

“Let’s Defeat Traffic”: A Verbal-Visual Analysis of the Meaning and Theme of a Word on a Cover of *Época* Magazine / “Vamos vencer o tráfico”: análise verbo-visual da significação e do tema de uma palavra em uma capa da revista *Época*

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a verbal-visual analysis of the meaning and theme of the word “tráfico,” such as it appears on one of the covers of *Época* magazine. In order to do so, it takes into account the etymology and the historical changes of the meaning of the word in certain concrete contexts in which it circulated, so as to verify how its polysemy contributes, in conjunction with the cover visuality, to produce a certain impact on the reading audience. The analysis is based on Vološinov’s theory of meaning and theme, and emphasizes the importance of the social and historical context in the study of ideological signs. The results indicate how an analysis of this kind can clarify the communicative purpose of word usage and permit a historical and critical understanding of an issue.

KEYWORDS: Traffic; History; Meaning; Theme; Verbal-Visuality

RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta uma análise verbo-visual da significação e do tema da palavra tráfico, tal como aparece em uma das capas da revista Época. Para isso, leva em conta a etimologia e as mudanças históricas de significação da palavra em determinados contextos concretos em que ela circulou com o intuito de verificar como sua polissemia contribui, de forma articulada com o visual da capa, para produzir certo impacto sobre o público leitor. A análise se baseia na teoria de significação e tema de Bakhtin/Volochinov e enfatiza a importância do contexto social e histórico no estudo do tema de signos ideológicos. Os resultados apontam como uma análise desse tipo pode esclarecer o propósito comunicativo do uso da palavra, bem como permitir uma compreensão histórico-crítica de determinado assunto.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Tráfico; História; Significação; Tema; Verbo-visualidade

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Introduction

Often, the construction of both implicit and explicit meanings of an utterance depends not only on the verbal or visual material present, but also on the knowledge of the social and historical context in which it is used. This is the case with magazine covers, whose headlines must be attention grabbing and sometimes controversial in order to capture the interest of the intended audience. This was the case of *Época* magazine, whose November 26th, 2010 cover had the following headline: “Vamos vencer o tráfico” (“Let’s Defeat Traffic”). These words are accompanied by the image of a skull and knife in the center of the cover, with two crossed revolvers behind. These visual elements are arranged such that they appear to be within a target.¹

This article will present an analysis of the verbal content of the headline from a historical, semantic and pragmatic point of view, with an emphasis on the word “tráfico” (traffic). The objective is to permit a thorough historical and critical understanding of the headline’s theme in this context. Each word has a particular history that is diachronically constructed and that acquires a multiplicity of meanings, therefore contributing to the word’s current polysemy. In addition, the concrete context of the utterance — in this case as the headline of *Época* magazine, directed towards the Brazilian population — influences the interpretation.

Beyond the analysis of verbal elements, this study will also consider the visual aspects of the cover as well as the content of the corresponding article in order to shed light on the purpose of the use of the word “tráfico” in the historical context of modern Brazil. Starting from Bezerra Neto’s study (2009), which presented the semantic history of the word “tráfico,” the current article will present a Bakhtinian reading of these findings, taking into consideration the connection between the word and the social context in which it is used, as well as the distinction between meaning and theme. Another goal is to analyze critically the various implications of the word and some of their possible effects on readers.

¹ To view the magazine cover, click on the link and look for the 29/11/2010 issue: <http://epoca.globo.com/tempo/noticia/2013/06/capas-de-epoca.html>

1 Theoretical Base

From a Marxist perspective, Vološinov (1973)² emphasizes that the word and the utterance in which it is found are inherently historical and social: they cannot be understood outside the social context in which they occur. Corroborating this idea, Yaguello (2009, p.16) declares that the utterance “is of social, and therefore ideological, nature”³ and does not exist “outside a social context, because each interlocutor has a ‘social purview.’”⁴ In this way, the utterance reflects and refracts the power relations between the interlocutors and the concrete historical situation in which the interaction occurs. Therefore, the meaning of an utterance is not simply the sum of dictionary definitions of the individual linguistic elements; rather it also encompasses the social relations between the speakers and the intention of speech, thus acquiring an important role in the formation, maintenance, and change of ideology.

The same idea can be applied to individual words, which Vološinov (1973, p.14) refers to as “the purest and most sensitive medium of social intercourse,” implying that the social relations reflected in language are representations of the struggle between classes, as Yaguello (2009, p.14) explains: “the word is the arena in which contradictory social values confront each other; within its system, the conflicts of language reflect class conflicts” and “verbal communication [...] implies conflicts, relationships of domination and of resistance, adaptation or resistance to the hierarchy, use of language by the dominant class to reinforce its power, etc.”⁵

In this way, each word used in the relation between two interlocutors historically constructs or modifies the social hierarchy and nothing that is said lacks an ideological function. If words reflect and refract the social structure in this way, it follows that they also reflect and refract any modification that may occur in this system. In this sense, Vološinov explains that:

² VOLOŠINOV, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1973.

³ Original: “é de natureza social, portanto ideológica.”

⁴ Original: “fora de um contexto social, já que cada locutor tem um ‘horizonte social.’”

⁵ Original: “a palavra é a arena onde se confrontam os valores sociais contraditórios; os conflitos da língua refletem os conflitos de classe no interior mesmo do sistema”; “a comunicação verbal (...) implica conflitos, relações de dominação e de resistência, adaptação ou resistência a hierarquia, utilização da língua pela classe dominante para reforçar seu poder etc.”

Countless ideological threads running through all areas of social intercourse register effect in the word. It stands to reason, then, that the word is the most sensitive *index of social changes* [...]. The word is the medium in which occur the slow quantitative accretions of those changes which have not yet achieved the status of a new ideological quality [...]. The word has the capacity to register all the transitory, delicate, momentary phases of social change (1973, p.19).⁶

Taking into consideration the fact that words register even the most subtle ideological changes (including those that are not completed), studying the historical accumulation of meanings of a word and its etymology becomes an important explanation of the ideological charge carried from the past into present. The use of a certain word in a concrete situation can give way to connotations and nuances of meaning that can pass unnoticed when considering a word abstractly. This is due to the temporary, historical phases inherent in the transition from one ideology to another.

Vološinov (1973)⁷ also traces a clear line between the *meaning* and *theme* of a word. The meaning, on the one hand, contains “all those aspects of the utterance that are reproducible and self-identical in all instances of repetition”; additionally, these aspects are abstract and based on convention, they lack an independent, concrete existence (1973, p.100).⁸ Moreover, “*meaning*, in essence, means nothing; it only possesses potentiality – the possibility of having a meaning within a concrete theme” (1973, p.101; italics added).⁹ *Meaning* refers to the definitions found in a dictionary; however, since language does not exist independently of its historical and social environment, these definitions only acquire a *theme* when used within a real situation, evidencing their *potentiality*.

On the other hand, the theme is “individual and unreproducible.” It is “the expression of the concrete historical situation that engendered the utterance” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973, p.99)¹⁰ and corresponds to “the upper, actual limit of linguistic significance” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973, p.101).¹¹ Unlike the abstract and stable *meaning*, the *theme* is the concrete usage of a word and includes the *meaning* within a specific context,

⁶ For reference, see footnote 2.

⁷ For reference, see footnote 2.

⁸ For reference, see footnote 2.

⁹ For reference, see footnote 2.

¹⁰ For reference, see footnote 2.

¹¹ For reference, see footnote 2.

taking into consideration extra-verbal factors, such as the relationship between the interlocutors, the historical context, and the intention of the speakers. This means that the theme changes historically with every reiteration of the word.

Finally, considering the idea of the word as a reflex, refraction, and arena of social struggle, as well as the differences between *meaning* and *theme*, the analysis of the word “tráfico” (traffic) in this article is approached from multiple perspectives. As Vološinov states:

The task of understanding does not basically amount to recognizing the form used, but rather to understanding it in a particular, concrete context, to understanding its meaning in a particular utterance, i.e., it amounts to understanding its novelty and not to recognizing its identity (1973, p.68).¹²

That is, every word can take on various meanings and purposes, and, throughout history, acquires more of them every time it is used. Therefore, in order to understand the meaning and use of “tráfico” (traffic) on the cover of *Época*, it is necessary to carry out a social and historical analysis that includes the diachronic, transitory phases of its meaning, never losing sight of the novelty and innovation of this process.

2 Methodology

The cover of *Época* under analysis was selected because of its controversial topic and provocative combination of words and images. First, we looked up the definition of “tráfico” (traffic) in contemporary dictionaries: *Dicionário Houaiss da Língua Portuguesa* (2007) and *Dicionário Aurélio Básico da Língua Portuguesa* (1988). The differences between definitions pointed to a discrepancy between them and evidenced the potential for very different themes—either neutral or negative—that the word can take on. Comparing this analysis of the dictionaries to the etymology presented in Bezerra Neto (2009), through a Vološinovian lens, we looked to distinguish how the word changed from a neutral to a negative meaning, and how the historical and social context contributed to this change.

¹² For reference, see footnote 2.

After this first evaluation, other dictionaries were used to permit a diachronic study of the word, including traditional dictionaries starting in 1832 with the *Diccionario da Língua Brasileira* by Luis Maria da Silva Pinto, until, again, contemporary dictionaries like Houaiss (2007) and Buarque de Holanda (1988). Additionally, the *Dicionário Etimológico Nova Fronteira da Língua Portuguesa* (CUNHA, 1982) and the *Dicionário de Português-Latim* (FERREIRA, 1991) were consulted with the objective of accounting for the origin of the word. Using the meanings found in these dictionaries in conjunction with the information reported in Neto (2009) about the evolution of the word “tráfico,” the headline of *Época* was analyzed in both its historical and modern context, and we attempted to determine its theme by taking into account the visual and verbal elements of the cover. The most important aspect is to go beyond the etymological history, interpreting this history in light of the social context of the time period of publication and vice-versa, as Vološinov proposes.

3 Analysis

As can be seen on the cover of *Época*,¹³ the complete headline to be analyzed is “Vamos vencer o tráfico: a guerra ainda não acabou. Mas a ação da polícia, com apoio da população, mostra que é possível livrar o Rio de Janeiro — e todo o Brasil — desta chaga” (“Let’s defeat traffic: The war is not over yet. But the action of the police, with support of the population, shows that it is possible to free Rio de Janeiro — and all of Brazil — from this open wound”). At first glance, one notices the dark colors on the cover — it is almost completely black — and a skull, two revolvers, and a knife seem to be placed within a target. A superficial analysis of this utterance suggests that the word “tráfico” has a negative connotation: it is related to some kind of illegal commerce.

The text of the article within the magazine discusses the military invasion of the headquarters of the criminal group Comando Vermelho in Vila Cruzeiro, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, on November 25th, 2010. It states that *drug trafficking* is a problem in the entire country and that this originated due to the inaction of politicians and corrupt police. According to the article, it is not sufficient to capture the traffickers, because it is their

¹³ Cf. note 1.

possession of territory that gives them power parallel to the state's. The retaking of Vila Cruzeiro was important in this *historical context*, because it demonstrated the capacity of Brazil to host safely the Olympics and the World Cup, as well as proved the efficacy of the *Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora* (UPPs) (Units of Pacifying Police) to impose this security. Taking this into consideration, the first step in the analysis of the word “tráfico” on this cover of *Época* was to research current definitions of the word. The *Dicionário Houaiss da língua portuguesa* (2007) defines “tráfico” as: 1) Mercantile deal, business, commerce; traffic; 2) Clandestine, illicit, illegal business; 3) (older) The commerce of slaves; 4) Regionalism, same as ‘traffic (‘tráfego’) (department or staff).’¹⁴

It is important to note the third definition of “tráfico”: “the commerce of slaves.” This definition, marked as “antiga” (old) in the dictionary, hints towards how history could have influenced the change in meaning from a neutral to negative definition: the historical fact of slavery must be considered. To investigate the source of this polysemy and the different possible definitions, as well as the hypothesis that slavery had some connection to this, several older dictionaries were analyzed, including several of those cited in Neto (2009).

The *Dicionário Etimológico Nova Fronteira da Língua Portuguesa*, by Cunha (1982), that details the etymology of the word “tráfico,” states that the original meaning was “commerce, business, traffic (tráfego),”¹⁵ but the additional definition “improper business”¹⁶ from the 16th century was also allowed. The word comes from the Italian word “traffico.” Bezerra Neto (2009) shows data from the *Diccionario Encyclopédico ou Novo Diccionario da Lingua Portuguesa*, by Lacerda (1870), which traces the etymology to its Latin root: trans (beyond) + efficio/ere (to make, get), with the corresponding definition “mercantile deal or business,”¹⁷ which lacks the negative connotation present in Cunha’s definition (cf. NETO, 2009, p.103). Despite this, it seems that even in its origin the word permitted a definition relating to illicit commerce, although this was far from being the most common.

Neto (2009) analyses the *Diccionario dos Termos Homonymos e Equívocos da Língua Portuguesa* (1942), by Antônio Maria do Couto, that defines “tráfico” simply as

¹⁴ Original: “1) Trato mercantil, negócio, comércio; tráfego; 2) Negócio clandestino, ilícito, ilegal; 3) (Ant.) o comércio de escravos; 4) Regionalismo, mesmo que ‘Tráfego (repartição ou pessoal).”

¹⁵ Original: “comércio, negócio, tráfego.”

¹⁶ Original: “negócio indecoroso.”

¹⁷ Original: “trato mercantil ou negócio.”

“business, commerce, mercantile deal,”¹⁸ which differs from the additional definition found in Cunha’s dictionary (BEZERRA NETO, 2009, p.103). However, other forms of the word do show traces of negative definitions (this point will be discussed later). Bezerra Neto (2009) also discusses the *Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa*, by Fonseca and Roquette, enlarged in 1860, that defines “tráfico” as “business, commerce”¹⁹ (BEZERRA NETO, 2009, p.105). The 1870 *Diccionario Encyclopédico* by Lacerda preserves the licit meaning of “tráfico” (BEZERRA NETO, 2009, p.106).

Many of the definitions of “tráfico” given in 19th century dictionaries are ambiguous and permit various definitions, either neutral or negative. However, it is worth briefly considering related words, which can clarify the process of semantic change from neutral to negative. Beginning in 1842 with Couto’s dictionary, words related to “tráfico” — “traficante” (trafficker) and “traficância” (trafficking) — although not possessing their own, separate definitions, “signal a meaning of ‘guile, artfulness, trickery, cunning’”²⁰ due to the suffixes “-ante” and “-ância,” according to Couto (BEZERRA NETO, 2009, p.105)

Additionally, in this time period, the verbal form “traficar” already permits the definition “to do business without honesty, to exercise traffic” (BEZERRA NETO, 2009, p.105).²¹ Similarly, in 1860, Fonseca and Roquette point out that the verb “traficar” has two possible definitions: “the practice of those who live from trafficking” and “to do business with slangs.” They also state that “traficância” has negative connotations, defining it as “a deal, life of a trafficker; lack of frankness” (BEZERRA NETO, 2009, p.105).²² Lacerda in 1870 and Cândido de Figueiredo in 1899 (1913), in the *Novo Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa*, follow in the same style, giving negative definitions to the words “traficância,” “traficante,” and “traficar” (BEZERRA NETO, 2009, p.109).

Considering the negative, unambiguous definitions of the other dictionary entries related to “tráfico,” it is reasonable to propose that these related words began to acquire negative connotations first, which were transferred subsequently to the word “tráfico.” The use of “traficante” and “traficância” may have been limited only to illicit commerce,

¹⁸ Original: “negócio, comércio, tracto mercantil.”

¹⁹ Original: “negócio, comércio”.

²⁰ Original: “remetem a um significado de ‘astucia, manha, trapaça, treta.’”

²¹ Original: “negociar sem lizúra, exercitar o tráfico.”

²² Original: “a prática de quem vive do tráfico;” “negociar com gírias;” “trato, vida de traficante; falta de lisura.”

such as that of slavery, while “tráfico” may have maintained a broader range of references for more time, referring to various types of licit traffic.

Bezerra Neto (2009) cites the decade of the 1840s as the decisive moment in the change of definitions: it was precisely in this decade that the fight against slavery gained influence. With its abolition in England at the beginning of the century, people began to view the commerce of slavery as illicit and criminal. The word “tráfico,” often used to describe slave trafficking, may have changed meanings alongside the changes in attitudes about the business. The population’s perception does not change overnight, but it seems that the image of the slave dealer quickly acquired a stigma as a criminal engaging in dishonorable work (BEZERRA NETO, 2009, p.106). Although as early as 1842 negative definitions were already mentioned in Couto’s dictionary, “they were not emphasized at all” (BEZERRA NETO, 2009, p.106).²³ Later, explicitly negative definitions began to slowly emerge, and today the negative connotation is the principal definition. This slow historical change that started with negative connotations associated with “traficar,” “traficante,” and “traficância” finally reached also the word “tráfico” (BEZERRA NETO, 2009, p.107). In the *Dicionário Aurélio* (1988), all the entries appear with negative definitions of illicit activities, although they do maintain neutral definitions as well.

Reconsidering Vološinov’s theory, the changes in meaning cited by Neto (2009) can be understood as reflexes and refractions of the changes in popular ideology and the social and economic structure. As Vološinov explains:

The generative process of signification in language is always associated with the generation of the evaluative purview of a particular social group, and the generation of an evaluative purview – in the sense of the totality of all those things that have meaning and importance for the particular group – is entirely determined by expansion of the economic basis. As the economic basis expands, it promotes an actual expansion in the scope of existence which is accessible, comprehensible and vital to man (1973, p.106).²⁴

With this theory about changes in language paralleling those in social structure, we can understand the semantic change from neutral to negative of “tráfico” in terms of the social and economic changes in Brazil and in the rest of the world, which resulted in

²³ Original: “não tinham destaque algum.”

²⁴ For reference, see footnote 2.

new ideas about ethics and acceptability, as well as different ways of understanding a world no longer based on slavery. The expansion of the “scope of existence which [was] accessible” would have given rise to new attitudes that rooted themselves in society until they eventually changed the convention of a neutral definition of traffic to a negative one: slavery was then considered illicit and criminal. Remembering that Vološinov considers the word as a space of social struggle, the struggle to end slavery took place partially through the word “tráfico”: every time it was used it would have produced a clash of differing ideologies about slavery, challenging the previous ideology. Despite this, the change left traces of old definitions as alternatives to current definitions.

This is an ideal example of Vološinov’s explanation of polysemy. The author says that “a new significance emanates from an old one, and does so with its help, but this happens so that the new significance can enter into contradiction with the old one and restructure it” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973, p.106).²⁵ In other words, the current definition of “tráfico” as criminal and improper business has its roots in the previous neutral definition, but the historical context caused an evolution and reconstruction of new definitions, giving rise to the one most commonly used today. It is essential to know the history of “tráfico,” its changes, and the social changes related to the abolition of slavery to better understand the theme of the cover of *Época*. The theme of the word is inextricably linked to the context, and

[...] can only be observed in an utterance in a concrete situation. Identifying it requires taking into account not only the potential meaning of the sign, but also the meaning that it takes on in the historical moment and in the specific situation of the utterance, according to extra-verbal elements that contribute to the construction of meaning (CEREJA, 2010, p.206).²⁶

In this case, the context is the trafficking of drugs in Brazil and the rest of the world. The utterance is “Let’s defeat traffic” (“Vamos vencer o tráfico”). The implicit understanding is that trafficking is an illicit and criminal business that “we” must overcome. This use of the subject “we” (“nós”), implicit in the morphology of the

²⁵ For reference, see footnote 2.

²⁶ Original: “só pode ser observado numa situação concreta de enunciação. Identificá-lo exige que se leve em conta não apenas o sentido potencial do signo, mas também o sentido que este assume no momento histórico e na situação específica de enunciação, de acordo com os elementos extra-verbais que participam da construção do sentido.”

Portuguese verb “vamos,” (“let us”), includes the readers as well as the police and the editorial team of the magazine. The second part of the headline is: “The war is not over yet. But the action of the police, with the support of the population, shows that it is possible to free Rio de Janeiro—and all of Brazil—from this open wound.”²⁷ The words “war,” “free,” and “wound” are telling: “traffic” is an open “wound” that Brazil needs to be “freed” from by means of a “war.”

In this way, it is possible to understand the scale of evil of trafficking, leaving no doubt that it is an illicit activity. It is likely that any Brazilian relatively knowledgeable about current events who reads the magazine will notice this at first glance and will know that the headline and article are about *drug* trafficking. Additionally, it is important to draw attention to the word “to defeat” (“vencer”). Published on the cover of a nationally circulated magazine, precisely in the stages of preparation of Rio de Janeiro²⁸ for the soccer World Cup, the word “vencer” comes across as, 1) an attempt to show the world that Brazil is, in fact, capable of successfully and safely hosting the event, and 2) a peculiar resonance of the hopes of Brazilians to win the event they are hosting!

The inattentive reader may not think about the history of the word “tráfico” and its connections to slavery, or its theme in this historical context in a pre-World Cup Brazil. However, an analysis and reading like the ones presented here allows a more thorough understanding of the *purpose* of the magazine’s use of the word. It is not a naïve use. More than anything it is an advertisement to call the attention of the public to a serious problem, in the atmosphere of the World Cup. It establishes a parallel between two types of traffic — that of slaves and that of drugs — and, although readers may not consciously identify the connection of the word to slavery, they understand the gravity of the situation.

Because everyone knows, to a greater or lesser extent, the history of slavery, which is constructed discursively and legitimately as one of the biggest wrongdoings of the history of humanity, a comparison between drug and slave trafficking has a large impact. The use of such a potent polysemic word seems to be a call to the population: drug trafficking is a problem that rivals slavery in its seriousness and needs to be resolved. The implicit question is: “If slavery was not accepted and many fought to abolish it, why would something of the same nature and scale like drug trafficking be acceptable?”

²⁷ Original: “A guerra ainda não acabou. Mas a ação da polícia, com apoio da população, mostra que é possível livrar o Rio de Janeiro – e todo o Brasil – desta chaga.”

²⁸ Which is, in this case, used as metonymy of the country, taking “the part for the whole.”

Considering this aspect and also the use of the word “vencer” in the context of preparations for the World Cup, the *theme* of the headline can be defined in the following way: it is a promise that Brazil — through collaborative action of its citizens and police — will achieve the goal of freeing itself from drug trafficking. The headline is also about the importance of showing the world Brazil’s capacity in this area, and not just in soccer. This theme serves as a call to the population and, in the climate of the World Cup, is also an implicit and indirect strategy to reinforce patriotism and call the Brazilian population to act, appealing to their determination, pride and cohesion. Additionally, if this line of reasoning is correct, the idea *would be* that, overcoming drug trafficking, the country would also later win the World Cup.

The visual elements present on the cover reinforce this *theme*. The cover shows a skull crossed by a knife, with two crossed revolvers in the background, all within a target, referring to the extreme violence involved in drug trafficking that has caused thousands of deaths in Brazil. Some Brazilians will recognize the image as the symbol of the *Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais* (BOPE) (Police Special Operations Battalion), in Rio de Janeiro. According to this group’s website, the knife in the skull represents “the character of he who makes boldness his behavior” and the “secrecy of the missions.”²⁹ According to the *story* narrated on the site, during WWII, an Allied soldier saw skulls and human bones used as “trophies” in a Nazi concentration camp, and drove a dagger into one of them, exclaiming that life *defeated* (“venceu”) death. In this context, the knife also represents “victory over death” (cf. BOPE Operações Especiais, 2015).³⁰ Interestingly, the skull represents intelligence and knowledge, but *also*... death.

Beyond being the symbol of BOPE, the skull is placed within a target on the magazine cover, which can represent drug trafficking itself as the target of the war. Considering the color scheme, it can be noticed that the cover is almost completely black, serving as a reference to violence and to the dark, illicit business of trafficking. It can also be noticed that the words in the headline stand out in white, which contrasts with the rest of the cover because it is the color of purity, goodness and peace, and suggests the sense that the war is for a just and worthy cause.

²⁹ Original: “o caráter de quem faz da ousadia sua conduta”; “sigilo das missões.”

³⁰ Original: “vitória sobre a morte.”

Despite this, the source of violence is ambiguous. Logically, readers know that the world of trafficking is violent, but the cover shows the *ambiguity* of the situation. The skull, which should represent BOPE and the freeing from violence, becomes a representative of violence itself because it is within the target that Brazilians are fighting to attack. The colors are also significant here: if black is understood as the side of traffic and white is understood as the fight against this evil, the color gray should represent something in between, that is neither one nor the other. In this sense, careful readers will doubt the source of violence, and the line between good and evil blurs.

This symbolism calls attention to the extreme violence and cunning/guile of drug trafficking, and clarifies that it is, just as much as slavery, an unacceptable crime. Bringing everything together, attentive readers understand that a *war* involving the whole country—including BOPE and the population—is necessary to end drug trafficking. This war must be like the one that, *historically*, was needed to end slavery. Yet this same symbolism, in some way, questions BOPE and could suggest that this organization should also be the target of a war.

In addition to this, the connection between the headline and slavery suggests the idea that drug addicts are like *slaves of drug traffickers*, completely dependent, subjugated and involuntarily led around under their power. This complicates the situation, because the war is not solely to put an end to the traffickers and the violence they cause, but also to free addicts from the misery of the drug world: the *abolition* of addiction. Distinguishing the parallel with the historical problem of slavery makes the war against drug trafficking more urgent, because the addicts are victims of a system (or even of a society) that oppresses them. In this sense, the headline could be a call to action for a broader social change that encompasses not only drug trafficking but also the living conditions that historically give rise to addiction.

Knowing the social history of the word “tráfico” highlights that traffic is, more than anything, a business, and that the word used to describe it has not always had a purely negative definition. It also highlights that, due to the association with slavery, it acquired this definition. Not knowing history, readers will struggle to go beyond the superficial aspects in their reading and interpretation: the symbolism of the cover and of the connections (on purpose or not) with slavery often pass unnoticed.

5 Final Considerations

This study analyzed the word “tráfico,” taking into consideration the headline, the content of the article, the accompanying images, and the theme of the utterance on the cover of *Época* magazine. With a basis in the study of Neto (2009), which points to slavery as the turning point in the changes of the definition of the word, we mobilized Vološinov’s theory of language as a reflection and refraction of historical reality, and as the space of ideology and of social struggle, more specifically employing his concepts of *meaning* and *theme* in our analysis.

We concluded that the *theme* of the word in this context refers to drug trafficking in Brazil and that the headline would simultaneously be 1) a promise that the country is going to overcome trafficking and win the World Cup and 2) a convocation for the population to cooperate in the process. More specifically, the present study traced a parallel between the traffic of slaves, the semantic history of the word “tráfico,” the current drug trafficking, and the position of Brazil (in that time period) moving towards hosting and *winning* the World Cup.

With the historical changes of a society whose economic base was slavery to a new economic structure without it, the word “tráfico” became associated with illicit trafficking, reflecting changes in the ideology about the ethics of slavery, until arriving at a definition that is almost always negative. Today, the word still contains traces of past definitions, and this polysemy allows for richness in its interpretation. In addition, the implicit reference to the World Cup is a strategy to appeal to Brazilians’ patriotism and to try to build up the same amount of energy for the fight against drug trafficking as that directed towards the World Cup.

Considering the *theme* of the headline, the construction of the cover seems to have been a strategy to try to make readers feel capable and determined to move the current social structure and, moreover, to try to instill optimism about the ability of the country to be victorious both over trafficking and at the World Cup. Today, we can ask: have Brazilians *already* overcome trafficking? Not *yet*. In the same way, they have not yet won the World Cup, despite having already hosted it. The reading of this magazine cover after the World Cup, in a new historical context, acquires then a new theme: “Let’s *first* defeat drug trafficking! The World Cup can wait.”

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