According to the author, a taboo isolates all that is sacred, disturbing, forbidden, impure, establishing limits and punishments for its manifestations in social life.

In the case of these children, they seek to understand the taboo in its linguistic manifestation: the swear word. In his study on the subject, Orsi (2011, p. 336) defines the swear word as a linguistic taboo:

In general, the erotic-obscene Lexia can be considered a swear word, because both can be used by speakers to express insult, express feelings or to mask the name of a sexual organ in order to avoid the official terminology. Swear words are lexical units fired; they are verbal projectiles, according to Tartamella (2006). They are also seen as a cathartic element to alleviate social tension.

The understanding of swear words by these children is related to both the anthropological and the sociolinguistic and psychological dimensions. They refer to something that is socially transgressive, given its impure character, and therefore must be prohibited. On the other hand, they point out that this is still present in tense situations of social interaction, being expressed verbally as an insult. Finally, they emphasise the dimension of semantic inaccessibility, in which some people (probably adults)

<sup>14</sup> The names of the teacher (Lili) and the children are fictitious

<sup>15</sup> In Portuguese, “Palavrão” can be understood both as “swear word” and “big word”.

dominate its meaning and make use of it, while others (probably children) do not. In this sense, they express their feeling of confusion and incomprehension before the ambiguity of the social rules of the adult world.

Children understand the seemingly contradictory dimension of its use. The swear word, even if it is forbidden, is often used by adults, as well as by children, in an act of transgression. In this sense, to use the verb seems to be, for the group, to transgress the adult order, even if they do not understand the meaning of the lexicon.

The swear word involves a secret in the apprehension of meaning, which seems to be unknown to these children. If the meanings and senses of a word are appropriated in interactions with adults, then when faced with a swear word, children face the denial of the adult, either in sharing its meaning or in allowing its use. This is expressed by Leo when he says: “[...] it’s like pineapple, one person knows what it means and other persons don’t”.

Foucault (1988, p. 36) states that: “What is typical of modern societies is not that they have condemned sex to remain in obscurity, but rather that they have devoted themselves to always talking about it, valuing it as a secret”. The children of this group experience this issue. In a time of relaxation of customs, in which the use of swear words in the middle layers of society is no longer considered such a reprehensible behaviour or object of punishment in the education of children (SUTTON-SMITH, 1978; JAY; JAY, 2013; ORSI, 2011), the group demonstrates a repertoire of swear words (*holy shit, fucking shit, fuck you, shit*, terms that appear in the dialogue). However, they understand them as a secret of adult culture, striving to grasp them from the interpretations of the few elements available.

Another important dimension to be considered is the relationship between the swear word and the economy of children’s affections. Children understand that saying swear words is taboo, not only because it refers to the profane, but also because it is offensive to the other, as expressed by the child: “It’s something that we say the other doesn’t like”. Considering the child’s demand for affection and the fear of rejection, the use of swear words constitutes a disruptive element in social interactions which could result in the loss of friendship.

Jay and Jay (2013) observed the use of swear words already by two-year-old children in their empirical research. However, they emphasise that not only is the repertoire of swearing different, but also its meaning among young children differs from that of adults, which we will see in the continuation of the dialogue:

Pausing the laughter, André lifts his middle finger to ask to speak.

He looks at the researcher and laughs.

Fábio: You know, for example, I’ve seen a video that has a guy, and then there’s an ant who speaks a swear word.

Lili: Okay, but how do you know that this (points to the gesture with the finger) is ugly?

Luiz: I don’t know, I just know that to know you have to know that this is ugly.

Luan: Will we leave this question for home?

Lili: Maybe... you can ask your parents what is a swear word.



André: A swear word is when we say something that's not good to say.  
 Lili: If it's a bad thing to say, why do people say it?  
 André: They say because they feel anger, to release it.  
 Leo: For example, one single person in the world invented the swear words: *God*.  
 Luiz: Of course he didn't invent it! Ah...if it were him... [thinking] ...if it were him...  
 Leo: Hold on, I did not finish. I think, I think, I guess, I don't know... eleven people invented eleven swear words... [addressing the teacher] I have to say a swear word to explain...  
 Lili: Okay...  
 Leo: Like...*Devil*...somebody swears, people decide it's going to be a swear word, and it's going to mean one thing: God of evil.  
 Luan: Do you know how we know? Someone invents the word, invents that it's ugly and when we say *body shit*, we remember the person who said it to another person, who said it to another person, who said it to another person, who said it to us.  
 André: How do we know if the word is big like *otorhinolaryngologist* and when it's a swear word?  
 Luan: André, you just said that a small word is a dirty word and it's not... otherwise, my name would be a swear word!!!  
 Lili: He said it coooould be.  
 André: But *shit* is small and it's a swear word. People say it without knowing what it is.  
 [inaudible overlapping conversations]  
 Tomás: We know it's ugly because people tell us it's ugly.  
 João: It's something that's not polite?  
 Marcelo: I know because *arsehole*... it's just that *arse* is a part of the.... [points to his own lap]. But what about a finger? [points to own finger] Why is a finger [referring to the gesture with the middle finger] a swear word? André: When God was born, he didn't have a middle finger. And he invented it so that no one would have the middle finger. So, all he doesn't have is a swear word.

Following the dialogue, the children continue to express their perplexity at the concept of swear word, its origin and interdiction. While they ask seriously, they play with transgression, for example, when André raises his middle finger, laughing at the researcher, indicating that this gesture has an obscene meaning, although it does not dominate the use of the gesture.

Children also understand the social dimension of swearing and the prohibition of its use: “We know that it's ugly because people tell us that it's ugly”. Thus, adults are both those who master the meaning of bad language and transmit it to children in social interactions (SILVA, 2014), and those who teach that such words should not be used because they are “ugly” and indicate bad education.

Faced with this perplexity, the children of the group resort to the relationship between the sacred and the profane in order to understand the origin of the word, using a religious *ethos*. If God created all things, would He also have created the swear word? (they seem to think). But if the dirty word is something bad, how did God create it? At that moment, they take up the middle finger reference: if the swear word did not come from God and the raised middle finger is a swear word, God does not have this finger. So, according to them, a swear word is all that God doesn't have (in his body).

We can infer that children reproduce an opposition between the sacred and the profane, in which the swear word refers to something absent from the divine body. Mary Douglas (1976), in her classic study of the senses of purity/impurity, states that the etymological root of the term “holiness” is that which is placed separately. Similarly, Rodrigues (2006, p. 23) states: “[...] the sacred being is the forbidden being that cannot be violated, to which we dare not approach, because He cannot be touched. He is permanently protected from this contact by prohibitions that isolate him and protect him from the



profane”. In this sense, the profane middle finger becomes absent in the divine body, keeping it pure.

The centrality of the body in the formulation of the concept of swear word is also reported in adults (ORSI, 2011), who use swear words referring to body parts to express sexuality, while children take the body as a referent to discuss the concept of the swear word (the middle finger). Although they understand this relationship, they do not seem to grasp the sexual dimension (when they refer to the middle finger), indicating that they have not mastered the metaphors used in adult culture to refer to sexual organs. Thus, it is not possible to say that children establish a relationship between body and sexuality. However, we can dialogue with the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1976, p. 149), when she states that “the body symbolism is part of the common stock of symbols, being deeply emotional due to the human experience of individuals”. The body, therefore, constitutes a powerful symbolic reference for the construction of the notion of swears word, considering that children deal with prohibitions in the exhibition and manipulation of some of their organs from an early age.

As highlighted by Jay and Jay (2013), the meaning of a swear word is very distinct between young children and adults. To the extent that they make less use of swear words in front of children, they use original interpretations to understand it. Such interpretations, as represented above, are something peculiar to children’s culture, not accessible to adults. Freud (1977), in his essay on the children’s comic, had already drawn attention to this dimension by stating that children’s motives for pleasure are incomprehensible to adults. Thus, if the use of bad language involves a secret of adults, relative to the profane domain, children also build their own cultural universe with meanings inaccessible to adults: the children’s comic. By dialoguing with Corsaro (2011), we can understand that the children’s comic is an interpretative reproduction of the adult world, as pointed out by Silva (2014) in his study of the meanings attributed to swear words by children from the popular classes.

The teacher conducted the conversation naturally, listening to what the children had to say without giving them a correct answer or paying too much attention to the jokes that inevitably arose from the subject. Some children took advantage of being able to say what they wanted and had fun talking about what could not be made explicit on other occasions. Other children assumed a researcher posture, making use of school skills that were already being developed with the teacher in other projects – they proposed a formal research project and suggested discussing the issues raised there at their home. In a round of jokes, a child proposed that they prepare a book of class jokes, showing how seriously they took the research proposed there. They have committed themselves to the collective construction of knowledge about obscenity and have even jointly developed concepts of the swear word. For the kids in that class, a swear word is: “something that a friend doesn’t like”, “it’s something that one person knows what it means and another person doesn’t”, “something that we say”, “an ugly word”, “a word that is not good to say, but we say it because we feel anger, to release it”, “it’s a word that someone invented and decided was ugly”, “a ugly word that one person says to another and that we remember who taught us that it was ugly”, “sexual parts”, “it’s something that’s not polite”, “it’s something that God doesn’t

have”.

In summary, in the concept collectively constructed by these children, a swear word is a word arbitrarily invented and forbidden by another (by God or by culture), whose meaning they do not know (although some suspect it refers to the reality of their bodies), but that someone had decided is ugly. For them, the selection of ugly words is communicated to children as a shared secret. They understand that such words should not be said because they are ugly and saying them would be bad manners or would have the potential to offend someone. Although it is ugly to say swear words, they think it is good to say them in order to alleviate from anger. The concept of swear words of these children, which cannot be generalised to other children’s groups, confirms its dimension of taboo, to be interdicted because of its aggressive or insulting character.

This draws attention to how children use common school strategies in that context to gain access to the adult secrets of the obscene world. Having as strategy a dialogue proper to the learning processes in that school, they raise hypotheses and formulate theories through the mediation of the teacher in an intellectual research activity, without, however, experimenting or using swear words, either in the observed situation or in later situations.

After this promising start, the children did not return to the subject, nor did they use swear words, either in the classroom or during recreational and leisure moments. On the other hand, the oral transmission of so-called children’s obscene folklore was not present in any situation. It is important to analyse this absence, reflecting both the profile of the investigated group and the methodological limits of the research.

These children, as previously mentioned, were mostly single children. Living in a metropolis where intergenerational and interclass coexistence is little present among children from the middle and upper classes (CARVALHO, 2018; LANSKY; GOUVEA; GOMES, 2014), the group had little interaction with other social or generational groups besides their family and neighbours in their daily lives outside school. No child referred to friends or colleagues as a source of information, but only to adults, who controlled their access. We believe that our case study expresses the relationship of children of this social group with the so-called children’s obscene, in which the greater control and monitoring of parents hinders access to the repertoire of child folklore, especially its obscene manifestations.

The way swear words were used was very different from that found in Silva’s (2014) study, which was conducted in another cultural context in a very distinct social group. In the observation of the soccer field, the children were found to appropriate swear words through an interpretative reproduction of an adult-centric context. There were strong inter- and intragenerational interactions with children of different ages, sharing linguistic taboos with adults. Adults in that cultural context were marked by a masculine ethos and were permissive regarding the use of swear words by children, who appropriated the social spaces of the use of linguistic taboos.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As this is a case study limited to the specificities of the group under study, the conclusions of the research cannot be generalised, nor do they address all the possible ways of sharing the children's obscene. Therefore, further studies conducted in other spaces of socialisation, with children from different age groups, or in school institutions of other social classes are required, as already pointed out by Jay and Jay (2013) in their quantitative survey, where they observe that most studies of the use of swear words by children focus on the analysis of its evolution. Few investigations contemplate its emergence, apprehending the uniqueness of its use by children.

In this sense, further investigations based in the theoretical and methodological references of childhood studies would allow us both to retrieve the uniqueness of the expressions of children's obscene in its different manifestations and to situate the social and cultural conditions that enable its use.

In the case of this research, we understand that the sharing of obscene expressions by children requires some conditions. In addition to the methodological issues already mentioned, the low incidence of swear words found in this group may be due to the age of those children who, at the end of early childhood, “develop feelings of shame and repugnance that then rise against the perverse pleasures of early childhood as result of educational coercion or a biologically determined evolution [...]” (MILLOT, 1987, p. 25).

Furthermore, the strong family protection characteristic of this social group has possibly restricted children's access to obscene practices. The asepsis of children's programmes, the precautions in the face of potential contemporary risks (trauma, early sexuality, harassment, bullying), make urban middle-class children deal with issues considered adult in a significantly mediated way, especially because they have little contact with children of other ages and of a distinct social reality.

There is also a contemporary tension regarding the manifestations of the children's obscene which directly impacts the school. Whether or not there is a fertile cultural production directed at children in which some expressions of children's obscene folklore are present, in recent years, in Brazil, there is a growing movement for the prohibition of circulation and access to cultural productions and information on topics considered taboo by political and religious groups. Such tension shows, once again, that the child is the object of discourses and practices of control in the access to knowledge and culture in the name of a representation of purity and innocence that persists until today.

Even so, children's resistance to adult control persists as well, resorting to comedy and secrecy. Going back to Johnny: “The teacher asks Johnny to formulate a sentence with the word ‘mole’. He creates an obscene (expected) rhyme and is reprimanded. Faced with the prohibition, he rectifies: – The mole has fur on its feet, it just doesn't have it anywhere else, because the teacher doesn't want to”.

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