

## **LANGUAGE AND MEANINGS OF HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY IN URBAN CULTURE NARRATIVES: ANALYZING STICKERS USED ON CARS**

**Felipe Gustsack & Sandra Maria de Castro Rocha**

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### **Abstract**

Based on conceptions about language, urban technologies and narratives consummated within everyday life interactions, we problematize the cultural practice of narration in the urban context. We present the analysis of the data gathered during a research developed in the city of Santa Maria, Brazil, involving the collection and analysis of images and conversations with car drivers, as well as readers of car stickers, popularly known as “happy family” stickers. Among other findings, we observed that “happy family” stickers, strategically applied on the bumpers of cars, instigate several enlightening meaning processes of individual and collective forms of self and hetero identitarian narrative in the urban context.

### **Keywords**

Language; urban culture; narrative; family

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### **INTRODUCTION**

From the time when cave walls served to register myths, laws and other events, there have been narrators, and therefore readers, interpreters who found that media and various other materials could represent the possibility for them to be interpreted through their culture’s components. In Barthes’ words (2008, p. 19) under almost infinite ways, “narrative is present at all times, everywhere, in all societies; narrative begins with the history of mankind; there is no people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their own narratives, and these narratives are often appreciated by men from different, or even opposite cultures”, and have left fundamental legacies for future societies.

The documented History of each culture finds, through the resources and objects that they dominate, its own way to narrate and thus perpetuate itself over time. It has happened this way from the time when cave walls served to record important events of communities, until nowadays. It is possible to identify narratives marked by different cultures such as the Egyptians, in which the pharaonic deeds were recorded on papyrus, bas-reliefs and paintings, for instance. As another example, we may mention the tapestries, mosaics and miniatures through which medieval Christians told their stories. These forms of narration find parallel in several modern days’ phenomena, such as the bumper stickers that appear in everyday life on the back of cars and that mark the contemporary urban cultures. Thus, we may ask: are these images mere demonstrations or are they also a narrative in themselves, giving emphasis to the history of whoever is narrating them? Is it possible that these narratives, which circulate in the cars ahead of

us, are configured as a way, a language, a technology through which we also narrate ourselves, when we observe them as individuals participating in this culture?

To problematize these issues, we start with the assumption that, “as it happens with an image, a narrative puts a new world before our eyes” (Sodré, 1988, p. 75). Following this line of thought, we conceive language as an action in which we participate during the continuous process of becoming, of shaping our identity and the world we live in. In order to make the action, the emotion, the social interaction and the coexistence carried out by language more evident, Maturana (2002) speaks of a “lingo”, thus understanding the language as an act that happens through consensual coordination of interaction. Larrosa (2006) states that what we are able to read in a book is the result of our deepest mental and psychological dispositions. Paraphrasing said author, we may say that what we are able to read in an image (painting, sculpture, drawing, engraving, etc.) are our ways of narrating, proposing and recording interactions. In their different potentialities – oral, written and pictorial, among other narratives – they constitute us and, based on them, we continue to create other narratives.

A visual narrative provides us with the possibility or the circumstance of being *in* an image. That is, images are (permeable) narratives, because they are constituted of interconnections between different interpretations, as stated by Echeverría (2006), who points out that we cannot say how things really are, being only possible for us to say how we interpret and consider them. Therefore, the act of narrating involves interpreting ourselves, since every form of giving meaning and of understanding belongs to the realm of language. In Echeverría’s words (2006, p. 32) “there is not a place out of language, from which we can observe our existence”; that is, human existential experience takes place in and through language.

By focusing our gaze on an urban environment, we see tattoos marking skins and graffiti – another urban form of visual communication – spread out on facades, on the walls, on the most adequate places and also on the most inappropriate ones. Said places end up acting as canvases, as supports of artistic expressions, of cries and of sighs. These artistic expressions are, as Bretas says, like languages in graphic-visual appeals, embraced in the notion of a communicative everyday life that reveals the “ontological dimension of the realization of life that is marked by experience” (Bretas, 2006, p. 29).

Within the problematic of the modes of self-narration in urban daily life, the main purpose of this article is to contribute to the widening of the observations around narratives of urban culture, by analysing significance processes underlying the ‘happy family’ stickers stuck on the back of cars. We also have an interest in showing that this kind of narrative, considering its visibility and opacity, gives rise to several significations, which point out to the comprehension we have about family as well as about several types of subjectivities that are being configured within this urban culture.

#### URBAN NARRATIVES AND CULTURE UNDER OBSERVATION

We have observed a growing process of isolation to which men and women, in the name of security and protection, have been subjected, in order to keep themselves

restricted to safe places, such as malls, condominiums, buildings, houses and cars. Thus, the people who live in cities end up keeping out of familiarity, isolated by the tinted films that cover their vehicle's windows, as well as by the locked doors. In fact, they stop looking at the passengers of the car running alongside theirs, and are not seen by them either. The films that protect people from possible attacks, also avoid the presence of the Other's eyes, while the population – blind to their fellow drivers – travels along the same roads, in cities that do not need to be big for those attitudes to be made part of everyday life.

According to Araújo (2004) the car competes with the house in regards to criteria such as protection and comfort. It is possible to observe this competition between automobiles and housing throughout the history of vehicles. The author also points out that the house, when is being planned, 'grants' to the car it's own exclusive space. In this sense, the researcher says:

The car competes with the house, and is, in extremis, a form of housing, a space that offers in miniature, but consistently, the protections and the comfort of home, whatever it may be. Not to mention that sometimes, in certain groups of society, it is their only home, the car keeps the individual from the outside world and, depending on its design and settings, it offers several other possibilities that a house does not usually suggest or allows. All this would be only a matter of marketing if it were not so closely linked to the sociological characteristics of individuals who idealize, compare, purchase and use a car. Indeed, the issue revolves around fitting the car and the mobility options that it offers into a lifestyle; that is, an articulated set of practices and representations that define the way of being of individuals in society. (Araújo, 2004, p. 4)

In an urban cultural context, cars produce feelings of warmth and, at the same time, of threat. They welcome us whenever they invite us to the dialogue that is reflected in the narratives they produce when circulating, according to their designs, colours and stickers, therefore leading us to ontological traits, which characterize human story. They threaten us through narratives brought about by their mechanical power, deafening noise and all that they carry of unknown, of strange. But, apart from the aforementioned subjects of the urban narrative, there is another subject that, though not as visible, is more concrete: the individual that can be friendly and, at the same time, a potential aggressor. Said individual can be in the car alongside ours, on the sidewalk, at the traffic light; according to Bauman (1998), we create this stranger, who lurks in a car and in the shadows. Said stranger can be the one person that creates the prospect of a happy meeting and, at the same time, the bearer of distress, thus making us insecure and lost. In closed cars, the dark tint is part of contemporary urban strategies to nullify that stranger (or the stranger in ourselves), which is not even seen (or does not let him/herself be seen) above-board. In this sense, it is worth remembering that:

Following the sociological theories of imaginary, we can discern a particular sociability in certain 'countercultures', or social micro groups, which

include the desire to be invisible as a form of identity expression. (Tomás, 2010, p. 165)

Queiroz and Lacerda (2005) emphasize that men and women are, *par excellence*, beings who are able to process the feeling of fear, thus, they recognize the need for security as fundamental. The authors consider that fear is an important ingredient for the social production of space, appearing as a social control strategy, and “in that sense, it does not seem to be absurd to talk about the existence of a culture of fear, particularly in contemporary urban society” (Queiroz & Lacerda, 2005, p. 5). Pastana (2005) concurs with this idea, saying that fear, associated with criminality, is now incorporated into the *modus vivendi* of large cities:

More and more cities assume features dictated by an “architecture of fear” – high walls, fences around the houses, alarms and sophisticated security systems, as well as other related phenomena: visible growth of private surveillance companies, high number of guns in circulation, exodus from areas and regions where the risk of travelling alone is presumed to be high, besides other self-protection mechanisms. In face of that, individuals and institutions shape their behaviours according to the new reality and reorient themselves to live with fear and insecurity under the tension and the expectation of being victims of criminal offenses. (Pastana, 2005, p. 183)

Such behaviours can be explained by the fact that we are beings of lingo, or, in other words, interpretative beings. That is, we live from and in the search for meanings about what we do and about what we let undone, about what we are and about what we are not, in an individual and social sense. Therefore, sometimes, we have difficulty searching for security, because we do not consider as legitimate being (Maturana, 2002) the other that might be looking at us from the car beside ours and to whom we would also look at, perhaps because we disregard that “we do not know that to maintain a certain coherence as regards our vision about things we lack the possible point of view of the Other (Le Breton, 2009, p. 36). Thus, we tend to deny the look from the other, going against the chance of welcoming and searching for, “a form of symbolic protection against adversity, a protective surface against world uncertainty” (Le Breton, 2009, p. 38).

Bauman (1998), a reader of Deleuze, explains the characteristics of post-modern society according to the ephemerality, the immediacy and fragility of emotional bonds between people, now linked by “liquid love”. The author calls attention to the contempt of otherness that people who live in the present time and in such culture have; present days individuals no longer recognize each other in every relationship, which causes “blockages” in everyday communication. Deleuze, quoted by Le Breton (2009, p. 37), explicates that an individual’s desire is related to desiring the Other, since “What I want is what is seen, thought and possessed by a possible other.”

In face of those observations and following a train of thought that conceives the desire for isolation and hiding oneself behind dark car windows as a mode of narration,

it is also possible to classify this hiding as a form of language game, since in other social spaces the individuals are expected to open up to the world, recovering, through ideas transmitted by images, what Guimarães and França (2006) call the social bond. Said bond is discursively constituted by a number of indeterminate language games: “Men, freed from the grand narratives (or not believing in such narratives) become subjects of new and episodic utterances” (Guimarães & França, 2006, p. 95).

Following Maffesoli's (2006) ponderings, it is possible to say that individuals could choose the ambiguous and individualist attitude of protecting (and hiding) themselves; however, said attitude tends to be dissipated, when faced with the human need of identification with a group (or tribe). In the present study, we can talk about the people who make use of the “happy family” stickers on their cars as a tribe.

According to the aforementioned author, such urban tribes can be understood as various networks that are formed due to affinity, groups of interest and neighbourly bonds, and are established in a more or less ephemeral mode (Maffesoli, 2005). Said networks have in common an array of lowercase values that collide, attract and also repel each other, forming “a constellation of ill-defined and totally fluid contours” (Maffesoli, 2005, p. 18). This idea of a communion of small values approximates Maffesoli's ideas to those of Hall, since the latter exposes the concept of multiple identities (or flexible identity), that can be defined as the “decentralization of fixed and stable identity, resulting in open, contradictory, unfinished, fragmented identities of the post-modern subject” (Hall, 2006, p. 46).

In order to have a better understanding of space and urban culture, the challenge for contemporary intellectuals and politicians, according to Bauman (2009), is to recover the communitarian dimension of public space, as a way to learn the art of a safe, peaceful and friendly coexistence. Therefore, we will try to pursue this problematic about the modes of interpreting and narrating the urban space, systematizing information produced throughout the use of direct observation, in the city of Santa Maria – RS – BR.

#### **METHODOLOGICAL NOTE**

In order to better organize data production, an observation plan was drafted, even though our intention was to accomplish what Lakatos and Marconi (1988, p. 170) define as non-systematic observation, also called spontaneous, informal, simple, free or occasional observation. That is, the observation done without recurring to the use of any technique, carried out without planning, without control and without previously elaborated observational requisites. It was decided that the target public would be composed of occupants of cars that had stickers on. This public had to be enlarged due to the interest shown by other persons who approached the researches during data gathering stages of the study, maybe attracted by the picturesque. The first action planned for this work was the production of a random photographic record of sticker images affixed on cars. At that phase of the research we chose to work in urban sceneries marked by car mobility, whether in circulation or parked in streets, sidewalks, schools, parks, parking

lots of supermarkets and of shopping malls. Some images were also collected from the Internet, in order to complement the archive.

However, it was important to raise indicators about the mode through which each individual sees and ascribes meaning to the stickers. Thus, our research plan included the description of a way to approach interviewees, as well as the intention to report the experience when writing this article. Our challenge was to act as spontaneously as possible, waiting for people to approach the cars with the stickers on. Due to that procedure, there was no prior selection. It also became unlikely to know previously the number of participants, considering that, usually, when we initiated a conversation with a single member of one family, all of the other members ended up participating in the interaction, thus taking part on the interview.

Based on the starting research questions, we talked to 32 people / families that produced some narratives around the compositions of their families presented on their respective stickers. Therefore, we organized the information provided by the conversations in six dimensions, about which we will speak later on.

#### **VEHICLES AS DISCLOSURE MEDIA**

Driving around the city - in any Brazilian city, for that matter - it is possible to see numerous stickers on the backs of cars. The use of said stickers has been common for a while, now. It is possible to find folkloric “truck statements” placed on the back of cars and said statements, as hilarious, grotesque and critical as they may seem, had the implicit function of softening the loneliness of the travel and the difficulties of the road. In a way, they showed that whoever was driving the truck in front had, in his own manner, something to say, some intentionality (Fig. 1). From this point of view, the phrases, transported from interstates and highways to the urban space, radiate senses and different meanings, depending on the subject. This highlights Echeverría’s approach, who points out that “we may as well say: tell me what you observe and I will tell thee who thou art” (2006, p. 42). In other words, the understanding or interpretation that an individual presents about a determined matter (or image) tells us about who this individual is, as well as about the culture this person belongs to.

Today, it has become increasingly uncommon to find these sentences on trucks, because most of them belong to business fleets. Companies tend to value a ‘clean layout’ on their trucks, what requires impersonality and, therefore, the exclusion of personal adornments outside of the vehicles. Cars carrying stickers with comic characters, artists and politicians retrieved from comics are also not a novelty. Commercial cars “stamped” with their corporate and advertising messages, to which end a great amount of the automobile’s surface is used, are not new, either. Indeed, that technology has developed and became accessible, both in terms of cost and offer, and started to be seen as a marketing strategy used by some companies to promote their brand’s affixation. Those cars are used not only as a mean of locomotion, but also as a form of advertisement.



Figure 1: Truck quotes  
Source: Online Search<sup>1</sup>

In this space of visual possibilities offered by cities – and by roads, in accordance with the nostalgic references to truck statements – different communicative processes emerge. In the communication process triggered by bump stickers the backs of the cars are usually adopted as support, since the communication with the car placed beside is difficult, due to the closed windows or the dark films. Thus, the communication of the stickers is addressed to the occupants of the vehicle that is behind the emitter of the message, requesting them to make sense and attach meaning to the images they see.

A brief semiotic analysis of this material shows us that tastes, personality traits and emotions are expressed in these narratives of urban culture, not excluding spiritual choices, leisure, etc., as demonstrated by the series of images reproduced below (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Expressions of tastes, preferences, by means of the figures

<sup>1</sup> Truck quote 1 – “Children are like farts: you can just handle your own”. Retrieved from [http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-r6ZW-ccG7ik/TZJvtoVo7\\_l/AAAAAAAAAcY/qKsz\\_lpL5Wg/s1600/caminh%25C3%25A30.png](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-r6ZW-ccG7ik/TZJvtoVo7_l/AAAAAAAAAcY/qKsz_lpL5Wg/s1600/caminh%25C3%25A30.png)

Truck quote 2 – “Hi, temptation! I came to see you! Without you I don’t know how to live”. This sticker is a pun that plays with the pronunciation of the numbers and the words. The numbers are strategically positioned to substitute the pronunciation of some parts of the sentence, being their own pronunciation similar to that of the parts excluded. Retrieved from [https://encrypted-tbn2.google.com/images?q=tbn:ANDgGcTDKKAtBiY4aycRowowoPCgH3AcWngjw3\\_k4Jt\\_GjLF8525s1j5A](https://encrypted-tbn2.google.com/images?q=tbn:ANDgGcTDKKAtBiY4aycRowowoPCgH3AcWngjw3_k4Jt_GjLF8525s1j5A)

Truck quote 3 – “Speed controlled by holes”. Retrieved from [http://2.bp.blogspot.com/\\_m315Tl7o7sk/TFrXvtbDEel/AAAAAAAAABJo/XmhS3PXQjlc/s1600/Frases+caminh%C3%A3o+o8.jpg](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_m315Tl7o7sk/TFrXvtbDEel/AAAAAAAAABJo/XmhS3PXQjlc/s1600/Frases+caminh%C3%A3o+o8.jpg).

Truck quote 4 – “Anyone who loves roses, is capable of enduring the thorns”. Retrieved from <https://ensfundamental1.wordpress.com/frases-de-parachoque-de-caminhao/>

These illustrations are specific forms of communication. A communication can be understood, in the sense given by Maffesoli (2006, p. 44), as a sensitive form of contemporary social life, comprehended outside of the moral standards, as a link serving as “social cement” in a time of crisis of the old certainties and of collapse of the old utopias. Following this line of reasoning, it is possible to say that the stickers on the cars promote networks of symbolic exchange woven in affective maps, through which inhabitants who drives ahead share their fields of experiences and relationships with someone who comes behind them – or who sees the car from behind. That is why these images and expressions are signs requesting the participation of others in the identity production of someone else in this chosen form of narrative. One question comes to our mind: in the impossibility of establishing “conventional” ways of communication, would the stickers be a way for people to open themselves up to the world, of creating boundaries through which they give themselves to be read, since they do not let themselves be known or seen?

When considering the stickers placed on the cars as narratives, we are taking them as leitmotifs for stories, insofar as it is the narrative that enables the lived experience to be named as story. Such stickers, bearing the quality of artefacts of a visual culture, and having the possibility of being understood by the look of the other, are a way of orienting the vision of the other so he/she can “enter” that car. These images are compositions, interpretations and, therefore, self-poetry narratives (of the authors and of their families). Would they be a way of showing the other that inhabitants of that car are not empty, that they have what to tell, that they give meaning to something? Do stickers placed on private cars repeat the function of their commercial counterparts? Or, in other words, do they also serve as advertising material? And as the others, (being of visual nature) do they have a chance to structure the feeling and the thought of the reader?

Both written and pictorial narratives instigate our subjectivity. The conception of narrative that we work with in this study encompasses two possibilities: of a story being told through an image and of a story of the image. The communication with the observer/reader happens through the choice of “eloquent” images with which, by potential interactions, one wants to narrate the world.

In our research we have addressed, at first, the use of stickers related to the family experience and to the conceptualization of family. Focusing on the stickers, on images “tattooed” on the cars, we begin to realize the sophistication of the identitary elements available to those who choose to put these images on their cars. The composition of a ‘happy family’ stuck on the car ahead instigates an individual to produce silent narratives of identification/differentiation, of inclusion/exclusion, of personal elements and features as well as of their relations as strategies that lead them to compose the picture of their own family.

The user of stickers, in interaction with images, chooses and creates the image of his/her own family, whose members acquire the status of characters integrated into the narrative devices of self and others, within that family scenario. The viewer/reader interprets this image, being instigated by it to create representations and plots that also



intertwine in the self-narrative process. In short, the visual narrative provides to an individual the possibility of self-representation and of self-display through an image.

The interpretation of images, in the case of stickers, provokes an interaction between those who chose the images and those who observe them as readers. Among them, according to the words of Maffesoli (1995, p. 93), the image is, above all, a vector of communion, that interests more because of the sharing of emotions that it motivates than because of the message it discloses. That is, the image is seductive, whatever it's content, since it favours a collective feeling and a lingo, or, in other words, the ways of narrating within a given cultural context.

### **WE MAKE OURSELVES IN THE NARRATIVES**

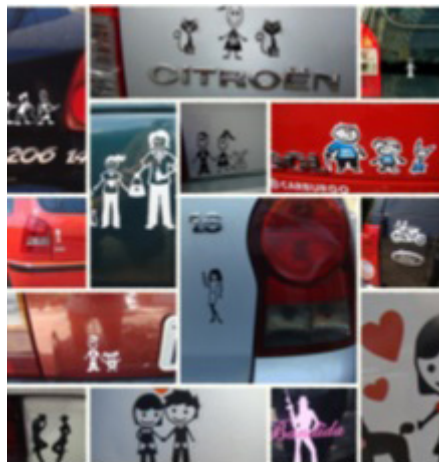


Figure 3 – Stickers for singles

Considering what was exposed above, it becomes appropriate to give relevance to the narratives of the fans of this social practice, removing them from the banality of everyday life. In conversations propelled by the stickers that we went on registering during the observation, we could signal self-narratives as well as narratives of the group to which subjects belong. It is relevant to remember that, at first, we focused on the potential narratives around family dimensions. As we moved forward with our observation, we realised that several types of images of single people (for instance, images of women and men, with or without children, with or without pets) had come to request a place in that lingo, and were circulating on cars bumpers, as if willing to reveal themselves against those families that were occupying the public narrative space. To paraphrase Bachelard, we react with them insofar as on the basis of one image we activate our experiences and we can build resignifications of the world. As Bachelard states, the image ‘awakens in us the active being’ (Bachelard, 1994, p.53).

In the table below, we expose examples of the aforementioned pictorial narratives, traditionally known as “happy family” stickers. Along with the images we recorded a summarized version of the arguments used by some interviewees to explain the stickers, justifying their choices, which refer to the cultural traits that mark their identities.



A daughter:

In my family, my father and my brother support Grêmio<sup>2</sup>, whereas my mother and I are fans of Inter<sup>3</sup>. I am the oldest child. My brother is the “mama’s boy”. On Mother’s Day, we gave her a poodle puppy. Now, dad’s dog, which is very old, has company. When I chose the stickers, I wanted to show that they care for us and we are theirs (referring to the pets).

A mother:

*At home, we live with three people and my son’s dog. Sunday, when the three of us were at home, we woke up early and had chimarrão<sup>4</sup> together. My husband likes traditional songs and the bucolic life. I prefer to stay in town, I am a city person, and I only go to the countryside to rest. On the other car, we had a sticker with the coat of arms of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Now, when I saw this gaúcho<sup>5</sup> (referring to the man on the sticker), I could not resist and had to put it on the car. My husband said he does not like these things, but he loved being called gaúcho at a parking lot in São Paulo, by another gaúcho.*

A grandfather:

I was the one who bought the picture. They affixed it. Here (pointing to the picture), you can see me – Grandpa –, the grandmother, our son and our daughter and one of our granddaughters. The sticker is still missing another granddaughter, who was born in December, and my son-in-law, who is a supporter of Grêmio. He did not want us to place his sticker there. There is another sticker here. It says: “No other success can compensate for failure in the home”. I am a religious person [...] and one of our apostles said this in a conference. It is no use to be successful and have money, if, at home, my family is disunited. In this way, we do not live true happiness.

A godfather:

It was very interesting. She told me a few days ago that she wanted to place the “picture” of our family on her mother’s car. I went out with her, we went to the newsstand and she looked and looked. There were various types of people. Finally, she decided: Bobby (her little dog), herself, my brother (her father), myself (her godfather) and my mother (her grandmother). I looked and started laughing, because she put us side by side and, as I have no girlfriend and my brother is not married anymore, one may think that we are a gay couple, side by side with the mother of one of us (who looks like a grandma), the little girl and the puppy, both adopted by the couple.

Table 1: Examples of narratives in images and family arguments

Observing the narratives exposed above we realise that, in the elaborations of self-images, individuals experience, together with a potential interlocutor, a political exercise in the communicative space that takes place in everyday life. When they say, “I wanted to show”, “I could not resist and put it on the car”, “Here, you can see”, “it makes you think”, they also suggest how much this self-image is necessarily entangled with the acknowledgement of the understanding and of the presence of the Other.

Our experiences allow us to affirm that the perception of images depends on our personal histories, on interpretations we do from ourselves, on the interactions with the environment, and on the reinterpretations we do of languages. We are continuously composing ourselves through different narratives that can have different dimensions or different types of language, in a “flow of action coordination” or a lingo, as Maturana (2002) states.

To Heilbrun (quoted in Colomer, 2001, p. 4), “we live our own lives through texts, which can be either written or spoken”. The authors note that whatever the form or the means, stories will form us and they are what we use to produce new fictions, new

<sup>2</sup> Grêmio is a well-known football team from the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

<sup>3</sup> Inter is short for *International*, another well-known football team from Rio Grande do Sul

<sup>4</sup> *Chimarrão* is a traditional caffeine-rich infused beverage from South America. It can be found in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and the Bolivian Chaco. In Brazil, its consumption is more common among the inhabitants of the southern states, such as Rio Grande do Sul.

<sup>5</sup> In Brazil, those who are born in Rio Grande do Sul are called *gaúchos*.

narratives. Through the ideas of these authors, it is possible to understand that we are storyteller beings as well as organisms that, individually and socially, live narrated lives.

While we were listening to the testimonies of people who make use of the stickers, we realised that those who place the decals on their cars want (perhaps unconsciously) to provoke the very moment of narrating. The stickers are maybe used as triggers, icons or links to the meanings they imply. One can say they are an affective resource; something like opening the car window to say that whoever goes inside has somebody to love and is loved, and to proclaim him or herself as a good and family-driven person.

Based on the research questions, we talked to 32 people / families that have produced some narratives around the compositions of their families in the respective stickers. Therefore, we organised the information provided by conversations in six types, from which we have highlighted those that follow. Each type is supported by particular theoretical approach.

#### NARRATIVE AS A CROSS TALKS NETWORKS

The story that follows is the result of the invitation we made to a mother who was leaving a playground with her 3-year-old son to talk about the sticker:

Mother - [...] it shows everybody holding hands, look... Everyone is here... the team... but mom, who is not *gremista*<sup>6</sup>, had to become *gremista* by force... What else ... Here's L. holding hands with Dad. And then everyone knows that daddy has two little boys who are *gremistas*. You know... it was on Dad's birthday, we gave to Dad this sticker as a gift. [...] And there are the little hearts...

Son - It has G. (himself), L. (his brother), Dad, Mom. N. (sister).

Here we understand that the narrative stuck on the car, as well as its description reported above, were constituted by observing storytellers about themselves and others. In this perspective, it is worth remembering Maturana's words (2001, p. 130), when he states that "language happens when two or more people operate through their recurrent interactions in a network of cross recursive and consensual talks".

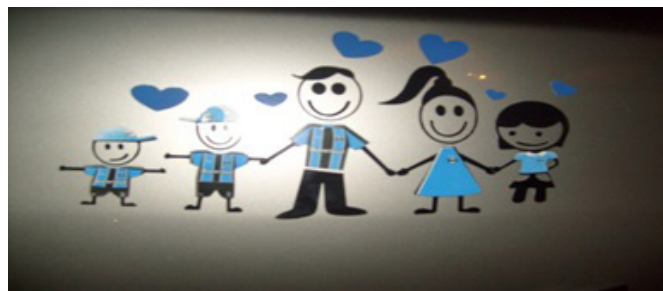


Figure 4: Happy *gremista* family - Reference to fans of Grêmio Porto Alegre Soccer Team

<sup>6</sup> The fans of *Grêmio Foot-Ball Porto Alegre* are called *gremistas*.

### NARRATIVE AS ASSIGNING ROLES TO THE CHARACTERS OF LIFE

Sometimes, during the data-gathering phase, even when we were not actually in front of a car with a sticker, people wanted to talk to us about their experience and did not hesitate to talk about themselves. We could say, on the basis of the example below, that they even made explicit, considering the order through which they named their “relatives”, the importance that they ascribe to their family members. When we asked a woman (M.I.) if she had a sticker on the car, she answered this way:

M.I. – I have... I am not against it... In fact it has a lot to do with... To me, the union is what matters. However, there are people who are against it [...], but I have it on my car... I have stuck two little dogs, me, and him (her husband), and my little boy... The only one that I have...

The spontaneity of the words used reveals the place occupied by family *members*, the animals' place, the kids, the spouses and themselves in a narrative. Not to mention that these stickers are children's choices. As we have come to know, it is worth remembering that: “it is the narrative that makes us the own character of our lives; it is the narrative that furnishes a story to our life: We do not make the narrative of our life because we have a story; we have a story because we make the narrative of our life” (Delory-Momberger, 2008, p. 37).

Other choices, to our surprise, bring very particular information about family relationships, what drives us to think of urban languages as approximations that make public and private orders hybridized.

### NARRATIVE AS AFFECTIVE BONDS OF MEMORY

To illustrate this type of narrative, we used the story of a four-year-old boy whose family we met and to whom we asked if he had a sticker on the car. He immediately took us to the cars parked nearby and proceeded to show himself on the bumper sticker of his parents' car (Figure 5: the boy, his turtle, the dog, the mother and the father) and on his grandparents' car (his grandfather, grandmother, himself, his cousin and the turtle). When we asked who they were, R. pointed to the family in this order and then he reported that he has a “very small” turtle, and that the cousin is the uncle's daughter. The boy pointed out that the uncle “cares for her (the cousin, his daughter), but her mother does not care for her” (probably an interpretation which is anchored in adult narratives of the family). He really wanted to talk about this particularity, because he then returned to the same issue of the cousin who, together with him, was part of the familiar portrait displayed at the grandparent's car. R.'s insistence regarding the registration of such emotional bond caught our attention. In addition, R.'s mother told us that, when they went to buy the sticker, as requested by her son, they got surprised when the boy asked for the dog sticker, since he only owns a stuffed dog.



Figure 5 - Illustration about affective bounds

This narrative shows how the family accepted and resignified the affective experiences – or affective memories – of the child in the final image, regardless of the kid's emotional bonds being related to living beings or inanimate objects. The narrative, here, produced a 'system' in which images the child identified himself. According to Bosi (1999), who revisits Bergson's theories, the composition of this narrative took place in a similar way to the description of:

The own internal dynamic of memory as a process that is part of any image and that, through similarity or contiguity associations, will touch other images that form, together with the first, one system. The memory would be, therefore, a highly mobile organization whose basic element is sometimes one aspect, and sometimes another aspect of the past; hence the diversity of the 'systems' that the memory can produce in each of the spectators of the same fact. (Bosi, 1999, pp. 50-51)

#### NARRATIVE AS A PRODUCT OF CULTURE AND DAILY LIFE

We can determine, by examining the language of stickers, that children's and women's tastes prevail when it comes to choosing the images. However, there are some exceptions. That was the case with a man whose story we present below (Figure 6).



Figure 6 – Illustration of everyday life

EH It was a quarrel... Actually, it was P. (son), because his classmates had (it). At school, his classmates had the sticker, right... On their parents' cars... The parents used... And then he started demanding one from us. In fact, we started observing the stickers on cars. Something like... Look...

There are more puppies than... than family members... We started to see these things... We went to look for one... We sought it and it seems that the thing sort of went out of stock... Then, after, we found it and we identified ourselves with the thing, even more because of the team... We being *gremistas*, plus the dog, *gremista* as well... That was it... He said... In the beginning we were expectant, in the sense of being observers... There even is some creative stuff... There was a couple, with so many little girls by one side, with little boys and a huge line of puppies and we taking care...

This narrative (Figure 6), when compared to the narrative transcribed immediately before, demonstrates how the language which sustains it, as well as the cultural conditions behind its production, interfere in its final constitution. The difference between reported elements regarding the process of narrative constitution and the image stuck on the car as a final narrative calls attention. The story, which is also a narrative (Barthes, 2008), shows that this family had difficulties finding an image with which they could identify themselves, choosing a closer version, more in accordance with the colours that characterize the team they support, as well as with the general trend of using stickers on the cars, than with any other reason. When comparing the two texts it might be said there are mistakes on what regards the language. This does not jeopardize the conception of the narrative, insofar as the five key elements of its structure are present: event, characters, time, space and narrator. Returning to Barthes (2008, p. 19) it may be said that “the narrative derides both the good and the bad literature: international, trans-historical, cross-cultural; narrative is there, like life is” (Barthes, 2008, p. 19).

#### NARRATIVE AS POWER ELEMENT

In a quick meeting in the parking lot of a shopping mall, we talked to a young woman who was picking up her children. We went towards the boys who told us that it was their mother who wanted to put the “family” on the car. They liked the sticker, but they did not like the fact that on their “photos” they were not wearing *Grêmio* jerseys (although the boys’ t-shirts were blue on the image) because the mother did not want it that way. In addition, they said that their new little puppy was still missing on the image. The mother, winking at us, while the boys entered the car, said she had put the sticker for every women to know that the owner of that car is a happily married man and has two children. This narrative shows us how society enables the attribution of:

(...) words, mannerisms and great sentences, language rituals to the anonymous mass of people, so they can speak about themselves – speak publicly and, under the threefold condition that this discourse is directed and put in circulation within a well-defined power device, to bring up the background of existences hitherto almost imperceptible, and, from that tiny war of passions and interests, give power to the possibility of a sovereign intervention. (Foucault, 1992, p. 123)

## NARRATIVE AS MEMORY DESIRE

The organization and classification of natural, social, political and economic events, present in the circularity of phenomena, is characteristic of the human nature. It is an attempt to reach self-understanding and the understanding of the environment. To this end, human beings ascribe meanings to events, or, as Derrida (2001, p. 9) prefers to say, we deconstruct the principle of archiving with the “evil of the archive”, as an “absolute impatience” of a “desire for memory”. During our interviews, we had the opportunity to chat with a couple that was accompanied by their son, and the father told us about the characters that composed their family’s sticker. In the end, he added, “now another fish has been incorporated to the family: Albert. It is not on the car”. And laughing, the father said: “It is not catalogued”.

Referring once more to Derrida (quoted by Leite, 2009, p. 79), we can say that the meanings of the abovementioned narrative can be extended on a comparison between fiction and reality. After all, it shows “complicity between fiction and testimony”. That is, there is an approximation between the fictional and what is lived, which is typical of urban culture narrative, and that extends the conception of memory far beyond registration, for which “non-literary testimony is no more proof than a testimony under the form of a literary fiction”.

We think, therefore, that, considering both the stickers that “display” the family elements and the very practice of exposing the chosen image of the family, and also taking into account the multiplicity of configurations and arrangements that show themselves, it is possible to see a change concerning the ‘imaginary’ of the family constitution, what produces the coexistence of different models. Images pasted on the rears of cars bring about, therefore, family portraits that are built by the groups to which those who carry said images belong. We refer to all kinds of images: cinematographic, pictorial, sculptural, technological and so on. Maffesoli (2001) stated that it is not the image that produces the imaginary, but the opposite. The existence of an imaginary, he said, is what determines the existence of sets of images, thus, “The image is not the support, but the result” (Maffesoli, 2001, p. 76).

In this sense, while we address these bumper stickers as lingo manifestations, along with pictures of family understood as social and cultural practices, the very images have come to show us the changes that have already occurred in the social imaginary regarding family pictures. Families have made themselves available to be read and to be understood (or sold?) by means of the circulation of their cars, which are used as true advertising space for the family’s constitution and cultural identity.

There is a theoretical approach that differs from ours and collaborates to more macro-structural understandings, demonstrating how new cultural practices are becoming ritualistic and configuring ways of being and living in society. Said approach advocates that those practices create opportunities for signs of management and meanings of production, thereby generating economic and political attitudes. Therefore, it is important to quote Silva and others (2011) especially when they state that:

Every culture has its rituals and these practices insert individuals in a particular religion, community, society or, in more specific terms, in a given symbolic code. In contemporary society, one may consider as rituals those behaviours and actions that structure a common social dynamic and that communicate through a system of meanings to which individuals belong to. They belong to the communication domain, as they involve the manipulation of signs and the construction of meanings. (Silva et al., 2011, p. 304)

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The stickers, as products of the cultural industry, of visual communications and of communications technologies can be seen as a favourable tool for education, inasmuch as they bring about different meanings as well as a rich contribution for potential learning. That is, the narratives of the urban culture, brought about into the study and the debate within the educational field, as a relevant approach to educational spaces, can help teachers, schools and education in general to recognize themselves and to recognize the other as legitimate elements in their own culture, thereby understanding their influence on school relations. Furthermore, they may extend the reference scenarios emerging from the interaction between learners, the visuality of urban images and its meanings.

The manufacture of such stickers as well as other visual communication products is certainly made after a reading of the society for which they are destined. After all, the desire and the need to belong to the imaginary of a “happy family” emerge from this very society. And, as we have stated, the study of these narratives, as well as of the meanings ascribed to them by their authors, allows us to infer about desegregation processes, new “incorporations” and re-adjustments through which the family institution is going nowadays. Therefore, the aforementioned study helps educators to understand a little more about the culture of the human beings that go to school on the present days.

It seems to us that, in previous decades, the initiative to exalt the dissolution of the conservative establishment of the nuclear family was converted into a form of appreciation of alternative ways of life and living. Due to the conversations we had with people who use and who do not use the “happy family” stickers we find plausible to say that there is, nowadays, in the intention to showcase one’s “family image” an assignment of values, not only of conservative values, but, above all, of new values that reaffirm family as constituted not just by parental bonds, but also by cultural ties.

By focusing our discussion on the “happy family” stickers and removing them from the banality of daily life, we aimed to give continuity to the debate about the plurality of family depictions, which are abundant within the contemporary society. We acknowledge, in this way, the criticism regarding the absence of a greater attention in school relationships that could exploit the demonstrations, as well as the narratives of the urban context, and find other meanings for the comprehension of students and their families, highlighting the relational complexity in our culture, which mobilizes schooling within diversity. //



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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Felipe Gustsack graduated in Literary Arts (Portuguese and English) from the Federal University of Santa Catarina (1988), has a Masters Degree in Education awarded by the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (1998) and holds a PhD in Education, awarded by the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (2003). He is a Professor at the Post-graduate Program of Education of the University of Santa Cruz do Sul (PPGEdu) and teaches at the Master of Education of this institution.

E-mail: fegus@unisc.br

University of Santa Cruz do Sul – UNISC, Rio Grande do Sul – RS, Brazil

Sandra Maria de Castro Rocha graduated in Literary Arts (Portuguese and English) from the College of Philosophy, Sciences and Literary Arts Imaculada Conceição (1986) and holds a post-graduate degree in Literary Arts awarded by the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (1988). She also holds a post-graduation degree in Educational

Computing (2000) awarded by the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul and a Masters Degree in Education, awarded by the University of Santa Cruz do Sul (2011). She teaches at the Educational Technology Centre of Santa Maria City (NTEM), working on the following topics: media, educational psychology, Internet, mathematics education and web quest. She is a Collaborating Professor at the Pallottine Centre for Aging Studies (NUPEN) at the College of Palotina in Santa Maria (FAPAS/RS, Brazil).

E-mail: manacroch@gmail.com

University of Santa Cruz do Sul – UNISC, Rio Grande do Sul – RS, Brazil

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