

# Attack, Assent or Defend? Strategic (Political) Responses to Corruption Scandals

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## Abstract

This study aims to identify strategic responses in the official statements issued by the group of political agents mentioned on "Fachin's List". These statements in response to corruption accusations comprise a mediatized corpus of secondary data that was investigated using interpretive discourse analysis. This study uses an institutionalist approach to the political context considering the complexity and plurality of the institutional sphere, in which each voter is an interlocutor of political discourse. This study also included analyses on how the discursive constructions are formed using intertextual, rhetorical, ambiguous and semantic elements. The results outline five distinct strategies in the official notes, which apply both to individuals as well as organizations: (a) attack by expressing consternation; (b) empathy for supporting anti-corruption actions; (c) manipulation by projecting a political *ethos*; (d) manipulation by revoking legitimacy; and (e) an adaptive posture in raising ambiguity – contributing to reflection and assessment of reactive behaviors of individuals and organizations in situations of crisis, scandals, guiltiness and corruption.

**Keywords:** strategic responses; language; corruption; discourse analysis.

## Introduction

The years 2016 and 2017 were highly eventful in the Brazilian political scene. During an appeal on the afternoon of April 11th, 2017, a significant blow shocked the political world: the publication of "Fachin's List"; this list encompasses the investigations authorized by Minister Luiz Edson Fachin, rapporteur of Operation "Car Wash" (Castro & Ansari, 2017) at the Brazilian Supreme Court (STF), based on the plea bargains of contracting company Odebrecht. The document points towards 200 politicians, including 9 ministers, 28 senators, 42 federal deputies and 3 former presidents as suspects of corruption.

The expression "Fachin's List" is striking on its own, not only because it raises suspicion over some of the highest political seats and roles in the nation but its iconic name also alludes to other famous lists in world history. If the weight of its name is a symbol by itself, publishing the list brought "the political world to its knees" (Redação, 2017). How can organizations and political agents react to a scandal of such dimension and appeal? How can they stand tall in the face of these accusations? Should they choose to retreat or counterattack?

As the media shines the spotlight on political scandals, claiming for the "right of defense" has become a notorious practice. Established by the 1988 Brazilian Federal Constitution, adversarial proceedings and fair hearings are protective legal instruments available to any party, who is, therefore, free to employ these resources to seek protection. Given these legal prerogatives, the media pays close attention to these manifestations, which can be scientifically seen as communicational responses to the disclosure of corruption or the onset of image and reputation crises (Schembera & Scherer, 2017).

Corruption and its consequences receive wide media coverage, through which it develops linguistic articulations and creates meaning (Medeiros & Silveira, 2017). Such matters – corruption, language, meaning, media – allow for various combinations of scientific approaches, thus conveying the importance of making this topic the object of academic studies (Marani, Brito, Souza, & Brito, 2018), especially in interdisciplinary fields. However, it is still difficult to define what a corrupt act is (Brei, 1996), as well as to establish what are the peculiarities of Brazilian corruption, which could prove relevant to the study of national public administration and, to some extent, of the corporate world, given the 'promiscuous' relations between the public and private sectors (Faoro, 2008). A broader approach on the topic is therefore feasible, as corruption is not a phenomenon inherent to the Brazilian people (Paiva, Garcia, & Alcântara, 2017) – nor to their character (Filgueiras, 2009) – but a social construct with a wide moral gradient (Brei, 1996).

We thus chose to focus on corruption not due to its national aspect, but because of the peculiarities of the political discourse to which it is related and adheres to. From an intersubjective point of view, corruption is seen as a tendency to breach morality and ethics via the misuse of power or authority (Klerk, 2017). As a result of these acts, there are personal and organizational efforts to regain "prestige, stability, legitimacy, social support" (Oliver, 1991, p. 150). In the linguistic and discursive field, the statements – as an exercise of the right for adversarial proceedings – compose an interdisciplinary *corpus* of analysis.

Therefore, the focus is on language, mechanisms and practices associated with corruption (Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2017; Hirsch & Milner, 2016; Slager, 2017), especially ones following disclosure of scandals, with special attention to strategies of social

influence and atonement. In view of this, emphasis is given to official statements issued after corruption scandals, in particular as a strategic response from accused agents and organizations, assuming that these occur at organizational level – not only at individual level – and thus constitute a contribution in (and to) these areas, based on multilevel analyses enabled by Organization Studies (Adler, Du Gay, Morgan, & Reed, 2014).

From the perspective of Institutional Theory (Scott, 2014), strategic responses are the group of actions, reactions and decisions aimed at "interest-seeking, active organizational behavior as responses to institutional pressures and expectations" (Oliver, 1991, p. 146). A fundamental convergence point between official statements and strategic responses is the change of agents and organizations from a former condition of impotence (or passiveness) to the exercise of their power of influence (Oliver, 1991). This is because official statements are rebuttal instruments capable of influencing (or reestablishing an influence on) public opinion that have the objective of facilitating the reintegration of the accused into the institutional environment (Schembera & Scherer, 2017). Moreover, they are components of a potential rhetorical strategy with the direct purpose of seeking legitimacy or acceptance (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005).

Above all, the statements can sustain tones of defiance and aggression (Oliver, 1991) or even empathy and regret (Freitas & Medeiros, 2018). The message can also carry an affective tone with positive or negative tone regarding the facts it seeks to rebut (Coombs & Holladay, 2008), assigning emotional nuance to the topic. On the other hand, the content may be focused on the use of words that convey a technical and scientific tone (Pinto, 2006), presenting arguments based on the respondent's expertise.

Choosing which of these characteristics – one or more – will be present in an official statement is just one of the challenges faced by those who plan and write them because they must: (a) present a convincing message to the audience (Coombs & Holladay, 2008); (b) deal with the plurality of readers from the point of view of multiple institutional expectations (Meyer & Höllerer, 2016); and (c) encompass the complexity of a crisis situation, a context in which multiple expectations must be taken into consideration (Ocasio & Radoynovska, 2016). Given this context, this article seeks to answer the following question: **how do strategic responses manifest on official statements, given the use of language in a political context of corruption?**

The empirical material chosen to answer this consists of the extensive set of official statements issued by 101 political agents involved/cited on the so-called "Fachin's List". The material underwent a discourse analysis following the guidelines established by Putnam and Fairhurst (2001) and Phillips and Hardy (2002), emphasizing intertextuality. This analytical exercise is a contribution to studies that deal with strategic response at organizational level because although the issuing parties of these public statements are mostly individuals, the conclusions reached herein – as a set of discursive strategic political responses – can be extended (albeit with limitations) beyond individuals and include organizations, following on the footsteps of other works such as those by Ailon (2013) and Medimorec and Pennycook (2015). Considering the strategic political responses analyzed, the study contributes to reflections, assessments and discussions around the reactive behaviors of individuals and organizations amid situations of crisis, scandals, culpability, and corruption that compromise their institutional image, reputation and operational conditions in the face of their reference institutional contexts.

It also contributes to Institutional Theory studies in regards to the topic of 'strategic responses' (by individuals or organizations) and to language studies within that theoretical perspective. For the former set of studies, although a number of works have been inspired by the now classical research propositions of Oliver (1991) (e.g., Clemens & Douglas, 2005; Dhalla & Oliver, 2013; Machado-da-Silva, 2003; Marquis & Raynard, 2015; Vermeulen, Zietsma, Greenwood, & Langley, 2016), only a few reflected on them from a predominantly linguistic perspective (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Meyer & Höllerer, 2016) and/or involving the political dimension *per se*. This study seeks to contribute to both perspectives within this literature.

Relatively recent developments in Institutional Theory suggest that the centrality of language as a core component of socially constructed reality must be further scrutinized through empirical studies (Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers, & Vaara, 2015; Phillips & Malhotra, 2017) so that processes of (de)(re)institutionalization that constitute organizations and organizational fields can be demonstrated competently. With this in mind, it is important to investigate not only language as a premise of the social construction of reality but, above all, to demonstrate how it happens, manifests and causes effects and consequences in social life through its practical (communicational) use (Meyer & Höllerer, 2016; Meyer et al., 2018; Misangyi, 2016). This study also seeks to contribute in this sense by focusing on the uses of language in the process of (re)producing strategic responses that, to some degree and given their spread, seem to have become somewhat of an institution in the field of Brazilian politics.

## Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework presented in this section – and that constitutes the groundwork for this study – is not intended to exhaust a specific line of theory or even the entire state of the art surrounding a topic. Rather, it intends to compose a solid argumentation to analyze the relevant content regarding 'strategic responses' and 'corruption'/'scandals' (at both organizational and individual levels). It is based mainly on Institutional Theory, focusing on the linguistic and political perspective of such contents.

### *Strategic responses and their manifestation through language*

Based on the understanding that organizational compliance is not static nor unavoidable for guaranteeing survival and longevity, Oliver (1991) outlines five possible strategies for organizations facing institutional pressures. During her presentation of organizational strategic responses, Oliver highlights the ability of organizations (and agents in a field) to defend interests and convey the appearance of compliance with specific institutional norms to gain legitimacy and prestige. The author maps the institutional background and organizational conditions that, when combined, result in different organizational stances, ranging from acquiescence to the manipulation of the underlying logic of institutional spheres. Thus, a high potential for influencing the organization or agent is accompanied by a high likelihood that the person will adopt an aggressive, defying or manipulative attitude towards these assumptions to shape them to their personal interests.

The first strategic response analyzed by Oliver (1991) is to **acquiesce** or **comply**, which may imply that the organization is mimicking other organizations considered the reference point in

regard to the perceived demands from regulatory, normative or cultural authorities. In this strategy, the organization is motivated by the search for greater legitimacy, fear of negative sanctions, the expectation of obtaining additional resources, or a mix of these elements (Suddaby et al., 2017). Still following the typology proposed by Oliver (1991), the second type of strategic response is to **commit**, which encompasses a set of other responses seeking to balance, hinder and even negotiate institutional demands with other stakeholders. This strategy is more likely to emerge in places where authorities have conflicting roles, in such a way that the part of the organization that applies the strategy is expected to balance/equalize expectations to mitigate potential conflicts or incongruities; also including bargaining for the elements and resources needed to implement these strategies.

The third type of strategic response is to **avoid**, **evade** or **escape**, and involves efforts to conceal and/or protect specific parts of the organization to avoid the need to comply with the institutional demand. This can be accomplished through actions or behaviors that are perceived as disguised, activities that mend or soften tensions between the field and the organization, as well as evasion or escape from the need to comply under the pressure from the environment (Kern, Laguecir, & Leca, 2018).

The strategic response of **defying** corresponds to organizations not only resisting against institutional pressures by publicly defying them and the need for compliance but also going against the imposition of such demands and bypassing such pressures, objecting against or even attacking them. Lastly, Oliver (1991) explains that organizations can also respond to institutional pressures by **manipulating** attempts to co-opt, influence or even control the environment in some way, whether intentionally or opportunistically. This happens via the mobilization of various kinds of capital, from economic to symbolic, including retaining resources and information that help organizations manage the costs of these actions.

In reference to the seminal study by Oliver (1991), Coombs and Holladay (2005) present four categories of strategic responses that are specific to crises. They delve on the affective or technical connotations as well as the positive (agreement or optimism) or negative (negation, rejection) tones present in discursive constructions. The categories of strategic responses are: (a) apology (regret), (b) compensation, (c) empathy or (d) information. The first three responses are endowed with intense affection, whereas the last is concerned with the somewhat technical rebuttal of disclosed information that may affect the image of the organization or agent.

From another perspective, Sillince, Jarzabkowski and Shaw (2012) classify different types of organizational responses based on the role of rhetoric, especially regarding the use of various forms of ambiguity. The authors argue that the need to persuade many audiences demands ambiguous rhetorical constructions from organizations, allowing for multiple interests to be aligned with those of the organization. This means that rhetoric is useful for comprehending how organizational messages are constituted, enabling connections between persuasive meanings even if the audience is absent (Sillince et al., 2012). Thus, ambiguous constructions tend to favor strategic responses that cater to diverse audiences; in turn, this leads to pluralistic linguistic constructs with multiple foci and tones.

Freitas and Medeiros (2018) consider the responses of an accused party as rationalization tactics. The authors performed a national survey based on the analysis of statements by accused

parties in order to establish textual relations that demonstrate efforts to deny harm, responsibility and the victim; motivate social reflections; appeal to high loyalties and; employ the metaphor of balance. Such strategies are seen as a form of conduct justification, a way of neutralizing negative feelings and perpetrating corruption schemes (Freitas & Medeiros, 2018).

According to Schembera and Scherer (2017), the act of disclosing corruption can be viewed from a temporal perspective: before disclosing the scandal, during the crisis, and after it. This logic results in a sequence of acts of discovery, explanation, penalization, and recovery that is useful insofar as it shows that organizations (or agents) may, in their own time, choose different strategies that are suitable for moments when the accusations are in full throttle or when they are sizzling down. For example, stakeholders may, at first, be more eager for information about the "what" or "why" surrounding the occurrence of certain facts (Schembera & Scherer, 2017). The latest stages include an inclination for recovering legitimacy, setting a positive agenda and regaining space.

Therefore, different discursive constructions are related to different organizational and personal strategies. A highly aggressive and manipulative strategy tends to highlight the negative tone of the accusations, using past news to either reject or rebut them. On the other hand, an apology may not be a compliance strategy, but rather a way of expressing a "more realistic assessment of its values in crisis communication" (Coombs & Holladay, 2005, p. 253) that motivates a condescending reaction between listeners/readers, leading the way to manipulation.

Conversely, ambiguity can distort the identification of a specific organizational strategy, allowing different audiences to understand the message according to their current institutional logic. Upon identifying the existence of multiple institutional expectations (Meyer & Höllerer, 2016), the organization might use dubious or uncertain discursive constructions, enabling various interpretations (Schane, 2002).

In summary: (a) strategic responses are filled with intents to find the most convincing message for the agent/organization stakeholders; (b) these intents are manifested by the underlying tone and appeal of the written or spoken statements; (c) the tone is related to more or less aggressive strategies, according to the understanding of how to maintain/improve/regain the reputation that was put under risk due to accusations and/or crises; and, finally, (d) it is not always possible to accurately define the strategy behind a specific message because elements such as ambiguity may have multiple purposes, even when used deliberately.

### *An institutionalist view of political discourse*

The use of official statements as strategic responses can be defined by the conditions of plurality and complexity of the institutional sphere, whose base are the fundamentals of institutionalist studies. Clemens and Douglas (2005) base their view of plurality on the constituents defined by Oliver (1991). The authors believe that the variety of entities (such as State, interest groups, organizations, customers/consumers, and the general public) is crucial when choosing strategies. On the other hand, Meyer and Höllerer (2016) focus on the coexistence of various institutional logics, indicating that organizations must deal with multiple audiences. Plurality intensifies when approaching the political field. The topic finds correspondence in multilevel or layered institutional issues (Adler et al., 2014), mapping agents, conflicts, interests, and especially the way how these factors are considered among economic and political issues (Stryker, 2002). It is

far from a unified view of institutions and allows for the coexistence of complementary or even completely divergent institutional assumptions.

Complexity is closely linked to plurality but their conditions are not absolutely equal. Here, complexity is seen as a phenomenon that results from plurality and is socially constructed, insofar as agents and organizations get involved in specific institutional fields (Ocasio & Radoynovska, 2016). Complexity includes the difficulty to understand assumptions of an institutional field, allowing for the adoption of the most appropriate, adequate or even advantageous strategic response, thus conciliating the stakes at play. Organizations and agents thus experience complexity when facing incompatible institutional pressures (Vermeulen et al., 2016).

For Filgueiras (2009), the social view over political scandals deals exactly with the plurality and complexity of institutional assumptions, as it addresses the view of an intersubjective antithesis between moral values and social practice. Thus, political discourse aims at neutralizing this opposition to strengthen national tolerance in regard to the act of corruption (Filgueiras, 2009). Therefore, the conjunction and eventual clash between socially ingrained institutional assumptions intensify the use of neutralizing resources, mitigation of negative feelings and adoption of tactics that rationalize supervening facts (Freitas & Medeiros, 2018).

In turn, the subjectivity of this social construction is immensely relevant because the voter is a potential interlocutor of political discourse (Pinto, 2006), which is also particularly endowed with three other peculiarities: provisionality, anteriority, and arbitrariness (Pinto, 2006). Successful political discourse is capable of provisionally fixating meanings (Pinto, 2006). Therefore, when the listener/reader accesses the discourse, they feel convinced by the ideas exposed therein. Since exposure to political discourse is frequent, provisionality is massive. Political discourses follow one another and act on the construction of new meanings in a simultaneously subsequent and substitutive way.

This results in anteriority: political discourses are based on the principle that the "truth" *per se* does not exist (Pinto, 2006). Each discursive construction is the beginning of an idea. In this case, the truth is nothing more than a discursive construction; anteriority is the precept that no truth exists prior to political discourse. The preceding facts are unimportant: political discourse focuses on the future, on the meanings it can establish, especially in the context of uncertainty (Pinto, 2006).

The third condition, defined by Pinto (2006) as arbitrariness, comes from these characteristics. Arbitrariness concerns the convenient denomination of a particular object, state, or situation, i.e., if we call a pen a chair, it will be a pen as long as we all accept that denomination. For Pinto (2006), "what must be clear is that the meaning of a discourse is completely arbitrary" (p. 81), and the essential goal of political discourse is to construct arbitrary truths. On the other hand, political discourse calls for adherence, and the plurality and complexity of institutional assumptions are a challenge for political interlocutors. It is the attempt to make sense to the largest number of people and audiences, in a complex tangling of words and meanings that can be articulated through discourse.

The need to convince can be stronger when facing the disclosure of an act of corruption or during an image or reputation crisis. These cases include an institutional expectation for the accused party to manifest themselves. Thus, "there is a complex web of intertextual and situational contexts that is likely to influence the discourse. When parties stand accused or accuse one another, they are

expected to respond" (Bamber & Parry, 2016, p. 348). The goal of corruption is understood as to achieve personal/organizational interest, which naturally implies having to distance others from their interests. To escape this dichotomy, political agents use impersonality, especially in relation to the practice of corruption (Klerk, 2017).

The fact is that the accusation or the disclosure of corruption incites the need for manifestation, for a statement. This condition reinforces the link between corruption, reputation and language that underlies the properties of political discourse. These properties are related to the need for clamor and adherence but are hindered by institutional conditions. It is therefore essential to understand the possibilities of combining language and institutional expectations to reveal how strategic responses can manifest subliminal intentions.

Based on this theoretical frame of reference, the themes of discursive strategic responses in political settings, 'corruption'/ 'scandals', and underlying institutional processes can be applied to the analysis of individual speeches delivered by political agents, in such a way that the conclusions of this analysis can be viewed from the perspective of organizational issues (Schembera & Scherer, 2017; Scott, 2014).

## Method

The empirical material was chosen based on its capability of serving as evidence of the presence of textual and intertextual elements that enable official statements to be considered strategic responses. Furthermore, a substantial volume of material was required and, above all, a variety of public agents and organizations involved. In this sense, studies such as those by Ailon (2013) and Richards, Zellweger and Gond (2017) exemplify – and, in a way, support – the possibility of analyzing materials from secondary sources (from news media or having public reports as primary sources) when dealing with corruption scandals, especially from a linguistic point of view.

"Fachin's List" proved to be a rich and vast material due to the number of names therein. The report, broadcasted on the TV news program *Jornal Nacional* (Portal G1, 2017), had components that were valid for this research: the official statements were both oral and written. Recipients could be both listeners and readers, and those who delivered the statements were denominated "interlocutors". The empirical corpus was composed of secondary data that comprised the set 110 manifestations disclosed in the report. Four cases were excluded from the analysis because the political agent cited informed that they would not emit statements or because the political agent (or their representative) was not found by the media. After this exclusion, the sample consisted of statements from political organizations (such as the *Palácio do Planalto* and political parties), 8 ministers, 30 senators, 6 governors, 38 deputies, 2 mayors, 3 former presidents, and 19 other accused parties (such as members of parties that do not currently hold public positions, spouses of accused agents, among others).

The statements were issued by the interested party, the media and press advisors, public relations or interinstitutional professionals, and lawyers or representatives of the parties mentioned in the list. This means that the original data sources were sufficient to reach saturation since they included all the (valid) statements of this universe regarding the aforementioned or subsequent facts which were covered by the news media.



The data did not require treatment to maintain confidentiality due to the public nature of the statements. However, to avoid any partisan or even ideological connotations in the choice of fragments, the analysis tables show only the initials of the interlocutor. Some parts with mentions to the name of the accused party were intentionally omitted. This was made to control possible biases that would turn this analysis one-sided.

Data analysis focused on the interpretative bases proposed by Putnam and Fairhurst (2001) and Phillips and Hardy (2002) for an institutionalist discourse analysis (Phillips & Malhotra, 2017). The methodological choice reflected the epistemological guidelines of the study, in the sense that discourse is considered "communicative action that is constructive of social and organizational reality" (Heracleous & Hendry, 2000, p. 1252). This points towards a relationship of mutual construction between discourse and reality.

Regarding procedural aspects, the study was based on the classification of statements, allowing for the categorization of fragments under analysis, based on Putnam and Fairhurst (2001). After being duly classified, the segments were grouped based on intertextuality, considering that the intersubjective formation of meaning is not enabled solely through the text, but rather through its ability to connect to other texts, pointing towards the formation of discourse (Maguire & Hardy, 2009).

The methodological steps are detailed below:

1. Categorization of fragments began with the creation of a table that listed the official statement and its **interlocutor**, adopting the *a priori* classification of Putnam and Fairhurst (2001). Coding was performed during this stage.
2. Category **structure** (written, oral) was used to identify the potential need for different treatment of oral or written statements, given their publicization in different communication media. In this case, the language used was shown to have had sufficient affinity with the written or oral statements, which allowed them to be treated equally.
3. After these 13 preliminary categories were created, the **lexical** aspects became the Following the condition of **text** and **intertext** also adopted *a priori* as per Putnam and Fairhurst (2001), the statements were divided into fragments with thematic intertextual similarity, totaling thirteen preliminary categories of analysis. The saturation point was reached when the empirical material did not elicit for more categories to be created.
4. Focus. Later, still in the grammatical field, pronouns, adverbs, cohesion, and coherence aspects became more relevant, as well as the presence of figures of speech, composing the syntactic analysis.
5. Considering the grammatical and linguistic elements being analyzed, there were significant amounts of superindividual discursive practices with semantic content that refer to the creation of the intersubjective and pragmatic meaning of discourse formation (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). This was subliminally supported by shared concepts, e.g., fairness, righteousness, repentance or hope.
6. The final categories (findings) were then defined based on the results of the previous steps, to consolidate the **formation of discourse**. The analysis connected fragments to **emotional tones**<sup>1</sup> (Coombs & Holladay, 2008), linking them to Oliver's (1991) strategic responses and

reaching the pragmatic level of language use through (a) grammatical elements such as manifested and latent language practices; (b) the intertextuality that supports intersubjective nuances; and (c) the deliberate choice of grammatical components that disclose emotional or impersonal tones.

As a result, the thirteen categories were converted into five research findings, which are analyzed throughout the next section. The discussion section also includes a summary table that correlates the final findings with the strategic responses provided by the theoretical apparatus.

## Intertext as a strategic answer

*Insult and defiance: expression of consternation, positioning as the target of persecution, and the name as a political ethos*

Analysis of the sample of official statements showed that part of the people cited on "Fachin's List" uses language as a strategic response of defiance (Oliver, 1991), prioritizing attack techniques aimed at the accusations published on the media. Data analysis unveiled three noteworthy points: (a) broad use of adjectives to convey surprise, consternation, or misconception regarding the content of the accusations; (b) characterizing the name as an asset or as a political *ethos* (Burton, 2004, cited in Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005); and (c) rebuttal of accusations based on the argument that the news media is persecuting the agent. Table 1 shows examples of how points "a" and "b" are evidenced by discourse analysis:

Table 1

### Discursive Constructions of the Name as Political *Ethos*<sup>1</sup>

Interlocutor	Fragment expressing surprise	Fragment expressing the use of name as <i>ethos</i>
Interlocutor BBM	"It causes me great <b>embarrassment</b> . . .	. . .to have my <b>honor</b> and <b>dignity</b> tarnished"
Interlocutor DJB	"I am very <b>surprised</b> . . .	. . .over the mention of <b>my name</b> in the list of people under investigation"
Interlocutor IC	"I find it completely <b>unjust and unreasonable</b> . . .	. . .the citation of <b>my name</b> . I consider this retaliation. . ."
Interlocutor RF	"It was with absolute <b>perplexity and indignation</b> . . .	. . .that I received the information that <b>my name</b> is on the so-called 'Fachin's List'"
Interlocutor CZ	"An <b>irresponsible, mediatic</b> disclosure. . .	. . .that blamed all those who had <b>their names</b> cited"
Interlocutor JR	"Although <b>surprised</b> . . .	with the inclusion of <b>his name</b> among those under investigation, the deputy . . . remained absolutely calm"
Interlocutor NP	"The mayor . . . said he was <b>perplexed</b> . . .	. . .with this <b>mention</b> "

Interlocutor UCMS

"He was **surprised**. . .. . .with the news that **his name** had  
been included on the so-called  
Odebrecht list"

Sources: Elaborated by the authors.

The first step is to analyze the grammatical, syntactic and lexical aspects of the fragments. In regards to grammatical construction, the statements show a pattern: the first part consists of a manifestation of consternation and surprise, followed by a second part that clarifies what caused this perplexity, namely, the mention of the person's public name on the group of political agents cited on "Fachin's List".

From a lexical point of view, there is a broad use of adjectives depicting surprise, perplexity, and indignation, sometimes in the sense of disqualifying the 'List', or accompanied by the notion of hyperbole and superlatives, i.e., the recurrent use of words such as "completely", "absolute" and "greatly". The main terms that convey this idea are in bold in Table 1. Grammatical and lexical constructions show elements attuned to the defiance strategy. The most important of these arises from the interlocutor expressing their refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the accusation or source. In a similar analysis, Freitas and Medeiros (2018) state that social weighting strategies are based on the denial of legitimacy; thus, "if the legitimacy of the accuser is questionable, so is the argument" (p. 16).

Taking precedence over the factual truth, since "truth is a discursive construct" (Pinto, 2006, p. 80), the political agent prioritizes social acceptance or worthiness (Oliver, 1991) by refraining from rebutting on technical grounds or presenting facts that differ from the ones the accusation is based on. The interlocutor bets on their reputation and influence, evoking for themselves the legitimacy of their speech and giving less prominence to what was said.

Proceeding to the second fragment, in which the expressions in bold "my name" or "his name" were used repeatedly, it is clear that the expression is used in a connotative sense, closely related to the idea of honor and reputation. This is because the meaning of the expression "name" goes back to the political personality of the accused, as in the Latin term *persona*<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the strategy to counter the weight of the accusations is to remind the reader/listener of the honor and reputation of the political agent. Therefore, in appealing to the "historical character" (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005, p. 45), the official statements deny the credibility of the accusations by valuing recent achievements and actions of their targets. This also creates a sense of haziness over who deserves legitimacy: the accuser or the accused. In three other fragments transcribed in Table 2, this is applied to the context of political persecution or retaliation:

Table 2

**Discursive constructions of political persecution and retaliation**

Interlocutor	Fragment of the response statement
Interlocutor DR	"(The interlocutor) has been a victim of selective and targeted leaks"
Interlocutor IC	"I see this as retaliation for standing against the tax exemption awarded to consortia. . ."
Interlocutor LILS	"Only the permanent practice of lawfare <sup>3</sup> can explain this new episode, after lifting all prior suspicions cast against our client"

Sources: Elaborated by the authors.

Note that the focus of these fragments is the *ethos*, which depicts a situation of trial by media, i.e., judgment by the people based on news media pieces. This argument is also closely linked to the construction of truths and is therefore not related to proof of innocence. Thus:

Despite facing accusations and legal evidence and even conviction in some instances, the accused continue to plead not guilty, claiming that supposed persecution is in place and taking the focus away from legally substantiated accusations. (Freitas & Medeiros, 2018, p. 16)

According to Oliver (1991), the strategic response of attacking may occur in response to media actions – understood herein both as an institution or the "4<sup>th</sup> Power" or as an organizational agent or even professionalized organizational field – that affect public opinion, leading listeners/readers to question which of the organizations or agents involved are legitimate enough to be credible. Discourse analysis, therefore, defines that the **defiance strategy** was implemented by the people cited. This conclusion is based on (a) the recurring use of adjectives and superlatives regarding the perplexity caused by being cited on the list, evoking their legitimacy before public opinion; (b) using the expression "my name" as political *ethos*<sup>4</sup>; and (c) raising *ethos* to the same level as the media, defending the thesis of persecution by the media.

*Empathy and affection: supporting and strengthening anticorruption actions*

The responses demonstrate that certain political agents/organizations have chosen to adopt a positive tone (Coombs & Holladay, 2008) by avoiding words of confrontation, consternation, or negative word-of-mouth (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). This strategy denotes empathy with the reader/listener to reinforce that they share the accused's expectation for justice. Afterwards, it shows that the empathic tone used gives a certain degree of scientificity to the discourse. The following section explains how the responses are used to achieve these objectives by performing a grammatical and lexical analysis of the official statements, according to Table 3:

Table 3

**Discursive constructions arguing for trust in justice and anticorruption actions**

<b>Interlocutor</b>	<b>Fragment of the response statement</b>
Interlocutor GK	"The minister <b>reaffirms</b> his <b>trust</b> in justice"
Interlocutor CCL	"It should be investigated, indeed! Investigate until the end! And investigate immediately!"
Interlocutor JV	"We owe nothing and we fear nothing. We <b>trust</b> justice."
Interlocutor JCA	"Minister Fachin authorized investigations on everyone, without distinction, and that is good. Every public man must be ready to be investigated"
Interlocutor JL	"The deputy . . . <b>trusts</b> the work of the institutions"
Interlocutor ZD	"The deputy <b>reinforces his trust</b> in the Supreme Court and on the investigation of the Federal Police"
Interlocutor CL	"I <b>support</b> the institutions and do not fear any process"
Interlocutor RM	"(He/she) <b>Trusts</b> the investigation of justice and the separation of powers"

Sources: Elaborated by the authors.

The set of verbs that reinforce the positive message, i.e., that justice will not fail, are highlighted in bold. This holds a high degree of similarity to the use of other terms, namely: reaffirm, reinforce, support, trust. On the lexical aspect, there is a recurring use of the word "trust" and its derivations, as highlighted in Table 3.

There are also hidden messages, especially the presentation of the following subliminal logic: if the person (the public figure) is not afraid, they trust the justice and national institutions. There is even room for more intense sentences, such as "we owe nothing and we fear nothing" or "It should be investigated, indeed! Investigate until the end!". These discursive constructions are rhymed, fluid, and symmetrical in Portuguese. This type of construction favors the fixation of meanings, even if provisional (Pinto, 2006). The empathic tone works because it is intended to inform the reader/listener of the following message: "because we have no fear, we support the investigation. We are on the same side".

The word "investigation" and its derivations are particularly prominent, as is the way in which employing them confer technicity and even scientificity to the discourse. Coombs and Holladay (2008) cite a form of response in which the technical and scientific character of the enunciation is provided by information only. Although the scientific aspect is not presented in its pure form, there is the underlying idea that investigation will uncover the facts, "the truth". This perception can also be found on the main media objectives which value the act of investigating, because "the search for truth" is very closely related to the scientific discourse, i.e., to the investigation" (Pinto, 2006, p. 86).

The strategy of delegating "truth" to justice and investigation allows us to create a provisional meaning: something like "we shall see!". This gap in meanings and its inherent provisional aspect seek to address the plurality of institutional expectations that is so prominent in political contexts and emphasized in critical circumstances (Meyer & Höllerer, 2016). The reason is that, instead of proposing an attack to legitimacy, the political agent or organization chooses to comply with the positive aspect of justice by showing their adherence to the content of the list. For

Oliver (1991, p. 152), plurality is a core element of the **compromise strategy**, which aims at "balancing the expectations of multiple constituents". In this strategy, the affective tone can manifest via pacification tactics that seek to reach stability – albeit provisional – in relation to the uproar caused by an accusation.

### *Protagonism and centrality of the 'political character': the appeal to trajectory and unblemished reputation*

It is now important to go back to the issue of *ethos* (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) and the political agent's assertion of their historical character, after being mentioned on the 'List'. The *ethos* now becomes the protagonist and the core that other ideas spread from. Therefore, the public man is the main topic of the following statements, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4**

Discursive constructions of the public man and political trajectory

Interlocutor	Fragment
Interlocutor AA	"In all his <b>trajectory</b> (the interlocutor) has never dealt with illicit matters with anyone"
Interlocutor LM	"The seriousness of <b>my public life</b> speaks on my behalf"
Interlocutor DA	"The people of Bahia and Brazil know <b>my trajectory</b> of over 30 years of public activity"
Interlocutor CR	"My honor and <b>my</b> full and transparent <b>trajectory</b> in public life for over 20 years speak on my behalf"
Interlocutor MPG	"I categorically affirm that, in <b>my entire public life</b> , I have never taken part in corruption"
Interlocutor CZ	" <b>We will continue</b> to honor the people's trust and work towards building a more just and generous country"
Interlocutor KA	" <b>My history</b> and my righteousness are the cornerstones of my defense"

Sources: Elaborated by the authors.

The selected fragments contain lexical intertextuality but above all convergence of meanings. The underlying message leads the reader to the following reflection: Does merely being cited on a list of accusations tarnish the entire public life of this political agent? Therefore, there is the opposition to the idea of the political trajectory, the public man, the honor and the *ethos* against the contents of the "Fachin's List". The base study for this analysis was structured by Suddaby and Greenwood (2005), who used rhetorical analysis to investigate segments and coded them to demonstrate the prominence of a particular persuasive element. The logic of making the *ethos* more prominent is also used in the present analysis, despite methodological differences between rhetorical analysis and the discourse analysis employed here. Nevertheless, when employing discourse analysis, it is unwise to move away from the strategic use of rhetoric – i.e., from the persuasive language used for the positioning of confrontation, reinforcement, or maintenance of institutional assumptions –, especially in times of change (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005).

The analyzed *corpus* is marked by the recurrent use of the terms "trajectory" or "public life", which is emphasized by the use of the possessive adjective "my" as a pleonasm. Other noteworthy grammatical constructions are recurring adverbs of manner, e.g., "categorically" and hyperboles consisting of extreme terms such as "never", "any", and "nobody". Another way of giving the *ethos* prominence is via constructions that convey the idea of political trajectory "speaking by itself", i.e., appealing to the historical character so that responding to the accusations is unnecessary. This is a way of superficially making the political discourse impersonal (Pinto, 2006) by changing the subject of the sentence from the first person to the third person: "political trajectory".

Referring to the agent's trajectory is a bold **strategy** that seeks to **manipulate** institutional assumptions via the possibility of "shaping values and criteria" (Oliver, 1991, p. 152). Although this might be enough to avoid the negative tone of confrontation, it also carries an emotional appeal that defines reputation as the most valuable resource amid a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Similarly, Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) state that "rhetoric can be used to expose and manipulate subordinate and dominant institutional logic and create momentum for institutional change" (p. 36).

### *Nonconformity: denial and the argument of not being aware of the contents of the accusation*

This section highlights the use of lexical and syntactic characteristics that portray denial. Regarding semantics, Table 5 focuses on the nuances of the act of denying, which are theoretically bound to the use of textual and intertextual elements that demonstrate the tone of the chosen strategic response.

Table 5

#### **Discursive constructions of denial and claims of not being aware of the contents of the accusation**

Interlocutor	Fragment
Interlocutor MT	"The narrative published today does not correspond to the facts and is based on an <b>absolute lie</b> "
Interlocutor ANF	"The accusations are <b>lies</b> "
Interlocutor MAP	". . .even though I have not been officially notified and <b>have no knowledge</b> of the accusation"
Interlocutor HB	"He <b>denies</b> having committed illegalities"
Interlocutor NA	"The office (of the party) says the accusations made by the whistleblower are totally <b>false</b> "
Interlocutor CN	"He relentlessly <b>denies</b> having received anything irregular or in a covert manner"
Interlocutor DJB	"I vehemently <b>oppose</b> any allegation of illicit acts"
Interlocutor RF	"I will judicially charge these <b>liars</b> so that they have to prove the accusations"
Interlocutor BG	"The member of parliament <b>affirms</b> he has not committed any irregularities and stresses that he will ask for access to the information from this possible inquiry in order to know what is the actual accusation"

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Interlocutor GVL	"(The interlocutor) declared he will demonstrate before justice that this accusation is a <b>work of fiction</b> "
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Sources: Elaborated by the authors.

To analyze the excerpts in bold of the fragments presented in Table 5, it is necessary to understand the three main ideas present therein and the linguistic elements used to depict them. The parts or words in bold refer to the idea of lies, falsehood or even fiction. In this case, there is a discursive effort to construct a new (albeit provisional) truth: there is some kind of plot or plan to tarnish the public agent's image.

The first underlying idea of the fragments is that the whistleblower<sup>5</sup> plays the role of villain, in opposition to any villainy that may have been imposed by "Fachin's List" to those cited therein. The whistleblower, therefore, assumes the role of a source of unjust acts and untruth. This recalls the opposition between "good" and "evil", which allows us to understand the situation as a "narrative" (please refer to the fragment on the first line of Table 5) or as a "work of fiction" (fragment on the last line).

The second idea underlying the statements chosen for analysis is denial using verbs and adverbs that radically oppose the content of the accusation. They are firm and incisive words, such as "deny", "reject", "affirm", followed by adverbs that reinforce this aspect, such as "categorically" or "relentlessly". In this case, there is a direct and outright opposition in regard to the citation, which conveys the notion of vehement and unquestionable denial. However, this opposition offers stakeholders a binary interpretation that bears the implicit risk of denial (Bamber & Parry, 2016). This is because denial is a way of polarizing the response, ultimately oversimplifying the chosen strategy. Thus, if the reader/listener does not believe the denial, they will naturally be guided by the affirmation that there is only the "guilty" or the "innocent". To reinforce the denial – rather than the affirmation of guilt – political agents employ two other discursive properties: arbitrariness and aggression.

The first noteworthy element is the use of the terms "illegality", "irregularity", "illicit" in a broad manner and alongside terms that give them unrestricted meaning such as "anything", "any" or "never". As a result, the sentences reinforce the negation, as in "I never committed any illicit acts", "I did not commit any irregularities", among others. By employing arbitrariness, the political agent attempts to eliminate limitations and controversies about the meaning of "illegality" related to the acts they are allegedly involved in; therefore, the interlocutor did not commit any illegality, in any sense of the word. Since the terms "irregularity" or "illegality" may have been used arbitrarily, generalizing is a way of closing interpretation gaps.

Bamber and Parry (2016) state that denial can be more or less aggressive; the use of aggressiveness can be viewed from the perspective of its emotional component (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Thus, statements can express the (evident or implied) manifestation of anger, which aims to imbue the reader/listener with the same outrage experienced by the public agent facing this political and legal misunderstanding. The language of denial can oscillate between caution and aggressiveness, the latter being in accordance with the idea of attack (Oliver, 1991). In the study conducted by Medimorec and Pennycook (2015), denial is part of the strategy of accusing others. When dealing with environmental issues, the accused organizations shift the focus of the



accusations by portraying environmental scientists as "alarmists" and warning about the existence of another "villain". In turn, this other villain can be understood as the system itself, or as organizations that act in a coercive or misleading manner, leading to what Freitas and Medeiros (2018) consider a denial of responsibility.

Denial is based on strategies that point towards less use of neutral language (Medicmorec & Pennycook, 2015). Coombs and Holladay (2008) state that assuming an emotional tone means using less neutral language and moving away from technical and scientific tones. In this sense, the main intention of the sentences is not "sharing evidence" but "discrediting the opposing perspective" (Medicmorec & Pennycook, 2015, p. 7).

In conclusion, the properties of statements and arguments used by organizations/agents tend to conceal the truth from the reader/listener by portraying the accusation as opaque and fragile, given the lack of transparency surrounding its disclosure and its potential inability to convey the truth. Together, these attributes seek to strengthen the support of denial by trying to control the risks and counterproductive effects related to this strategy (Bamber & Parry, 2016).

Denial is closer to the attack element and the idea of **manipulation** proposed by Oliver (1991) due to its aggressive tone. Based on discourse analysis, denial is not only the pure act of denying (the intention of distancing oneself, detaching oneself, or dissociating oneself from an act, fact or event) but also redirecting the focus towards the false, vilifying fact perpetrated by an untrustworthy agent. This is a deliberate effort towards "shaping values and criteria" (Oliver, 1991, p. 152) by evoking the legitimacy of politicians.

#### *The benefit of the doubt: the ambiguity in the statement "the truth shall appear"*

During the theoretical section of this study, the concepts of 'ambiguity' and 'plurality' were briefly articulated to understand how dubious or ambiguous discursive constructions broaden the ways in which institutional expectations can be met (Meyer & Höllerer, 2016). In this sense, the level of ambiguity present in constructions of the type "the truth shall appear" enables the reader/listener to argue for the "benefit of the doubt". See the following fragments from Table 6:

Table 6  
Discursive constructions of the restoration of truth

Interlocutor	Fragment
Interlocutor EO	"The senator trusts judicial investigations will clarify <b>the truth</b> "
Interlocutor DJB	"I tell the Brazilian society, especially Santa Catarina, who always trusted me, that I hope <b>the truth will be reestablished</b> quickly"
Interlocutor LF	"Once again, I trust the investigations will <b>clarify the facts</b> . . . Once more, justice will be done."
Interlocutor AC	"The deputy is set on seeking alongside the Supreme Court all information in order for the <b>truth to prevail</b> "
Interlocutor AO	"No one is more interested <b>in finishing</b> this inquiry"
Interlocutor EO	"The <b>truth will prevail</b> . Brazilian justice has the maturity and firmness to ascertain and distinguish the <b>truth</b> from the lies and alternative versions."
Interlocutor DL	"Regarding the mention of my name in investigations by the Supreme Federal Court, I receive them with a calm mind, because I <b>trust that truth will prevail</b> and justice will be done"

Sources: Elaborated by the authors.

To understand the format used in discursive constructions, three main ideas can be taken from the fragments above, namely: (a) trust in Justice; (b) reestablishment and prevalence of the truth; and (c) focus on the outcome/conclusion. According to Pinto (2006), in political discourse, truth is the result of the provisional fixation of meaning. Therefore, the statements transcribed above use the passage of time (i.e., the time between the declaration and the conclusion of the investigation) in their favor. Consequently, there is no fear of a possible divergence between the outcome (a guilty verdict) and the content of the statements (allegation of innocence), since truth is volatile and seen only as a provisional state. Ambiguity is also related to the provisional aspect of the statements. In general, the presence of this discursive (or rhetorical) element is associated with a "lack of clarity" or "uncertainty in relation to the application of a term" (Schane, 2002, p. 1). However, ambiguity is, above all, an attribute of the language employed and includes (a) lexical, (b) grammatical (syntactic) and (c) semantic aspects.

While the three ambiguity types ('a', 'b' and 'c') can appear simultaneously, understanding semantic ambiguity is vital. In the semantic field, there is a prevalence of the idea that certain words, phrases, texts or utterances carry multiple definitions or are subject to multiple interpretations (Schane, 2002). Above all, semantic ambiguity is particularly subtle and may not be visible during a superficial reading and may require reading other texts or experiencing certain situations in order to be identified. This covert condition of semantic ambiguity is called 'latent ambiguity' (Schane, 2002).

Latent ambiguity benefits from the idea that context is changeable and truth is provisional (Pinto, 2006). Sillince et al. (2012) focus on understanding how ambiguity is used strategically from the perspective of rhetoric and considering the strategic intent (the so-called 'deliberation factor'). The authors discuss the adaptive ambiguity that uses this temporality.

"Adaptive ambiguity enables the interlocutor to temporarily adopt values that are shared with the public for the purpose of taking specific action while turning (the assumptions) in favor of their interests and values" (Sillince et al., 2012, p. 647). The idea that "the truth shall appear" does not tell us exactly what facts will emerge, and this is where latency ensues. Following the semantic interpretation only (in this case, the hermeneutic step of comprehending, after the step of interpreting semantic conditions), the reader/listener is led to think that the final verdict will be in favor of the accused political agent, given the combination of meanings established on the grounds of an alleged "trust in justice".

This is accompanied by the underlying argument that the accused can abstain from speaking up at that moment because time will bring forth the facts and history will retrospectively absolve them. The weight of clarifying the facts is thus placed on the outcome, which allows for provisional neutrality and omission of the accused. The strategy of adaptive ambiguity is particularly adequate to understand the various institutional expectations and points towards a momentary **avoidance** posture in regard to the topic. This is employed to try to escape by distorting the temporal focus of attention or the temporary change of goals or activities (Oliver, 1991). Therefore, the main characteristic is the attempt to elicit both a large number and a wide breadth of interpretations in which the benefit of the doubt uses time in favor of the accused.

### *Strategic responses focused on the political aspect*

Focusing on institutional conditions, language properties and the prominent particularities of discourse in the political universe, the content of the official statements is related to the strategic character of **strategic responses, considering the use of language in a political context**. Regarding institutional conditions, strategies are centered around the complexity and plurality of institutional expectations, as well as the challenges faced by organizations. Therefore, it is daunting to gain or maintain legitimacy and acceptance in institutional fields marked by distinct logics and sometimes complementary and/or controversial expectations (Vermeulen et al., 2016). The variety of stakeholders is also exponentially expanded in political discourse since every single voter is a new interlocutor (Pinto, 2006). This characteristic is what defines the particularities of political discourse, including arbitrariness, provisionality and anteriority.

Especially when political discourse is uttered as a reaction to a corruption scandal reveal (Klerk, 2017) or during a reputational crisis, gimmicks such as denial or making the corrupt act impersonal are more common. This happens because, in a convergence of its many possible definitions, the act of corruption can be seen as something that directly favors the interests of the corrupt (Klerk, 2017) and, if this interest takes priority, other interests are neglected. How is it possible to make those who had their interests compromised dissociate themselves from this discourse?

The summary table below combines the analyzed points taking as reference the work of Oliver (1991), in which strategic responses are understood in accordance with predictive and institutional factors and their developments. The columns in Table 7 present the theoretical arguments, linguistic evidence and the institutional assumptions that were given priority, while the lines focus each of the five individual research findings.

Table 7

**Strategic responses focused on the political aspect**

Strategic response	Empiric evidence found	Purpose/function	Main arguments	Characteristic linguistic elements	Institutional context of use of the strategic response (reference about the critical/crisis context)
Defiance	Insult and defiance: expression of consternation, posing as the target of persecution, and the name as a political <i>ethos</i>	To insult and defy by expressing consternation, positioning oneself as the target of some kind of persecution, exalt the political <i>ethos</i> character of the one employing this type of strategic response.	<p>Legitimacy is claimed based on the historical character (<i>ethos</i>).</p> <p>Surprise and consternation define the affective tone of the response in detriment of a technical response.</p> <p>The idea of political persecution creates a sense of haziness around the concept of truth.</p>	<p>Grammatical constructions follow the same order, with a causal explanatory clause (the first sentence expressing consternation and the second pointing towards a demand for explanations regarding the "Fachin's List").</p> <p>Broad use of adjectives and hyperbole.</p> <p>Use of language that appeals to an emotional and defying affective tone.</p>	Institutional <b>complexity</b> and <b>plurality</b> act on both the foundation and the outcome of the strategy (increased intensity) because they are treated and considered based on the idea of the discursive construction of truth by the one employing this strategic response.

Strategic response	Empiric evidence found	Purpose/function	Main arguments	Characteristic linguistic elements	Institutional context of use of the strategic response (reference about the critical/crisis context)
Compromise	Empathy and affection: supporting and strengthening anti-corruption actions	Conveying the idea that the accused shares with the reader/listener the expectations of justice, reinforcing the collective demand for the investigation and the revelation of the truth.	<p>The affective and empathic tone moves away from a confrontational stance and promotes a closer relationship between the interlocutor and the reader/listener;</p> <p>The demand for investigation attaches some scientificity to the discourse which is aligned with the media objectives of searching for the truth.</p>	<p>Use of verbs that reinforce a convergence of meanings, e.g., "reaffirm", "support", "reinforce", "trust";</p> <p>Repetition of the term "trust" and its derivations;</p> <p>The resulting semantic meaning is centered around the word "investigation";</p> <p>Use of rhythmic, intense discursive constructions with high mental fixation potential.</p>	<p>The responses include environmental <b>plurality</b> by balancing and pacifying institutional expectations. References to the investigation include a notion of <b>provisionality</b> which promotes the idea of waiting for the investigation, justice, and truth to emerge.</p>
Manipulation	Protagonism and centrality of the 'political character': the appeal to trajectory and unblemished reputation	Presenting oneself as legitimate, leading the reader/listener to ponder whether the mere citation in a list of accused people is enough to tarnish years of public life.	<p>The presence of rhetorical elements and the persuasive tone characterize the sense of consternation and confrontation.</p> <p>The public agent advocates for their own legitimacy by highlighting their long public life and using an emotional tone.</p>	<p>Discursive constructions show a contradiction between the personal tone (e.g., the use of the possessive adjective/pronoun "my", "mine") and the notion of impersonality shown by the use of the political trajectory and <i>ethos</i> as subjects.</p> <p>The text analyzed includes persuasive language and the use of extreme adverbs of mode and time ("categorically", "vehemently", "never").</p>	<p>Efforts are centered around the issue of institutional <b>complexity</b>, given the extensive web of understandings that permeate the field during crises. The strategy is extremely bold and passionate, aiming to manipulate values and criteria in order to hinder the strengthening of the dominant logic. Thus, the political discourse works with the idea of <b>adherence</b> and intensifying the assertion of the public figure.</p>

Strategic response	Empiric evidence found	Purpose/function	Main arguments	Characteristic linguistic elements	Institutional context of use of the strategic response (reference about the critical/crisis context)
Manipulation	Nonconformity: denial and the argument of not being aware of the contents of the accusation	Outright opposition of the accusations by purporting the whistleblower's lack of prestige. Since the whistleblower's guilt is already recognized, the interlocutor challenges their legitimacy.	<p>Denial as an attack.</p> <p>The argument of claiming to be unaware of the contents negatively affects the legitimacy of the citation.</p> <p>Carries the intention of denouncing deliberate political persecution.</p> <p>Under extreme circumstances, the discursive construction adopts tones of narrative that depicts the accusation and the citation as fiction.</p>	<p>The language of denial focuses on the use of negative terms as verbs, adverbs, and adjectives.</p> <p>Less neutral language, reinforcing the emotional and aggressive tone.</p> <p>Lexical similarity is progressive, moving from lie to slander, to persecution, and finally to a piece of science fiction.</p>	<p>Understanding the institutional <b>complexity</b>, the interlocutor adopts an extremely bold strategy that directs the reader/listener towards polarization (the truth or the lie). The risk lies in the binary aspect of the denial. The main characteristic is the use of <b>provisionality</b>, given the artifice of indicating the existence of a new villain - i.e., the whistleblower - in order to depict a narrative of "good guy and bad guy".</p>

Strategic response	Empiric evidence found	Purpose/function	Main arguments	Characteristic linguistic elements	Institutional context of use of the strategic response (reference about the critical/crisis context)
Avoidance	The benefit of the doubt: the ambiguity in the statement "the truth shall appear"	To momentarily avert the reader's attention from the facts, taking advantage of the passage of time between accusation and sentence. Raise the idea of a favorable outcome for the accused, based on the benefit of the doubt.	<p>The benefit of the doubt is manifested by ambiguity - and adaptive ambiguity especially -, which employs provisionality and temporality;</p> <p>Adoption of a positive and trusting tone towards justice, which helps to suggest a favorable outcome for the accused;</p> <p>Raising the idea of truth and justice being reestablished and prevailing.</p>	<p>Discursive constructions operate on the parallel notion of two moments: the present and the future, in which "the truth shall appear";</p> <p>The especially semantic ambiguity establishes a moment of doubt.</p>	<b>Plurality</b> is followed by <b>ambiguity</b> . The benefit of the doubt is democratic and lends itself to infinite interpretations. The passage of time is used to the interlocutor's advantage, allowing the interim evasion of the negative fact and creating a new perspective, which proposes the expectation for the favorable end.

Sources: Elaborated by the authors.

Oliver (1991) presents the foundations for five types of strategic organizational responses. The official statements analyzed – which fulfill the requirements necessary for encompassing organizations in situations of crises, scandals or tense circumstances due to corruption – also included five strategic political responses, namely defiance, compromise, avoidance, and two modes of manipulation according to the variation of purpose/function identified. Then, by applying Oliver's (1991) original model of strategic responses to political discourses (thus mapping and identifying the strategies presented), we systematized (Table 7) the analytical possibilities for the study of behaviors surrounding the emission of strategic responses by/inside organizations, considering that these agents also deal with the mobilization/conciliation of political and marketing interests (obtaining or retaining resources) when facing critical events.

## Conclusions

This study applied an institutionalist perspective to political discourse by exploring the strategic character of responses issued by political agents cited in the so-called "Fachin's List". It focused on the nuances of language and its rhetorical, discursive, ambiguous and intertextual aspects, which are used to express communicative intentions between agents and organizations of the political field and its wide range of interlocutors.

The Institutional Theory approach was chosen in an attempt to dialog with discursive and linguistic studies, so one of the main contributions of this study is the synthesis of their main methodological and theoretical connections. This was performed to unveil manifest or underlying intents of conformity, confrontation, attack or acquiescence on the official statements. This analysis has the humbleness of considering the particularities of the political field (e.g., arbitrariness, provisionality, and complexity), as well as the care of being based on intertextual, lexical, semantic elements and rhetorical and ambiguous discursive constructions.

To substantiate the categorization of official statements, we analyzed the roles of rhetoric and ambiguity (Sillince et al., 2012), affective or technical connotations, negative or positive tones of statements (Coombs & Holladay, 2008), tactics of rationalization (Freitas & Medeiros, 2018) and the time aspect (Schembera & Scherer, 2017). This study thus contributes to the development of a theoretical and conceptual framework that is aligned with the analytical model of Oliver (1991) by following the rereading herein, which is expanded by the elements of Coombs and Holladay (2008). This is done by relating the strategic responses of the text from 1991 with discursive responses and inserting categorical elements in search of the characteristics of statements issued under circumstances of corruption scandals and the resulting political crises, which had not been clearly taken into consideration in Oliver's (1991) strategies. The application of Oliver's model (1991) on the unusual empirical object of this study contributes to reflections about and assessments of the reactive behaviors of not only individuals but also organizations who find themselves amid scandals and crises that compromise their institutional image, reputation and operating conditions before various stakeholders (Palmer, Smith-Crowe, & Greenwood, 2016).

The deliberate choice of words, similarity of statements, use of verbal tenses and subjects in the first or third person, adjectives, hyperboles or negatives are theoretical and conceptual elements that complement the theoretical framework by offering some perspective on the pragmatic use of language and the possibility of grouping statements, which is synthetically



demonstrated by the linguistic elements presented in Table 7. These responses are considered as deriving from the intention of preserving/ensuring a positive image and reputation of those who employ them, in view of the need to communicate with a variety of stakeholders who hold different expectations regarding these statements during situations of crises, scandals, guilt and corruption. Therefore, the institutional context is also encompassed given the relevant properties of political discourse.

This study has limitations. Discursive particularities have not been explored in depth in regard to their adherence to the corruption scenario in Brazil. Moreover, due to the adoption of a broad concept of corruption that flirts with its intersubjectivity and the meaning of political discourse, it was impossible to deepen the analysis of repercussions of recent scandals. However, the peculiarities of corruption in Brazil must be further explored in Brazilian journals (Marani et al., 2018), and the connection between these peculiarities and the accused's official responses and statements made before the media and the press shows that this is a scientific gap that must be addressed.

There were no correlations drawn between the political offices held and the type of strategic response, so it would not be plausible to claim, for example, that accused ministers have a more intense response when compared to the deputies cited on "Fachin's List". The political class was considered as a whole in a nonpartisan way and without making inferences concerning power, influence or position occupied by the interlocutors since the main object of analysis was the linguistic uses of the collected discursive facts. This was done by grouping interlocutors according to similarities in their discourse and not by their political party. Even so, this possibility could also be analyzed by codifying the agents mentioned according to their political position at the time of the statements, which paves the way to new works that relate position and response strategies. Given the vast empirical material produced and reported after corruption scandals are disclosed, other institutional analyses could focus, for example, on how successfully can reality be construed by discourse vs. the complexity of the institution given its underlying plurality of logics.

It is also possible to deepen discussions involving the effective distinctive properties between vocabularies supported by political representatives of different ideological spectra, given that our analysis shows that the political class approached appeals to the same rhetorical resources when under critical circumstances – almost in a supra-partisan way – such as those of the study, which suggests – counterintuitively to ideas like "ownership" or "territoriality" of language use – the existence of cross-sectional and inherent elements in political discourse. Moreover, by adopting an intertextual perspective towards the responses, it was possible to broaden the analysis and to understand how isomorphic pressures act on the political discourse as a whole, especially when considering the content and language of the statements, in view of the empirical observation that politicians rarely tell what campaign promises are actually achievable, which exchanges of favors have taken place behind the scenes and what resources/alliances are necessary for a candidate to be elected. Thus, it would be possible to explore what gives legitimacy to political discourse and, consequently, to such political agent(s) – be it an individual or an organization.

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## Notes

1. It should be noted that the statements were not directly delivered by the political agent or organization, but by news media journalists (when they were presented orally). They were also cited in the article published by Portal G1 (2017).
2. In Latin, the word *persona* means mask (in the sense of 'character').
3. "Lawfare" is a form of war in which the law is used as a weapon. It denotes the misuse of laws and judicial systems for military or political purposes by means of intimidation and thwarting, aimed at destroying enemies, raising public outcry and manipulating opinions. Retrieved from Recuperado de <https://bit.ly/2PU9JeX>
4. See section "Protagonism and Centrality of the 'Political Character': the appeal to trajectory and unblemished reputation" herein.
5. The plea bargain became applicable under Law 9.613/1998 as a way of fighting money laundering, despite being applicable under other laws of the Brazilian legal framework. The whistleblower forfeits their right to silence and commits themselves to tell only the truth and to present evidence in exchange for benefits such as the reduction of sentence (Jade, 2015).

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