

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE STUDY OF TABOO(S) IN LANGUAGE, MEDIA, AND AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION

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Citation: Bucaria, C., A.D. Mitzel and A. Sileo (2024) “Considerations on the Study of Taboo(s) in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation”, C. Bucaria, A.D. Mitzel and A. Sileo (eds) *Taboo in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation*, *mediAzioni* 43: A1-A9, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/20435>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: Taboo, by its very nature, is deeply rooted in language and culture, constantly evolving as the social boundaries of what is acceptable shift – sometimes slowly, sometimes almost imperceptibly. What we mean today by taboo needs careful examination, in order to investigate how the boundaries have been redrawn over the years and how these boundaries are constantly negotiated, for example when it comes to intercultural communication. Without any pretense of being exhaustive, this contribution offers some contextualization for the study of taboo(s) in the fields of language, media, and audiovisual translation across themes such as sex, religion, death, disability, homo/transphobia, and racism. It includes discussion on present and future directions in taboo research and it also introduces and contextualizes the contributions included in the special issue *Taboo in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation*.

Keywords: taboo; TaCo conference; audiovisual translation; language; media.

An article recently appeared in the Television section of British newspaper *The Guardian* (Hogan 2024) comments on the trend of featuring male genitalia more prominently in media (particularly TV and film) in the last few years. Starting from an episode of the HBO series *House of the Dragon* (Season 2, Episode 3), in which two penises are shown – the first of which erect during fellatio – Hogan proceeds to list several examples of other on-screen appearances of full-frontal male nudity in recent years, among others, in the TV series *Euphoria* (2019-in production) and *Normal People* (2020), and in the Amazon Prime Video film *Saltburn* (2023). As the article argues, while female nudity has long been normalized on screen, male nudity – whether aided by prosthetics or not – is still likely to cause a level of viral curiosity at best and outrage in the worst of cases.

However, a key and defining element in the reception of taboos that Hogan also mentions is context. As supported by Allan, a prolific scholar in the field of taboo as language behavior, “taboo is conditioned by context” (2018: 10), and more specifically “every taboo must be specified for a particular community of people for a specified context at a given place and time. There is no such thing as an absolute taboo that holds for all worlds, times, and contexts” (ibid.: 16). In the case of media products, “context” might be defined as when and where a piece of media is shown, to what audience, and what the recipients’ expectations are. For example, extreme violence, sex, and swearing would be not only tolerated but somehow even expected in the kind of programming offered by US cable channels such as HBO and Showtime and by the subscribers to these services; on the other hand, the same kind of content could hardly be shown to the more general public on networks such as ABC or CBS during the primetime slot, at least not without viewer complaints. To further complicate the issues relating to taboo reception is of course the fact that many audiovisual media products are now made globally available, as is content accessible on the web, for example through social media. Both in the cases in which this content is mediated for different lingua-cultural contexts and in the cases in which it is accessed by speakers of other languages through a lingua franca such as English, the receivers’ culture(s) is bound to have an impact on taboo perception. To return to the initial example of male nudity displayed in *House of the Dragon*, in the version of the episode available for Italian viewers on SKY the erect penis is blurred, while the non-erect one is plainly visible, a choice that speaks, more in general, to issues relating to the manipulation and adaptation practices that audiovisual media may undergo when they cross national borders, and, more specifically, to potential differences in the kinds of taboo that are considered suitable for a target lingua-cultural context – in this case, for example, male nudity seems to be considered more acceptable when not engaged in sexual activity.

In a world that seems to be pushing the envelope of taboo acceptability for the inhabitants of specific linguistic and cultural contexts as well as on a global scale, it seems to be particularly relevant to acknowledge the importance of a scholarly investigation of taboos and their reinforcement and/or breaking in various areas of language, culture, society, media, translation, and communication in general. Similarly, the subject of taboo in language, culture, and media seems to have become especially relevant in the last few years, a

period in which political correctness at both the institutional and individual level has been seen, on the one hand, as a crucial tool in protecting minorities and more vulnerable people from verbal abuse and in preventing the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes and, on the other, as a set of measures and a way of thinking which can significantly limit free speech in many aspects of the public sphere. For instance, American comedian Jerry Seinfeld has recently expressed his views on contemporary comedy, stating in an interview (Remnick 2024) that the current crisis of comedy was brought about by “the extreme left and P.C. crap, and worrying so much about offending other people”, referring to the notion – often invoked by right-wing politicians and pundits – that “you can’t joke about anything anymore” because political correctness has, effectively, killed comedy. It is therefore easy to see how ideas about taboos and how taboos are received by audiences can effortlessly be manipulated and weaponized for ideological reasons, and used to polarize public opinion (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Mendiburo-Seguel *et al.* 2023).

These and other similar considerations on taboos in their various incarnations have contributed to set the rationale for The Taboo Conference (TaCo) Series, an interdisciplinary conference held every two years and originated in 2012 by a group of scholars at the University of Bologna’s Department of Interpretation and Translation. One of the main goals of this conference series is to offer scholars in different disciplines a space to share their research on taboo, a feat that can prove fraught with taboos in and of itself at other conferences focused on more general aspects of the humanities. TaCo has had five editions so far, with the first one held at the University of Bologna at Forlì, Italy (2012), the second one at Durham University, UK (2014), the third one at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, Spain (2016), the fourth one in Bertinoro, Italy (2018), and the fifth at Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata in Rome (2022). Although each edition has had a specific focus, TaCo has always encouraged the scholarly exploration of areas such as, among others, sex and sexuality (including nudity, non-normative sexual practices, and pornography), death and dying, sickness and disability, scatology, racism and sexism, and religion and blasphemy. Over the years, both plenary talks and general submissions have reflected the full scope of the conference’s themes, focusing on issues such as taboos in political satire, identity and gender politics, ethnic stereotypes, political correctness and the discourse(s) surrounding it, wokeness and free speech, and the debate between real and perceived offense through humor and comedy. Scholars from disciplines as diverse as linguistics, translation studies, cultural anthropology, sociology, media studies, performance and theatre studies, and literature have presented their research at TaCo.

As the first collective publication inspired by TaCo since its inception, the articles selected for this special issue build on some of the themes of the conference, with a particular focus on explorations of taboo in language, media, and translation, and – in many cases – the intersections among these different but increasingly interconnected fields. The aim of this special issue is to offer a multidisciplinary space in which the study of taboo can continue to be pursued by building on previous relevant research in adjacent disciplines. For example, scholarly interest in taboo has come from disciplines and subdisciplines such as

linguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and language acquisition, in which swearing and “rude” language in general have been looked at not only from the point of view of production (for example in learners of a second language and in terms of the gendered use of profanities) but also in terms of their pragmatic ramifications for interpersonal communication, such as in the case of politeness and impoliteness research (e.g., Bousfield 2008; Brown and Levinson 2014; Culpepper and Hardaker 2017; Culpepper 2018), derogatory language (Andersson and Trudgill 1990; McEnery 2005), and the use of dysphemisms as face-threatening behavior (Goffman 1967; Zajdman 1995). A number of contributions in this special issue tackle taboo-related issues in audiovisual translation, a discipline that over the years has been very prolific in the study of cross-cultural taboo mediation, particularly in dubbing and subtitling. Specifically, the angle of textual manipulation and (self)censorship in audiovisual products seems to be endlessly fascinating, with both older and more recent publications (e.g., Chiaro 2007; Díaz-Cintas 2012; Alsharhan 2020; Valdeón 2020; Avila-Cabrera 2023; Guillot 2023; Pavesi and Formentelli 2023; De Rosa 2024) focusing on how different taboos are negotiated across different language combinations. Media and humor studies have often looked at taboo breaking in the context of comedy and offence (e.g., Oring 2003; Pérez 2022), both in fictional and non-fictional genres – for example in stand-up comedy (Lockyer and Pickering 2005; Krefting 2014) and political discourse in comedic television programming (e.g., Sienkiewicz and Marx 2021; 2022). Among the key issues often addressed in these disciplines are the difference between “punching up” vs. “punching down” (Lockyer and Pickering 2008) – i.e., using taboo humor to make fun of privileged people or categories of people as opposed to people who are the victims of social oppression or other forms of discrimination (Davies 2011) – and the use of taboo comedy for shock value (Krefting 2014). Both could be seen as relevant aspects to the study of taboo in general, as they reconnect to the previously mentioned ideas of context and purpose, and to the sliding nature of taboos that necessarily require to be anchored to a specific time, place, and culture.

On a terminological note, going back to Allan and Burrige’s work on taboos that many papers in this collection reference, a particularly helpful statement by these scholars notes that “taboo refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts” (Allan and Burrige 2006: 11). While this concept of taboo seems very apt – particularly because of its expansiveness – at the same time we prefer not to define “taboo” in more specific terms for the purposes of this special issue. Taboo has been given such an extensive range of definitions that limiting ourselves to only one of them would be restrictive and anachronistic. Therefore, it is our intention to leave it to each contributor to provide their own definition of, and perspective on, taboo. We truly believe that offering different angles to the ongoing conversation on the topic, from different disciplines, will add to the significance of this special issue.

The essays collected here reflect the multidisciplinary vocation of the TaCo Conference Series and range from audiovisual translation studies to media studies and theatre, humor studies, linguistics, and computer science. Analyses

apply both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and, in a bid to linguistic inclusivity, they include both European and non-European languages. The taboo areas and fields of application covered in the collection run the gamut from religion and sex in its various iterations to political discourse, body modification, and censorship and regulation.

The first group of essays falls under the broader area of audiovisual localization. The paper by **Pilar Rodríguez-Arancón** and **José Javier Ávila-Cabrera**, “Religious References in the Subtitling of *Succession* into Spanish”, analyzes the religious references retrieved in the subtitling of the TV series *Succession* (Season 3) from English into European Spanish. Based on a descriptive approach, the study employs Ávila-Cabrera’s taxonomy of translation techniques to validate the initial hypothesis: religious references tend to not be transferred into the target language, as they are either omitted or toned down. Speaking of dysphemistic language, **Angela Sileo**’s essay “Dirty Dubbese: Dubbing as a Means of Taboo Language Transfer from English into Italian” looks at the phenomenon of “dubbese” – and specifically at what she terms “dirty dubbese” – aiming to investigate the ways in which this hybrid, pseudo-colloquial variety of Italian made up of routine translations, clichéd expressions, and calques from English has been influencing the taboo language production of native Italian speakers. By means of a quali-quantitative analysis, Sileo’s findings reveal that primarily negative transfers (in Gideon Toury’s terminology) can be observed. In her paper “The Translation of Sex-Related Language in TV Series: Analyzing the Fictional Speech of LGBTQ+ Characters”, **Sonia González Cruz** analyzes the depiction of LGBTQ+ characters in TV series on streaming platforms, which presents a challenge for translators and adaptors: their task is to transfer fictional speech based on diverse identities that need and deserve to be properly preserved into another lingua-cultural system. The paper focuses on the translation of *Euphoria* and *Sex Education* from English into Spanish and shows that LGBTQ+ characters’ sex-related speech does not seem to be considered a taboo, as no omissions nor censorship have been detected in the adaptation process. **Chiara Bucaria**’s contribution “(Re)Assessing the Adaptation of Audiovisual Taboo Content: The Role of Paratextual Information” analyzes the localization of taboo language and content through the paratextual information available on the streaming platforms Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. Her research suggests that, in general terms, blatant examples of textual manipulation and censorship of audiovisual products on streaming platforms have decreased over the past few years due to the adoption of extra-textual, taboo-mediating tools such as ratings and content advisories.

The second set of contributions offers perspectives on the areas of language, communication and performance. One of the papers that look at taboo in the form of swearing, **Marianne Rathje**’s “Use of Swear Words Among Young Danes in the Reality TV Series *Ex on the Beach*” tackles the so-far relatively neglected area of swearword use in the speech of young Danish people. The study aims to bridge this gap by providing valuable insights in a gender-related perspective, by contradicting previous research indicating that the use of swearwords – as revealed by her analysis of *Ex on the Beach* – is more frequent in men than in women. Also looking at lesser studied languages, **Thomas Wier**’s article

“Whored-out to the KGB’: Defining Obscenities in Georgian and Other Languages of the Caucasus” explores how obscene constructions function across languages and what their connection is to anthropological taboos. It argues that obscenities have three key characteristics: nonliteral taboo referents, lexical specificity, and grammatical idiomaticity. Weir also shows that these same traits found in the obscenities of Western languages can also be found in less-commonly studied languages of the Caucasus. In “From *Sex and the City* to *Sex Education*: Sex-Related Metaphors in TV Series”, **Adeline Terry** compares sex-related metaphors in the two TV series with the aim of determining whether shifts in the use of conceptual sex metaphors can be detected, roughly two decades apart. By adopting a quantitative methodology focused on metaphorical X-phemisms, Terry concludes that – even though *Sex Education* is generally thought to adopt a more inclusive approach – the source domains used for sex-related conceptual metaphors mostly remain anchored in dysphemistic, violent, dehumanising language. **Roxanne Padley**’s study titled “‘You Won’t Be Able to Tell It’s Been Done’: A Linguistic Analysis of Stigma in Cosmetic Surgery Discourse” looks at the cultural taboo of cosmetic surgery. Through a mixed-method analysis of a corpus of spoken surgery consultations, Padley analyzes linguistic patterns related to stigma around cosmetic surgery. By adopting corpus linguistic methodologies, ethnography, and corpus-based discourse analysis, she finds the patterns that emerged indicate both surgeons’ and patients’ desire to hide the surgery. In turn, she concludes, this might have negative repercussions by reinforcing the already existing stigma around seeking out cosmetic surgery. In the realm of performance studies, **Alexander Millington**’s essay “Sex as Spoken Words in Contemporary British Drama” focuses on the descriptive acts of sex and intimacy on the contemporary British stage as written texts and spoken words, specifically the use of language in Katherine Chandler’s *Lose Yourself* (2019) and Anna Jordan’s *Freak* (2014). Millington argues that by using the description of the sexual acts, rather than overtly performing them, the intimate, aural connection that occurs between the performer and the spectator can be greater than the visual.

The last two essays in this special issue address the increasingly relevant uses of taboos in the world of digital communication. In “From Guard Rails to Epic Fails’: Can Generative AI Police Its Own Capacity for Offense?”, **Tony Veale** notes how social media platforms have become the outlets of choice for many provocateurs in the digital age. Not only do they afford egregious behaviors from their human users, but this misbehavior can also serve to magnify, and even weaponize, the least desirable outputs of the generative AI systems (often called “bots”) that also operate upon them. Veale’s article considers the responsibilities that AI system builders bear for the offences caused by their online creations, and explores what they can do to prevent, or mitigate, the worst excesses, whether explicit or implicit. Lastly, **Anthony Dion Mitzel**’s contribution “An Unlimited Memeiosis of the ‘Let’s Go Fuck Joe Brandon’ Meme: Sociocultural Ramifications of Taboo Humor in Strategic Political Discourse” analyzes the role played by memes in political communication, by focusing on one specific case study, the “Let’s Go Brandon” meme cycle, as an example of complex political ideas distilled into content that is easy to share and able to influence public

opinion and political engagement. The paper also attempts to offer future insights into the evolving and dynamic intertwining of sociocultural/political discourse, memes, and the impact of taboo language and humor at the sociocultural level.

Despite the richness of the nuanced and varied contributions collected in this special issue, a number of aspects relating to taboo in language, media, and audiovisual translation deserve further scholarly attention and may be considered as potentially interesting and relevant avenues for future research. In terms of taboo-related themes, for example, a number of areas – such as death, illness, disability, racism, and homo/transphobia – have only been tangentially addressed by the contributions in this collection, despite their prominence in today’s society, for example in the form of discourse around terminal illness and end-of-life care, assisted suicide, and the increasing polarization of public opinion on identity issues and cancel culture. As far as contexts of application are concerned, it should be noted that while all the essays about translation in this special issue address taboos in the context of audiovisual localization, other forms of translation might be equally interesting areas of inquiry, not least the cases in which AI-assisted tools are now starting to be used in translation practice, particularly when it comes to creative texts. Moreover, further research would be welcome exploring taboos in other textual genres such as advertising¹, video games, and online communication in general, e.g., social media platforms’ policies on what kind of content is considered inappropriate and/or harmful and therefore subjected to proscription on said platforms. More in general, a particularly urgent avenue for future research seems to be an analysis of taboos from a diachronic perspective. Specifically because of the everchanging nature of taboo and of its tendency to lose part of its impact through familiarization and repetition (Bucaria and Barra 2016), explorations of the evolution of what is considered taboo and of the ways in which different kinds of taboo are negotiated would be particularly valuable. In fact, research seeking to explore the shifting boundaries of the acceptability, reinforcement, and breaking of taboos in their various incarnations as produced and perceived in today’s increasingly multicultural societies appears to be of extreme value.

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¹ See, for example, the use of dark humor revolving around death to promote funeral businesses, an example of which is the viral campaign for the Italian funeral home Taffo.

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FILMOGRAPHY

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RELIGIOUS REFERENCES IN THE SUBTITLING OF *SUCCESSION* INTO SPANISH

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Citation: Rodríguez-Arancón, P. and Ávila-Cabrera, J.J. (2024) “Religious References in the Subtitling of *Succession* into Spanish”, in C. Bucaria, A.D. Mitzel and A. Sileo (eds) *Taboo in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation*, *mediAzioni* 43: A10-A28, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/20437>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: The way taboos are translated can be controversial as it can depend on the characteristics of the communicative act related to the speakers’ context, culture, age and idiolect. However, we could generalise that some taboos can cause a strong reaction to the audience in the context of audiovisual translation (AVT), and some of them are particularly delicate to address, as is the case of religious references. Subtitlers are responsible for transferring the source text (ST) into a target text (TT) in the form of subtitles. In the case of Spain, whether or not the resulting subtitles are more or less faithful to the original cannot be said to be the result of censorship nowadays. However, phrases such as “Jesus fucking Christ” can pose a challenge to the professional, who must consider the best option to render the full impact of its contextual load. The result, for example, can vary from abiding by the rules of what can be considered politically correct, not being fully faithful to the ST or, by contrast, transferring some offensive or taboo load to the TT in the form of a (non-)religious phrase. On streaming platforms in Spain, these expressions tend to be compensated by other offensive phrases which avoid the direct insult to “God” or “Jesus Christ” (Ávila-Cabrera 2020), thereby resorting to ideological manipulation (Díaz Cintas 2012). The present study analyses the series *Succession* (Jesse Armstrong 2018–2023), season 3, and its subtitled version into Spanish, broadcast by HBO España (Spain). Based on a Descriptive Translation Studies approach (Toury 2012) and following Ávila-Cabrera’s (2023b) taxonomy of translation techniques, our initial hypothesis is that religious references are usually subtitled in a neutralised or offensive way, the latter excluding the direct reference to the religious figure. This paper aims to show the way that religious references in this TV series have been subtitled into Spanish for the Spanish audience from a linguistic approach, contributing to enriching the literature on AVT and religious phrases as taboo elements.

Keywords: religious references; taboo language; interlingual subtitling; translation techniques; faithfulness; ideological manipulation.

1. Introduction

Audiovisual translation (AVT) is a field of study within the discipline of Translation Studies (Chaume 2018) in which translators need to implement strategies and techniques, as well as being required to have a very good knowledge of the languages and cultures involved in the transfer from a source text (ST) into a target text (TT), and which has gained a prominent role given the production and distribution of digital content. Following Chiaro:

[a]udiovisual translation is one of several overlapping umbrella terms that include ‘media translation’, ‘multimedia translation’, ‘multimodal translation’ and ‘screen translation’. These different terms all set out to cover the interlingual transfer of verbal language when it is transmitted and accessed both visually and acoustically, usually, but not necessarily, through some kind of electronic device. (Chiaro 2009: 141)

One linguistic aspect that can be particularly challenging to this professional practice is the translation of taboo words because of the impact that these terms or phrases can have on the target audience and culture (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2021). Among the multiple topics that can be considered taboo, some can be less controversial than others depending on the languages and cultures involved. For example, sex, violent language, scatology or matters relating to death are topics normally dealt with faithfully in European countries. However, when it comes to religion, different approaches can be used because the audience’s sensibilities can be offended when religious figures are insulted (blasphemy) or even when they are simply taken in vain (profane expressions). It is true that the degree of permissiveness related to these religious transfers is culturally dependent, but it can be affirmed that they often make translators resort to less faithful renderings or even to cases of self-censorship, and censorship imposed by the client.

In the context of subtitling, as the AVT mode under study in this paper, technical manipulation (Díaz Cintas 2012) is a must because, as a rule, the ST needs to be condensed. In addition, when subtitlers feel the need to soften or delete taboo content, Díaz Cintas describes it as ideological manipulation. Two cases of manipulation are therefore present when films or TV series in a source language (SL) are subtitled into a target language (TL): technical and ideological. The latter is our focus here and can take place in the case of direct insults to religious figures, not usually translated in the form of blasphemy in professional subtitles in Spain (Ávila-Cabrera 2020).

This paper aims to present the results of a case study which explores the interlingual subtitling of religious references found in the third season of the TV series *Succession* (Jesse Armstrong 2018–2023). Following a linguistic approach based on Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) (Toury 2012) and using the taxonomy of subtitling techniques presented by Ávila-Cabrera (2023b), our analysis centres on the subtitling of religious references from American English into Spanish for a Spanish audience from a linguistic point of view. The main goal is to shed light on how these expressions are rendered in the TT, paying attention to their taboo load. In order to do so, we will identify the cases that

were not transferred at all, those transferred faithfully as well as those transferred avoiding blasphemy, but using other offensive elements instead in an attempt to maintain some offensive/taboo load in the TT.

2. Theoretical framework

There are several topics that are considered taboo in Western countries and are normally treated faithfully in subtitling, such as sex. However, in the case of Latin America, audiovisual programmes in neutral Spanish tend to tone down or eliminate the load of taboo terms and swear words in the TT (Fuentes-Luque 2015). This also happens in Arabic countries where the use of euphemisms or deletion is normally the rule (Al-Adwan 2015). When it comes to religion in AVT, different approaches play their role in accordance with the target culture and audience. There are euphemistic phrases that are preferred by some speakers such as “Gosh” or “Lord” (Allan and Burrige 2006) to avoid the use of profane language such as “God” or “Jesus Christ”.

This section presents a cultural approach to religion as well as the research conducted in AVT with religious references as the object of study. In addition, a taxonomy of translation techniques (Ávila-Cabrera 2023b) is discussed as the tool for the analysis of data in this case study.

2.1. A cultural approach to religion

Religion is a deeply ingrained aspect of human society, playing a significant role in shaping beliefs, values, practices, and social structures across diverse cultures (Geertz 1973). For this reason, its study cannot be confined to theological or philosophical analysis alone, and scholars from various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology and cultural studies have increasingly recognised the importance of adopting a cultural approach in order to understand it better (Ortner 2006). This perspective emphasises the dynamic interplay between religion and culture, highlighting the mutual influence and co-creation of meaning between the two, and recognises that religious beliefs and practices are embedded within specific cultural contexts, so that they cannot be separated from the broader social, political, economic, and historical factors that shape a society (Taylor 2008). Therefore, this approach encourages scholars to explore how religion is constructed, negotiated, and transformed through cultural processes, such as rituals, symbols, myths, narratives and collective experiences. By examining religion through a cultural lens, researchers gain insights into the diverse ways in which worldviews are constructed, interpreted and lived by individuals and communities.

One key aspect of the cultural approach is the recognition of religious pluralism and diversity. It acknowledges that religious beliefs and practices vary significantly across different cultures and subcultures, challenging the notion of a universal or homogeneous understanding (Fuller 2001). Instead, this perspective encourages scholars to explore the unique expressions of religion within specific cultural contexts, including indigenous beliefs, Eastern

philosophies, Abrahamic faiths and new religious movements. Moreover, it highlights the agency and creativity of individuals and communities in shaping their own religious identities and practices and emphasises that they are not static or fixed but subject to reinterpretation, adaptation, and innovation (Geertz 1999; Paden 2013).

As an illustrative example, Lawson and McCauley (1990: 5), who published one of the foundational works on the understanding of religion as a cognitive science, explain that “we construe a religious system as a symbolic-cultural system of ritual acts accompanied by an extensive and largely shared conceptual scheme that includes culturally postulated superhuman agents”. A similar stand is adopted by Whitehouse (2004: 2) when referring to religious rituals explaining that “religion consists of any set of shared beliefs and actions appealing to supernatural agency”. Through this lens, researchers can analyse how individuals and communities negotiate and construct their religious identities in response to social, political, and cultural changes, in no way a unique and permanent identity. This approach also provides a framework for understanding religious syncretism, hybridity and the emergence of new religious forms in contemporary societies. This evolution is also clear in the translation, via captioning or revoicing, of audiovisual products in the case of Spain, where the treatment of the transfer of the load contained in these terms has undergone obvious changes in the last twenty years.

Although recently religion has been described as a dispensable cognitive spandrel (Dennet 2006) or even a dangerous delusion (Dawkins 2006), much research also supports the idea that it can be a cornerstone of evolution in complex societies (Atran and Henrich 2010), as it is not just based on rituals and beliefs, but also sacred values that are venerable for whole communities (Taves 2009; Herzfeld 2017). These sacred values represent deeply held convictions and principles and often shape the moral framework, social norms and ethical guidelines followed by individuals within the community and, consequently, influence the language that is considered acceptable.

2.2. Studies on religion and AVT

We have witnessed a growth of publications concerning taboo topics in AVT in the last few decades such as sex (Díaz Cintas 2001; Chiaro 2007; Ogea Pozo and Bujalance 2022; Ogea Pozo and Botella Tejera 2023), taboo, offensive or foul language (Azzaro 2005; Ávila-Cabrera 2015a; Barrera-Rioja 2023), manipulation and self-censorship (Gómez Castro and Pérez L. de Heredia 2015; Bucaria 2018; Sanz-Moreno 2017; Alsharhan 2020), taboo comedy (Bucaria and Barra 2016; Chiaro 2016), swearing and insults (Guillot and Pavesi 2019; Valdeón 2020; Ávila-Cabrera 2023a; Guillot 2023; Pavesi and Formentelli 2023), and taboo language in the L2 classroom (Valdeón 2015; Beseghi 2016; Bruti 2016; Ávila-Cabrera and Rodríguez-Arancón 2018). However, it must be said that this is an ample field that has not been explored as much as many other topics within the scope of AVT such as culture, identity, humour, and multilingual films.

Studies on how religious references are subtitled in Arabic countries are more frequent. Izwaini (2017, 2018) studies religious expressions (God and

religion) that are considered taboo in Arabic subtitling, among other taboo topics such as sex, alcohol and drugs. The author discusses the fact that these taboo expressions are the object of censorship and manipulation in the subtitles and tend to be toned down or translated in a less offensive or even a non-offensive manner. However recently, Fakharzadeh and Dadkhah (2020) conducted a study that analysed 478 expletives of a religious historical series subtitled from Persian to English by professional in-house subtitlers. The results indicate that the toning down of expletives takes place when the receiver is a revered religious figure and when the semantic field of Persian is not internationally well-known. On the other hand, when the receiver is a negative figure, expletives tend to be translated maintaining the force of the ST. The authors relate these results with the translation agents' religious ideology. It is interesting to observe that the results provided by Khoshsaligheh *et al.* (2018) reveal that Iranian fansubbers do not follow the toning down or deletion conventions that prevail in Iranian dubbing. Instead, their renderings aim to be uncensored and faithful to the ST.

Other studies that deal with the treatment of religious references as well as offensive language subtitled into Spanish are those by Ávila-Cabrera (2015b, 2016a, 2016b), which scrutinise some of Tarantino's films. In a case study by this author (2020) focusing exclusively on religious references in some Tarantino films subtitled into Spanish, the tendency to not subtitle blasphemy (understood as insulting "God" or "Jesus Christ", for example) in a faithful manner is highlighted. Instead, other offensive phrases which would not offend religious audiences, but that can transfer some taboo or offensive load, are used. Scandura's (2020) PhD thesis deals with neutral Spanish in the dubbing of infant and juvenile TV series. She states that in dubbing from English into neutral Spanish, religious expressions are normally changed for others. This decision is made by the client, the TV station, the production company or the dubbing studio, although the translator usually avoids the use of vulgar terms (Ferrari 2010), which can be done in the form of self-censorship (Chaume 2008a) or ideological manipulation (Díaz Cintas 2012).

Allan and Burridge (2006) acknowledge that the intensity of words can be modulated by making use of: a) orthophemisms or more neutral utterances, for example, "Jesus"; b) euphemisms or sweet talking such as "Lord"; and c) dysphemisms or offensive expressions such as "Christ!" The subtitling of expressions such as "Oh my God!" or "Jesus Christ" in English-speaking circles can have an impact on the audience. However, it must be said that a closer translation such as *Oh Dios mío* ["Oh my God"] into Spanish neutralises the effect of the ST phrase considering that mentioning "God" in these terms in Spanish is not offensive or taboo. Instead, it is culturally related with mentioning this religious figure as a gesture of despair or joy. There is an exception in Spanish, which is the exclamatory use in vain of "God!" as in ¡*Dios!* ["God!"], normally acknowledged as offensive by religious people (Ávila-Cabrera 2023b). Thus, the subtitling of profane phrases (naming religious figures in vain) and blasphemy (insults to religious figures) into Spanish is a controversial matter that audiovisual translators must keep in mind in order to avoid offending the audience, even though the ST actually uses them in their oral form.

2.3. Translation techniques to deal with taboo language

The translation tools used by translators can be varied. Among them, we can find the first taxonomy of translation techniques proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet (1977). In addition, Molina and Albir Hurtado (2002) present a taxonomy of strategies and techniques for translation practice. Other approaches also address strategies for subtitling culturally specific terms (Pedersen 2007; Díaz Cintas and Remael 2021), for translating humour (Martínez Sierra 2004), or for dubbing and subtitling (Martí Ferriol 2007). We can therefore state that there is diversity in the number of translation strategies and/or techniques at the translators' disposal in accordance with different scholars' approaches.

As there are different definitions for the concepts of translation strategies and techniques, we will resort to Molina and Hurtado Albir's (2002) postulate. According to these authors, the translator makes use of a translation strategy to face a translation problem. The translation solution unfolds in the TT in a particular way – these authors refer to this operation as a translation technique.

In the research analysis conducted here and based on DTS, we have made use of the translation techniques elaborated by Ávila-Cabrera (2023b: 78), whose taxonomy deals with what is considered offensive, “those linguistic terms or expressions made up of swearwords, expletives, etc., which are normally considered derogatory and/or insulting”. Taboo language, those “terms that are not considered appropriate or acceptable with regard to the context, culture, language and/or medium where they are uttered” (Ávila-Cabrera 2016b: 28), and religious references when used in vain are topics considered taboo by different cultures.

The aforementioned translation technique taxonomy is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Ávila-Cabrera's (2023b: 78) taxonomy of translation techniques.

| TRANSLATION TECHNIQUES | |
|------------------------|--|
| TRANSFER | a) Load toned up b) Load maintained c) Load toned down |
| NON-TRANSFER | d) Load neutralised e) Load omitted |

As can be inferred from Table 1, there are two degrees that concern the transfer – or lack thereof – of the phrases' taboo load in the TT. Then, if the transfer has been made, there are three alternative results: a) the load has been toned up because it has gained intensity; b) the load has been maintained because the solution found is similar in intensity; c) the load has been toned down because it has lost part of its original intensity. As for those instances in which the transfer has not been made, there are two possible results: d) the load has been neutralised because the solution found eliminates its intensity completely; e) the load has been omitted and there is no trace of it.

This taxonomy of translation techniques will be used for the analysis of the corpus presented here. We cannot forget about a resource used by translators called compensation. Chaume (2008b) refers to it as a cognitive process that leads to the substitution of a communicative effect for another one, which appears at another stage of the TT. This is common in subtitling when it is not possible to include a taboo element or swearword, for example, in the subtitle because of the spatio-temporal restrictions, but which will be visible later in an attempt to compensate for that previous loss (Díaz Cintas and Remael, 2021). However, no compensation cases have been found in this sample, for which reason we have followed Ávila-Cabrera's (2023b) translation techniques exclusively.

3. Methodology

This case study was conducted in order to analyse the treatment of religious references (including both profane phrases and blasphemy) when subtitled into Spanish for the audience in Spain. The corpus was taken from the third season of the TV series *Succession* (Jesse Armstrong 2018–2023), whose audio is in American English and that is broadcast by HBO España (Spain). This TV series is about the Roy family, whose head is Logan Roy, CEO and owner of a global media firm Waystar RoyCo. He has suffered some decline in his health and his daughter and three sons are fighting for the control of the company. The reason why the third season was chosen is that the main characters' exchanges were particularly interesting for analysing the treatment of religious references given its terminological variety. This study is based on the DTS paradigm (Toury 2012), so it focuses on describing the way in which the translation was done, but not prescribing the way in which it should have been done. In order to obtain the data, the 9 episodes of the third season were watched, all the religious references found in the ST were noted down and then compared with the subtitles in Spanish. Thus, we followed a linguistic approach, but did not focus on the spatio-temporal technicalities of the subtitles.

3.1. Initial hypothesis and research questions

Our point of departure is the fact that blasphemy (understood as direct insults to religious figures) is very rarely presented in professional subtitles. Thus, our initial hypothesis is that religious references are not normally subtitled faithfully or, if some offensive load is transferred to the TT, it is done through the use of other non-religion-related offensive formulas.

To this end, we have established three research questions to address our initial hypothesis:

- RQ1. Were religious references transferred to the TT maintaining some offensive or taboo load?
- RQ2. Were religious references transferred in a neutralised way or omitted in the resulting subtitles?

RQ3. Were religious references transferred in another offensive way avoiding insults towards religious figures?

In order to address the above RQs, a descriptive analysis of the audiovisual text was completed while watching the 9 episodes, which were subtitled by audiovisual translator Marina Rodríguez García (Iyuno-SDI Group). While RQ1 and RQ2 can be addressed by making use of the translation techniques followed, RQ3 needs to be answered through the observation of the religious phrase in the ST and its transfer to the TT.

This research design therefore aims to shed light on this case study based on the treatment of religious references subtitled from American English into Spanish for the Spanish audience.

4. Data analysis and results

This section presents a number of samples to discuss the translation techniques (Ávila-Cabrera 2023b: 78) observed in the subtitling of this case study. In addition, the results found after the analysis are discussed here in order to address the RQs and our initial hypothesis.

4.1. Data analysis

After the analysis of the transfer from the audio in American English subtitled into Spanish for the Spanish audience, we found 46 instances in which religious references are used in 8 of the 9 episodes of the third season of *Succession* (see Appendix 1). A description of the examples that relate to the translation techniques observed is shown in the following tables that also include the season (SE), episode (EP), ST and TT (along with a back translation).

TRANSFER-TONED UP

We would like to point out that our analysis did not reveal any case of transfer of the load by being toned up in the subtitles.

SE03 EP05: TRANSFER-MAINTAINED (RELIGIOUS)

| ST | TT | Back translation |
|--|---------------|------------------|
| -Just take this for a toast. Yeah. Oh, God . | -Dios. | [-God.] |

As can be seen in the sample above, the use of “God” in the ST is used as a profane phrase, because mentioning *Dios* [“God”] can be considered taboo for the religious source audience. In this case, the transfer has been made through the use of a taboo religious term as it entails mentioning *Dios* in vain. Thus, the load has been maintained in the TT.

SE03 EP07: TRANSFER-MAINTAINED (NON-RELIGIOUS)

| ST | TT | Back translation |
|---|--|---|
| -Sorry. -I said no. Jesus , dude. Dude? | -¿Cómo? --- -Que no. Tío, joder . | [-What?] --- [-I said no. Dude, fuck .] |

In this case, we find that “Jesus” has been transferred to the TT through the offensive term *joder* [“fuck”]. As can be seen, the transfer has been made and the load has been maintained through a non-religious offensive word.

SE03 EP07: TRANSFER-TONED DOWN (NON-RELIGIOUS)

| ST | TT | Back translation |
|---|---|--|
| -Oh, my fucking God. -This is dumb. | - Joder . -Vaya gilipollez. Yo entro. | [- Fuck . -What a fucking thing. I’m entering.] |

In the sample shown above, we can observe that the ST contains blasphemy in the form of “fucking God”. The ST phrase has been subtitled via an offensive term, *Joder* [Fuck]. However, we can highlight that the latter has not the same force as the original, therefore, the transfer has been made, but toned down with a non-religious – albeit offensive – term.

SE03 EP08: NON-TRANSFER-NEUTRALISED

| ST | TT | Back translation |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| -Depth? Oh my God! | -¿Profundidad? Dios mío. | [-Depth? My God!] |

The above sample presents the recurrent phrase “Oh my God!”, which in the source culture has some offensive connotations because it mentions the name of God in vain. It has been subtitled as *Dios mío* [“My God”]. However, for the target audience, this is an expression used by speakers that refer to God without the aim of insulting this religious figure, but in a way that shows religious devotion. The transfer has therefore not been made because the load has been neutralised in the TT despite the fact of having used a religious phrase.

SE03 EP08: NON-TRANSFER-OMITTED

| ST | TT | Back translation |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| -Roman. - Jesus . Fuck. | -¡Roman! --- - Joder . | [-¡Roman!] --- [- Joder .] |

In the ST from the sample above it can be observed that the ST contains “Jesus”, which has been omitted in the subtitle. The reason for this seems to be the need for text condensation in subtitling, which here implies choosing between “Jesus” and “Fuck”. However, our analysis here is that the transfer of the religious name has not been made due to omission in the subtitle. Nonetheless, we can observe that there is an offensive term in the TT, *joder*

["fuck"], although it is beyond the goals of our analysis as it corresponds to the term "Fuck" from the ST. Further studies on the f-word are those provided by Fernández Dobao (2006), Pujol (2006), Soler Pardo (2013), McEnery and Love (2018), and Valdeón (2024), among others.

As introduced at the beginning of this section, none of the examples found in our analysis made use of translation techniques in which the transfer of the religious phrase was made by toning up the load. Instead, all the cases explored can be explained in terms of being transferred by maintaining and toning its load down, and not being transferred by neutralising or omitting its load.

4.2. Results and discussion

This section deals with a discussion of the results obtained after the quantitative and descriptive analysis of the corpus based on a linguistic and DTS approach. In order to shed light on the subtitling of religious figures of the third season of this TV series, the research questions raised in this paper are answered as follows.

- RQ1. Were religious references transferred to the TT maintaining some offensive or taboo load?

Firstly, our focus was on the number of religious instances present in the ST. We analysed a total of 48 instances, which are developed and shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Religious reference instances transferred and not transferred.

| Religious instances | Transfer | | | Non-transfer | |
|---------------------|----------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Toned up | Maintained | Toned down | Neutralised | Omitted |
| 46 (100%) | 0 | 16 (34.78%) | 5 (10.86%) | 15 (32.63%) | 10 (21.73%) |

Thus, 21 instances (45.64%) were transferred to the TT and 25 cases (54.36%) were not, therefore, we can state that more than half of them were not subtitled in the TT.

- RQ2. Were religious references transferred in a neutralised way or omitted in the subtitles?

Paying attention to the non-transfer cases, in 15 of them (32.63%) the loads were neutralised in the translation choices made in the TT. In addition, in 10 instances (21.73%) the ST references were omitted. This percentage (54.36%) has been the most common in the treatment of religious figures.

- RQ3. Were religious references transferred in another offensive way avoiding offence towards religious figures?

Out of the 21 instances (45.65%) that were transferred to the TT, 16 were cases in which the offensive or taboo load was maintained in the subtitle. In addition to this, 8 of these cases in which the load was maintained account for 17.39%. We cannot assert that the majority of cases were transferred without using some religious load, but none of the cases found in the subtitles included blasphemy or a direct insult to a religious figure. In addition, we did not find any case that included either blasphemy or a profane phrase in the TT when the ST did not originally have it.

After addressing the research questions and observing that the recurrent tendency has been to not transfer religious references very faithfully in the TT, we can support our initial hypothesis that indicates that blasphemy is very rarely presented in professional subtitles, this case study showing not a single example. This result is in line with Ávila-Cabrera's (2020) case study on the subtitling of religious figures into European Spanish in some of Tarantino's films. On the other hand, an opposite trend is that of studies on fansubbing and taboo language (Beseghi 2016; Khoshsaligheh *et al.* 2018), in which subtitles free of censorship can be found. All in all, the professional subtitles for this TV series broadcast in Spain seem to be less offensive for a religious audience when it comes to subtitling religious references considering that cases of ideological manipulation or self-censorship can be at play.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the subtitled version of the TV series *Succession* in relation to religious references has provided valuable insights into the treatment of taboo language in AVT. The findings of this study support the initial hypothesis that religious references are often not subtitled faithfully into Spanish, and instead, alternative translation techniques are employed to maintain or tone down the taboo load.

The results indicate that a significant number of religious references were not transferred to the TT, accounting for more than half of the instances analysed. This suggests that subtitlers often choose to omit or neutralise religious references in order to avoid potential offence or controversy. The decision to not transfer these references can be seen as a form of self-censorship or as a result of the subtitler's perception of the target audience's sensitivity towards religious topics. However, there may be cases in which the non-transfer of the load will respond to technical constraints. No compensation cases were found in the TT either.

In the cases in which religious references were transferred, the study revealed that the translation techniques employed tended to maintain or tone down the taboo load rather than toning it up, of which we found no examples. This suggests a cautious approach to handling religious content in the subtitles, aiming to strike a balance between faithfulness to the ST and respecting cultural sensitivities.

The analysis also highlighted the use of alternative offensive or taboo language to replace direct religious references, which indicates that subtitlers

often resort to other offensive terms or expressions in an attempt to maintain the offensive or taboo load while avoiding direct insults to religious figures. This practice aligns with the concept of ideological manipulation in AVT, where subtitlers employ strategies to convey the intended impact or effect of the SL while considering the cultural and linguistic norms of the target audience. These results are in line with previous research on the same topic but applied to other media content.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on AVT and taboo language, particularly in relation to religious references. The results emphasise the importance of considering cultural and religious factors in the translation process, highlighting the complexity and challenges faced by subtitlers in rendering meaning in a way that is acceptable to the target audience. However, the fact of not having interviewed the subtitler of the season is a limitation of this study, whose findings could have been triangulated with the qualitative information granted by Marina Rodríguez García.

Further research can expand on this study by examining the treatment of religious references for different target audiences. Additionally, investigating the reception and audience reactions to the subtitled versions of religious references can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of translation choices on viewers. Another line of research could be to carry out the same type of analysis in the full four seasons of the series in order to obtain more conclusive results. Last but not least, comparing the dubbed with the subtitled version would allow us to elucidate whether there are similar tendencies to translate religious references in these two AVT modes.

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TV SERIES

Succession. (2018–2023) Jesse Armstrong, Gary Sanchez Productions: USA.

APPENDIX 1. Analysis of the third season of *Succession*¹

| ST | TT |
|--|--|
| SE03 EP02 | |
| -Now on Safetime. - Oh my God! | -Ahora, en Safetime... - Dios mío. |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| - Jesus! -Stop trying to convince me of shit. | - ¡Dios! -No me convenzas. |
| | Transfer: maintained |
| -Yes, you fucking do. -Is it the goddamn donuts? | -Sí, joder. ¿Han sido los donuts? -¿Te han gustado los putos donuts? |
| | Transfer: maintained (no religious reference) |
| -Fuck you, plastic Jesus . -You’re a fucking twat. | -Que te den, Jesucristo de pacotilla . -Puta gilipollas. |
| | Transfer: maintained |
| SE03 EP03 | |
| - Jesus . Everyone’s doing fucking somersaults for him right now. | - Joder , qué piruetas/hacemos todos por él. |
| | Transfer: maintained (no religious reference) |
| - Oh, my God . -Same. | - Madre mía . -Lo mismo digo. |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| - Jesus Christ . | - Vaya tela . |

¹ Note: the table above shows the source text (ST) in American English on the left column, where we can also find the season (SE) and episode (EP). The target text (TT) can be seen on the right column in the form of Spanish subtitles and the translation technique employed for each case is shown below.

| | |
|---|--|
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| -Oh my God. Guess what, we're down a guest. Oedipussy has ghosted my ass. | -Vaya por Dios. Qué pena. Falta el invitado. |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| SE03EP04 | |
| -Oh, God. -I know. | -Ay madre. -Ya. |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| SE03 EP05 | |
| -Christ, Dad, you just said it's not far off what we originally offered. | -Acabas de decir que es similar a lo que les ofrecimos. |
| | Non-transfer: omitted |
| -God, I wish I know the thinking. | -Ojalá razonase como él. |
| | Non-transfer: omitted |
| -Jesus, fucking take it easy. You wanna give him the fucking tabasco suppository? | -Relájate, joder . ¿Le ponemos un supositorio de tabasco? |
| | Transfer: maintained (no religious reference) |
| -They're good if we're good. It's done. -Oh my God. | -Vale. Les vale si nos vale. Listo. -Genial. |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| -Oh, my God. -It's not creep. No, it's not, come on. | -No, vamos. |
| | Non-transfer: omitted |
| -Kira Mason. -Oh, my God. | -Kira Mason. -Madre mía. |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| -Oh my God. | -Dios mío. -Cerrad el micro... |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| -Just take this for a toast. Yeah. Oh, God. | -Dios. |
| | Transfer: maintained |
| SE03 EP06 | |
| -Jesus. -Greg. | -Joder. -Greg. |
| | Transfer: maintained (no religious reference) |
| -Oh, Jesus. | --- |
| | Non-transfer: omitted |
| -Speak of the devil. You take care. Good to see you. | -Hablando del rey de Roma... Cúidate. Ha sido un placer. |

| | |
|--|---|
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| SE03 EP07 | |
| -Oh, my God. This feels disgustingly Kendall. | -Dios mío, qué asco. Esto es muy Kendall. |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| -Oh, Jesus. | -Jesús. |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| -Oh my God. -What? | -Dios mío. -¿Qué? |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| -Oh my fucking God. -This is dumb. | -Joder. -Vaya gilipollez. Yo entro. |
| | Transfer: toned down |
| -Oh my God. Did you see that? I just got moved. | -¿Lo has visto? Me ha movido. Vale. |
| | Non-transfer: omitted |
| -Oh, God. -What is it? | -Una tontería. -¿Qué pasa? |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| -Well, I said no, Greg. -Sorry. -I said no. Jesus, dude. Duh? | -¿Cómo? -Que no. Tío, joder. |
| | Transfer: maintained (no religious reference) |
| -Ken, Jesus. | -Dios, Ken. Oye. |
| | Transfer: maintained |
| -Oh, my fucking God. You know what? | --- |
| | Non-transfer: omitted |
| -Neither of you should be in here. -Oh my God, you're right. | -No deberíais estar aquí. -Es verdad. |
| | Non-transfer: omitted |
| -Why don't you hit me maybe? Come on, shitty Jesus. You know you want to, just fucking hit me. | -Anda, Jesús de pacotilla. Quieres hacerlo. Pégame, joder. |
| | Transfer: toned down |
| SE03 EP08 | |
| -Depth? Oh my God! | -¿Profundidad? Dios mío. |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| -We had a deal. Jesus Christ. | -Joder. |
| | Transfer: maintained (no religious reference) |

| | |
|--|---|
| -Oh my God, you can't ask someone to say terrible things and then get... | -No puedes pedir que te digan cosas feas y luego ponerte... |
| | Non-transfer: omitted |
| -Jesus! Fuck. Yeah, that's his dick. | -Dios. Joder. Sí, es su... polla. |
| | Transfer: maintained |
| -Roman. | -¡Roman! |
| -Jesus. Fuck. | -Joder. |
| | Non-transfer: omitted |
| -What is it? | -¿Por qué mandas esto? |
| -Jesus. | -Dios. |
| | Transfer: maintained |
| -Jesus, Dad. I'm screwing around! | -Joder, papá. Si es de coña. |
| | Transfer: maintained (no religious reference) |
| -God, this must so hard for you. | -Debe de ser muy difícil para ti. |
| -It's fine. | -Estoy bien. |
| | Non-transfer: omitted |
| SE03 EP09 | |
| -Jesus. -Hey, buddy. | -Madre mía. |
| | -Hola, tío. |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| -Jesus, no, God, Dad, can we not... | -Dios, no, papá. ¿Podemos no...? |
| | Transfer: maintained |
| -Jesus, what is she on? | -...para alimentarlo... |
| | -Qué coñazo. |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| -Jesus. I feel ill. | -Madre mía. Voy a vomitar. |
| | -¿Sí? |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| -I'll scale the north face of the fucking Eiger. Jesus fuck. | -Me cago en la puta. |
| | Transfer: maintained (no religious reference) |
| -Jesus Christ. | -La leche. |
| | Non-transfer: neutralised |
| -Get ready, okay? | -Prepárate, ¿vale? |
| -Jesus. Okay. | -Dios. Vale. |
| | Transfer: maintained |

DIRTY DUBBESE: DUBBING AS A MEANS OF TABOO LANGUAGE TRANSFER FROM ENGLISH INTO ITALIAN

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Citation: Sileo, A. (2024) “Dirty Dubbese: Dubbing as a Means of Taboo Language Transfer from English into Italian”, in C. Bucaria, A.D. Mitzel and A. Sileo (eds) *Taboo in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation*, *mediAzioni* 43: A29-A43, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/20479>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: Taboos and taboo language are culture-specific, although overlapping areas do exist between different lingua-cultural systems (Pavesi and Malinverno 2000). When it comes to tele-cinematic products, the use of intensifying expletives seems to be increasingly frequent in English source texts whereas (self)censorship still prevails in Italian *dubbese*. Yet, taboo language is present in Italian dubbese as a footprint left behind by over-mechanical adaptations, offering word-for-word renderings of the source text and resulting in the so-called “doppiaggese”: this hybrid language is a pseudo-colloquial variety of Italian, characterized by routine translations, cliched phrases or sentences, repetition/redundancy and, more importantly, by calques from the source language (Rossi 1999; Alfieri *et al.* 2003; Sileo 2018). This essay analyzes taboo language transfers from English into Italian through dubbing, by providing examples from dubbed products and relying on corpora of contemporary spoken and written Italian as well as on dictionaries of the Italian language. Transfer phenomena are categorized based on both qualitative and quantitative criteria: as in Toury 1995, they are divided into either positive or negative transfers; on the basis of previous work by this author (Sileo 2018), an additional qualitative categorization is proposed, contrasting semantic and structural calques; moreover, a quantitative criterion takes into account the “size” of calques – ranging from lexical or word-level to sentence-level interferences. The aim is to determine whether and to what extent “dirty” dubbese has been influencing the taboo language production of Italian native speakers. The analysis revealed that the transfers are mainly of a negative type and cross word-unit borders, embracing more structured and more extended phrases; semantic calques seem to be scarcely present. This study, in spite of its limitations, might serve as a starting point for more extensive and in-depth analyses of presumable interferences from English into Italian.

Keywords: taboo language; AV products; dubbese; interference; English vs. Italian.

1. Introduction

Uttering or hearing certain expressions may cause discomfort due to fear, religious feelings, prudery, embarrassment (Galli de' Paratesi 1964: 17-19). The areas of taboo involved range from the divinity, some animal species, sexual activity, birth, damnation, body fluids (Apte 1994), and are culture-specific (Pavesi and Malinverno 2000: 76): although some overlapping can be detected in such areas as sexual repression and magical-religious fear within the western tradition in tele-cinematic discourse, references to the religious sphere (“the hell”, “bloody hell”) are less frequent in the Anglo-Saxon context compared to the Italian one: the minor frequency is supposedly due to the fact that cursing is more blasphemous in English (*ibid.*). Among the target language equivalents generally proposed for dubbing, in fact, Italian *che diavolo* (“what the hell”) and *maledetto* (“damn”) do not possess the same intensity and aggressiveness of their English equivalents (*ibid.*). It is also worth noting that the actual morphology or, one might say, phono-morphological attire of the word seems to be involved in the amount of discomfort a word arises, since other equivalents pertaining to the scientific field and to “baby talk” do not bother the recipient (Galli de' Paratesi 1964): “poo”/*popò* is less uncomfortable than “crap”/*merda*. In other words, semantics is not the only factor involved in the choice of words for everyday communication. When it comes to audiovisual (AV) communication, a wider range of issues have to be taken into account.

2. Taboo language in tele-cinematic products

The use and frequency of intensifying expletives seems to be increasing in English movie scripts: in the past two decades, they have almost doubled in the Pavia Corpus of Film Dialogue, and this is due to two main tendencies, as identified by Formentelli and Ghia (2021): on the one hand, the occurrence of swearwords is growing in Anglophone tele-cinematic products; on the other hand, censorship has lessened its grips, at least in the English-speaking world (*ibid.*: 64), whereas an opposite direction seems to have been taken by dubbing into Italian, where “omission and mitigation have increased considerably in the last decade” (*ibid.*: 47). This suggests that Italian dubbing continues to pursue, or even reinforce, partial (self)censorship of bad language, as already documented by Pavesi and Malinverno (2000), Chiaro (2007), and Mereu Keating (2004). Mitigation is also accompanied by sharp change in register, which appears to be a typical feature of film translations (Pavesi and Malinverno 2000: 82).

The lexico-grammar constructions in which [*expletives*] occur show different degrees of routinisation in set expressions (*bloody hell*, *fucking hell*) and fixed syntactic frames (*bloody/fucking/(god)damn* + headword; *WH-word* + *the fuck/the hell*) that in most cases do not coincide with those available in Italian. (Formentelli and Ghia 2021: 48)

They are mainly intensifiers (see Fuchs 2017) or emphasizees used in formulaic interrogative constructions and also in phrasal verbs; they are employed as expletive slot fillers to modify nouns, adjectives, verbs or adverbs (Formentelli and Ghia 2021: 50) and serve an emotive function (Jakobson 1959). Whereas expletive interjections are not retrieved in syntactic constructions with other words, expletive slot fillers are syntactically combined with other linguistic elements in a versatile way, as in some of the cases under analysis: they generally follow the canonical English order (i.e., occurring before a headword), but at times they are also inserted in fixed phrasal units, proper names or compound words (Formentelli and Ghia 2021: 50). These expletives have undergone a process of grammaticalization/delexicalization: this is generally due to the frequent use of an element which becomes a filler or a habit in the speaker's idiolect, especially if the speaker is a youth¹. Most of them belong to two lexical fields: sexuality and religion (*ibid.*).

In dubbing, adaptation choices depend on 3 main factors (Pavesi and Malinverno 2000: 78-81):

1. semantic and functional correspondence, based on affinities which may also end up establishing stereotypes (“damn” > *maledetto/dannato*), whereas in some cases it is not always possible to retrieve literal correspondences and one has to opt for semantically-related terms (*bastardo, figlio di puttana*);
2. technical parameters, namely the sync – thus, “bullshit” > *balle* instead of *stronzate*; they come into play in case of close-ups, in particular;
3. adaptor's creativity, which plays a major role in this specific case, since swearwords are not resorted to as a means for the plot to progress, so “fidelity” to the source text content is not paramount here (“Bullshit!” > *Ehi, palle di merda!*).

The orientation in rendering intensifying expletives in Italian is towards source language expressions, i.e., calques (Formentelli and Ghia 2021: 47). Many of these calqued equivalents contribute to a thriving Italian dubbese, locally known as “doppiaggese”, a term loaded with a negative connotation and used to refer to both an artificial way of acting and to some pre-fabricated “plastic” speech, featuring interferences from the source language, which is mainly English.

In this study, I am going to focus on the latter meaning of “doppiaggese” as a pseudo-colloquial variety of the Italian language characterized by routine translations, cliched phrases or sentences, repetition/redundancy and, more importantly, by calques from the source language (Sileo 2018).

¹ Taboo language is, at least in movies, more frequently detected in young speakers and, in terms of gender, more in men than in women (Pavesi and Malinverno 2000: 78). Although dubbed scripts generally reveal minor frequency of taboo language, the equivalents are increasingly closer to the source language ones (*cavolo* > *cazzo: ibidem*), a tendency which is retrievable also in Italian TV products (Sileo 2018).

3. Categorizing calques

Over the past decade or so I have carried out analyses focused on calques from English compounds, phrases, and sentences which have been transferred into everyday colloquial/spoken, but also written, Italian. These analyses fall into a line of inquiry that has been pursued by several scholars (among others: Rossi 1999; Alfieri *et al.* 2003; Sileo 2018), whose findings converge to show that such transfer does indeed take place. However, not much has been said on whether the process extends to taboo language, and to what extent it is actually employed in everyday Italian. The taboo expressions have been subdivided into both qualitative and quantitative criteria, following the categorization proposed in Sileo 2018.

As regards the **qualitative criterion**, calques may be divided into either semantic or structural. The former refers to a calque of the meaning of the original element: it generally takes place between words belonging to two different languages and having similar phono-morphological “attire” and meanings: the interfering language adds an additional nuance that did not exist in the target language. Some of these calques are labelled as “cavalli di ritorno”: in other words, a horse that had been given/lent to some other owner and that has been returned to the original “breeder” enriched with additional embellishments (or meanings), generally more abstract/metaphoric. This is the case of *realizzare*²: from “turning something from imaginary to real” in a concrete sense, *realizzare* is now being used in Italian with the meaning “to understand, to make something real (in one’s mind)”.

A structural calque takes place when the structure of the compound/phrase /sentence is copied or reproduced in the target language: in other words, the constituent order of the original is replicated, but the elements used pertain to the recipient language, and this is why the interfered phrase is less evident to the target language speaker, since the presence of the source language is hidden behind the “curtains” of already existing words in the target language. Two examples of (sentence-level) structural interferences follow:

- *Il tuo segreto è al sicuro con me*, which is the exact replica of “Your secret is safe with me”, to replace the more natural *Manterrò il segreto*;
- *Quello che vedi è quello che hai/che c’è/che avrai* for “What you see is what you get”, retrieved in *The Bold and the Beautiful* (Episode 6535): the expression is absent in the relevant literature and also in the dictionaries consulted. It is an example of a negative transfer (not justified by sync) for which there is no direct and unique rendering in Italian: *Sono quello che vedi* might be a functional equivalent, albeit shorter than the original version and less elastic, because it is less suited to cover the manifold semantic nuances of the English source.

² Perhaps the most renowned case of semantic calque; the added meaning is a more abstract and metaphoric one. For further information, see Rossi 1999 and Sileo 2018.

A further **qualitative criterion** goes back to Toury's distinction between positive and negative transfers – the former referring to elements which already exist(ed) in the target language but whose frequency is increased due to the influence of the source language/text, the latter referring to elements which did not exist in the target language and occasionally violate the rules of the target language.

A quite popular instance of positive transfer (PT) is *già* to translate “yeah” instead of *Sì*, *hai ragione* (Rossi 1999: 26) or *infatti*, although other Italian equivalents would be possible, depending on the context. In dubbed Italian, it occurs with excessive frequency. The result is a frequently unnatural use: instead of its evaluative function – you evaluate what has been said and you agree –, the particle often takes on the function of a filler (Pavesi 1994: 137). According to Bucaria (2008: 155), this is one of the clearest examples of articulatory similarity between source and target text, especially in close-ups, and this is to the detriment of the natural rendering and very often also the meaning of the original text.

One of the most frequently analyzed negative transfers (NT) is the holophrastic use of *assolutamente* (without adding *sì/no*) to translate both “absolutely” and “absolutely not”: this was probably due to an initial interference from French, then supported and spread by English in the affirmative and, later, in the negative form. According to the OED, in fact, the colloquial elliptical use of “absolutely” with affirmative meaning is of American origin and attested no earlier than 1892, in Mark Twain's *The American Claimant*, so an English influence prior to French cannot be assumed. In the earliest attestations of absolute usage in literary corpora, in fact, the adverb has a positive meaning – which can be inferred, with difficulty and not without uncertainty, from the context –, and this leads to infer that speakers might have later extended this usage also to negation³.

The **quantitative criterion** employed is based on the “size” of the calque, ranging from:

1. lexical or word-level calques, which basically coincide with semantic calques, since they pertain to single words and their meanings being calqued (see footnotes 2 and 3);
2. intra-syntagmatic calques: they include interferences which take place within a syntagm, generally a noun phrase, for example possibly redundant possessives⁴ and the pre- or post-nominal position of adjectives⁵;

³ The aim of this investigation into the origins and development of the English source is to underline how one should not neglect the influence and the role played by French in introducing interferences into Italian.

⁴ In Italian, the possessive should be omitted if the term of reference seems obvious; omission is mandatory when the controlling verb includes an atonal pronoun with an affective-intensive function (Serianni 2006: 271-72). However, overly mechanical translations, faithfully replicating the source text, spread stylistic unnaturalness, such as the hammering repetitions of the pronouns *tu* and *tuo* that are certainly dependent on the English structure, but also, in the case of advertising, on the desire to emphasize message personalization (Giovanardi *et al.* 2008: 87).

⁵ In this rather unstable area of Italian, loosely defined normativization may result in gray areas where usage is at the speaker's discretion, with renderings often strongly unnatural, semantically anomalous (Cardinaletti and Garzone 2005: 13), yet not automatically a-grammatical. In Italian, the position of the qualifying adjective is not necessarily fixed. There are, however, differences

3. inter-syntagmatic calques: they include interferences which occur in the area between syntagms, generally referring to verb government phenomena⁶;
4. quasi-sentence calques: these interferences include cases which extend beyond the inter-relations between individual syntagms and embrace partially variable structures which almost reach the sentence level, but allow for variations, in terms of subjects and subsequently verb form variation. In other words, they are not fixed structures, invariantly replicated, and they do not possess the status and independence of an actual sentence: for example, *esserci sangue cattivo*, as in *Abbiamo saputo che c'era sangue cattivo (Chicago Fire S4E15)*, whereas *non scorreva buon sangue* might be the most natural equivalent in Italian; and,
5. sentence-level calques, fixed structures holding the status of independent invariable clauses, as in the examples provided in the previous pages, to which we could add a newly introduced interference, as in “what you see is what you get” to translate *quello che vedi è quello che hai/c'è/avrà* (Sileo 2018).

4. Sources and methodology

Since my aim here is to investigate how English strongly impacts on everyday Italian, with reference to taboo language, in order to ensure reliability of results and analysis, the potential interferences detected in the corpus analyzed have been searched within a reference corpus which is as comprehensive as possible, and includes the following dictionaries, listed in a chronological order and covering a wide time span (from the late nineteenth century to the 2010s):

- a. Crusca: *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, Cellini, Florence 1863-1923, voll. 12, 5th edition.
- b. IEI: *Vocabolario della lingua italiana*, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Rome 1987, voll. 5.
- c. Zingarelli: *Lo Zingarelli: vocabolario della lingua italiana*, Zanichelli, Bologna 1997.
- d. Nuovo DELI: *Il nuovo dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*, M. Cortelazzo-P. Zolli-M. Cortelazzo (eds), Zanichelli, Bologna 1999, voll. 5.
- e. GRADIT: *Grande dizionario italiano dell'uso*, T. De Mauro (ed.), UTET, Turin 2000, voll. 6.

between the two orders involving multiple levels of analysis: a difference in semantics, in function, in the speaker's attitude, and in register (Dardano and Trifone 1995: 517). According to Klajn (2012: 186), the N+Adj sequence is obligatory in French much more often than in Italian, where, not only in poetry, the position of the adjective was extremely free for centuries. Then, certainly also due to the influence of French, the post-nominal position began to stabilize, without becoming exclusive. Nowadays the tendency is supposedly to restore the pre-nominal order.

⁶ The case of *ringraziare/grazie + di/per* is rather emblematic: Italian admits both sequences in a considerable percentage of cases, as an additional gray and poorly normatively structured area. However, one often happens to find typically purpose structures such as *ringraziare/grazie + per + present infinitive* used with a causal (past) sense, resulting in a grammatically incorrect solution, as well as a theoretically unnatural one, as in “Grazie. Grazie per starmi vicino, grazie per ... per capirmi, per sopportarmi” [*CentoVetrine* 3238-39-40-41]; the increasing frequency in its use – most importantly in everyday spontaneous social-media Italian –, however, seems to be slowly changing the native speaker's perception (Sileo 2018).

f. Devoto-Oli: *Vocabolario della lingua italiana Devoto-Oli*, L. Serianni-M. Trifone (eds), Le Monnier, Florence 2007.

g. OED: *Oxford English Dictionary*

Among the reference corpora used, a domestic newspaper has been included, since newspaper language is generally more open and more ready to welcome new words or loan words, also occasionalisms which are not necessarily present in dictionaries, thus not (yet) officially recognized as being part of the receiving language. The reference newspaper is *La Repubblica*, and the time span covers the period from 1/1/1984 to 27/8/2022, which enables the retrieval and comparison of data both from a synchronic and from a diachronic perspective.

“Spontaneous” Italian has also been taken into consideration during the analysis: PAISÀ⁷ is a large corpus of authentic contemporary Italian texts from the web, harvested in September/October 2010 and sprung from the project PAISÀ (an acronym which stands for “Piattaforma per l’Apprendimento dell’Italiano Su corpora Annotati”); its aim is to provide a large resource of freely available and authentic Italian texts for language learning. The project is a joint effort of: University of Bologna; CNR Pisa; European Academy of Bozen/Bolzano; University of Trento.

The study also relies on a corpus of multi-language (non)adapted cinematic dialogue, *Forlìxt*, a project launched in 2003 at the University of Bologna.

5. Corpus analyzed

The elements under analysis are drawn from both an American soap opera, *The Bold and the Beautiful* (henceforth, BB) – episodes from 6516 to 6537, aired in 2013 – and the short script entitled *Un dialogo possibile*, produced and filmed by AIDAC, the Italian association of audiovisual script translators and adaptors. It was launched in May 2008 during a conference held at the Accademia della Crusca and pre-fabricated by the association in order to show how Italian dubbese is imbued with interferences from English and how the interferences mainly go unnoticed by the average audience. Among them are numerous instances of taboo language, which make the script of particular interest for the present study. Quite the opposite can be said about BB: as pointed out by Alfieri *et al.* in their 2003 study on the Italian adaptation of its dialogues, the tendency towards (self) censorship is relatively marked and still seems to be hard to fade away, despite decades’ passing by.

The present analysis has been focused on three main clusters, mostly rotating around one passepartout word serving as the main constituent of a phrase or even used within a sentence: Cluster 1 – the religion-related cluster – is further divided into two sub-clusters, both pertaining to “(the) hell” and the concept of “damnation”; Cluster 2 revolves around the word *culo* as the recurring fixed element within larger phrases; Cluster 3 dwells on the dichotomy between an

⁷ Corpus Italiano (last accessed on 11/07/2023).

alleged transfer from English (“to fuck” > *fottersi*) and a presumably more natural Italian equivalent (*vaffanculo*).

5.1. Cluster 1. “(The) hell” and “damn(ation)”

5.1.1. “The hell” and its renderings into Italian

This is one example of English swearwords which serve emphatic functions, also on the screen. In the research carried out by Formentelli and Ghia (2021) on the Pavia Corpus of Film Dialogue, this expletive turned out to be quite limited in use, but one which showed a marked increase in translations over time and a lower incidence of omissions (*ibid.*: 62-63). The routines adopted in Italian adaptations are mainly source-oriented (*che diavolo*) but have a milder offensive force than *che cazzo/cavolo*, which appear to be very rarely used in older films (p. 63). A similar tendency towards (self) censorship can be detected in *The Bold and the Beautiful*, as already mentioned:

- i. **Bill:** Steffy gave it *a hell* of a try.
Bill: Steffy ci ha provato una volta.⁸ [BB6516]
- ii. **Bill:** Will you just back *the hell* off, Taylor?
Bill: Puoi farti gli affari tuoi, Taylor? [BB6533]
- iii. **Bill:** I’m scared *as hell* for Katie. ...
Bill: Mi spaventa lo stato in cui è Katie. [BB6533]
- iv. **Bill:** Are you kidding me? What *the hell* are you doing?!
Bill: Sei ancora qui? Ma che *diavolo* stai facendo?! [BB6533]

Examples (i), (ii), and (iii) seem to be at odds with the thesis proposed by Formentelli and Ghia (2021) on film dialogue: this might be due to several reasons, including the different medium (cinema vs. TV); a corpus of TV dialogue is much needed in order to draw clearcut conclusions. Example (iv) testifies to the mitigation of the source text as a fundamental requirement for this genre, as confirmed by the literature. As Pavesi and Malinverno (2000: 82) point out, due to its flexibility, in Italian it may be translated as *diavolo* only after interrogative words, as in example (iv), whereas in example (ii) the expletive has been completely omitted in Italian and the register selected is quite higher than the source text; in other contexts, it seems to be disappearing, as also proved by examples (i), (ii), and (iii), at times replaced by other intensifying elements, which however do not possess the same meaning in terms of emotions (*ibid.*: 82).

⁸ In this specific case, one might argue that the omission of “hell” is due to the specific syntactic/lexical context, as the possible direct equivalent in the receiving language would not fit the context and the resulting utterance would sound unnatural. However, this omission could have been compensated by relocating the informal-register phrase in the following sentence, for example; since this is not the case, we may conclude that this is an instance of (self)censorship aimed at ensuring a style that is more formal than the original one.

Table 1 sums up the results of the analysis and displays the number of occurrences in *La Repubblica*: 878 occurrences of *che diavolo*, 696 of *che cazzo*, and 395 of *che cavolo*; the latter two are supposedly the most natural in Italian.

In Paisà, we find: *che cazzo* (34), *chi cazzo* (9), *chi diavolo* (7), *che diavolo* (9), *come diavolo* (6), *come cazzo* (2), whereas in Forlìx, *che/chi diavolo* and *dove diavolo* are retrieved in German and French movies; in two cases, “the hell” has been translated into *che diavolo*.

Table 1. Cluster 1 – results.

| | a) <i>DIABOLO</i> | b) <i>DANNATAMENTE</i> |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Dictionaries | [No example detected ⁹] | GRADIT: 20 th century ZINGARELLI: “rare” |
| Newspapers | <i>che diavolo</i> (878) <i>che cazzo</i> (696) <i>che cavolo</i> (395) | <u>894 occurrences</u> (as an adverb) [1984-1994: <u>12 occurrences</u> 2012-2022: <u>451 occurrences</u>] |
| Film dialogue | <i>che/chi diavolo; dove diavolo</i> (English, German, French) | <i>Dannatamente:</i> <u>0 occurrences</u> |
| TV series / SO dialogue | [see the examples provided above] | <i>dannatamente frustrato</i> [BB6537] |
| Web Italian | <i>che cazzo</i> (34), <i>chi cazzo</i> (9), <i>chi diavolo</i> (7), <i>che diavolo</i> (9) | <u>110 occurrences</u> [intensifying adjectives & modifying verbs] |

The larger use of *che/chi/dove diavolo* – mainly in questions and exclamations – in the reference corpora as opposed to less polite equivalents seems to confirm that the tendency towards (self) censorship is still thriving, at least in dubbed Italian; newspaper Italian and spontaneous Italian provide a slightly different insight into the phenomenon. All things considered, however, the construct WH- + *diavolo* seems the most frequent, although the least natural in Italian. For all these reasons, we might conclude that this is a structural positive transfer, at an intra-syntagmatic level.

5.1.2. “Damn”

As for *dannatamente* to render “(god)damn” but also “fucking¹⁰” (Pavesi and Malinverno 2000: 85), found in *The Bold and the Beautiful* (E6537: *dannatamente*

⁹ In a more recent online version of GRADIT, we find instance of *chi diavolo* used in interrogative sentences (*Diavolo* > significato - Dizionario italiano De Mauro (internazionale.it)). One might argue that the usage has been introduced more recently, thus confirming the thesis advanced in the opening pages.

¹⁰ “Gus is fucking awesome” > *Gus è dannatamente bravo* (source: Paisà).

frustrato) followed by an adjective: GRADIT dates it to the twentieth century, with the hyperbolic meaning of “exaggeratedly, very much, too much”, as in “they are damn unfortunate, it was a damn difficult exam”; also in Devoto-Oli 2007 the adverb is attested in the twentieth century, while it is absent in Nuovo DELI and Crusca. It is attested in Zingarelli 1997, though defined as “rare”. Given its rather recent attestation, we can conclude that this is a negative transfer; in *La Repubblica*, we have 894 occurrences for the adverb (12 occurrences in the 1984-1994 span, 451 occurrences in the 2012-2022 span). In Paisà, we find 110 occurrences, both before/intensifying an adjective and modifying a verb. Forlì features 0 occurrences for *dannatamente* and 1 occurrence for *dannata*.

In conclusion, the phrase *dannatamente* + adjective/verb is a negative transfer, a structural calque at an intra-syntagmatic level.

5.2. Cluster 2. “Ass”/culo

This element can be found inserted within different stock phrases or even sentences, such as *to save somebody’s ass*, *to have one’s ass*, *to shag ass* (Giordano 2020). Based on the research carried out by Giordano (*ibid.*: 137-138), this is generally a case of omission, especially in a diachronic perspective. In GRADIT, among the phrases whose meaning is somehow related to the elements analyzed in this section, we only find *parare il culo* (“to cover one’s ass”) and *levarsi di culo* (presumably obsolete and no longer intelligible to native Italians).

In the dialogue “fabricated” by AIDAC¹¹, we find some interesting combinations:

- a. Lei: Dacci un taglio, sennò *porto subito via il mio culo da qui*.
[BACK TRANSLATION – Woman: Cut it out, or *I’ll get my ass out of here right now.*]
- b. Lei: E la cosa giusta da fare ora [...] è *portare via il mio culo da qui*.
[BACK TRANSLATION – Woman: And the right thing to do now (...) is *get my ass out of here.*]
- c. Lui: Attenta al gradino!
Lei: Grazie, amico, *mi hai salvato il culo!*
[BACK TRANSLATION – Man: Watch the step! Woman: Thank you, man, *you saved my ass!*]

Table 2. Cluster 2 – results.

| | <i>SALVARE IL CULO</i> | <i>PORTARE VIA IL CULO (DA ...)</i> |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Dictionaries | GRADIT: <i>parare il culo</i> | GRADIT: <i>levarsi di culo</i> |

¹¹ The script is not a spontaneous one, it serves as a caricature – thus, an exaggeration – of interferences which have been featuring tele-cinematic speech adapted from English into Italian; the objective of AIDAC was to “season” the dialogue with an abnormal amount of such elements, which are still constantly retrievable and retrieved in adaptations into Italian.

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Newspapers | <i>Salvare il culo</i> (10) <i>Salvato il culo</i> (11) | <u>1 occurrence</u> : 8/12/1988 [in a translation] |
| Film dialogue | Forlixt* : <u>0 occurrences</u> AIDAC : Grazie, amico, <i>mi hai salvato il culo!</i> [Thank you, man, you saved my ass!] | Forlixt : <u>0 occurrences</u> AIDAC : a. <i>Porto subito via il mio culo da qui.</i> [I'll get my ass out of here right now] b. E la cosa giusta da fare [...] è <i>portare via il mio culo da qui.</i> [And the right thing to do (...) is get my ass out of here] |
| TV series / SO dialogue | <u>0 occurrences</u> | <u>0 occurrences</u> |
| Web Italian | <u>1 occurrence</u> | <u>0 occurrences</u> |

AIDAC's "dialogo impossibile" provides us with a couple of alleged negative transfers which are not attested in the Italian dictionaries, but are timidly present in newspaper Italian. In *La Repubblica*, we find:

- 11 occurrences for *salvato il culo*, only one of them dating back to 23/7/1995 – as for the other 10 cases, dating ranges from 2002 to 2020: 4 of them are translations;
- 10 occurrences for *salvare il culo*: only 2 of them date back to the 1990s, 1 to the 2000s;
- only one occurrence for the phrase *portare via il culo*, dating back to 8/12/1988, within a translation.

In Paisà, we only find 1 occurrence for *salvare il culo*, zero occurrences for *portare via il culo*. One interesting example is the phrase (*potere/ci*) *scommettere il proprio culo*, found only in Forlixt in a movie adapted from English:

Nigel: *You bet your size-six ass.*

Ci puoi scommettere il tuo culo 42. (*The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006)

All things considered, we can conclude that *salvare il culo*, (*potere/ci*) *scommettere il proprio culo*, and *portare via il culo* (*da* + noun phrase) are negative transfers, structural phrase calques.

5.3. Cluster 3. *Fottiti/vaffanculo*

Based on the OED, "fuck" was first attested in Middle English, also as "fuk" in the 16th century: it supposedly answered to a "ME type *fukēn (wk. vb.) not found; ulterior etym. unknown. Synonymous G. ficken cannot be shown to be related". First attested a. 1503 in Dunbar's *Poems* as a verb, and first used as "the coarsest equivalent of *damn*" in imprecations and exclamations in Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Nuovo DELI and GRADIT define *fottere* as to sexually possess a woman, from colloquial Latin *füttere*, of uncertain etymology. Attested in the XIV century, in Dolcibene, Petrocchi's *Novo dizionario universale della lingua italiana* dates it back to 1887 as an equivalent of *ingannare, imbrogliare* ("to cheat").

GRADIT first dates *vaffanculo* back to 1953, in A. Palazzeschi's *Roma*; as for *fottuto*, the dictionary defines it as an adjective already used in Italian before 1535 in injurious epithets. *Andare/mandare a farsi fottere/a fare in culo* are attested in Gadda (1893-1973); *fottersene* and *fottuto* are used in Vincenzo Monti (1754-1828).¹²

AIDAC repeatedly featured *fottersi* in their "impossible dialogue" as a rather evident example of "doppiaggese":

1. Lei: Chi *se ne fotte* di Nanni Moretti!
[BACKTRANSLATION – Woman: Who *gives a fuck* about Nanni Moretti!]
2. Lei: Per chi mi prendi [...]? *Fottiti*, amico!
[BACKTRANSLATION – Whom are you taking me for [...]? *Fuck you, man!*]
3. Lei: *Fottiti* tu e i film americani!
[BACKTRANSLATION – *Fuck you* and American movies!]

In *La Repubblica*, we find 70 occurrences for the alleged transfer – *vaffanculo* amounts to 959 occurrences –, mainly used by journalists complaining about the artificiality of *fottiti*, labelled as most frequently used in/on Italian TV (12/01/2007). Among the "complainers," we find I. Bignardi, claiming that Italian swearwords have their own right to a better translation from the English "fuck off" (14/06/1991). *Fottiti* is defined as most frequently used in TV Italian (12/01/1994) and a more natural equivalent is called for.

Based on the data collected in Paisà, *vaffanculo* seems to be the most natural and the most frequently used, with its 45 occurrences vs. 0 occurrences for *fottiti* and 3 for *si fotta*. In Forlìx, we only find 2 occurrences for *fottiti*, in a German movie (*Nordrand*, 1999); *vaffanculo*, by contrast, can be found in 25 instances, in German, French, Chinese, and Italian movies.

Table 3. Cluster 3 – results.

| | FOTTITI | VAFFANCULO |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Dictionaries | OED: a1503, Dunbar Poems, tr. "to copulate"; 1922, <i>Ulysses</i> , imprecation/exclamation GRADIT: XIV cent., coll. Latin <i>füttere</i> | GRADIT: 1953, A. Palazzeschi, <i>Roma</i> |

¹² Fabio Rossi in parole oscene in "Enciclopedia dell'Italiano" (treccani.it) (last accessed on 11/07/2023).

| | | |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Newspapers | <u>70 occurrences</u> 28/1/1995: «nei doppiaggi italiani, [...] l'assurdo insulto “fottiti”?» | <u>959 occurrences</u> |
| Film dialogue | Forlixt: <i>fottiti</i> (2, German) AIDAC: a. <i>Fottiti</i> , amico! [<i>Fuck you, man!</i>] b. <i>Fottiti</i> tu e i film americani! [<i>Fuck you and American movies!</i>] | <u>25 occurrences</u> (7 German, 3 French, 1 Chinese, 14 Italian) AIDAC: <u>0 occurrences</u> |
| TV series / SO dialogue | <u>0 occurrences</u> | <u>0 occurrences</u> |
| Web Italian | <i>Si fotta</i> (3); <i>Fottiti</i> (0) | <u>45 occurrences</u> |

Although average Italian speakers seem to perceive *fottiti* as unnatural and consequently to scarcely use it in spontaneous communication, the etymology and first attestations of both exclamations lead us to conclude that *fottiti* might be an additional case of semantic calque, at a word level, but of a positive type, since it was already used in Latin, borrowed by English around the early XVI century. It presumably remained latent in the Italian vocabulary, to subsequently come back to the surface due to the so-called “English invasion”, powered both by the prestige of the language and by the mentioned tendency to over-mechanic translations.

5. Conclusions

The present study has analyzed only a limited number of swearwords and taboo expressions from English into Italian. The corpora of contemporary spoken and written Italian and the Italian dictionaries which served as reference corpora have yielded fruitful insights into the phenomenon. The alleged transfer phenomena, divided into subcategories based on previous literature (Touy 1995; Sileo 2018), have been analyzed with the aim to determine whether and to what extent “dirty” dubbese has been influencing the taboo language production of Italian native speakers. The results, summarized in Figure 4, show how the English language retains a strong impact on everyday Italian, also when it comes to taboo language.

Table 4. Summing up results.

| | |
|---|--|
| Cluster 1 1a. WH- word + <i>diavolo</i> 1b. <i>dannatamente</i> + adj/verb | PT; structural; intra-syntagmatic level NT; structural; intra-syntagmatic level |
| Cluster 2 2a. <i>salvare il culo</i> | NT; structural; phrase calque |

| | |
|---|--|
| 2b. <i>portare via il culo</i> (da + NP) 2c. <i>(potere) scommettere il proprio culo</i> | NT; structural; phrase calque NT; structural; phrase calque |
| Cluster 3 <i>Fottersi</i> | PT; semantic; word-level |

As shown by Table 4, the majority of transfers are of a negative type and cross word-unit borders, embracing more structured and more extended phrases. Semantic calques seem to be scarcely present in the corpus analyzed. Although in its preliminary stages, this study might serve as a starting point for more extensive and in-depth analyses of presumable interferences from English into Italian in the realm of taboo language by resorting to the method applied and the reference corpora used.

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THE TRANSLATION OF SEX-RELATED LANGUAGE IN TV SERIES: ANALYZING THE FICTIONAL SPEECH OF LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS

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Citation: González Cruz, S. (2024) “The Translation of Sex-Related Language in TV Series: Analyzing the Fictional Speech of LGBTQ+ Characters”, C. Bucaria, A.D. Mitzel and A. Sileo (eds) *Taboo in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation*, *mediAzioni* 43: A44-A55, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/20480>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: In recent years, there has been a notable rise in the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters in TV series available on online platforms. This poses a challenge for translators from a linguistic, social and cultural perspective, as they need to deal with the transference of fictional speech according to diverse identities. In this respect, translators are not only in charge of translating the fictional speech for a given audiovisual product to be either subtitled or dubbed into a different language, but they have the role of conveying and preserving LGBTQ+ characters’ identities accurately. The objective of this paper is to analyze the translation of sex-related language in TV series with LGBTQ+ representation. On the basis of a selected corpus of two different English-language TV series (*Euphoria* and *Sex Education*), this descriptive study analyzes the fictional speech of several LGBTQ+ characters and focuses on the translation of sex-related language from English into Spanish in both their dubbed and subtitled versions. The translation strategies used to render sex-related conversations when translating audiovisual fiction are discussed throughout the study in order to show different ways of facing the translation of specific sexual expressions. In this respect, the study intends to highlight the fact that all decisions made when translating fictional conversations that LGBTQ+ characters have about sex may have an influence on the representation of several topics such as sexuality, gender or identity. The study also discusses how other aspects such as the translation of inclusive language and the expression of gender identity may also affect the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters.

Keywords: audiovisual translation; LGBTQ+ ; sex-related language; subtitling; dubbing; gender; identity; sexuality; sexual orientation; descriptive analysis.

1. Introduction

The representation of LGBTQ+ characters in TV series on streaming platforms has experienced a significant surge in recent years, signaling a growing trend towards inclusivity and diversity in the media. Translating LGBTQ+ fictional speech, particularly when it involves sex-related language, presents notable and unique challenges for translators. Preserving essential aspects such as gender identity and, specifically, non-binarism, becomes crucial while navigating the complexities of translating diverse identities. Thus, translators face the challenge of finding suitable ways to translate sexual expressions, ensuring comprehension for all types of audiences. Furthermore, translating fictional speech for genderqueer, non-binary, and transgender characters requires meticulous attention to accurately depict and maintain their identities. Therefore, the translation process entails an understanding of the cultural, social, and linguistic nuances associated with LGBTQ+ representation.

In this article, a descriptive study analyzes the translation of fictional speech containing sex-related language in the series *Euphoria* and *Sex Education*. The analysis will cover the translation from English into Spanish of different dialogues in both their dubbed and subtitled versions. The study will focus on the translation of fictional speech about sex and sexuality for different LGBTQ+ characters, considering various intrinsic aspects such as gender and identity. An analysis comparing the subtitled and dubbed translated versions will be presented in order to analyze any different meanings or nuanced messages. The analyzed fragments will serve as illustrative examples of potential translation strategies to be used by translators when encountering sex-related language in LGBTQ+ fictional audiovisual contexts. By examining the different translation strategies applied, the study aims to shed light on the intricate decisions made by translators in rendering sex-related language in LGBTQ+ fictional audiovisual contexts. As the translation of identities carries significant impact on audiences, translation strategies for rendering sex-related language in LGBTQ+ contexts will be examined taking into account the meaning and nuances of the message transferred and its alignment with the specific identity of each character.

2. LGBTQ+ studies and Audiovisual Translation

In the last two decades, the number of LGBTQ+ studies related to translation has remarkably increased and the application of gender-focused theories to AVT studies has witnessed significant development since the early 2000s. Within the framework of translation, Baer and Kaindl (2018) present the first book-length publication which provides a critical exploration of the emerging field of research on the queer dimensions within Translation and Interpreting Studies. This volume analyzes the intricate relationship between translation and queer aspects of sex, gender, and identity. Concerning audiovisual translation, von Flotow and Josephy-Hernández (2019) identify three primary approaches that address gender-related issues in audiovisual products. The first approach consists

of analyzing feminist materials and involves examining feminist themes and perspectives present in Anglo-American audiovisual products and exploring their translation into Romance languages. This approach analyzes how gender roles, representations and ideologies are portrayed in audiovisual texts and how they are conveyed through translation. The second approach focuses on analyzing the differences between subtitled and dubbed versions of Anglo-American source texts concerning gender. This approach intends to explore the different ways in which gender-related aspects such as linguistic choices, voice acting, and cultural norms are rendered in these two translation modes and its implications for the audience. The third approach centers on investigating source texts that contain gay and queer language and content, examining how these elements are dealt with in translation. This approach investigates the challenges and strategies employed in translating LGBTQ+ themes, identities and cultural references, and analyzes the impact on representation and audience reception in different linguistic and cultural contexts. The present study mixes both the second and third approach as it intends to analyze the sex-related language of LGBTQ+ characters while comparing their dubbed and subtitled translations into Spanish.

Different previous studies deal with the translation of LGBTQ+ fictional speech for audiovisual media and reflect on the translation strategies applied to render characters' gender or identity (Ranzato 2012, 2015; Sandrelli 2016; Díaz Pérez 2018; Pleguezuelos 2021). Ranzato (2012) examines the portrayal of the fictional language of homosexuals on screen in order to observe how Italian translators and dubbing adapters have approached the translation of gayspeak. From a semantic perspective, the study compares the gay lexicon between English and Italian in three different audiovisual products (*Angels in America*, *Six Feet Under*, and *The Boys in the Band*). In the same line, Ranzato (2015) presents a full analysis of the gayspeak fragments in the five seasons of the series *Six Feet Under* and focuses on the translation from English into Italian in the dubbed version. Concerning the dubbing of gayspeak from English into Italian, Sandrelli (2016) analyzes how fictional speech in LGBTQ+ series is manipulated or even censored in the gay-themed series *Queer as Folk*, *Queer as Folk* (US remake) and *The L World*. Another study which also analyzes the dubbing of gay identity in audiovisual media is the one conducted by Pleguezuelos (2021). In this case, the study focuses on analyzing the translation from English into Spanish of specific linguistic elements together with cultural references related to the LGBTQ+ community and humorous aspects in the series *Will & Grace*. As for contributions related to LGBTQ+ studies and subtitling, Díaz Pérez (2018) presents an analysis of twelve different movies by Pedro Almodóvar and examines the translation strategies applied to produce English subtitles for those audiovisual products. The study explores the representation of the characters' identities and the translation of dialectal features, gayspeak and swearwords. On the other hand, Villanueva (2019) compares the professional subtitles and the fansubs for the TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. His study focuses on analyzing the subtitling from English into Spanish and specifically the presence of microtextual features related to camp.

3. The translation of sex-related language

The presence of sex-related language and sexuality in fictional speech, particularly in relation to the representation of LGBTQ+ characters, presents a distinct set of challenges and complexities for translators. According to Santaemilia (2015), the act of translating the language of love or sex holds political significance. It is considered a delicate and nuanced task with profound rhetorical and ideological implications. Furthermore, it serves as a reliable indicator of the translator's stance towards prevailing concepts of gender and sexual identities, human sexual behaviors, and societal moral standards. Santaemilia (2015) reflects on the relation between the concepts of translation and sexuality and considers that the act of translating sexuality often perpetuates and reflects gender-based biases and societal constructs. In translation, established social norms that define what is considered moral or indecent are typically reinforced, although there is also the possibility, however limited, of challenging or defying them. It is important to recognize that translators are never neutral agents, and this is particularly true when dealing with sex-related language. Translators must make decisions that involve social attitudes, censorship, political or ideological constraints, economic or institutional pressures, and other influencing factors.

As for the translation of sex-related language in audiovisual media, some scholars such as Lung (1998) investigated the translation of sexual expressions from English into Chinese and found out that this type of expressions were mistranslated, omitted or manipulated to a certain extent. Also, Scandura (2004) reflects on the types of censorship imposed on subtitling, including self-censorship, and provides examples of mistranslation and undertranslation from English into Spanish of several fragments from various audiovisual products. On the other hand, Chiaro (2007) explores the translation of sex on Italian TV and analyzes the fact that those less normative sexual practices are usually toned down or omitted as being considered taboo for the target audience. Finally, the translation of sex-related language has also been analyzed in audiovisual texts that result from the adaptation of literary texts such J.K. Rowling's novel entitled *The Casual Vacancy*. In this study conducted by Santaemilia (2019), the Spanish dubbed version is examined based on different elements such as social morals, gender issues and diverse ideologies. These studies highlight the challenges and difficulties encountered when translating sex-related language within the context of audiovisual media. By examining specific examples of fictional speech and exploring different linguistic, cultural and social contexts, these contributions serve to illustrate how sex-related language is handled and transferred in the field of audiovisual translation.

4. An analysis of the translation of sex-related language of LGBTQ+ characters

In this section, the translation of sex-related language of LGBTQ+ characters in the series *Euphoria* and *Sex Education* is analyzed. A descriptive qualitative

analysis is performed to compare the subtitled and dubbed translations of the series from English into Spanish as for the translation of sex-related language and sexuality issues. The fictional speech of characters with different sexual orientations (gay, lesbian, pansexual) and diverse gender identities (cisgender, transgender, non-binary) is examined and the strategies used by translators to convey different intrinsic aspects related to gender, sexuality and identity are analyzed according to the expectations and perceptions of the target audience. It is worth mentioning that translators' decisions may also depend on the technical constraints of audiovisual translation itself, such as limited time and space, rather than solely on linguistic or sociolinguistic factors. In addition, the difference between providing a written form of the translation for the subtitled version or an oral form of the translation for the dubbed version also needs to be taken into consideration.

4.1. Analysis of the translation of sex-related language of LGBTQ+ characters in *Euphoria*

Euphoria is an American series that first premiered on the subscription-based platform HBO in 2019. The show revolves around a group of high school students and their experiences as they navigate the complexities of adolescence. It explores various themes such as identity, love, drugs, sexuality, and trauma. The series provides an unfiltered portrayal of the challenges faced by young individuals in today's society. In *Euphoria*, the relationship between Jules Vaughn and Rue Bennett is a central storyline that explores the dynamics of their friendship and personal growth. Jules, portrayed by Hunter Schafer, is a transgender girl who moves to the town where the series is set, seeking a fresh start and hoping to find acceptance. Rue, played by Zendaya, is a cisgender girl struggling with drug addiction. Jules and Rue's connection begins when they meet shortly after Jules' arrival. They develop a strong bond and become sources of support for each other. Their relationship evolves over time, encompassing elements of friendship, romantic interest, and reliance. Jules represents a sense of freedom and exploration for Rue, who often depends on Jules for stability amidst her turbulent life. Jules, in turn, finds comfort in Rue's companionship and appreciates Rue's genuine acceptance of her transgender identity.

From a linguistic standpoint, it is important to note that the other characters consistently refer to Jules using she/her pronouns, reflecting her gender identity as a transgender girl. Jules seamlessly integrates with the rest of the characters and defies stereotypes often associated with transgender individuals. The focus of Jules' storyline extends beyond her transition, instead exploring the various challenges and experiences that can arise during childhood and adolescence. Throughout the series, there is a notable instance where Rue refers to Jules in a way that stands out linguistically. Instead of using the term "girl" to signify Jules' feminine gender, Rue opts to use the term "person". When it comes to translating this particular dialogue into Spanish, there are two different strategies used by translators. In the subtitled version, the translator follows the same linguistic path as the original text and uses the term "persona" to maintain the nuance intended by Rue's choice of words. This allows Spanish-speaking viewers to

experience the same linguistic distinction that English-speaking audiences encounter. On the other hand, in the dubbed version, the translation strategy differs slightly. In order to convey the same emphasis on Jules' feminine gender, the dubbed translation opts to mark the feminine gender explicitly, using a term that aligns with the Spanish language's gendered structure. This decision is made to maintain consistency with the character's portrayal and preserve her identity in an accurate way:

EN: She's not a sexual person.
ES (Subtitled): No es una persona sexual.
ES (Dubbed): No es una tía muy sexual.

Similarly, another example of gender omission when translating sexual expressions which make reference to a woman can be also found in a different fragment of this series. In this case, a cis-gender woman talks about her own sexual practices and refers to herself as a "fucking savage". It can be observed that in the dubbed version, the sexual expression is translated in a literal way effectively preserving the original sexual expression while meticulously emphasizing the character's gender by making use of the gender markers in Spanish. This deliberate emphasis ensures that the viewers fully grasp that the character in question is indeed a woman who fearlessly embraces her own sexuality. However, in the subtitled version the gender is not marked, and the sexual expression is translated into Spanish by using a modulation technique navigating the linguistic nuances to convey the intended meaning. Instead of overtly marking the gender of the character, the translator opts for a different approach. The sexual expression is reformulated into Spanish by maintaining the desired impact and omitting any explicit gender markers:

EN: I'm a fucking savage.
ES (Subtitled): A mí me va lo fuerte.
ES (Dubbed): Una puta salvaje.

Focusing on the relationship between Rue and Jules, there are some instances which reflect the sexual intercourse among these two characters. As for the translations of those sexual expressions, the decisions taken by translators in the dubbed and subtitled versions also differ in some cases. The following example illustrates that a non-explicit sexual expression in English has been literally translated into Spanish in the dubbed version while the same expression has been reformulated in the subtitled version. These varying translation choices demonstrate the complexities involved in conveying sexual expressions across different languages and cultural contexts. Despite the subtitled version containing a longer translation for this fragment, an unusual circumstance given the time and space constraints of subtitling, the translator adopts a more general perspective to provide an idiomatic and natural expression in Spanish. However, the dubbed version corresponds to a literal translation of the English version. In both cases, the translators face the challenge of preserving the intimacy and intensity of the scene while considering the sensitivities and cultural

expectations of the viewers and both of them provide a non-explicit translation for a sexual expression:

EN: I really wanna go down.
 ES (Subtitled): Me gustaría hacerte de todo.
 ES (Dubbed): Me apetece bajar.

Finally, another instance proves that translators of the dubbed and subtitled versions used different approaches and techniques when translating sex-related language in fictional speech. In this specific scene a close friend of Rue and Jules inquires about the nature of their relationship, questioning whether they are in love. Interestingly, both translators mark the feminine gender of the characters, yet the versions slightly differ from one another. In the dubbed version, the translator chooses to pursue a strategy of total equivalence, seeking to preserve the original dialogue as faithfully as possible. By adhering closely to the source material, the dubbed version maintains a direct and straightforward rendering of the friend's query, thereby reflecting the character's curiosity without introducing any additional implications. The subtitled version takes a slightly divergent path, opting to incorporate a synonym that conveys a much more colloquial tone. This choice adds a layer of subtlety and playfulness to the dialogue. It is worth noting that this alternative translation in the subtitled version could potentially be perceived as an implicit reference to the characters' sexual organs:

EN: You guys are in love, right?
 ES (Subtitled): Estáis encoñadas, ¿no?
 ES (Dubbed): Estáis enamoradas, ¿no?

4.2. Analysis of the translation of sex-related language of LGBTQ+ characters in *Sex Education*

Sex Education is a popular British comedy-drama series that premiered on the streaming platform Netflix in 2019. The series is set in the fictional Moordale Secondary School, where Otis Milburn, the son of a sex therapist, and his classmate, Maeve Wiley, decide to set up a sex therapy clinic for their fellow students. The series presents a wide range of topics related to sex, relationships and identity, and tackles sensitive issues such as consent, sexual orientation, gender identity, body image and mental health. *Sex Education* features a diverse cast of characters, each grappling with their own insecurities, desires, and discoveries. In addition, the series stands out for its representation of LGBTQ+ characters, as it portrays several characters from various sexual orientations and gender identities, providing a platform for meaningful conversations about sexual diversity, acceptance, and self-discovery.

For instance, Ola and Lily's relationship in *Sex Education* is a significant portrayal of a same-sex relationship that develops and evolves throughout the series. Ola, who initially dates Otis Milburn, eventually realizes about her attraction to women and begins to explore her sexuality identifying herself as

pansexual. On the other hand, Lily is portrayed as a quirky and socially awkward character who navigates her own journey of self-discovery. When Ola and Lily first meet, their connection is built upon a shared interest in robotics and their mutual participation in the school's quiz team. As their friendship deepens, they begin to explore their feelings for one another, ultimately embarking on a romantic relationship. Their relationship is characterized by tenderness, support, and a shared sense of understanding. Ola and Lily serve as pillars of strength for one another as they navigate the complexities of their identities and the challenges that come with being in a same-sex relationship. Although the number of specific references to sexual intercourse among these two characters is relatively low, there are some differences as for the translation of the characters' gender and identity that can be remarked. When translating a characters' dialogue during a lesbian sexual intercourse, the feminine gender is marked in the subtitled version, whereas a modulation technique is applied in the dubbed translation without marking the feminine gender of the characters involved:

EN: Do you have to be so vigorous?
 ES (Subtitled): ¿Tienes que ser tan intensa?
 ES (Dubbed): No, no tan fuerte...

The series *Sex Education* also highlights the importance of LGBTQ+ representation by including non-binary characters like Cal. Cal's character serves as a powerful embodiment of the journey towards self-discovery and self-acceptance that many non-binary individuals experience. Throughout the series, Cal not only navigates their own personal struggles but also becomes a vocal advocate for the rights and visibility of non-binary people. They assert their preference for the use of they/them pronouns, which accurately reflects their non-binary identity. However, their choice is not always met with immediate acceptance, and they often encounter resistance and rejection from other characters. From a linguistic perspective, the dialogues in the original language deliberately aim to create a neutral language space by occasionally omitting the explicit use of pronouns when referring to Cal. This linguistic choice aligns with the character's non-binary identity, emphasizing the importance of gender neutrality and inclusivity. However, when translating the series into Spanish, translators face the challenge of preserving Cal's non-binary identity within the language's marked gender structure. To address this, translators employ various strategies to ensure that the non-binary identity is accurately conveyed. In one specific scene where Cal shares a kissing moment with Jackson, a cisgender boy, Jackson refers to Cal as a "beautiful" person. On the one hand, the translator of the dubbed version applies a transposition technique to avoid marking the gender of the character. In this way, the adjective is turned into a noun in the Spanish translation. On the other hand, the translator of the subtitled version marks the gender of the character by translating the expression literally and using the morpheme *-e*. The use of the morpheme *-e* aims to create a more inclusive language by offering a gender-neutral alternative to the traditionally gendered forms of masculine and feminine. It is often used in written and spoken contexts to promote gender inclusivity and to challenge the binary nature of the

Spanish language. This strategy allows translators to convey the nuances of gender identity more accurately:

EN: You're beautiful.
 ES (Subtitled): Eres hermosa.
 ES (Dubbed): ¡Qué preciosidad!

As a final noteworthy example of *Sex Education*'s commitment to diverse representation, the series also shines a spotlight on the portrayal of gay characters, contributing to a variety of identities and experiences within the show's narrative. The character of Eric is portrayed as a confident young man who embraces his identity as a gay teenager. He fearlessly expresses himself and refuses to conform to societal expectations, breaking free from traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Throughout the whole series, he openly talks about his sexual orientation and sexual practices. For instance, in one scene where Otis is talking about his problems with masturbation, Eric answers by providing an explicit reference to his sexual organ. The translator of the dubbed version applies a literal translation technique but at the same time introduces a more colloquial equivalent term for the translation of the word "penis" into Spanish ("rabo"). The explicit reference is therefore maintained so as to keep the essence of the original sexual expression in the dubbed translation. However, the explicit reference is replaced by making a generalization or neutralization in the subtitled translation. In this way, the meaning of the original dialogue is maintained, but the tone differs slightly by providing a more formal expression to make reference to a specific sexual practice:

EN: At least I can touch my own penis.
 ES (Subtitled): Al menos me puedo masturbar.
 ES (Dubbed): Al menos yo sí puedo tocarme el rabo.

In another specific scene in the series *Sex Education*, there is a complex and humorous sexual expression that arises, involving a wordplay related to Eric's nickname, "Tromboner". In this scene, Eric expresses his frustration over a fellow student who teases him by referring to the nickname. Eric explains that the reason behind the nickname "Tromboner" is a rather embarrassing incident that occurred during his time playing with the school's band. He confesses that he had an erection while performing, which led to his classmates associating the trombone instrument with his sexual arousal. Despite Eric's discomfort and annoyance with the nickname, the scene takes a humorous turn as the conversation unfolds. The dialogue involves wordplay and double entendres, with characters engaging in sexually suggestive banter while still maintaining a lighthearted tone. Throughout the analysis, it is often observed that literal translation or equivalence can be successfully employed to translate sexual fictional speech involving cisgender men or cisgender women characters regardless of their sexual orientation. This strategy aims to maintain the original meaning and intention of the dialogue while adapting it to the target language. By using this technique, translators strive to preserve the essence of the characters and their interactions. However, translators need to make use of

different strategies such as adaptation to provide more idiomatic and natural expressions in the target language, and also to succeed in translating humorous expressions related to sex and sexuality. In this particular case, there is no direct equivalence to translate this word game into Spanish, requiring translators to create a new expression that elicits the same humorous effect on the target audience. The word “Tromboner” in English entails a double meaning, as it can refer both to a person who plays the trombone and to an erection. As there is not a word in Spanish that conveys this double meaning, the expression needs to be adapted. However, the part in which the character clarifies that he cannot be a “Tromboner” because he actually plays the French horn has not been transferred completely into Spanish. The word that the translators chose to replace the English nickname (“Trom-polla”) does not make direct reference to the instrument that Eric plays, so the clarification he makes about the instrument afterwards does not convey the same meaning and intention as the original text:

- EN: He still calls me Tromboner. [...]. The nickname doesn't even make sense. I play the French horn.
- ES (Subtitled): Aún me llama Trom-polla. [...]. Mi apodo tampoco tiene sentido. Yo toco la trompa.
- ES (Dubbed): Aún me llama Trompolla. [...]. Y ese mote es ridículo. Sabrá lo que es una trompa...

5. Conclusions

The presence of LGBTQ+ characters in TV series from online platforms has seen a remarkable increase in recent years, highlighting the growing inclusivity and representation in the media. Translating LGBTQ+ fictional speech containing sex-related language while preserving essential aspects such as gender identity and, specifically, non-binarism poses significant challenges for translators. These challenges extend beyond the translation of sex-related language and encompass various contexts, as the difficulty of translating fictional speech increases when diverse identities also need to be conveyed. Translators need to deal with the challenges of translating sex-related language within a LGBTQ+ context and they must find a proper way of translating sexual expressions so that they become comprehensible for all type of audiences. In this way, it becomes crucial for translators to pay special attention to the translation of dialogues written for genderqueer or non-binary characters and transgender characters, ensuring that their identities are accurately portrayed and maintained. In addition, the translation process requires an understanding of the cultural, social, and linguistic intricacies associated with LGBTQ+ representation. The knowledge of translation techniques and strategies is essential but translators also need to be familiar with LGBTQ+ issues in order to use the adequate translation strategies to express and preserve LGBTQ+ characters' identities. Collaboration with experts in the field could also facilitate the accurate portrayal of LGBTQ+ identities, contributing to an authentic and respectful representation in the translated versions of TV series.

The translations of the TV series analyzed throughout this descriptive study (*Euphoria* and *Sex Education*) prove that sex-related language does not seem to be considered a taboo when translating from English into Spanish, as there are no omissions nor censorship in the audiovisual products that have been analyzed. However, it is noteworthy that the number of sexual scenes involving LGBTQ+ characters still lags behind those featuring heterosexual characters. The low presence of this type of content in the online platforms makes it difficult to analyze translators' strategies using a quantitative approach, as the number of instances is not representative enough. In this way, the fragments analyzed throughout this qualitative study are presented as examples of possible ways to proceed when encountering sex-related language in a LGBTQ+ fictional audiovisual context. In the fragments presented, translators use a wide variety of strategies to convey fictional speech and preserve characters' identities taking into account gender and inclusiveness. The comparison between the subtitled and dubbed versions of the different TV series analyzed in this descriptive study proves that in some cases translators' decisions differ when translating sex-related language for one AVT mode or another. These differences extend beyond the specific spatiotemporal constraints and characteristics of either dubbing or subtitling and that not only has a linguistic impact on the final product but also affects the portrayal of the characters as far as gender and identity are concerned. This also implies that the message is conveyed with a slightly different meaning from that of the original text, as in some fragments the subtitled and dubbed versions render messages with different nuances. As translation of identities is a sensitive topic which has a great impact on the audiences, the translation strategies to be used for the rendering of sex-related language in a LGBTQ+ context should be coherent and consistent. For this reason, each decision made during the translation process needs to be aligned with the specific character's identity to ensure consistency between the subtitled and dubbed versions. By acknowledging and adapting to the evolving landscape of LGBTQ+ representation in audiovisual content, translators can play a vital role in ensuring that diverse identities are accurately conveyed across different cultures and languages.

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(RE)ASSESSING THE ADAPTATION OF AUDIOVISUAL TABOO CONTENT: THE ROLE OF PARATEXTUAL INFORMATION

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Citation: Bucaria, C. (2024) “(Re)Assessing the Adaptation of Audiovisual Taboo Content: The Role of Paratextual Information”, in C. Bucaria, A.D. Mitzel and A. Sileo (eds) *Taboo in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation*, *mediAzioni* 43: A56-A76, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/20516>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: This paper focuses on a recent shift in the adaptation of taboo language and content that has been happening over the last few years in the dubbing and subtitling of audiovisual content for the entertainment industry. While previous research on the cross-cultural adaptation of taboo language and subjects has pointed out that blatant examples of manipulation and censorship often occurred in dubbed and subtitled dialogue, this paper argues that recent changes in the distribution of audiovisual content – such as the global presence of streaming and on-demand platforms and an increased awareness from audiences – now tend to make it less likely for major cases of cross-cultural taboo manipulation to happen without going unnoticed or generating pushback. By looking at the cases of Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, the paper argues that the paratextual information available on the interfaces of streaming platforms – in the form of extra-textual tags and content advisories – reframes taboo content for global audiences in a less invasive way when compared to the heavy-handed, textual manipulation that was common in dubbing and subtitling in the age of (exclusively) linear TV. Examples from the Netflix and Amazon Prime Video English- and Italian-language interfaces are provided to support the idea that in these cases cultural and linguistic localization can play a crucial role in adapting taboo content for global audiences and in affecting their viewing choices.

Keywords: audiovisual translation; paratexts; interfaces; streaming platforms; rating systems; content advisories; trigger warnings.

1. Introduction

Taboo content and language have always been key, yet complicated, multifactorial aspects in the distribution of audiovisual products. While adapted versions of films and TV series are known to have been created for different audiences even intra-culturally – for example by either editing out entire scenes or bleeping swearwords for TV primetime or in-flight entertainment – it is the distribution across national borders that most often tests the boundaries of taboo acceptability from a lingua-cultural perspective. Needless to say, navigating the boundaries between linguistic accuracy and cultural adaptation is particularly challenging when operating between cultural contexts that do not share the same kind of sensitivity towards the same taboos. Indeed, work has been – and continues to be – done in the discipline of audiovisual translation investigating how interlinguistic adaptation processes have negotiated what is perceived as potentially disturbing or less-than-desirable content for audiences in different lingua-cultural contexts (among others, Pavesi and Malinverno 2000; Díaz-Cintas 2012; Díaz-Cintas *et al.* 2016; Valdeón 2020; Ávila-Cabrera 2023; Pavesi and Formentelli 2023). Evidence of manipulation and/or censorship in media texts has been found not only in contexts in which repressive political regimes and religious prescriptiveness predictably tend to thwart freedom of expression (e.g., Vandaele 2002; Alsharhan 2020; Yuan 2023), but also – more surprisingly – in democratic countries in which such freedom should, in theory, be guaranteed (for the Italian context see for example Bianchi 2008; Parini 2014; Zanotti 2016).

However, a recent shift should be acknowledged in the adaptation of taboo language and content as far as non-linear TV distribution is concerned. While traditional, linear distribution might still enforce, to some extent, the downplaying or even the complete omission of taboo words or references to the spheres of sexuality, illness, death, disability, religion, politics, etc. (Allan and Burrige 2006), most streaming platforms have implemented a detailed paratextual apparatus of tags, disclaimers, and content advisories that alert and guide subscribers in their viewing choices. For a number of reasons that will be detailed in the next sections, this system of extra-textual material has provided additional tools in the cross-cultural reframing of taboo content in both fictional and non-fictional programming, and in some cases has arguably replaced the heavy-handed textual manipulation that used to be the norm until a few years or decades ago. In the Italian context, specifically, the situation described above has been undoubtedly facilitated by legislative changes as well, with a gradual shift taking place toward self-regulation in media distribution. While for TV outlets self-regulation had already been in place thanks to 2002's "Codice di autoregolamentazione TV e Minori"¹ (Self-regulation code for TV and minors), preemptive censorship in films was definitively removed as recently as 2021. A new rating system² has replaced the previous system, which was put in place by a 1962 law and required preemptive clearance before a film could be distributed

¹ <https://www.mimit.gov.it/index.php/it/ministero/organismi/area-tutela-minori/codice-di-autoregolamentazione>

² <https://cinema.cultura.gov.it/cosa-facciamo/attivita-amministrative/tutela-dei-minori-classificazione>

in theaters. For territories in which a similar self-regulation system is in place, streaming platforms are therefore held accountable for providing ratings for their own programming that mirror the target country's approved ratings.

It seems particularly relevant to reassess the ways in which taboo language and content are repackaged for global distribution in this historical moment, in which taboo content is ever-present in fictional and non-fictional audiovisual offerings at the production end and in which, at the distribution end, streaming platforms largely subscribe to a policy of not directly altering taboos (see section 2). The landscape of the international distribution of localized content is further complicated by viewers' new demands and expectations as far as sensitive topics are concerned. These seem to sometimes represent possibly competing tensions, with on the one hand groups of vocal viewers keen on denouncing content manipulation or less than adequate translation choices in dubbing and subtitling, and, on the other, audience segments who demand the clear flagging of triggering subjects (such as rape and suicide), especially for the benefit of minors and trauma survivors.

In this context, this paper aims at taking stock of a shift that is in some ways independent of audiovisual localization, as the self-rating systems on streaming platforms are applied to content regardless of global distribution. At the same time, however, paratextual information about content available on such subscription services is an integral part of the user interface that also requires localization for the different territories in which these services are accessible, and its adaptation should therefore be studied as part of audiovisual translation (AVT) at large.

The next few sections will look at some of the ways in which taboo language and content are flagged on two of the most common streaming platforms available in Italy – Netflix and Amazon Prime Video – with the aim of both mapping these different systems and to call attention to how the localization of paratextual information (such as tags indicating genres and sensitive themes) is a key element in providing extra-textual guidance to programs containing depictions of taboo language and/or sensitive subjects meant in the widest possible sense. After describing the evolution of taboo content adaptation in audiovisual products (section 2), the paper will move on to stress the significance of paratextual information on streaming platforms and to provide a few examples of how these paratexts were adapted from English into Italian (section 3). I will argue that, although the situation might be different in countries/territories other than Europe, such paratextual information on streaming platforms is a form of intervention that has in part replaced the hands-on, textual manipulation of content that was much more common in AVT practice until a few years ago. Section 4 will offer some concluding remarks and ideas for future research in this field.

2. The cross-cultural adaptation of audiovisual taboo content: then and now

The cross-cultural manipulation of audiovisual texts – not just in terms of censorship, but, more in general, as a subtler form of cultural domestication –

has been abundantly documented in the literature (see Introduction). In Italy, this phenomenon can be traced back as far as the fascist regime's decision in the 1930s to ban/edit foreign-sounding productions, particularly the ones that were seen as threatening to the ideals of national identity and values supported by the regime (Mereu Keating 2016). Historically, dubbing has been seen as the AVT mode that has been most conducive to this kind of manipulation because of its ability to completely hide the original audio track through revoicing (Chaume 2018), thus providing ample leeway for toning-down strategies such as the use of euphemisms, omission, paraphrase, shifts in register, and standardization.

Television content in the age of linear TV has been particularly subject to this kind of intervention. On traditional TV, content has to fit into predetermined boxes, put in place not just by different cultural sensitivities but also by programming rules and conventions on certain networks, for specific audience segments and time slots. Additionally, in the past manipulation of source-language material was determined not only by the presence of themes or language perceived as disturbing per se, but also, in a number of cases, because of an objective mismatch between the source- and target-culture distribution systems. Famously, in Italy the animated series *The Simpsons* (1989-ongoing) was initially marketed as a children's program, and Italia 1, a terrestrial network part of the privately-owned Mediaset group mainly targeting younger viewers, aired the show in the afternoon, as opposed to the much later time slot offered by FOX in the United States (Barra 2011). A similar mismatch can be found for the series *Six feet Under* (2001-2005), an HBO production offering a surreal, often darkly humorous take on subjects such as death, mental illness, and relationships that was first aired in Italy on Italia 1, with evident consequences on the integrity of its adaptation through dubbing (Bucaria 2010).

Despite the fact that *Six Feet Under* was perhaps one extreme example of manipulation and presumably not all TV content was adapted with the same kind of abandon in the early to mid-2000s, research has shown that other series have undergone a similar fate (Chiaro 2007; Bucaria 2018) and that the manipulation approach was being routinely adopted in AVT practice in Italy, attracting scholarly attention and later even becoming part of "fan lore". For instance, two famous examples of manipulation commented on online blogs involve the popular series *How I met your mother* (2005-2014) and *Friends* (1994-2004), and how their Italian dubbing negotiated two examples of jokes based on political taboos – one mentioning Mussolini's assassination and the other referencing Silvio Berlusconi's morally questionable behavior while holding political office. In both examples, an explicit intent seems evident to purge the original dialogue of "uncomfortable" references to Italy's history or more recent political situation. It should be noted that *Friends* was originally aired on state-owned RAI and *How I met your mother* first found its way on Italian screens on Italia 1, a private network founded and owned by Berlusconi and his family. Similar examples of manipulation involving different kinds of taboos have reportedly been common in the adaptation of more recent audiovisual products as well, and might have been the result of – if not explicit ideological censorship from the commissioners – at least the individual translators' and adapters' self-censorship (e.g., Zaixi 2019).

Further evidence of the extensive manipulation approach in the Italian context – regardless of the presence of taboo elements – is provided by the dubbed version of the TV series *The Nanny* (*La Tata*, 1993-1999), which completely domesticated the premises of the show. Fran Drescher’s character (Fran Fine), a Jewish-American woman from Flushing (Queens, New York) was re-packaged as Francesca Cacace, an Italian immigrant from the Lazio region of Ciociaria (Frosinone). Not only were all references to New-York Jewish culture and language replaced by Italian realia or dialectal turns of phrase, but the familial relationships between the characters were also changed – Fran’s mother Sylvia became her aunt Assunta, while her grandmother Yetta became another aunt (Ferrari 2011). The dubbing adapters for the series decided that Italian viewers would not be able to “get” the culture-specificity of the original show and would therefore not enjoy the sitcom. However, regardless of the success of this domesticating approach – which no doubt contributed to create a huge following for the series over the years – it is undeniable that such an extreme approach, which was also previously adopted for the Roseanne Barr sitcom *Roseanne* (*Pappa e Ciccio*, 1988-1997),³ would probably not be viable in today’s more complex audiovisual distribution landscape.

The recent shift that this paper aims at illuminating is a partial moving away of more recent audiovisual adaptation practice from this kind of systematic and in some ways “anything goes” alteration of audiovisual content towards a more restrained approach to the cross-cultural adaptation of some of these products. While until a few decades ago dubbing dialogue adapters were not only free, but in some cases forced, to improvise target-language dialogue because of missing or inaccurate source-language scripts or because of difficulties in consulting adequate material to support their translation choices, recent changes have made this option no longer viable.⁴ In fact, in the age of streaming and on-demand services the decision to offer only a censored – or even too domesticated – localized version seems to go against the current general trend, which is to not omit taboo words and/or tone down dialogue, and not to arbitrarily cut out “disturbing” scenes completely.

Over recent years, a number of factors have contributed to what appears to be a diminished tolerance for manipulation and censorship in AVT practice, both from distributors and audiences. At the production/distribution end, the global reach of streaming platforms has made it possible for these services to exercise increased vigilance on how their content is adapted in a number of different target languages, arguably even more so as far as their own original productions are concerned (part of what Lobato (2019) calls “long-distance localization”). In the case of Netflix, for example, the company’s centralized localization policies are readily available on their Partner Help Center,⁵ on which Netflix’s localization providers across the globe can find detailed, language-specific

³ In the Italian version, Roseanne become Annarosa from Naples and she speaks with a slight Neapolitan accent.

⁴ “Il doppiaggio tra passato e presente: traduttori e dialoghisti a confronto”, roundtable discussion that took place at the University of Bologna’s Department of Interpreting and Translation, May 6th, 2024.

⁵ <https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/hc/en-us>

guidelines on how to create subtitles, dubs and voice over tracks for the service's products. These guidelines also include specific instructions on what to do in the case of potentially offensive dialogue, stating that "Dialogue must never be censored. Expletives should be rendered as faithfully as possible".⁶ The company's declared zero tolerance for manipulation of the source-language content is also reiterated in the guidelines to AVT providers on how to find solutions to problematic adaptations from their freelance practitioners:

Translations and transcriptions should always be an accurate representation of the intent of the original content language without adding additional vulgarity or censorship.

Always match the tone of the original content, while remaining relevant to the target audience (e.g. replicate the tone, register, class, formality, etc. in the target language in an equivalent way).⁷

Amazon Prime Video has also adopted similar localization guidelines. While previously much more leeway was left to the professionals taking part in the adaptation process, choices on how to render taboo language and content have now been centralized by these corporations, as opposed to being left almost entirely to the national localization teams, like it used to be in the past. While I am not suggesting that this policy is enough to ensure that all products are devoid of manipulation, major cases of censorial intervention on the audiovisual texts themselves are now much more strictly monitored and likely to be flagged during the localization process.

An additional factor typifying the reduced tolerance towards manipulation in AVT practice is to be found at the receiving end of the localization process, i.e., viewers subscribing to these streaming services. The last few years have seen an increase in audience engagement and empowerment in providing feedback for dubbed and subtitled products, which translates into stricter surveillance on the localized versions from certain audience segments through social media and other online outlets, such as blogs and YouTube. Combined with the immediate access to the source-language versions granted by digitally distributed content, this growing empowerment afforded by social media and the Web 2.0 virtually to all users of any service or product has contributed to making the distributors of audiovisual content more accountable for their choices in terms of the manipulation of taboo elements and language (Bucaria 2019), but also, more in general, towards localized versions that are considered problematic on other levels (e.g., Bucaria 2023).

This ever-evolving landscape of audiovisual localization and distribution in the era of streaming services begs the question of what happens when the copious amounts of taboo language and content currently available on these platforms travel cross-culturally. As mentioned in the introduction, this appears to be a particularly relevant question in a market in which competing tensions seem to

⁶ From the "Italian Timed Text Style Guide" for subtitles, available at this link: <https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/hc/en-us/articles/215349898-Italian-Timed-Text-Style-Guide>

⁷ <https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/hc/en-us/articles/360050602953-Translation-Offensive-Translation-Error-Text->

be at play. On the one hand, there are the sheer quantity of taboo content available on streaming platforms across different genres (from comedy and drama to adult animation, stand-up comedy and true crime documentaries) and these providers' self-branding as unequivocal bastions of "edgy" and "unfiltered" content (see anti-censorship guidelines above). At the other end of this balancing act are viewers' expectations and/or demands for said unfiltered content to remain unaltered during the localization process, and, at the same time, to also mediate potentially disturbing content for the benefit of particularly vulnerable audience segments.

This paper argues that an attempt to square this localization circle comes in the form of extra-textual intervention rather than, as it was more often the case in the past, through textual manipulation per se. Since both the commissioners and the end-users of the localized versions are likely to be especially vigilant of major departures from the source-language material, target-language dialogues are likely to be left more "intact", while the flagging of taboo language and sensitive subjects happens extra-textually, to be exact through the paratextual information available as part of a program's description on the user interface. Naturally, the implication here is not that taboos are not any longer downplayed or omitted across all target languages – in fact, some studies (e.g., Alsharhan 2020) suggest that in certain lingua-cultural contexts audiovisual translators still consistently resort to euphemizing as a strategy to render taboo language. However – at least in the European context – what the current landscape of global audiovisual distribution seems to shy away from is the systematic and overt alteration of source-language content, because it would pose too big a risk of repercussions were these instances to be detected and exposed.

The remaining part of the paper will describe the ways in which two streaming platforms – Netflix and Amazon Prime Video (APV) – use paratextual information to guide subscribers in their viewing choices when it comes to taboo language and themes present in their products, and will comment on the importance of considering these paratexts as a key part of the audiovisual localization process.

3. Paratextual elements in audiovisual localization

In recent years, a considerable amount of scholarship on paratexts has come from the discipline of media studies, which has applied the original conceptualization of book paratexts by French literary theorist Gérard Genette (1997) to media texts such as films and TV series. Notably, Gray (2010) introduced the distinction between, on the one hand, industry-created promotional paratexts such as posters, trailers, teasers, merchandise, and other material released by the creators and distributors of media texts, and, on the other hand, fan-created paratexts, such as fanfiction and video mash-ups, which fans create for, among others, affective and community-building reasons.

Similarly to literary paratexts, media paratexts may have a number of different functions, that go from offering a summary of the content of a media product, such as film or TV synopses, to enticing potential viewers to go to the

movie theater or stream online content. For example, titles, posters, trailers, and other visuals all perform such “appellative” function, in Nord’s terminology (2006). Gray labels these “entryway paratexts”, as they often are the first contact that audiences have with the “main text” (for example a film or TV series), and as such are powerful tools in framing and contributing to the decoding of the media text that they anticipate or around which they are placed. More in general, carefully packaged paratexts can prime specific readings and interpretations, and create expectations and associations with other similar or related media products.

Despite the importance of paratexts in intercultural communication, less attention has been devoted to these crucial texts by (audiovisual) translation scholars (Bucaria and Batchelor 2023), with some exceptions including Batchelor’s book-length study of paratexts and translation (2018), studies by Ross (2013) and Bucaria (2021) on the adaptation of film titles, and O’Sullivan’s research on the paratextual use of retranslations on DVD extras and covers (2018). In particular, rarely has attention been paid to the role played by paratextual elements in the cross-cultural adaptation of audiovisual taboo content.

By specifically focusing on the ways in which streaming platforms localize their interfaces for the global consumption of sensitive content, this paper acknowledges the importance of these entryway paratexts, because, as Johnson notes, “online TV interfaces also play a paratextual role in shaping our encounters with media texts” (2019: 111). The ephemeral paratextual material (Grainge 2011; Pesce and Noto 2016) that accompanies the content available on streaming platforms is for all intents and purposes an integral part of the paratextual apparatus that may affect viewers’ choices. These include not only trailers, teasers, cast interviews or specials, but also, significantly, content warnings, advisories, and rating systems that alert viewers about the potentially disturbing elements that some of this content depicts.⁸ Sections 3.1 and 3.2 will focus, respectively, on tags, rating systems, and additional paratexts that are used to reframe taboo or sensitive content.

3.1. Tags and rating systems

In compliance with the self-regulating mechanism by which media outlets have to provide ratings and advisories for their own content (see Introduction), on both Netflix and APV content is categorized both by genre and maturity ratings, and content advisories describing the potentially disturbing elements are also provided. Additionally, both Netflix and APV use tags in the form of keywords, usually describing the product’s tone. The rest of this section will provide more detailed examples for each platform in the English and Italian interfaces. It should be noted that the examples provided here are not meant as a statistically

⁸ It should be noted that on streaming and on-demand platforms, personalized recommendations (e.g., “you may also like” or “more like this”) based on users’ history and specific algorithm-created categories can also be considered as paratextual “settings” that guide viewers’ experience and enjoyment – albeit perhaps more implicitly – however, this is beyond the scope of the present paper.

relevant selection, but merely as an exploratory illustration of the kind of analysis that can be carried out about the adaptation of paratextual information. Further studies might want to include a more representative sample, for example in terms of genres and formats.

Also worth noting is the fact that the concept of “taboo” adopted for the purposes of this paper is as wide as the tags and content advisories provided by the two platforms. In other words, both the type of taboo (e.g., sex, violence, racial stereotypes, rape, suicide) and its various manifestations (for example visual and/or plot-related content, as well as sensitive language in the form of offensive and derogatory terms) were not further categorized by the researcher but simply commented on based on the platforms’ self-identified content labels and advisories.

3.1.1. *Netflix*

For each of its products, the Netflix interface provides users with a very short description of the plot (sometimes just an endorsement from a critic or entertainment publication), accompanied by information on year of production, cast members, director(s)/creator(s), and in some cases the ranking in the Netflix TOP10 list (for example, “#9 in TV Shows Today”). Genres are used to classify content and can be used to search the platform for similar content by selecting the hyperlinked words. Genre descriptions tend to be quite detailed, not being limited to just “drama”, “comedy”, “thriller”, etc., but offering more nuanced indications, including, for example, the origin of the product and whether it’s a TV show, film, stand-up comedy special, documentary, docuseries, etc.

A maturity rating is always present, usually accompanied by a list of elements that are flagged as potentially problematic, such as “violence”, “sex”, “nudity”, “language”, “sexual violence”, “suicide”, “domestic abuse”. Less commonly, the more generic tags “mature themes” and “suggestive content” are also used. By selecting the maturity rating, users are linked to a detailed description⁹ of the maturity rating system applied for their country. In the case of Italy, the classifications used by Netflix are: ALL, 7+, 10+, 13+, 16+, 18+, with the last two ratings being grouped into the category “Recommended for Adults”. Additional information is also provided on how the content tags might change depending on different seasons of the same TV series. This description also explains that, once the program starts, the age rating and content tags appear on the left-hand top corner of the screen, as well as providing instructions on how to set a maturity rating on a user profile. Information available at the same link further explains that “Netflix sets maturity ratings by the frequency and impact of mature content in a title, such as the amount of violence, sex, adult language, nudity, or substance use that may be present”.

One of the most interesting among Netflix’s paratextual information – and perhaps the most directly relevant aspect in terms of translation per se – is the use of tags (usually one or more adjectives) to position the platform’s content in

⁹ The content appears in the language selected by the user as their display language: <https://help.netflix.com/en/node/2064>

terms of general tone. For example, *Bridgerton* is “swoonworthy, witty, emotional” (“travolgente, arguto, emozionante”), *The Big Bang Theory* is “quirky” (“bizzarro”), and *Black Mirror* is “mind-bending, ominous” (“spiazzante, inquietante”). These items link to recommendations to similar products – for example by selecting “irreverent”, users are shown more content containing this tag.

By way of example and without any pretense of exhaustiveness, Tables 1 and 2 offer the two sets of paratextual information, in English and Italian, provided by Netflix for the series *After Life* and *Big Mouth*, both containing copious amounts of taboo language and content and both rated 16+.

Table 1. Netflix’s paratextual information for *After Life*.

| | English | Italian |
|--|---|---|
| Description | This darkly comedic series about a widower struggling with the meaning of life was created by and stars Ricky Gervais . | Un giornalista cerca di superare la morte della moglie trasformandosi in un burbero , nel tentativo di tenere lontane le persone che cercano di aiutarlo. ¹⁰ |
| Genres / Generi | TV Dramas, British, TV Comedies | Drammi TV, Britannico, Commedie TV |
| This show is: / Caratteristiche | Deadpan, Witty, Irreverent | Umorismo inglese, Arguto, Irriverente |
| Maturity rating / Clasificazione per età | 16+ language, substances, sexual violence, suicide. Recommended for ages 16 and up. | 16+ linguaggio, uso di droga, violenza sessuale, suicidio. Non adatto ai minori di 16 anni. |

After Life is a series created by British comedian Ricky Gervais that revolves around the main character’s grief after his wife dies of cancer. Tony, Gervais’ character, is so grief-stricken after his wife’s death that he turns into a particularly unfiltered version of himself, always saying whatever crosses his mind, with little concern for other people’s feelings. In true Gervais style, this attitude generates frequent darkly funny situations, but also gloomy explorations of a person’s reaction to grief, such as suicidal ideation. The series is rated 16+ for the presence of the following elements: language, substances, sexual violence and suicide. The keywords used to describe the show are “deadpan” (“umorismo inglese”), “witty” (“arguto”), and “irreverent” (“irriverente”), and it should be noted that the show is also tagged as “Dark Comedy” (“Commedia cupa”) in the preview box (mobile version), although for some reason not in the program’s description per se. Interestingly, while “witty” and “irreverent” were rendered in Italian with a close equivalent (“arguto” and “irriverente” respectively), the

¹⁰ “A journalist tries to get over his wife’s death by turning into a grouch, in an attempt to keep people away who are trying to help him”.

modifier “deadpan” is adapted in Italian as “umorismo inglese” (“British/English humor”). While it might fit this particular show, this tag is also used on the platform for non-British productions such as, among others, *BoJack Horseman*, *Orange is the New Black*, and the Iliza Schlesinger film *Good on Paper*. One might therefore wonder whether the Italian translation – which is arguably only a partial, quite narrow equivalent for the word “deadpan” – might potentially skew viewers’ expectations and consequently affect their choice whether or not to watch products containing this tag.

Also interesting in terms of translation is the fact that the short description for this series is different in the two languages, with the English one further highlighting the show’s potentially controversial content by means of the phrase “darkly comedic”, which is not present in the Italian version. Moreover, the English version uses Ricky Gervais’ name to create an association with his specific brand of very provocative, no-filter comedy, with which audiences might be familiar from the comedian’s stints as host of the Golden Globe Awards or, more in general, from his social media presence. The Italian version does not mention Gervais’ name, thus failing to prime direct associations with that specific brand of taboo comedy.

Big Mouth is an animated comedy series created by Nick Kroll, Andrew Goldberg, Mark Levin and Jennifer Flackett, and addresses, in quite an explicit way, the disruptive changes brought on by puberty in a group of teenagers under the guidance of their own private “hormone monsters”. The series is described as “raunchy, witty, quirky” and recommended for people 16 and over because of “sex, nudity, language”.

Table 2. Netflix’s paratextual information for *Big Mouth*.

| | English | Italian |
|--|--|--|
| Description | Powered by wicked humor , a stellar cast and genuine heart, this NSFW coming-of-age comedy earned multiple Emmy nods for Outstanding Animated Program. | Con un umorismo perverso , un cast stellare e uno spirito genuino, questa commedia di formazione per un pubblico adulto ha vinto vari Emmy come Miglior programma animato. ¹¹ |
| Genres / Generi | Sitcoms, TV Comedies, US TV Shows | Sitcom, Commedie TV, Serie TV USA |
| This show is: / Caratteristiche | Raunchy, Witty, Quirky | Ammiccante, Arguto, Bizzarro |
| Maturity rating / Clasificazione per età | 16+ sex, nudity, language. Recommended for ages 16 and up. | 16+ sesso, nudità, linguaggio. Non adatto ai minori di 16 anni. |

¹¹ “With perverse humor, a stellar cast and a genuine spirit, this coming-of-age comedy for an adult audience won various Emmys as Best Animated Program”.

As in the case of *After Life*, the Italian translation of specific tags and keywords offers interesting observations on the possible associations created in potential viewers. For example, the adjective “raunchy” is localized with the Italian adjective “ammiccante”, meaning “suggestive” or “allusive”, from the verb “ammiccare”, literally “to wink” but also metaphorically “to allude/refer to”. However, “raunchy” – used on Netflix to describe films such as *Bridesmaids*, *Superbad*, and *The Hangover*, series such as *Sex education* and *Shameless*, and several stand-up comedy specials by comedians such as Amy Schumer, Ali Wong and Sarah Silverman – arguably denotes content that is “sexually explicit, vulgar, obscene”, (often in a comedic, exaggerated way), and not just “allusive”, which might be read here as a slightly euphemistic solution.

The description for the show – which, unlike the one for *After Life*, appears to be a translation of the same English text – also provides material for observations on the localization of this paratextual information. While the acronym “NSFW” (Not Safe For Work) is rendered with the acceptable functional equivalent “per un pubblico adulto” (“for an adult audience”), the expression “wicked humor” is adapted as “umorismo perverso”, which literally translates as “perverse (in the sense of morally deviant/twisted) humor”, arguably a more judgmental take on this particular brand of comedy than would have been achieved through different adjectives, such as “audace” or “malizioso” (naughty, mischievous).

A more general look at the 16+ and 18+ offerings on Netflix reveals that other tags and keywords used to flag taboo subjects are, for example, “offbeat” / “anticonformistico” (non-conformist, unconventional), “quirky” / “bizzarro” (strange, bizarre), “witty” / “arguto” (witty, clever), “gritty” / “crudo” (raw, in the sense of realistic), “provocative” / “provocatorio” (provocative), “no filter” / “senza filtri” (without filters), “ominous” / “inquietante” (disturbing, unsettling), and “dark” / “cupo” (dark).

3.1.2 Amazon Prime Video (APV)

APV’s paratextual information includes a synopsis of the product, year of production, genre(s), a maturity rating and, in some cases, additional information on award-winning films or TV series (e.g. “OSCAR® 6X winner” or “GOLDEN GLOBES® 3X winner”). Genre tags appear to be more conventional and broader than the ones used by Netflix (e.g., drama, suspense, horror, thriller, unscripted, kids, young adult audience, comedy, romance), but, similarly to Netflix, users can select them for suggestions on similar content in that genre. APV uses the following maturity ratings: Kids (All), Older Kids (7+), Teens (13+), Young adults (16+), and Adults (18+). As opposed to the Netflix interface, however, it takes much more effort to find this information, which is available in a subsection of the “help” section accessible from the user profile called “Content grievance and complaints”.¹² This subsection lists maturity ratings for some of the countries in which APV is available, but does not include further information on the rationale underlying the platform’s use of these

¹² <https://www.primevideo.com/help?nodeId=GFGQU3WYEG6FSJFJ>

ratings. Overall, APV's approach to communicating their ratings policy appears to be less transparent than Netflix's. However, contrary to Netflix, in the case of TV series APV displays the rating for each episode next to its synopsis and this provides a more differentiated assessment depending on each episode's content and themes.

Tags describing the tone of a product are not used across the board on APV (although they can be found for some of their content),¹³ nor do they link to similar content on the platform. Some of the tags that relate to the presence of potentially taboo subjects partially overlap with Netflix's and are adapted with the same Italian equivalents, such as "dark" ("cupo"), "ominous" ("inquietante"), "frightening" ("spaventoso"), "gritty" ("crudo"). It is worth noting that vulgar content of a sexual nature is usually tagged as "coarse" / "grossolano" (rough, vulgar), instead of "raunchy" / "ammiccante". While the APV tag is arguably a more general description of this kind of content than "raunchy", the Italian adaptation (*grossolano*) seems to be a closer transposition.

A separate "Details" tab contains information on cast members, director(s)/creator(s), audio tracks and subtitles, and content advisories. The latter appear to be less varied than Netflix's, as content tagged as 13+, 16+ and 18+ usually contains combinations of the same 8 advisories: violence, frightening scenes, foul language, nudity, sexual content, smoking, alcohol use, and substance use. APV's content advisories seem to be concerned with the same broad spheres of taboos as Netflix, although APV adds a further category, "smoking", that to the best of my knowledge Netflix does not flag as problematic. Series synopses tend to be longer and more descriptive on APV as opposed to Netflix, perhaps as a way to offset the absence of tone tags for much of the content on this platform.

Table 3. APV's paratextual information for *Fleabag*.

| | English | Italian |
|----------------|---|--|
| S1 Description | <i>Fleabag</i> is a hilarious and poignant window into the mind of a dry-witted, sexual, angry, grief-riddled woman, as she hurls herself at modern living in London. Award-winning playwright Phoebe Waller-Bridge writes and stars as <i>Fleabag</i> , an unfiltered woman trying to heal , while rejecting anyone who tries to help her and keeping up her bravado all along. | <i>Fleabag</i> è un'esilarante e intensa finestra nella mente di una londinese sarcastica, sensuale, arrabbiata e straziata dal dolore . La pluripremiata commediografa Phoebe Waller-Bridge ha scritto e recitato nel ruolo di protagonista di <i>Fleabag</i> , una donna priva di filtri inibitori che cerca di superare un lutto , ma si ostina ed allontana chiunque tenti di aiutarla mantenendo un atteggiamento spavaldo. ¹⁴ |

¹³ It was not possible to immediately identify the rationale for the choice to include tone tags for some products and not others.

¹⁴ "*Fleabag* is a hilarious and intense window into the life of a woman from London who is sarcastic, sensual, angry and grief-riddled. Multiple award-winning playwright Phoebe Waller-

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| Genres / Generi | S1: Comedy S2: Comedy, Drama | S1: Commedia S2: Commedia, Drammatici |
| Maturity rating / Clasificazione per età | S1: 18+ nudity, violence, alcohol use, smoking, foul language, sexual content S2: 16+ nudity, violence, alcohol use, smoking, foul language, sexual content | S1: 18+ nudità, violenza, uso di alcol, scene con fumatori, linguaggio volgare, contenuto sessuale S2: 16+ nudità, violenza, uso di alcol, scene con fumatori, linguaggio volgare, contenuto sessuale |

Table 3 summarizes some of the paratextual information available for the series *Fleabag*, an internationally successful comedy/drama series created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge – who also stars in the titular role – and focusing on the protagonist’s often disastrous approach to the relationships in her life. In this case, variations are noticeable between the two seasons of the show, with the genre tag “drama” being added to the second season and the maturity rating being lowered from 18+ to 16+ from season 1 to season 2, despite content advisories remaining unchanged. The show’s synopsis also includes useful keywords that offer more context on the series and its tone. The adjectives used to describe *Fleabag* herself seem to be particularly relevant to confirm the content advisories for the series: she is described as “dry-witted” (“sarcastica”), “sexual” (“sensuale”), “angry” (“arrabbiata”), “grief-riddled” (“straziata dal dolore”), and “unfiltered” (“priva di filtri inibitori”). The Italian adaptation is mostly close to the English-language description of *Fleabag*, with the exception of the word “sexual”, rendered instead as “sensuale” (sensual), which arguably euphemizes the explicitly sexual nature of some of the protagonist’s encounters and comments in the form of asides to the audience. Notably, unlike the Ricky Gervais case discussed above, Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s maternity of the show is fully acknowledged in both synopses as paratextually relevant information for viewers. As an additional point of interest, it should be noted that whether or not the use of less adherent, seemingly euphemistic adaptations for some of these adjectives (e.g., “sensuale” instead of “sexual” and “ammiccante” for “raunchy” in examples from Netflix) are the result of a conscious attempt at edulcorating the content or simply a consequence of oversights is difficult to assess without further investigation into the roles and workflow for the adaptation of these paratexts. Indeed, particularly as far as synopses are concerned, further research is needed to understand who the translators are that are tasked with adapting these paratexts – are they human translators? are they the same translators responsible for adapting the series/film/documentary in question? – and whether or not further quality control is provided before the content is made available on the platforms.

Bridge wrote and starred as *Fleabag*, a woman without filters who is trying to get over a person’s death, but is driving everyone away who tries to help her by keeping up her bold attitude”.

Most examples discussed above for both platforms refer to original content, i.e., cases in which Netflix and Amazon Studios are both producers and distributors of their own content. However, streaming platforms also distribute a considerable amount of content that they did not originally produce and that is sometimes simultaneously available on other platforms as well. While some of this content receives similar maturity ratings on both platforms – the series *The Good Doctor* and *Young Sheldon*, for instance, are rated 16+ and 13+ respectively on both Netflix and APV – a cursory look at other examples reveals some discrepancies. The film *Fight Club* is rated 16+ on Netflix (for “violence and self-harm”) but 18+ on APV (for “nudity, violence, substance use, alcohol use, smoking, foul language, sexual content”). The series *The Office* (US version) is recommended for people 13 and over on Netflix (no content advisory) but for people 16 and over on APV (“substance use, foul language, sexual content”); conversely, Netflix assigns “teen” series *Riverdale*¹⁵ a much higher rating (16+) than APV (7+). If we look beyond the two platforms considered here, the picture becomes even more varied. For example, *The Big Bang Theory* is rated 16+ on APV (“violence, alcohol use, foul language, sexual content”), 13+ on Netflix (“sex”) and PT (per tutti – “for all”) on SKY. The film *The Favourite* is 18+ on APV (“Nudity, violence, alcohol use, smoking, foul language, sexual content”), 16+ on Disney+, and 13+ on Netflix (“violence, sex, substances, self-harm, mature themes”). Different maturity ratings in some cases imply a change in the recommended age bracket across different platforms. This means, for example, that *Riverdale* is considered “Recommended for adults” according to Netflix ratings but “safe” for Older Kids (7+) according to APV.¹⁶

While further, more systematic research would be needed to assess whether some platforms are stricter than others in applying their maturity ratings and advisories for similar content, it seems likely that a certain level of subjectivity is at play in how these ratings (re)frame taboo content for the same national audience and potentially impact subscribers’ viewing choices.

3.2. Other disclaimers and trigger warnings

Other forms of paratextual information may be used in order to flag potentially disturbing elements. For particularly sensitive content, platforms sometimes choose to pair their rating system and content advisories with additional materials that function as trigger warnings and disclaimers. As with the paratextual information addressed in the previous section, the underlying idea is that the flagging of taboo subjects is performed extra-textually as opposed to hands-on intervention on the products’ dialogue and/or scenes. For international distribution, platforms with a global reach sometimes localize such paratexts for national audiences.

Recent examples of this strategy on Netflix include additional material provided for the drama series *13 Reasons Why*, which, over four seasons, tells the story of the ways which rape and suicide affect the lives of a group of American

¹⁵ *Riverdale* is available on APV only for seasons 4 through 6.

¹⁶ I am very grateful to Marilinda Malaspina for her help in collecting these examples.

teenagers. In addition to the 16+ rating for “violence, sex, substances, sexual violence, suicide”, and tags describing the show as “dark, suspenseful, emotional”, a “content warning” is also present stating that:

This series contains scenes that viewers may find disturbing, including graphic depictions of sexual assault, substance abuse, and suicide. If you or anyone you know need support or crisis resources, please go to 13ReasonsWhy.info for more information.

When it first appeared in 2017, the series became controversial with some viewers because of its very raw depictions of rape and suicide in a group of teenagers, and especially because viewers felt that Netflix was not offering viewers sufficiently accurate trigger warnings prior to watching the show. As often happens, the warning above was therefore added as a consequence of complaints from viewers. Currently, the first episode of each season also includes another form of content warning: for the first three seasons it’s a brief video presentation – both dubbed and subtitled into Italian – featuring the main cast members. The video addresses the importance of talking about the issues depicted in the show, but also alerts viewers that they might want to watch the series with a “trusted adult”. The actors also provide contact information for the benefit of people who are struggling with similar issues. For season 4, a warning to the same effect is presented as on-screen text with subtitles in Italian. This case serves as a further example of how some distributors of audiovisual content now choose to be more receptive to “grassroot” initiatives of this kind from their subscribers.

The horror anthology series *Them* on APV is rated 18+ for “nudity, violence, frightening scenes, substance use, smoking, foul language, sexual content”. The first season is set in the early 1950s, when a black family – the Emorys – moves into a white neighborhood and faces extreme racism from their neighbors as well as being the victims of supernatural forces that start threatening their lives. Reportedly (Braxton 2021), *Them* spurred mixed reactions from critics and viewers because of its depiction of extreme racial violence, especially in the wake of recurring incidents of real-life brutality toward black Americans in the United States and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement. In addition to the standard content advisories, APV chose to add the following on-screen warning at the beginning of season 1’s episode 5, which contains a particularly gruesome depiction of violent and traumatic events in the Emorys’ back story. In this case, the warning is not subtitled into Italian.

The following program contains scenes that display graphic content and violence, including sexual violence and violence against a minor. Viewer discretion is advised. / To hear from the creator and the cast, please visit the series page for bonus behind-the-scenes commentary.

Similar warnings have been recently adopted by platforms not only for modern-day productions, but also for older content that contains outdated and problematic depictions or treatment of issues concerning racist stereotypes and the representation of minority identities. Famously, Disney+ has included a

disclaimer for animated films such as *Dumbo* (1941), *Peter Pan* (1953), and *The Aristocats* (1970), in which some problematic depictions are present regarding racial stereotypes, sometimes used for comedic or lighthearted purposes. According to the warning, a similar version of which is also available on the company's website,¹⁷ this choice aims to contextualize such harmful depictions and stereotypes: "rather than remove this content, we want to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it, and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future together". The warning is translated in different languages for the localized versions of the Disney+ user interface.

Other outlets have adopted a similar "contextualizing" strategy. HBO Max, for example, made headlines in 2020 (Spangler 2020) when the platform temporarily removed the film *Gone with the Wind* (1939) because of its racist and stereotypical depictions of enslaved black people. The film, however, was made available again two weeks later with the addition of an explanatory video playing before the film. In the video, film and media scholar Jacqueline Stewart offers context on the time period depicted in the film (1860s) and the time during which the film was created and distributed originally. While stating that "the film's treatment of this world through a lens of nostalgia denies the horrors of slavery", Stewart further explains that "it is important that classic Hollywood films are available to us in their original form for viewing and discussion". *Gone with the Wind* is currently available in Italy on SKY on demand and its streaming service NOW with a parental guidance warning ("Bambini accompagnati"). However, no other warning or disclaimer appears before the film. This is especially surprising, considering that the Italian dubbed track for the film contains a much discussed, highly stereotypical rendition of the dialogue performed by the black actors, which is now considered extremely offensive.

This case points to interesting observations about the cross-cultural mediation of taboos in audiovisual content. On the one hand, there is one of the obvious corollaries of the centralized, "long-distance localization" policy (Lobato 2019) adopted by streaming platforms. When it comes to original productions, taboo content seems to be mediated through (mostly) consistent paratextual strategies that are applied to the different user interfaces available in the different territories, as opposed to taboo content distributed as part of services that are not globally available. In the latter case, taboo mediation policies are more likely to be affected by local sensitivities (see racism in the case of *Gone with the Wind*), which might not match the ones according to which taboos were flagged "at home" in the first place. However, the cultural specificity of some taboos and/or sensitive subjects is to be taken into consideration even when global platforms localize their own content. For example, season 4 of the Netflix series *Stranger Things* premiered on the platform just a few days after the 2022 Uvalde, Texas, school shooting, which left 22 people dead. Because of similarities in the first scenes of season 4's first episode, Netflix added a warning stating that "viewers may find the opening scene of episode one distressing" and included an additional warning in the episode description: "Warning: Contains graphic violence involving children". The warning was included only for viewers

¹⁷ www.Disney.com/StoriesMatter

accessing the service from the United States (Cain 2022), which can be seen as confirmation not only of the sliding, culture-specific relevance of taboos but also of the time sensitive nature of certain content warnings.

In the case of the paratextual information described above, it should be noted that platforms implement similar systems because they are legally required to do so and because they provide a sort of additional safety net against bad publicity. While it would be naïve to think that these corporations act exclusively in the interest of their subscribers, this extra-textual guidance system seems to have the benefit of placing more agency onto the viewers, albeit in a partially illusory way (Johnson 2019: 113-115). If the textual manipulation/censorship system in a way infantilizes audiences by preemptively deciding for them what they can or cannot be exposed to, keywords, content advisories and trigger warnings allow subscribers to make informed decisions based on personal preferences and sensitivities or simply on the specific circumstances in which they are using the service (for example in the presence of minors or other vulnerable people).

4. Conclusions

The paper has posited that a shift has been under way in the cross-cultural localization of audiovisual content on streaming platforms, which accomplishes the mediation of taboo or sensitive subjects not necessarily through “traditional” means such as textual manipulation and censorship, but through the use of paratextual information on the platforms’ interfaces, such as maturity ratings, tags, and content advisories. With examples from the two streaming platforms Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, the paper has illustrated the paratextual apparatuses used by each service – a combination of maturity ratings, content and tone tags, and warnings – to highlight how extra-textual information is used as a tool to guide subscribers in their viewing choices in the cases of products containing potentially sensitive subjects. Despite a certain level of subjectivity in the different disclaimers and rating systems used across different platforms, this kind of extra-textual intervention to mediate taboos can be interpreted as a step forward in the localization of audiovisual content when compared to the sometimes severe textual manipulation strategies that had been adopted in the age of exclusively linear TV. Indeed, this extra-textual guidance system may have the advantage of putting some agency back onto the viewers, without infantilizing audiences by choosing for them what kind of content they can be exposed to. As mentioned above, the implication is not that manipulation (for example in the form of self-censorship) no longer happens, but that in the case of streaming services it might happen in a less systematic, all-encompassing way, and that more vigilance may be applied to the individual choices of translators and dialogue adapters. In fact, further research may want to focus on a more systematic analysis of whether or not the streaming platforms’ no-censoring guidelines are indeed heeded in the linguistic and cultural localization process.

The paper has also called attention to the crucial role potentially played by the cross-cultural adaptation of this kind of paratextual information present on

the viewer interface, an area that has been rarely considered by audiovisual translation scholars in a paratextual framework. While the present paper is meant as an exploratory study limited to the English- and Italian-language interfaces, it has posited that the ways in which paratextual information such as tags, keywords and synopses are translated (or not translated) in different languages are likely to have a significant role in the subscribers' viewing choices when it comes to taboo content. In this respect, more extensive scholarship is needed not only to explore different language combinations and the culture-specificity of taboo-flagging keywords, but also to empirically investigate if and how audiences in different territories engage with paratextual information and to what extent it influences their viewing preferences and choices.

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USE OF SWEAR WORDS AMONG YOUNG DANES IN THE REALITY TV SERIES *EX ON THE BEACH*

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Citation: Rathje, M. (2024) "Use of Swearwords among Young Danes in the Reality TV series *Ex on the Beach*", C. Bucaria, A.D. Mitzel, and A. Sileo (eds) *Taboo in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation*, *mediAzioni* 43: A77-A99, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/20517>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: The majority of research on swear words has for many years been conducted on English language data (Beers Fägersten and Stapleton 2017: 7). In Danish language research, there has been a resurgence in the study of swear words in recent years, but the study of their use in young people's spoken language has been a neglected area. In this article, the use of swear words in the reality show *Ex on the Beach*, which was broadcast in Denmark from 2018-2019 and featured young participants in their early twenties, is examined. One finding is that young people swear more than in previous Danish studies, and the young participants from *Ex on the Beach* primarily swear with modern swear words from the taboo area of "lower body functions", which confirms previous studies of Scandinavian young people's swear words yielding the same result (Rathje 2010; Stroh-Wollin 2010; Hasund 2005). The proportion of English swear words among young people also appears to be increasing, not least the omnipresent swear word "fucking". Lastly, the study of swear words in *Ex on the Beach* reveals the result that female participants swear as much as the males, contradicting numerous previous national and international research results indicating that men swear more often than women (e.g., McEnery and Xiao 2004; Jay 1992; Jay and Jay 2013; Beers Fägersten 2012; Quist 2012; Rathje 2017; Bednarek 2008, 2010; Stroh-Wollin 2014).

Keywords: swear words; Danish; *Ex on the Beach*; spoken language; gender; sociolinguistics; reality TV; youth language.

1. Introduction

One often encounters claims in Danish media that Danish youth swear frequently and their language is filled with English swear words (see, e.g., Toustrup 2017; Madsbøl Christensen 2020). However, not much is known about the reality of Danish youth language in this area, as there is a lack of studies on young people's use of both Danish and English swear words in contemporary Danish spoken language. The largest study on the topic so far is Rathje (2010a), which showed that young and older generations used an equal amount of swear words (Rathje 2010a: 148-153). The study also demonstrated that, at that time (in the early 2000s), English swear words comprised 10% of the swear words used by young people. However, the data upon which this author's thesis was founded is 20 years old (from 2002-2003). Considering the general lack of studies on the escalating use of English swear words in non-English contexts (Beers Fägersten 2017: 65; Zenner *et al.* 2017: 107), there is a need for new studies on young people's use of swear words in modern Danish spoken language.

The purpose of this article is therefore to investigate young people's use of swear words in modern Danish spoken language. Despite certain challenges associated with comparing this with previous studies, I aim to discern if young people, as per the data used in this article, swear more than they have in previous studies. In the study, I will also look at which types of swear words young people use, both in relation to traditional categories (e.g., disease and religion) and regarding borrowing of English swear words. Here too, in comparison with previous research, I will establish whether there has been a change since the time when scatological and religious swear words were the most frequently used in young people's language (Rathje 2010a). Given the influence that the English language has on Danish (see, e.g., Gottlieb 2020; Heidemann Andersen 2020), I expect that English swear words today are more frequent than before.

2. Data

The data for this article is sourced from the reality program *Ex on the Beach* Denmark (hereafter abbreviated EOTB) broadcasted on the TV channel Discovery + /Dplay. The TV program revolves around the intrigues that arise when young men and women (with free access to alcohol) are placed in a luxury villa at an exotic holiday destination. The young participants are filmed 24 hours a day, and the program consists partly of footage of the participants' lives in the villa, and partly of footage of the participants being interviewed about the things that have happened in the villa during the day. The linguistic usage within the realm of reality television typically exhibits a greater degree of informality compared to many conventional television broadcasts, as reality shows strive to depict authentic interactions among participants (e.g., Aslama and Pantti 2006). Furthermore, reality television often emphasizes emotional scenarios, resulting in participants' language being characterized as emotive and expressive, including the incorporation of swearwords (Karpenko-Secombe 2022).

The EOTB series premiered in Denmark in August 2018 and, as of April 2024 consists of 8 seasons. The dialogue of the first three seasons of EOTB was manually transcribed, and the transcriptions together constitute a corpus consisting of approximately 560,000 words. Each season comprises 24 episodes of approximately 45 minutes each, therefore the corpus is based on a total of approximately 54 hours of TV.

The dataset from EOTB serves as a significant resource for investigating the contemporary linguistic patterns exhibited by young individuals. However, it is critical to note that the language employed within the context of this program does not comprehensively encapsulate the communication style of all young Danes, nor does it fully represent the linguistic habits of the EOTB participants themselves. It is plausible that a particular demographic may be predisposed to volunteer for participation in EOTB, and, furthermore, that a specific subgroup may be selected to appear in the show. Participants in a reality TV program such as EOTB are often characterized by being youthful, commonly lacking formal education or possessing vocational training, and by a distinct personality type that motivates their participation in such shows, namely characteristics such as extroversion, emotional openness, and a penchant for adventure (Jensen 2013). Reality TV participants like those in EOTB represent a demographic willing to expose themselves and their personal lives on television despite potential repercussions for their future reputation. Additionally, they can be perceived as juxtaposing the upper class, deviating from norms and values typically associated with more privileged strata of society (Jensen 2013).

The analysis conducted in this study primarily revolves around the discourse of these individuals within a singular and distinctive context – casual interaction with peers and in the presence of a camera or interviewer. Therefore, drawing definitive conclusions about the participants' language use in other social situations based on the EOTB dataset alone is a precarious endeavor. In fact, it is nearly impossible to ascertain with absolute certainty the complete spectrum of language use exhibited by the young participants throughout the EOTB recordings. This uncertainty stems from the fact that extensive hours of television footage are typically condensed into broadcasts lasting approximately 45 minutes. As an audience, we are unaware of the extent of editing carried out in the production of the reality shows that are ultimately aired (Zenner *et al.* 2015: 335). However, one can assume that the more dramatic recordings take up more space than the less dramatic ones, and therefore, at least in theory, one could get a different picture of the language of young people if one had access to all recordings. Concurrently, it should be noted that EOTB, as in any other reality show, is a program where specific participant behaviors (expressive, outgoing, and sexually active) are rewarded, as participants who provide good entertainment usually avoid being forced to leave the program prematurely. Participation in EOTB can thus be compared to a performance (Goffman 1992) in which participants take on a certain role with the expectations and obligations that come with it, such as specific language use and behavior. According to Goffman, it is important to be aware that the role one takes on when “performing” should not be confused with one’s underlying self (Hviid Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2002), and thus, it can be said that the language observed in

EOTB is a certain type of language expressed in a very specific social performance. Therefore, it cannot be defined as the participants' language per se.

Finally, one can also discuss to what extent the examined language is “natural”. Being recorded 24 hours a day while living in a vacation home with a group of people you have never met before is a situation that probably does not feel natural for that many people. However, it should be emphasized that the participants themselves have repeatedly stated in the media that they do not think about their language when they are recorded 24 hours a day (e.g., in DR's (Danish Broadcasting) radio program *Klog på sproget*, 31st July 2020), and that in comparable studies of language in reality shows, it is also assumed that the examined conversations are relatively natural (see, e.g., Fjeld and Kristiansen, unpublished).

The reservations made here regarding the data essentially apply to all reality shows. Nevertheless, reality TV has been the subject of several studies of especially young adults' language (Zenner *et al.* 2015; Hindriks and van Hofwegen 2014; Fjeld and Kristiansen, unpublished), primarily because the language reflected in the genre is the “ordinary people's” relaxed everyday language in a social context, collected in a form that is both easily accessible and sufficiently comprehensive for quantitative analysis.

Several researchers in recent years have insisted that it's time for TV dialogue to be taken seriously as research data and become the subject of systematic linguistic investigations (e.g., Bednarek 2010: 2), including even fictional TV, where reality data is closer to “natural language”. One argument for studying TV dialogue, whether it's fictional or from a reality program, is that the dialogue, whether viewed on traditional TV or streamed, is seen by many people, at least in the Western world. Thus, the language used in TV dialogues potentially affects the language of many language users (Bednarek 2010: 10; Coupland 2007: 185; Beers Fägersten 2016: 5).

3. Definition of swear words

The definition of swear words used in this article is derived from Rathje (2014b: 350-360), and it builds on previous definitions of swear words by Andersson and Trudgill (1990), Stenström (1991), Stroth-Wollin (2008), and Ljung (2011):

Swear words are words that refer to something taboo in the culture in which the language is used. They should not be taken literally, and they are used to express emotions and attitudes, but they are not used about other people. (Rathje 2014b: 356)

The concept of “linguistic taboo” covers a wide range, and swear words only constitute a subset of linguistic taboo:

The study of linguistic taboo is the study of forbidden or dispreferred meanings and words [...] that refer to problematic areas of reality such as sexuality, ethnicity, religion, economic status, aging, death, illness, or bodily

functions, among others, and the expression of these concepts through euphemism (mitigated expression), orthophemism (neutral expression) or dysphemism (offensive expression) [...] swearing and insulting [...] are also part of linguistic taboo. (Pizarro Pedraza 2018: 1)

The above definition of swearwords by Rathje (2014) excludes insults, i.e., words that are derogatory towards (other) people (besides oneself). The difference between swear words and insults can also be expressed as follows: “[...] swearing *at someone*, as opposed to swearing merely *in the company of someone*” (Beers Fägersten 2012: 159, my emphasis).

The aforementioned definition of swear words, which is used in this article, differs, for example, from the definition used by Ljung (2011), which also includes derogatory words. I have separated the two types of words because swear words and derogatory words presumably have different emotional effects on the recipient. Calling a girl, for example, a “whore” (derogatory word) probably affects the girl who is the target of the word more emotionally than if she had overheard someone say “for fuck’s sake” (swear word) in anger. Therefore, derogatory words can be characterized as coarse/aggressive language use, even though swear words can also be perceived as offensive. To illustrate the importance of distinguishing between swear words and derogatory words, an example from an interview conducted by Beers Fägersten (2012) can be provided. Here the interviewee says:

One thing that your survey didn’t really touch on was it’s one thing to swear and curse, but it’s another thing to curse at people. That’s one thing I hardly ever do. I hardly ever tell people “F-you”, and “You’re this” and call you names. (Beers Fägersten 2012: 150)

Jay (1992) points out that “not all dirty words are dirty all the time”. It depends on the context whether something should be understood as a swear word:

What is (un)mentionable for a speaker at a given moment is the result of an assessment of the communicative situation: who are the interlocutors, what is the relationship between them, what are they talking about, where are they, or how do they want to be perceived, are questions that determine what becomes a taboo. (Pizarro Pedraza 2018: 1)

Even an expression in the same language, but used in two different countries/cultures, can be crucial in determining whether an expression should be perceived as a taboo word or not, as shown by Chamizo Domínguez (2005: 15) with the example of *tortillera*: “*tortillera* (literally “female omelet maker”) is a term of abuse for “lesbian” in Spain; by contrast, it means “female tortilla maker” in Mexico and is not a taboo term at all”. In this study, I have in each case of a potential swear word examined the context to find out if the word is actually used as a swear word according to the above definition. To give an example of this, the word *pis* (a derogatory word for urine) can be used. The interjection *pis* can be used as a swear word in a statement like “Pis! How annoying”: it is a word that should not be taken literally and is used to express feelings and attitudes. But the same word can also be used as slang for “urine”

(*pis* as a noun) in a statement like “Mit pis er helt gult” (“My pee is completely yellow”) where the word should be taken literally and does not (only) express feelings and attitudes. The frequency analyses below take into account the meaning in which each word is used in the context. By “liberating” a word from its referential function (Andersson and Trudgill 1990: 53), it can be used to express feelings and attitudes, but if it is used in its literal sense, it can be called an expression of “vulgar” language use (Rathje 2014b). Such “vulgar expressions” are perceived by some as more offensive language use than swear words, as these words were rated as the most offensive in Beers Fägersten (2012: 94). The distinction between whether expressions should be understood literally (swear words) or non-literally (vulgar expressions) can also be found in Pizarro Pedraza *et al.* (2024), where a differentiation is made between referential and non-referential functions of taboo language. Here, non-referential expressions include swear words (such as the interjection “shit!”) and non-referential uses encompass, for example, “words and expressions used to refer to taboo concepts, like the noun ‘shit’ to refer specifically to ‘feces’” (Pizarro Pedraza *et al.* 2024: 1)¹.

The definition used in this article does not include whether and to what extent swear words are perceived or experienced as swear words, even though this means that the definition and thus the analyses below may include words that may not – anymore – be perceived as swear words. For example, in a survey of Danish swear words, *sgu* (a contraction of *så Gud hjælpe mig*, meaning “so help me God”) was perceived as a swear word by only 58% of the respondents (Rathje 2014a). It can therefore be discussed whether *sgu* is actually a swear word and whether the experience of swear words should be included in a definition. This is also discussed by Stroh-Wollin (2008), who in her diachronic study of Swedish swear words in drama dialogue over three centuries includes expressions that are hardly perceived as swear words by any Swedes at the time of the study (Stroh-Wollin 2008: 28). However, Stroh-Wollin includes these words because the perception of the strength of swear words can vary over time. As Allan and Burridge (2006: 9) also assert: “Nothing is taboo for all people, under all circumstances, for all time”. The perception of taboos, including the taboo content in swear words, varies over time, for example in relation to the culture it is used in: “taboo refers to a proscription of behavior for a specifiable community of one or more persons, at a specifiable time, in specifiable contexts” (Allan and Burridge 2006: 11). The perception of taboo also varies generationally within the Danish-speaking community, which likewise complicates a definition: when 69% of the elderly in the aforementioned attitude survey (Rathje 2014a) perceived *sgu* as a swear word, while only 47% of the younger generation did the same, it is difficult to determine whether *sgu* should be defined as a swear word – there are differing opinions based on the

¹ Pizarro Pedraza *et al.* (2024) find that their L2 informants understand the referential function of an expression in a foreign language, but struggle with the non-referential functions such as swear words and insults, likely because these require (more demanding) pragmatic competencies, and because swear words and insults are rarely practiced in foreign language acquisition.

experience of it. Therefore, the perception of swear words is not part of the definition here.

4. Method

All swear words have been manually identified in the transcribed data and entered into a spreadsheet. The transcribed EOTB data takes into account whether the conversation is a dialogue or whether the participants are speaking directly to the camera. The term “swear word” is used in the article to refer to both single words (*Livet det er kraftedeme ikke fair*, e.g., “Life is fucking unfair”²) and entire expressions (“Oh my God”). Expressions containing more than one swear word (e.g., “shit, shit”) are recorded as the actual number of occurrences (in this case, 2). Swear words that appear in purely English expressions (e.g., “DJ, spin that shit”) are also included. However, swear words that appear in expressions where one participant is quoting another participant (e.g., “‘fucking bad sex’, he declares”) are not included, since when one participant quotes another, the swear words used do not necessarily reflect the language usage of the person being quoted, but rather potentially that of the original speaker.

5. Danish swear words in the EOTB corpus

5.1. Frequency

In the data, there are a total of 5,105 instances of swear words. Given a total frequency of 558,837 words in the entire dataset, this equates to a total swear word frequency of 9.1 swear words per 1,000 words. These overall frequencies, however, is an average of the frequency distributed across the three seasons of EOTB and covers differences that are significant ($p < 0.001^3$) (see Table 1). This significant difference in the number of swear words across the seasons (particularly Season 1 compared to the following two seasons) will be revisited in Section 6.

² The Danish swear word *kraftedeme* directly translates to “may the cancer eat me”. However, in terms of its strength or force as an expletive in English, it is equivalent to “fucking”.

³ In all significance tests in this article, Pearson’s chi-squared test has been utilized, and in certain cases, Yates’ continuity correction or Fischer exact test has been applied. Moreover, each response option or word type has been checked for significant differences between the tested groups using a post-hoc test. The post-hoc test utilizes the standardized chi-squared residuals, which can provide an indication of the difference and whether the differences for each individual response option is significant upon conversion to p-value. Furthermore, the p-values in the post-hoc test have been corrected with a Bonferroni correction to avoid overestimating the difference for individual response options.

Table 1. Number of swear words in the three seasons of EOTB.

| | Occurrences of swear words in total |
|-----------------|--|
| Season 1 | 2,865 |
| Season 2 | 1,316 |
| Season 3 | 923 |
| In total | 5,105 |

To ascertain whether the overall swear word frequency is high or low, it can be compared to prior studies on the use of swear words in spoken language by young people. A generational language study (Rathje 2010a), with conversations recorded in 2002-2003 between unfamiliar youths aged 16-18, found 2.1 instances of swear words per 1,000 words (Rathje 2010a: 153). The same swear word definition has been used in both studies. When compared to the swear word frequency in EOTB, the frequency in the reality program is significantly higher, more than 4 times as high, to be precise. It might be tempting to interpret the difference as a shift in language use, suggesting a trend of younger people using more swear words than in the past, as is often assumed in Danish public discourse (e.g., Toustrup 2017). However, the data types vary so significantly that it is unclear what accounts for the frequency difference. The following factors could potentially explain the higher swear word usage in EOTB:

- The participants' average age is higher in EOTB, at 22.7 years, compared to 16.8 years in the generational corpus (Rathje 2010a: 67). Nevertheless, no published study suggests that people in their twenties use more swear words than teenagers.
- Only women participated in the generational study (Rathje 2010a: 84), and other research indicates that men use more swear words than women and that swearing is associated with masculine identity (e.g., McEnery and Xiao 2004; Jay 1992; Jay and Jay 2013; Beers Fägersten 2012; Quist 2012; Rathje 2017). This may explain why fewer swear words were found in the generational study.
- Participants in EOTB hail from all over Denmark, while those in the generational study are all from Copenhagen. Yet, no studies have identified any frequency differences in swear word use based on geographical location within Denmark.
- The communication settings in the two datasets are very different: in the generational study, two young strangers meet and converse in a café for around 30 minutes, whereas the participants in EOTB, though initially strangers, quickly get to know each other well. The EOTB setting includes eating, sleeping, and relaxation situations, which are hardly comparable to a formal café visit with a stranger. This could explain the lower number of swear words in the generational study.
- Due to the nature of the communication situation, participants in EOTB are likely to be less conscious of wearing a microphone 24 hours a day,

while café participants would probably be acutely aware of being recorded. This might account for the fewer swear words in the generational study, as individuals may censor their language when recorded by a microphone.

- EOTB features selected segments of recorded reality, and previous studies show that “emotional language”, including swear words, is a defining feature of fictional TV dialogue (Bednarek 2010; Sanger 2001; Kozloff 2000; Bubel 2006; Quaglio 2008). While EOTB is not fiction, it is a constructed reality created for commercial purposes that could be linked to fiction (Booth 2004). As such, one can expect a higher frequency of swear words in EOTB than in generational conversations.

The number of swear words in the EOTB corpus has a closer resemblance in frequency to a corpus of dialogue from children’s TV fiction (Rathje 2017) than to Rathje’s (2010a) generational study. Rathje (2017) compared three children’s TV programs targeted at the 7-12-year-old audience from the 2010s (the series *Pendlerkids* / “Commuter Kids” and *Panisk Påske* / “Panic Easter”) with a 30-year-old children’s TV series from the 1980s (*Busters Verden* / “Buster’s World”)⁴. The older TV series had 5.8 swear words per 1,000 words, while the newer series had 7.8 (*Pendlerkids*) and 9.2 (*Panisk Påske*) per 1,000 words. When comparing the number of swear words in newer children’s TV fiction with the 9.1 swear words in the EOTB corpus, these numbers are approximately the same. However, it is noteworthy that EOTB is a reality TV show featuring older participants than the teens in the children’s series, which are purely fictional. As for the frequency of swear words, EOTB’s language usage mirrors that of a fictional TV series for children. This may suggest that the language used in EOTB is influenced by a different and more liberal attitude towards swear words than what previous generations have experienced.

5.2. Types

There are three main types of Danish swear words based on the taboo areas they reference (Rathje 2010a): religious swear words, disease-related swear words, and swear words related to lower bodily functions, i.e., sex and excretion⁵. These main categories are similar in English (Stapleton 2010) with the exception of disease-related swear words. While older English expressions also referenced diseases, such as “Pox!” or “A pox on you” (Hughes 1991: 189; Ljung 2011: 43), referring to smallpox, such swear words are not prevalent in contemporary English. Ruetten (2018: 229) mentions that swear words associated with the taboo

⁴ The fact that swear words are allowed on Danish national children’s TV highlights the cultural and linguistic ideological differences in the censorship of swear words between Denmark and, for example, the USA. However, not all groups in Danish society condone the use of swear words in children’s TV.

⁵ Numerous studies differentiate between the sexual and scatological dimensions due to their distinct physiological, psychological, and anthropological characteristics. The decision not to separate these dimensions in this analysis stems from the prevailing convention within Danish profanity research to address these aspects in a unified manner, thus facilitating comparisons with preceding investigations.

of disease are a Dutch specialty – with expressions including, for example, AIDS, typhus, and cancer (Ruelle 2018: 233) – which is otherwise only attested in Yiddish and Polish and in Southern Germany during the 1300s-1400s. However, as shown below, swear words related to diseases also exist in modern Danish (although disease swear words in Danish originate from the 1700s (Rathje 2010a) and the swear word type is no longer productive in Danish as it is in Dutch).

The religious swear words can be divided into “celestial”, i.e., heavenly, expressions that reflect positive religious forces like God and Heaven, such as *du godeste gud* (“my goodness”) and *hvad i himlens navn* (“what in heaven’s name”), while the other category comprises diabolical expressions that represent dark forces such as the Devil and Hell, for example, *for fanden* (“for the devil”) and *for helvede* (“for hell”) (Stroh-Wollin 2014: 181). Religious swear words are the oldest type in Danish, with some dating back to before the Reformation, i.e., the 1500s (Rathje 2010a). Previous research suggests that religious swear words are typically used by adult and elderly Danes, rather than by the younger generation (Rathje 2014b). The use of religious swear words has been generally declining in the Western world, especially in Protestant regions – also seen in Dutch, as mentioned by van Hofwegen (2016: 7), referencing van Sterkenburg (2008). Conversely, there has been an increase in another type of swear words, particularly those related to lower bodily functions, especially sex (refer to Fjeld 2002; Pinker 2007).

As previously stated, Danish swear words can also reference diseases. For instance, the term *pokker* denotes smallpox or syphilis, and *kræft* refers to cancer. These diseases feature in expressions like *for pokker*, *pokkers*, and *kraftedeme*, a contraction of the phrase meaning “may cancer devour me”. Disease-related swear words in Danish are newer than religious ones, emerging around the 18th century (Rathje 2010a).

Lastly, there are swear words associated with the lower bodily functions, primarily sex and defecation. These include phrases like *lort* (“shit”), *skide* (“to defecate”), *pisse* (“to pee”), and the borrowed English terms “shit”, “fuck”, and “fucking”. The category concerning “lower bodily functions” includes the most recent Danish swear words *lort*, *skide*, and *pisse* originated in the first half of the 20th century, while the English terms “shit”, “fuck”, and “fucking” came into use in the latter half of the 20th century in Danish (Rathje 2010a). Past research has indicated that swear words related to the taboo topic of lower bodily functions are predominantly used by younger people, unlike middle-aged and older Danes (Rathje 2010a).

As illustrated in Table 2, the young participants in EOTB tend to use swear words that pertain to the taboo area of lower bodily functions most frequently:

Table 2. Used types of swear words in EOTB.

| | Religious | Disease-related | Lower bodily functions |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Use of swear word types in EOTB | 46 % (N = 2,337) | 2.9 % (N = 146) | 51.1 % (N = 2,611) |

As previously noted, past studies (Rathje 2010a, 2017) have demonstrated that Danish youths commonly use swear words related to lower bodily functions. In the generational study mentioned earlier (Rathje 2010a), 42.9% of the young group's swear words fell into the lower bodily function category. In contrast, this category accounted for 2.9% and 1.6% of the swear words used by middle-aged and elderly individuals, respectively. Likewise, in the aforementioned study analyzing the use of swear words in Danish children's TV series (Rathje 2017), one of the series with the highest frequency of swear words (*Panisk Påske*) consisted of 48.2% lower bodily function swear words. Thus, the analysis of data from EOTB reinforces the notion that young people frequently use swear words related to lower bodily functions, with this category making up 51.1% of swear words. The trend of increased usage of swear words from the lower bodily functions category in the present compared to the past has been corroborated in several Nordic studies – for example Rathje (2010b) for Danish, Stroh-Wollin (2010) for Swedish, and Hasund (2005) for Norwegian – indicating that young people are leading this trend, which is further confirmed in the current study.

5.3. Gender

Swear words are considered one of the linguistic features that most consistently demonstrate gender differences (Coats 2021: 23). They are often associated with masculine identity (Mills 2005: 273; Stapleton 2003: 22; Stapleton 2010: 292; de Klerk 1991; Lakoff 1975). Research has also shown that men/boys use more swear words than women/girls, both in spoken language (e.g., McEnery and Xiao 2004; Jay 1992; Jay and Jay 2013; Beers Fägersten 2012; Quist 2012) and in written language across traditional text types (Newman *et al.* 2008), social media (Bamman *et al.* 2014; Wang *et al.* 2014; Coats 2021), as well as in fictional contexts such as children's TV series (Rathje 2017), adult TV series (Bednarek 2008, 2010), and Swedish dramas from the 18th to 20th century (Stroh-Wollin 2014).

However, there appears to be no gender difference in the frequency of swear words used in EOTB:

Table 3. Frequency of swearing in relation to gender.

| | Occurrences in data | Percentage share |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Male | 2,517 | 49.3 % |
| Female | 2,549 | 49.9 % |
| Gender unknown⁶ | 40 | 0.8 % |
| In total | 5,106 | 100 % |

As shown, men and women use an equal percentage of swear words in EOTB. This result could indicate a shift compared to previous studies on everyday language use. Regarding fiction (Rathje 2017), the absence of gender differences in the frequency of swear words used in EOTB implies that within the genre of fiction, swear words may be employed to construct a masculine identity for characters. This may not reflect how language is utilized by young people in non-fictional contexts such as EOTB. The fact that women in EOTB use as many swear words as men could also suggest that previous findings indicating that women are judged more negatively than men when they swear (Stapleton 2003; de Klerk 1992) may not hold as firmly today. A recent study examining the use of swear words in a Nordic Twitter corpus (Coats 2021) revealed that among the five countries investigated (Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark), gender differences were the second least pronounced in the Danish Twitter data (with the least pronounced differences found in Sweden). Interestingly, the Danish data was distinct from the other Nordic countries in that Danish women used certain swear words more often than men (Coats 2021: 46). Therefore, besides indicating a temporal shift, the lack of gender differences in EOTB could also be partially attributed to the fact that we are dealing with Danish data, despite traditional gender differences having been observed in Danish data in the past (see Rathje 2017 and Quist 2012).

I also investigated whether men and women in the data used different types of swear words:

Table 4. Men's and women's swear words distributed by type.

| | Occurrences in data by male respondents | Occurrences in data by female respondents | Percentage share male respondents | Percentage share female respondents |
|------------------------------------|---|---|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Lower functions of the body | 1,114 | 1,470 | 44.3 % | 57.7 % |

⁶ "Gender unknown" is a term used to indicate that it has not been possible to determine which participant used the swear word, for example, because they are off screen, and therefore it is not always possible to determine the participant's gender.

| | | | | |
|------------------------|-------|-------|--------|--------|
| Religious | 1,301 | 1,034 | 51.7 % | 40.6 % |
| Disease-related | 102 | 45 | 4.1 % | 1.8 % |
| In total | 2,517 | 2,549 | 100 % | 100 % |

As illustrated by Table 4, there are some highly significant gender differences in the types of swear words used: women use the lower bodily function type of swear words significantly more than men ($p < 0.001$), while men use religious and disease-related swear words significantly more than women (in both cases $p < 0.001$). Given that lower bodily function swear words are the newest type, whereas religious and disease-related swear words are very old in Danish, it can be inferred that women significantly use more modern swear words, while men significantly favor traditional swear words.

The fact that the men in EOTB use traditional swear words and women use modern swear word is not surprising given the robust sociolinguistic evidence that women are leaders of linguistic change (e.g., Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003; Labov 2001), a point articulated by Labov (2001: 501) as follows: "any theory of the causes of change must deal with the general finding that in the good majority of linguistic changes, women are a full generation ahead of men". This outcome is also reflected in numerous earlier findings within the research on swear words. can be supported by previous research findings: 1) Rathje (2017) demonstrated in a study of children's series that the two male villains in *Panisk PÅske* were assigned more religious (diabolical) swear words in their scripted dialogue than other male characters. This was likely to shape their identities towards more stereotypically traditional personas with lower education and/or more inclination towards violence. 2) A study of Danish newspapers' use of swear words (Rathje 2010b) showed that *Ekstrabladet*, a former working-class newspaper typically read by individuals with lower education levels, had a higher frequency of (old-fashioned) religious swear words compared to newspapers traditionally read by a more educated target audience, such as *Information*, which featured more modern swear words, like lower bodily function swear words. 3) The aforementioned study of Nordic Twitter data, similar to this EOTB study, shows that men predominantly use religious swear words, while women primarily use swear words related to lower bodily functions, as well as English swear words (Coats 2021: 49). Coats (*ibid.*: 51) interprets this result as women avoiding stigmatized language variants, thus they may be quicker to adopt modern and prestigious variants associated with "the sophistication of global culture" (*ibid.*). This is consistent with previous sociolinguistic interpretations (Labov 1990; Trudgill 1974, 1998) which finds that men are more likely to use language that is associated with local identity and less prestigious variants compared to the language use of women. In sociolinguistics, "prestige" refers to the degree of respect or esteem that is attributed to certain linguistic variants, and which is closely linked to power and social status (e.g., Trudgill 1972). Women's use of swear words thus directly

hits the Gender Paradox (Labov 2001), which is the phenomenon that women are often both conservative (using fewer colloquial forms such as swear words than men) and innovative in terms of linguistic variation and change (leaders of sociolinguistic change, e.g. modern swear words): "women conform more closely than men to sociolinguistic norms that are overtly prescribed, but conform less than men when they are not" (Labov 2001: 293). Furthermore, everyday language forms – like swear words – are linked with masculinity and "toughness" (Holmes 2001: 157-161; Stapleton 2003).

6. English swear words in the EOTB corpus

In the initial part of this article, I discussed the general occurrence of swear words in EOTB and will now shift my focus to analyze a specific type of swear word, namely those of English origin.

The data set contains a total of 1,823 English swear words, such as "fucking", "shit", and "oh my God". As previously mentioned, considering the total number of swear words is 5,105, a little over every third swear word in the EOTB corpus is English. In Rathje's (2010a) generational study, it was approximately every tenth swear word among young people that originated from English. Thus, it seems the proportion of English swear words in the language of young people is increasing – bearing in mind the reservations mentioned earlier about comparing these two data sets.

As already mentioned, and shown in Table 5, the proportion of swear words is much higher in season 1 compared to seasons 2 and 3. Similarly, the proportion of English swear words is significantly higher in season 1 compared to seasons 2 and 3. The difference is statistically significant in both cases ($p < 0.001$).

Table 5. Number of English swear words in the three seasons of EOTB.

| | Occurrences of swear words in total | Occurrences of English swear words in total | Percentage share of English swear words in total |
|----------|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Season 1 | 2,865 | 1,134 | 39.6 % |
| Season 2 | 1,316 | 399 | 30.3 % |
| Season 3 | 923 | 290 | 31.4 % |
| In total | 5,105 | 1,823 | 35.7 % |

As depicted in Table 5, nearly 40% of the swear words in season 1 are of English origin, whereas the same percentage for seasons 2 and 3 is slightly lower, being 30.3% and 31.4%, respectively. The high incidence of swear words in season 1 can likely be attributed to this season being particularly characterized by the formation of groups, intrigues, and jealousy. However, it cannot be ruled out that the difference in the number of swear words between season 1 and the

subsequent two seasons could be due to the influence of the producers, such as the implementation of stricter guidelines for language use to adapt the show to a broader audience, or it may be due to a higher degree of self-censorship among the participants, who have watched the first season and are therefore more conscious of how they appear on TV, thus being more self-censoring regarding coarse language.

6.1. English Swear Words: Types

Similarly to the categorization of the Danish swear words, I have divided the English swear words in the EOTB corpus into two categories: “religion” and “lower bodily functions”.

Table 6. Overview of the total number of English swear words in EOTB.

| Occurrences of English swear words in total | Lower functions of the body | Religious |
|---|-----------------------------|----------------|
| 1,823 | 96.6 % (N = 1,761) | 3.4 % (N = 62) |

As depicted in Table 6, there are only 62 words and phrases, which equate to 3.4% of the total number of English swear words that can be categorized under “religion”. Examples include phrases like “oh my god” and “damn”. The remaining 96.6% fall under the “bodily functions” category, with examples such as “fucking” and “shit”. Thus, it can be observed that a rather limited group of swear words are borrowed from English, specifically those related to bodily functions. On the other hand, religious swear words – which otherwise constitute a significant part of the data – are borrowed only rarely. In Stenström’s (1991) study of swear words in British English, she notes that speakers in the corpus studied “preferred expletives originating in religion to other types” (*ibid.*: 241), whereas Ljung’s (1986) study of swear words in American data shows that sex was the most prevalent taboo in the swear words used. This result could indicate that the Danish youth in EOTB might be more influenced by American “swearing culture” than British when it comes to the borrowed English swear words.

6.1.1. English swear words: Religion

The religious English swear words that the young individuals use in the EOTB corpus primarily include expressions such as “(oh) (my) (fucking) God/my God”, followed by “damn” and “(oh) God”. The category labeled “Other” encompasses words and phrases that occur only once, for instance, “thank God” and “pray the lord.”⁷

⁷ Stenström (1991) provides evidence indicating that profanities associated with celestial concepts, namely those alluding to “heaven”, are perceived as less severe than those invoking “hell”. Additionally, within the Danish, swear words with celestial references are regarded as profane by a comparatively limited demographic (Rathje 2014a).

Table 7. English swear words: Religion.

| Words and expressions | Occurrences in data |
|------------------------------|---------------------|
| “Oh my (fucking) God/my God” | 75.8 % (N = 47) |
| “Damn” | 6.5 % (N = 4) |
| “(Äh) God” (“(oh) God”) | 3.2 % (N = 2) |
| Other | 14.5 % (N = 9) |
| In total | 100 % (N = 62) |

What primarily characterizes the religious swear words seen in Table 7 is their frequent usage in English. According to a 2006 study cited by Mohr in 2013, “oh my God” and “damn” rank among the 10 most commonly used swear words in American English. This study highlighted that “oh my God” was especially popular among women, with this single expression accounting for 24% of all swear words used by women (Mohr 2013: 177). It also noted that women tend to use milder, celestial swear words compared to men, a finding echoed in several other studies (Stenström 1991; Precht 2006). In the EOTB data set, “oh my God” is a prevalent expression, which accounts for approximately two-thirds of all instances.

Furthermore, research on the use of English swear words in Dutch (Hindriks and van Hofwegen 2014; van Hofwegen 2016) indicates that the most commonly used English religious swear words are “oh my God”, “God”, and “damn” – as well as “what the hell” and “Jesus (Christ)”. This aligns closely with the findings of this EOTB study, suggesting that the English swear words found in various European languages are often identical.

6.1.2. English Swear Words: Lower Bodily Functions

As previously mentioned, the majority of English swear words are related to the body’s lower functions. As depicted in Table 8, the words “fucking”, “fuck”, and “shit” predominantly characterize this category within the EOTB corpus of English swear words:

Table 8. English Swear Words – Lower Bodily Functions.

| | Season 1 | Season 2 | Season 3 | In total |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| “Fucking” | 58.8 % (N = 659) | 47.9 % (N = 179) | 46.1 % (N = 123) | 54.6 % (N = 961) |
| “Fuck” (incl. 1 occurrence of “holy fuck”) | 31.8 % (N = 357) | 32.6 % (N = 122) | 36.7 % (N = 98) | 32.8 % (N = 577) |
| “Shit/bullshit/oh shit/holy shit/ no shit” | 4.0 % (N = 45) | 11.2 % (N = 42) | 13.1 % (N = 35) | 6.9 % (N = 122) |
| “As shit” | 0.1 % | 0 % | 0 % | 0.1 % |

| | (N = 1) | (N = 0) | (N = 0) | (N = 1) |
|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| “Pissed” | 0.2 % (N = 2) | 0 % (N = 0) | 0.7 % (N = 2) | 0.2 % (N = 4) |
| “What the fuck” | 2.6 % (N = 29) | 4.8 % (N = 18) | 3.0 % (N = 8) | 3.1 % (N = 55) |
| “Fucked up” | 2.0 % (N = 22) | 2.1 % (N = 8) | 0 % (N = 0) | 1.7 % (N = 30) |
| “Fucked” | 0.3 % (N = 3) | 0.8 % (N = 3) | 0.4 % (N = 1) | 0.4 % (N = 7) |
| “As fuck” | 0.2 % (N = 2) | 0.3 % (N = 1) | 0 % (N = 0) | 0.2 % (N = 3) |
| Other ⁸ | 0.1 % (N = 1) | 0 % (N = 0) | 0 % (N = 0) | 0.1 % (N = 1) |
| In total | 1,120 | 374 | 267 | 100 % (N = 1,761) |

Table 8 reveals that the swear word “fucking” comprises just under 55% of all English swear words within the “lower bodily functions” category, with “fuck” accounting for slightly less than 33%. Together, these two swear words represent almost 88% of the total number of swear words. When including “shit/oh shit/bullshit”, the next listed swear word, this percentage increases to nearly 95%. Thus, the usage of English swear words within the “lower bodily functions” category in the EOTB corpus by young people is primarily centered around “fucking”, “fuck”, and “shit”. Furthermore, there is a significant difference between Season 1 and Seasons 2 and 3.

As noted, “fucking”, “fuck”, and “shit” are among the most recent swear words in Danish (Rathje 2010a). They are considered among the strongest swear words in both English (Beers Fägersten 2012) and Danish (Rathje 2014b), while also being highly prevalent. “Fuck” has been labeled the most ubiquitous swear word in the USA (Kirk 2013) and ranks among the most frequently used swear words in Scandinavian languages (Fjeld *et al.* 2019) and Dutch (van Hofwegen 2016; Zenner *et al.* 2015). In Dutch, “shit” has become so prevalent that it is the most used swear word overall (van Hofwegen 2016: 19), often preferred over native Dutch swear words. A study of English swear words in a Dutch Twitter corpus confirmed that “shit”, “damn”, and “fuck” rank among the most popular English swear words (Zenner *et al.* 2017). In an English study on 14-16-year-olds’ usage of different swear words, “fuck” (including forms such as “fucked” and “fucking”) was the most commonly used, followed by “shit” (Drummond 2020). In a recent study on which swear words Danish 13-14-year-olds use the most (Jensen and Rathje 2022), “fuck” and “shit” were reported as the most frequently used of all swear words.

⁸ It covers “motherfucker” used in the same way as “motherfucking” is normally used.

Therefore, the influence of the English language is largely confined to a few highly frequent words like “fucking”, “fuck”, and “shit” (and among religious swear words, “oh my God”), while other English swear words are seldom or only very infrequently used outside English-speaking countries (van Hofwegen 2016).

7. Conclusion

This study initially supports the widespread stereotype that young individuals are prone to frequent use of profanity, as reflected in the corpus under examination. The analysis reveals a notable surge in swearing among the young participants of EOTB, amounting to four times the incidence observed in a prior study focusing on young people’s dialogues. Nonetheless, considering the inherent incongruity between the two studies, the findings must not be considered to exist in a vacuum. To generate more robust conclusions regarding contemporary youth’s propensity for swearing, further complementary research scrutinizing their linguistic behavior across varying social contexts, or comparative analyses with previous reality series, are required.

Conversely, the investigation in this article contradicts another prevailing stereotype, which postulates that young individuals predominantly employ English swear words. The EOTB data reflects that just over a third of the total swear words employed originate from English, with Danish swear words constituting the remainder. Thus, despite certain English swear words such as “fucking” occupying a significant linguistic niche among the youth in EOTB, the preponderance of their swearing lexicon remains Danish. The data further suggests a broader trend of increased incorporation of English loanwords within youth parlance, as evidenced within EOTB.

Additionally, this study reveals a discernable pattern in the categorical distribution of swear words within EOTB, with religious and lower bodily function-related categories predominating, while those related to illness are scarcely employed.

Regarding the use of English profanity, the study highlights a frequency in the use of the religious phrase “oh my God”, as well as the lower bodily function-related swear words “fucking” and “fuck”. Rather than indiscriminate usage of diverse English swear words, the participants in EOTB recurrently employ a select few.

Moreover, a significant finding of this study, which contradicts extant research, is the parity between genders in their frequency of swearing, contravening the traditionally held notion of male predominance in this aspect.

The findings of this study can be further explored in future studies by comparing these with other Danish reality TV shows, such as *Paradise Hotel*, or various other types of media featuring young Danes. This comparison could reveal whether the observed swearing patterns are specific to the context of *Ex on the Beach* or more broadly representative of young Danish speakers.

Future research may also consider performing an analysis of young people’s use of swear words in an old reality TV series like *Big Brother*, which was broadcast on Danish TV in 2001. With nearly 20 years difference between *Big*

Brother and *Ex on the Beach*, this analysis could provide insights into the evolution of Danish youth's use of swear words and the impact of cultural shifts on language use over time.

Finally, a desirable future research project would be to compare the use of swear words in *Ex on the Beach* with the same program broadcast in several other countries. For example, this could be a Nordic study of swearing in Sweden and Norway compared to the Danish results of this article, or even comparing the Danish results with a Southern European country such as Italy, or comparing with the American version of *Ex on the Beach*. This could reveal cultural differences in language use and taboos around swearing.

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‘WHORED-OUT TO THE KGB’: DEFINING OBSCENITIES IN GEORGIAN AND OTHER LANGUAGES OF THE CAUCASUS

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Citation: Wier, T. (2024) “Whored-out to the KGB’: Defining Obscenities in Georgian and Other Languages of the Caucasus”, in C. Bucaria, A.D. Mitzel and A. Sileo (eds) *Taboo in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation*, *mediAzioni* xx: A100-A122, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/20538>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: Perhaps the most famous 20th century statement on the definition of obscenity comes from none other than the Supreme Court of the United States. In the 1964 court case *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, court justice Potter Stewart famously wrote defending the release of a film that the State of Ohio wished to ban for obscenity: “I shall not today attempt further to define [obscenity]... and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But *I know it when I see it*” (Stewart 1964). Such a statement from the highest court in the land reveals something ineffable about the idea of obscenity that even intellectuals and legal professionals have difficulty putting their finger on. Why is it that it is so hard to put into words the visceral feelings we sense when an obscenity is uttered? Why do different people in the same society come to different conclusions about what is obscene and what is permissible speech? Even more so, why does obscene language differ from one society to another? This paper will seek to provide some linguistic preconditions to such a debate. Following Ljung (2011), I will argue that obscene speech differs from non-obscene speech not in any categorical way, but rather belongs to an entire pragmatic class of emotive speech triggered by anthropological taboos, among which obscene speech constitutes only one part of a broad spectrum of behavior. But obscenities, by virtue of being speech, also bear formal properties of encoding distinct from other kinds of taboo-related cultural phenomena. I will further show that the properties that distinguish obscene from permissible speech in Western languages are also found in less familiar languages of the world, including the languages of the Caucasus, to which we will later turn.

Keywords: anthropology; Caucasus; obscenity; pragmatics; speech; taboos.

1. *Taboos and their linguistic encoding*

First, what is a taboo? Taboos are at base a perceived threat to the social order, along with institutionalized codes of conduct in response to such a threat. As Allan and Burridge put it, a “[t]aboo refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts” (2006: 11). Thus, aspects of the natural world such as natural disasters, dangerous animals or human conflict are not automatically taboo; taboos also require an individual or community response to such a threat, whether by requiring actions to carry out or actions to avoid. More often, taboos come from the norms of (mis)behavior within a given community defining how individuals within that community may or may not relate to one another. While almost any kind of behavior may be proscribed as taboo, most taboos fall within a small number of generalized perceived threats:

Table 1. Generalized categories of taboos.

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Sex and gender | Family relations |
| Death | Animals (clean vs. unclean) |
| Disease | Spirits of the Ancestors |
| Bodies of humans or animals | Religion or ideology |
| Bodily effluvia | Religious/ritual Objects |
| Food and its preparation | Domiciles of humans, animals or spirits |

Often, such categories of taboo overlap. Thus, amongst Khevsur highlanders of the Caucasus mountains in the Republic of Georgia, some traditional practices involving blood sacrifices to local divinities separate out discrete spaces for different participants in the ritual: only the *khevisberi* (or shaman shrine priest) may enter the inner-most sanctum of the shrine, and other participating men and women must attend in separate spaces around the shrine, with men allowed nearer the shrine while women must remain in designated spaces further away. Menstruating or recently pregnant women on the other hand form a distinct category and must remain even further away from the shrine (Charachidze 2001; Tuite 1998). Amongst the Adyghei of the north Caucasus, Smirnova (1986) notes that such avoidance taboos extend to many further aspects of life, including fairly elaborate rules forbidding brides from seeing grooms before their wedding, husbands from seeing wives in public for a year after marriage, parents from seeing their children in the presence of elders, and wives from seeing her husband’s relatives. In another case from a different Pshav highland community in Georgia, before a sacred horse race can take place, men (and only men) must drink unfiltered beer from a vessel called a *saq’eino* filled with two liters of beer; one is supposed to drink all two liters in one go without touching the vessel (“It is technically forbidden to be sober”, I was told on one such trip).



Figure 1. Pshav highlander man drinking sacred beer from a *saq'eino*-vessel before a sacred horse race, Iremtkalo, Georgia, July 2015. Photo T. R. Wier.

Naming taboos are also frequent. Makalatia (1935: 188) records that one man from the region of Khevsureti had five: *P'et're*, a “calendrical” name derived from the day of his birth according to the Orthodox religious calendar; *Daviti*, a taboo “spiritual” name used by his parents in early infancy to ward off evil spirits wishing to “vassalize” him; *Giorgi*, his name in honor of the divinity of the local para-Christian shrine; *Xirčla*, his taboo name as used by a daughter-in-law or sister in-law; and *Bec'ik'ua*, a separate taboo name when used by an aunt (see also Wier forthcoming-a). Taboos are thus not merely lists of specific rules, but rather webs of practice and behavior, in which particular taboos interact with other kinds of taboos mediated through a structured system.

All known human societies practice taboo proscription of one kind or another, and because all human societies also communicate via spoken language, taboos have consequently become woven into the fabric of the many various forms of speech. Linguistic taboos, though, differ from other kinds of taboos in that merely uttering a taboo word (whether an obscenity, the name of one's mother-in-law, the name of a deceased person or some other taboo notion) threatens to reify the taboo act or status, to bring it into lived reality indirectly. Linguistic taboos thus stand as a kind of separate mirror semiotic world in which a taboo notion is formally distinct from the way in which it is encoded through language.

This has some rather important consequences for the way in which linguistic taboos function. Because linguistic signs are (famously) arbitrary, the way in which taboo notions can be attached to particular linguistic signs is likewise contingent on the way speakers structure their usage. One consequence is that openly expressing a taboo may lead not to an obscenity or a dysphemism, but rather to a euphemism or neutral expression that obliquely expresses it, since these, too, point semiotically to the existence of the language-external taboo. These can be structured into a kind of linguistic emotive cline, in which some lexical items or constructions express the taboo in permissible ways (euphemisms

and neutralisms) while others express the taboo in increasingly impermissible ways (Table 2).

Table 2. The emotive cline reflecting taboo language.

| ← Euphemism | Neutralism | Dysphemism | Obscenity → |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| powder room, restroom, the facilities | lavatory, toilet, WC | the loo, the can, the john, the bog, etc. | the shitter, the crapper, shithouse |
| excrement, defecation, f(a)eces, waste, No. 2 | dung, stool, manure, poop, ordure | filth, crap, turd | shit, shite |
| copulate, fornicate, sleep with, know | have sex, make love | hump, shag, get it on, do | fuck, screw, bang, bonk, motherfucker |
| vagina | vagina | pussy, snatch, coochie | cunt, twat |

The fact that these are indeed pragmatically structured is illustrated by the fact that one cannot mix different categories along the cline without potentially violating the taboo. In English, one cannot for example say #“I’m going to the powder room to take a shit” without impermissibly violating the taboo, since despite the fact that *powder room* is a euphemism, it is embedded in a larger construction one of whose parts still violates the taboo.

Across languages, speakers often have other ways of avoiding a linguistic taboo. One common method in situations of language contact is to borrow a word from a contact language which, in itself, refers to the same taboo act or thing, but which because it is expressed in a separate code becomes occluded in the matrix language for purposes of the taboo. In the history of English, this has happened many times to refer to places of defecation: Middle English *privy* was replaced by French *gardez l’eau* “watch out for the water”, which in Scottish dialects became (after the Great Vowel Shift) *gardyloo* and then clipped to just *loo*; from there it was further replaced by French *toilet*, another loanword. Another avoidance strategy is to coin new words, sometimes by deformation of existing words: *feck(ing)* or *freak(ing)* instead of *fuck(ing)*; *heck* from *hell*; *gosh* from *God*; and so on. Sometimes speakers also implement metaphors such as *men’s room*, *take a dump* or *beat the meat* which may or may not be strictly euphemistic, but which nonetheless avoid directly expressing the taboo. Lastly, speakers very frequently do just that: they flout the taboo with the word that most directly expresses it, as in *fuck*, *shit*, *damn*, *cock*, *whore*. These we call obscenities.

Another consequence of the emotive cline is that it acts as a catalyst for language change in one direction along it or the other, either amelioration or pejoration. This can create a kind of well-known diachronic “euphemism treadmill” whereby new coinages become less euphemistic over time, and are consequently replaced by newer more euphemistic forms (Taylor 1974):

Table 3. English terms for lavatories across the centuries.

| 12 th c | 16 th c | 18 th c | 19 th c | 20 th c |
|--------------------|--|-----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| <i>privy</i> | <i>bog house, house of office, loo</i> | <i>water closet, toilet</i> | <i>lavatory</i> | <i>restroom</i> |

Because taboos are often the locus of language change in this way, historical linguists sometimes must take them into account in reconstructing earlier stages of languages. Thus the original Indo-European root for “bear”, **h₂ftk^{os}*, regularly became *ursus* in Latin, *arktos* in Greek and *ḫartakkas* in Hittite, while the Germanic and Slavic language families lost this root: they have **berô* “the brown one” and **medv-ědb* “honey-eater” respectively. This kind of extreme semantic shift would normally not be acceptable methodologically to linguists except for the fact that it is licensed by a specific known taboo surrounding cultic and predatory animals in ancient Indo-European society.

Like most formal features of human cultures, specific cultural taboos can come to die out over time, and when they do this can have a knock-on effect in the way language is used to express them. Thus changing attitudes about social class and social hierarchies in the 19th and 20th centuries led to the erosion of a taboo directly referring to subordinates: before this time, words like *cad*, *boor*, *rake*, or *cur* were deemed extremely obscene, while today they seem comical or banal because the underlying taboo has largely disappeared. Given enough corpus data we can even begin to hypothesize about when linguistic taboos appear or disappear (at least in written form). The prescription against speaking (or at least writing) about bodily effluvia may have become dominant in the English-speaking world sometime in the mid-18th century and since the late 20th century has been slowly disappearing, based on shifts in their usage that we observe at these times (Figure 2):

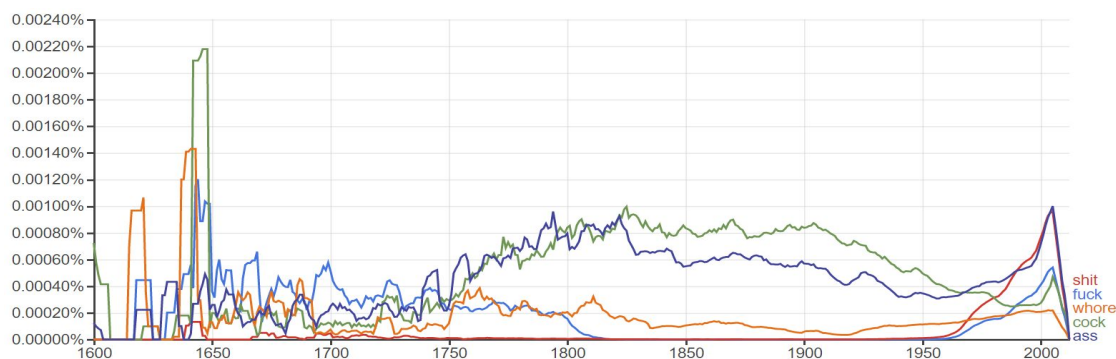


Figure 2. Usage of English obscenities in print across time, 1600-2020

(Google N-gram, 4 April 2020).

Whether this specific correlation is because of a taboo or some other social or technical process remains a topic for empirical investigation beyond the scope of this paper.

One key feature we see in obscenities is their structural and constructional dependence. Obscenities are not solely defined by their pragmatic use, but also by their lexical and grammatical properties. The forms on the left side of Table 4 are grammatical, while those on the right are ungrammatical (Ljung 2011):

Table 4. Grammatical dependence of obscene language (Ljung 2011: 7-12).

| Grammatical / Idiomatic | Ungrammatical / Unidiomatic |
|---|--|
| Execration: <i>Fuck you! Screw you!</i> | * <i>Bonk you! *Shag you!</i> |
| Expletive infixation: <i>Abso-fucking-lutely!</i> | ?* <i>Abso-shagging-lutely!</i> |
| Expletive intensifier: <i>What a fucking idiot!</i> | * <i>What a screwing idiot!</i> |
| Expletive focus construction: <i>What the fuck do you mean?</i> | ?? <i>What the copulation do you mean?</i> ?? <i>What the bang do you mean?</i> |

That is, even though the verb *fuck* has roughly semantically equivalent obscene synonyms in the form of *bonk*, *shag*, *screw*, etc., its **pragmatic** functioning in an execratory construction is exclusive to that lexical item; the execration cannot be simply interchanged with other obscenities into the same slot in the construction. This kind of lexical specificity becomes even more obvious when we widen our scope beyond English to other societies whose obscenities arose because of different taboos entirely. Although they generally fall into the same familiar overall categories discussed in Table 1, their specific translation into English (or even into other synonyms of their own language) rarely trigger the same kind of obscene reaction that standard obscenities in English do. This is possible also in part because obscenities refer not to *literal* referents, but to idiomatic *metaphorical* ones: if you call someone a prick or a bitch, you are not referring literally to a penis or to a female dog, but to a set of symbolic associations people in a specific community have with items in their world.

Table 5. Crosslinguistic variety of obscenities and their English translations (Ljung 2011: 74).

| Language | Obscenity | Literal Translation |
|-----------|--|--|
| Hindi | <i>Khutika bacha</i> | 'son of a dog!' (cf. English 'son of a bitch') |
| Icelandic | <i>Djöfullis anskoti</i> | 'Devil's devils' |
| Italian | <i>Porca Madonna, Porco Dio</i> | 'pig of a madonna', 'pig God' |
| Spanish | <i>Me cagoen Dios</i> | 'I crap on God!' |
| Greek | <i>Hysesse!</i> | 'Disbelief' |
| Danish | <i>Pokkers!</i> | 'Pox!' |
| German | <i>Drecksau, Aasgeier, Du Fickfehler</i> | 'crap pig', 'vulture', 'you fuck-mistake' |

Table 6. Quebecois French *sacres*.

| Quebecois <i>Sacre</i> | Literal English Translation |
|------------------------|--|
| <i>câlîce</i> | 'chalice' (sacramental wine cup) |
| <i>ciboire</i> | 'ciborium' (a cup for holding sacramental bread) |
| <i>criss</i> | 'Christ' |
| <i>maudit</i> [mo:dzi] | 'damned' |
| <i>esti</i> [ætsi] | 'the host' (the sacramental bread) |
| <i>tabarnak</i> | 'tabernacle' (i.e., the locked-box where the Eucharist is stored; this is the strongest <i>sacre</i>) |

In some cases, the taboos behind the obscenity are so culturally specific that they resist any close translation entirely. A famous case comes from Quebecois French, whose system of *sacres* (curses) stems entirely from the Roman Catholic mass and its various accoutrements and ritual objects (Table 6). In some cases, these can be concatenated into long strings of obscenities used to express extreme emotion, as in *Crise de calice de tabarnak d'esti de sacrament de trou viarge*, literally “Christ of the chalice of the tabernacle of the host of the sacrament of the Virgin’s pussy” (Freed and Kalina 1983).

So, to summarize, when we examine how obscenities function across languages, they have three main properties that distinguish them from nonlinguistic taboos and other forms of language (cf. also Ljung 2011: 4): (1) pragmatically and semantically, they have nonliteral taboo referents; (2) lexically, each obscenity manifests a distinct construction, and is not automatically interchangeable with other obscenities: “fuck” and “bonk” are not functionally equivalent as obscene swear words just because their base verbs are synonymous; and (3) grammatically, each obscene construction has independent properties not reducible to others, e.g., “fuck” in “fuck you” and “abso-fucking-lutely” have different grammatical distributions.



Figure 3. Example of Quebecois French *sacre*: *pas de publicité tabarnak*, literally ‘No fucking admail’.

2. Obscenities in Caucasian Languages

Almost all the literature on obscenities examines data from familiar western (or at least very populous) languages. Partly this is due to the nature of obscenities themselves: by virtue of being taboo, native speakers are often hesitant to discuss

them¹. But it also reflects the nature of language documentation efforts, since community-based language documentation often must work under constraints negotiated by and with the language community. Thus dictionaries, grammars and language corpora often conscientiously avoid or are even purged of taboo topics and language. Notably, even in western languages, dictionaries historically provided entries like Latin *membrum virile* “virile member” for “penis” until well into the 20th century (Coker 2019: 101), and often primary texts would remain untranslated into vernacular languages because of their obscene content, as famously was the case of the Roman poet Catullus’s *Carmen 16*, which begins: *Pēdicābo ego vōs et irrumābō* “I will sodomize and face-fuck you”. Sometimes, linguists and language-learners also only learn about obscene words and constructions by accident. For example, while studying Chechen, I was admonished to be very careful about the pronunciation of *бУТТ butt* “month, moon” because of its near homophony with the obscene word *бУД bud* “pussy, vagina”. So research on obscenities is not always straight-forward.

In an attempt to remedy this, I examined dictionaries and corpora and elicited forms from speakers of half a dozen languages of the Caucasus. So as to prevent circular reasoning, I also engaged with the anthropological literature (e.g., Makalatia 1934; Makalatia 1935; Smirnova 1986; Tuite 2000; Manning 2008; Tuite 2011; etc.) on the Caucasian peoples to ensure that my idea of an obscene idea or concept was not simply carried over as an exercise in translation². The Caucasus is a region famed at once for its linguistic diversity as well as its typological distinctiveness. The Caucasus today is home to approximately 80 living or recently extinct languages (see Wier Forthcoming-b; Figure 3) belonging to six different language phyla, three of which are considered so-called “autochthonous” families, found only there: Abkhaz-Adyghean, Kartvelian and Nakh-Daghestanian. In addition to these three are three other larger families: Indo-European, Turkic, and Semitic. Although no regional specialist has ever convincingly argued that any of these six phyla are phylogenetically related to each other, they undoubtedly share many broad features as a result of millennia of language contact and in other ways stand out from neighboring languages.³ For example, unlike most surrounding languages of Eurasia, Caucasian languages often feature typologically rare(r) voicing and phonation contrasts, such as glottalization or pharyngealization, non-nominative alignments of case assignment and agreement, unusually large numbers of categories (e.g., Batsbi’s eight gender classes, or the potentially dozens of distinct cases in Tabasaran or Tsez), unusual morphological phenomena such as endoclitics in Udi or morphological blocking in Georgian, and many other features not otherwise found in Europe or the Middle East (see Wier 2024 for more examples). These many unusual typological features have some rather profound effects on what a possible obscenity in a Caucasian language is because,

¹ One consultant for this paper willingly provided examples of obscenities in his language only if he remained anonymous.

²As much as possible, I tried to reconfirm the obscene status of a word or construction by speaking to native speakers, or, if a word is listed as vulgar or obscene in a dictionary, I examined its use in texts to the extent possible.

³See Tuite 1999, Wier in press, for extended discussions.

as noted above, speakers express themselves through the medium of the language they already speak. Thus the categories of such languages act as a kind of constraint.

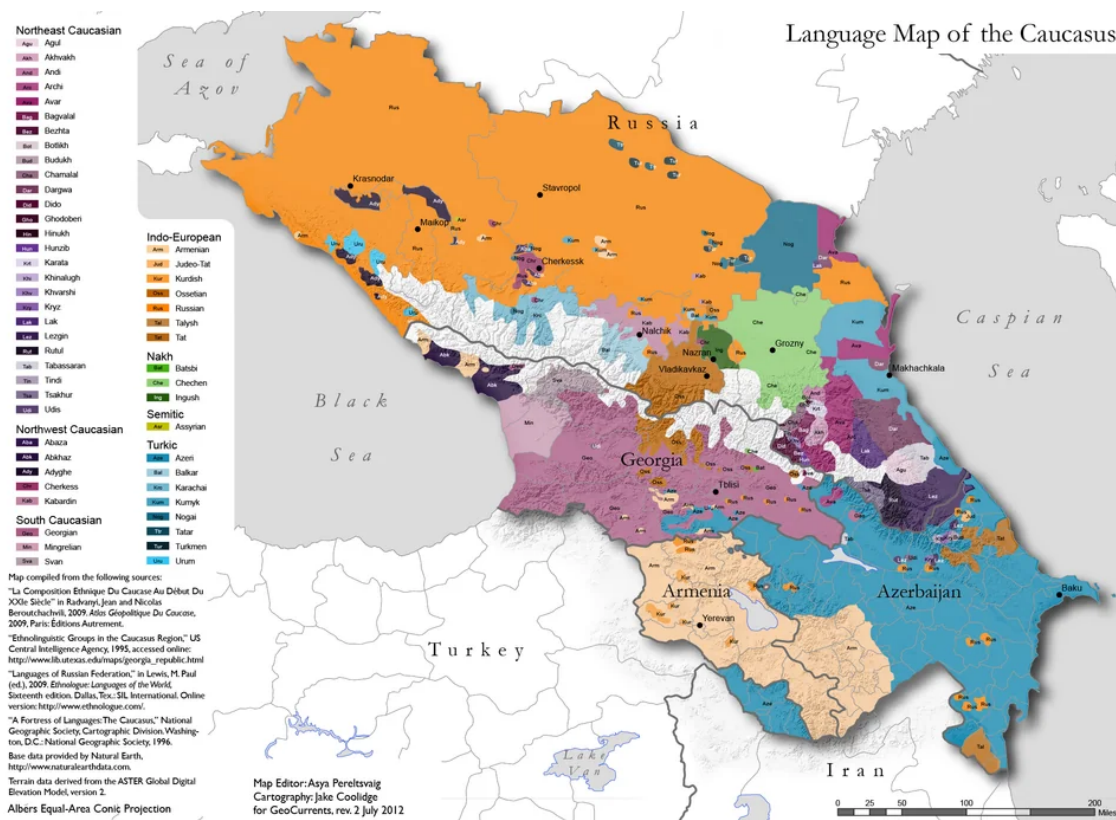


Figure 4. Map of Caucasian languages.

3. Semantic domains of Caucasian obscenities

What is clear from this research is that Caucasian languages broadly do share many of the same families of linguistic taboos found in Western languages. So for example genitalia, “private” body parts and sexuality form an important part of the obscene lexicon in a range of languages across different families: Georgian ყლე *q’le*, Armenian կլիր *klir*, Azerbaijani *sik*, Chechen лур *lur* or т’ен *t’ien*, Udi *k’ol*, all literally meaning “penis” (Table 7).

Table 7. Selected nominal obscenities in Caucasian languages.

| | <i>penis</i> | <i>buttocks</i> | <i>excrement</i> | <i>prostitute</i> | <i>breasts</i> | <i>vagina</i> | <i>place of perdition</i> |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Georgian</i> | ყლე <i>qle</i> | ტრაკი <i>traki</i> | მძღნერი მჰგნერი, ქაქი kaaki | ბოზი bozi | ძუძუ ჰუჰუ | მუტელი muteli | ჯანდაბა jandaba |
| <i>Armenian</i> | կլիր <i>klir</i> | ուտ <i>vor</i> | քաք <i>kak</i> | բოզ <i>boz</i> | ծիծ <i>cic</i> | սուց <i>suc</i> | ջհանդամ jhandam |
| <i>Azeri</i> | <i>sik</i> | <i>göt</i> | <i>rox</i> | <i>qəhbə</i> | <i>məmə</i> | <i>am</i> | <i>cəhənnəm</i> |
| <i>Chechen</i> | лур <i>lur</i> , т’ен <i>t’ien</i> | к’ег k’eg | бид <i>bid</i> | б’иж <i>b’iž</i> | накха naqa | буд <i>bud</i> | ж’оьжахати ž’ožaxati |
| <i>Udi</i> | <i>k’ol</i> | <i>šan</i> | <i>k’ak’ala</i> | <i>q’əhbä</i> | <i>c’ic’ik’</i> | <i>k’ut’</i> | <i>jähñäm</i> , <i>gehena</i> |

Table 8. Selected verbal obscenities in Caucasian languages

| | <i>copulate</i> | <i>ejaculate</i> | <i>defecate</i> | <i>urinate</i> | <i>masturbate</i> | <i>kiss (heavy)</i> |
|-----------------|--|-----------------------------|---|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| <i>Georgian</i> | ტყვნა <i>tq̄vna</i> , შეცემა <i>šecema</i> , გათხრა <i>gatxra</i> | გათავება <i>gataveba</i> | მოჯმა <i>mojma</i> , გაჯმა <i>gajma</i> | ფსმა <i>psma</i> | ნძრევა <i>nzreva</i> | ჩაზასა <i>čazasa</i> , მიზასა <i>mizasa</i> , მოჯიგრა <i>mojigra</i> |
| <i>Armenian</i> | քունել <i>kunel</i> | թախին <i>tapem</i> | քաղել <i>kakel</i> | շնել <i>šnel</i> | ժաժ տալ <i>žaz tal</i> | ? |
| <i>Azeri</i> | <i>sikmək</i> | <i>gəlmək</i> | <i>sıçmaq</i> | <i>işmək</i> | <i>oynamaq</i> | ? |
| <i>Chechen</i> | т'ен/буд дола <i>t'ien/bud dola</i> (male) т'ен хахка <i>t'ien xaxka</i> (female) | в-асвала <i>v-aslala</i> | ? | чиш тела <i>čiš tela</i> | сux toxа <i>sux toxа</i> | ? |

As in Western languages, these obscenities need not and in fact usually do not refer to their literal referents; more commonly they are simply terms of abuse or approbation. So in Georgian to refer to a man as a ყლე *q'le* is an expression of disrespect and abuse toward his entire person, and not merely a reference to his anatomy. The proof of this is that in some cases obscene forms become uninterpretable *except* in their broader metaphorical sense: Georgian ყლექალა *q'lekala* lit. “dick-woman” usually refers to a woman who speaks abusively or profanely in an exceptionally provocative way, and makes no particular suggestion about her gender identity or biological traits. And in fact, the obscene way to refer to a despicable obscenity or act is ყლეობა *q'leoba* “a fucking”. Many of these obscenities in fact form entire families of abusive or offensive language. Thus in Georgian we find the forms like the following (Friedman 1988):

- (1) a. ძაღლი შვილი *dzağlišvili* “son of a dog”, ვირიშვილი *virišvili* “son of an ass”, მშობელძაღლი *mšobelzağli* “parent-dog”, *mamazağli* “father-dog”, ღორიშვილი *ğorišvili* “son of a pig”,
 - b. ყლეთაყლე *q'letaq'le* “dick of dicks” (stupid person), ყლინჯი *q'linji* (idiot), ყლეობა *q'leoba* “a fucking” (terrible deed), ყლექალა *q'lekala* “dick woman”, გამოყლევებული *gamoq'levebuli* “dicked person” (very stupid person)
 - c. ტრაკიანი *t'rak'iani* “assy person” (brave person), უტრაკო *ut'rak'o* “assless” (coward), ნუ გაატრაკე *nu gaat'rak'e* “don't ass it!” (expression of disbelief, cf. English “you're shitting me”), მაზოლი მაქვს ტრაკზე *mazoli makvs t'rak'ze* “you're a pain in the ass” (lit. “I have a callous on my ass”), სადღაც ტრაკში *sadğac tr'ak'ši* “somewhere far away” (lit. somewhere in the ass; cf German *am Arsch der Welt*)
 - d. ბოზიშვილი *bozišvili* “whore-son” (despicable person), ნაბოზარი *nabozari* (lit. “whored”, someone who is despicable), გაბოზებული *gabozebuli* “whored-out” (KGB agent), ბოზიიიშ! *boziiış!* “whore-sss” (expression of amazement or shock, like English “Holy fuck!”)
 - e. იჯვამს *ijvams* “he shits himself”, ჩაჯმული *čajmuli* “one who is easily frightened” (lit. “one who shat downward”), გააჯვი *gaajvi* “fuck off!” (lit. “shit away”)

f. იფსამს *ipsams* “he pisses himself”, ჩაფსმული *čapsmuli* “one who is easily frightened” (lit. “one who pissed downward”)

In general, combinations of taboo categories heighten the intensity of the obscenity. So for example, ძაღლიშვილი *dzağlišvili* “son of a dog” is stronger than just ძაღლი *dzağli* “dog” by virtue of using two taboo categories: unclean animals and family members. Combinations of obscenities also sometimes allude to historical linguistic tropes, as with ყლეთაყლე *q’letaq’le* “dick of dicks”, which has the same structure as the Georgian translation of the Persianate titlature *mepe-ta mepe* “king of kings”, thus providing a kind of satirical inversion of the non-profane world.

Across the Caucasus by far the most general class of obscenity is that which refers to the sexuality of families and especially mothers. Thus in Georgian there are at least four common general verbal constructions to refer to sex with someone’s mother, as in (2):

- (2) a. შენი დედა შევეცი *šen(i) deda(s) ševeci* “I fucked [lit. gave it into] your mother”
 b. შენი დედა მოვტყან(ო) *šeni deda movt’q’an[i]* “I fucked your mother”
 c. შენი ჯიში მოვტყან(ო) *šeni jiši movt’q’an[i]* “I fucked your breed”
 d. შენს დედას გავთხარე *šens dedas gavtxare* “I fucked [lit. dug] your mother”

The earliest attestation of this trope comes from the travelogue of the 17th century Turkish explorer Evliya Çelebi, the *Seyahatname* (Gippert 1991). Çelebi recorded numerous details about the linguistic diversity of the Caucasus, including obscene remarks he encountered from the people there. He included several of the following “mother”-style execrations from Abkhaz, Georgian and Megrelian:

- (3) Abkhaz
 a. Wan dəskw’əst’ “Let me fuck your mother”
 b. Wəš’əsep’əs “I’ll fuck your wife”
- (4) Georgian
 a. ძაღ[ლ]მა დედა მოგიტყნას “May a dog fuck your mother”
 b. dzağ[l]ma deda mogit’q’nas
- (5) Megrelian
 a. ჯოღორქ დია-სქანი მიგიშახოდ[ას] “May a dog fuck your mother”
 b. joğork dia-skani migišaxod[as]

These very early curses indicate that many of these execration formulas are of very long-standing in the Caucasus, long antedating modernity and the occupation of the Russian and Soviet empires.

In some Caucasian cultures, obscenities more often involve ritual uncleanness. This is the case with many Chechen obscenities, as in (6):

- | | | | |
|-----|----|---|--|
| (6) | a. | <i>Han korta çilla kerçila</i> | “May your head roll in blood” |
| | b. | <i>Han da haqic volila</i> | “May your father deal with a pig” |
| | c. | <i>Mollin k’eag sanna çan-vealla ho</i> | “You’re as clean as a mullah’s ass” |
| | d. | <i>ʔoudel bid büücu ah</i> | “You’re talking stupid shit” |
| | e. | <i>Čiš dalla höga</i> | “You’re a pussy, grow up” (lit. “You appear as piss”) |
| | f. | <i>Nir yalla höga</i> | “You’re a pussy, grow up” (lit. “You appear as diarrhea”) |

And across the Caucasus, divine curses are frequent sources of obscenities:

- | | | | |
|------|-------------|---|--|
| (7) | Georgian: | ღმერთმა დაგწყევლოს! <i>Gmertma dag’q’evlos</i> | “May God damn you!” |
| (8) | Chechen: | <i>De:lan nealt xilla hun/çun</i> <i>Vorħden nealt xilla</i> | “God damn you” “Damn your seventh-generation great-grandfather” |
| (9) | Armenian | <i>Dalla daeçilla ho</i> Աստվածանիծիքեզ <i>Atsvats anitsi kez</i> Բոզիվաստակ <i>Bozi vastak</i> | “God take you away!” “God damn you” “God damn whore” |
| (10) | Azerbaijani | Allah sənə lənət eləsin | “God damn you” |

Some Caucasian languages also have racial or ethnic obscenities. In Georgian, the word ზანგი *zangi* literally means “black person, negro”, from Classical Persian زنگی *zangi*, and is usually considered to be a mildly derogatory or somewhat rude reference to someone of African ancestry. Though not so unspeakably obscene as the English word *nigger*, in polite company, one says შავკანიანი *šavk’aniani* (literally “black-skinned”) instead. Azerbaijani also borrowed this same Persian word, though in Azerbaijani it is not only not obscene, it is an entirely prosaic way to refer to black-skinned persons. This again illustrates that the emotional content of obscene language lies not in its strict semantic content – such words are not only cognate but are truth-conditionally the same between the two languages – but in the pragmatic manners of use to which they are put in a specific language community.

As a consequence of this, obscenities can come to have exceptionally specific usages that are almost impossible to translate into other languages. One example is the Soviet practice of installing in each courtyard in each city block a representative of the secret police, the K.G.B., usually a woman, who was essentially a “rat” (to use an English term from the Mafia). This person would pass on sensitive information about other citizens’ personal lives and social connections and receive remuneration or state services in turn. Such people were termed derisively in Georgian გაბოზებული *gabozebuli* lit. “whored-out”, from ბოზი *bozi* “whore”.

3.1. Obscenities and language contact

Another salient feature of Caucasian obscenities is the clear evidence for language contact amongst them. With great frequency, basic obscenities often show some evidence of being loan words, albeit sometimes only with numerous subsequent sound-changes or adaptation to the borrowing language’s phonology. Thus in Table 7 above, words for “penis”, “excrement”, “prostitute”, “breasts” and “place of perdition” are all broadly likely to be loan words from one source language or another, often one from outside the region. Thus a word for “hell” in Georgian, Armenian, Azeri and Udi all stem from the Arabic *جَهَنَّمَ jahannama*, the genitive of *جَهَنَّمَ jahannam*. The older Georgian word, *ჯოჯობეთი jojoxeti* (< **dojoxeti*) likewise is a loan from Middle Persian *dušox*, with a Georgian gentile suffix *-et* attached; the Chechen word is a transparent loan from Georgian. Meanwhile, Azeri *qəhbə* “prostitute” and Udi *q’əhbä* “prostitute” are both loans from Arabic *قَهْبَة qaḥba*, which literally means “cougher” – a word evocative of the taboo nature of a prostitute’s services. In some cases, a regional language is likely the original source: Armenian *կլիր klir*, Chechen *lur* and Udi *k’ol* are all likely loans from Georgian *ყლე q’le* “penis”, which is reconstructible to Proto-Kartvelian (Fähnrich 2007: 505). Georgian is also the likely source in Armenian and Chechen for the word “prostitute”, as the Laz cognate *ბოზო bozo* of Georgian *ბოზი bozi* “whore” simply means “girl”.

Table 9. Examples of language contact across Caucasian obscenities. Words of the same color-shading share common cognate or loan origin.

| | <i>penis</i> | <i>buttocks</i> | <i>excrement</i> | <i>prostitute</i> | <i>breasts</i> | <i>vagina</i> | <i>place of perdition</i> |
|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|---|
| <i>Georgian</i> | ყლე qle | ტრაკი traḳi | მძღნერი mzǧneri, ქააკი kaaki | ბოზი bozi | ძუძუ zuḥu | მუტელი muteli | ჯანდაბა jandaba, ჯოჯობეთი jojoxeti |
| <i>Armenian</i> | կլիր klir | նն vor | քաք kak | բոզ boz | ծիծ cic | պուց puc | ջիանդամ jhandam |
| <i>Azeri</i> | sik | göt | pox | qəhbə | məmə | am | cəhənnəm |
| <i>Chechen</i> | лур lur, т'ен t'ien | к'ег k'eg | бид bid | б'иж б'иž | накха naqa | буд bud | жобжахати žöžaxati |
| <i>Udi</i> | k'ol | šan | k'ak'ala | q'əhbä | c'ic'ik' | k'ut' | jähnäm, gehena |

These cross-cutting patterns of contact illustrate a feature of obscenities we saw in more familiar languages: that one way to obfuscate the linguistic taboo is to make use of another language’s term for the same referent, thus creating an alternative, more euphemistic encoding. For this reason, many people of the Caucasus have at least two obscene spoken registers: one a set of obscenities derived from elements of their own indigenous language, which is generally regarded as stronger, and a second milder set of obscenities drawn from another contact language, often Russian. In the case of some minority languages, as amongst the Megrelians, there is a tripartite system of obscene registers: the most

obscene being Megrelian, a somewhat milder set taken from Georgian, and a third taken from Russian (see Friedman forthcoming for more on Slavic obscenities).

3.2. Formal properties of obscenities

So it is clear that obscenities in Caucasian languages are drawn from familiar taboo categories, like Western obscenities, are generally interpreted not literally but metaphorically, and also like Western languages are frequently sourced from neighboring languages. But Caucasian obscenities also tend to have specific formal morphosyntactic or phonological profiles that set them apart from non-profane speech.

3.2.1. *Obscenities as expressive constructions*

Many Caucasian obscenities share similarities with so-called “expressive” speech consisting of “marked words that depict sensory information” (Dingemanse 2012, 2015; Wier 2023). Dingemanse has shown that expressive vocabulary often forms its own distinct subset within a language’s lexicon:

- (12) a. they are conventionalized expressions with consistent forms and meanings and not nonce formations or interjections;
 b. they typically possess structural properties (of phonology or morphosyntax) that distinguish them from other classes of words;
 c. they depict rather than merely describe an event or state in an affective, performative or mimetic way;
 d. their semantic content encodes sensory information of sight, sound, or a speaker’s internal psychological state.

So for example, obscene words often have a regular prosodic profile of simple consonant-vowel-(consonant) sequences: Georgian dʒudʒ *dzudzu* “breasts”, ʒʰɑdʒɑsɑdʒ *jandaba* “hell”; Armenian nn *vor* “butt”, pʰɑp *kak* “shit”, pɑnq *boz* “whore”, dʰɑd *cic* “tits”, pɑnɪg *puc* “pussy”; Azerbaijani *sik* “cock”, *göt* “butt”, *pox* “shit”, *məmə* “tits”, etc. Like these Caucasian obscenities, expressives across languages tend to make use of reduced numbers of phonemes otherwise available in the language, often have CVCV syllable sequences, and/or make use of partial or complete reduplication. While not all Caucasian obscenities manifest these traits, a great many of them do. What distinguishes obscenities from other kinds of expressive constructions is that they almost never directly reflect sensory information of sight or sound; they do however almost always reflect speakers’ internal psychological states. In this sense, obscenities might be considered to be a subclass of the wider category of expressives.

3.2.2. *Distinctions between obscene and non-obscene grammatical constructions*

Another feature of Caucasian obscenities that relates them to more familiar forms found in Western languages is that many of them bear idiosyncratic or unusual

grammatical properties that cannot be directly derived from non-obscene parts of the lexicon. One particularly striking example is found in Georgian execration formulas. As noted above, one common Georgian execration involves the use of the verb *šecema* “give into” and a reference to one’s mother. Now, most nouns in Georgian indicate possession by a separate preposed possessive pronoun, as with *čem-i saxli* “my house” in (13a) and *šen-i saxli* “your house” in (13b). However, kinship terms like *mama* “father”, *deda* “mother”, *deida* “maternal aunt”, *mamida* “paternal aunt” etc. do not function this way; instead, they take incorporated pronouns for possessors, as in *dedačem-i* “my mother” in (14a) and *dedašeni* “your mother” in (14b). Such a distinction represents a well-known typological contrast between alienably possessed nouns, whose possessors can in principle change, and inalienably possessed nouns, whose possessors are in some sense seen to be permanent possessors, as kinship terms, body parts, and other similarly seemingly inherent forms of possession usually are.⁴

- (13) Georgian alienable possession
- a. *čem-i* *saxl-i* *ak* *ar-is*
 1POSS-NOM house-NOM here be-3SG
 “My house is here.”
- b. *šen-i* *saxl-i* *ak* *ar-is*
 2POSS-NOM house-NOM here be-3SG
 “Your house is here.”
- (14) Georgian inalienable possession of kinship terms
- a. *deda-čem-i* *ak* *ar-is*
 mother-1POSS-NOM here be-3SG
 “My mother is here.”
- b. *deda-šen-i* *ak* *ar-is*
 mother-2POSS-NOM here be-3SG
 “Your mother is here.”

Crucially, Georgian obscene execrations do not make use of the inalienable incorporation: the possessor in (15a) is a separate prenominal modifier analogous to those in (13), and not formed like those in (14):

- (15) a. Alienable possession construction with obscenity reading
šen-i *deda* *še-v-e-c-i*
 2POSS-NOM mother.NOM PVB-1-PRV-give.AOR-AOR1
 “I fucked your mother” (lit. I gave it to your mother)
- b. Infelicitous inalienable construction with obscenity reading
 #*deda-šen-s* *še-v-e-c-i*
 mother-2POSS-DAT PVB-1-PRV-give.AOR-AOR1
 #”I fucked your mother” (acceptable reading: I gave it (in)to your mother)

⁴ In point of fact, there is some variation amongst languages with a contrast of alienable vs. inalienable possession in which precise sets of lexical items count as grammatically alienable vs. inalienable. Thus “home” or “land” might also count as inalienably possessed in some languages. For purposes of this example, it is sufficient to know that in Georgian only a few kinship terms have this particular grammatical property, and they belong to a fixed, closed class of words.

The implication of this is rather profound, since it means that *an inalienably possessed noun can be converted to an alienably possessed noun, but only when used as an obscenity*. That is, a kinship term, with all its affective emotional content, is in effect converted to an everyday object to be used as one likes. It is hard to think of a more direct manifestation of a culture’s objectification of women than that they are literally converted grammatically into alienable, disposable objects!

In fact, the obscene construction in (15a) has clearly shifted somewhat from its original meaning in more than just this grammatical sense. In normal conditions, Georgian assigns dative case to indirect objects in an aorist past tense, and nominative case to direct objects.⁵ Before about the last quarter of the 20th century, the obscene construction worked the same way: one would have said *šens dedas ševeci*, with the dative –s on “mother”. However, in contemporary, 21st century Georgian, the normal way to use this construction amongst all but the oldest generations is to mark it with nominative case. This is a strong indication that the meaning of the verb has fully grammaticalized as a direct object in nominative case –i, as in (15a), and has lost its original meaning “give” entirely.

The Nakh-Daghestanian languages also provide us some interesting examples of obscenities with distinct grammatical properties, and here these mostly involve the behavior of grammatical gender. Unlike most Indo-European or Semitic languages, which often have three, two or no grammatical genders, Nakh-Daghestanian languages are famous for having many multiple gender classes, with as many as eight gender classes in the Nakh language Batsbi (Holisky and Gagua 1994). The way gender is marked in such languages is determined by their agreement with verbal and adjectival prefixes in the singular and in the plural, with different gender classes having different singular/plural pairs of the same prefixes.

Table 10. Gender classes in Chechen.

| | | SG | PL | | |
|---|-------------------------|----|----|--|---|
| 1 | <i>k'ant</i> (boy) | v- | b- | <i>k'ant v-eza v-u</i> 'the boy is heavy' | <i>k'entii d-eza d-u</i> 'the boys are heavy' |
| 2 | <i>zuda</i> (woman) | y- | b- | <i>zuda y-eza y-u</i> 'the woman is heavy' | <i>zudari b-eza b-u</i> 'the women are heavy' |
| 3 | <i>ph'āgal</i> (rabbit) | y- | y- | <i>ph'āgal y-eza y-u</i> 'the rabbit is heavy' | <i>ph'āgalash y-eza y-u</i> 'the rabbits are heavy' |
| 4 | <i>naž</i> (oak) | d- | d- | <i>naž d-eza d-u</i> 'the oak is heavy' | <i>niežnash d-eza d-u</i> 'the oaks are heavy' |
| 5 | <i>mangal</i> (scythe) | b- | b- | <i>mangal b-eza b-u</i> 'the scythe is heavy' | <i>mangalash b-eza b-u</i> 'the scythes are heavy' |
| 6 | <i>ʼaž</i> (apple) | b- | d- | <i>ʼaž b-eza b-u</i> 'the apple is heavy' | <i>ʼežash d-eza d-u</i> 'the apples are heavy' |

⁵ Georgian has a complicated system of case-shifting from one tense to the next; see Table 14 below.

Thus in Chechen, which has six gender classes, words that agree with a prefix *v-* in the singular and *b-* in the plural are Gender 1, which mostly consists of masculine human nouns; while words that agree with *y-* in the singular and *b-* in the plural are Gender 2, which mostly consists of feminine human nouns; and so forth as in Table 10. As may be seen from this chart, the actual exponent of agreement, whether *v-*, *b-*, *y-* or *d-*, is almost never unique for any particular gender class, so that *b-* could represent plural agreement for classes 1, 2 and 5, while it represents singular agreement for classes 5 and 6. Semantically, only genders 1 and 2 are almost fully consistent, referring to male and female human nouns respectively, while the other genders divide up the rest of the world in different ways. Gender 3 mostly refers to domestic animals, while Gender 5 is where most words referring to tools and man-made products are classed. This reinforces the notion that formal gender in language is simply a way of dividing the world into classes of things on a grammatical basis (Corbett 1991).

Now, most nouns in Chechen belong in fixed classes: like Spanish or French, they simply belong to one class or another. But a certain number of nouns show variation in which gender they assign, and this is where it gets interesting for the purpose of the study of obscenities. One of these is *zuda*, one word for “woman”. Normally this noun belongs to Gender 2, since it agrees with *y-* in the singular and *b-* in the plural, as in (16a). But it also can occasionally shift to Gender 4, with agreement of *d-* in both the singular and in the plural, as in (16b). Crucially, this *also* induces an obscene reading in that particular agreement pattern:

- (16) a. *zuda* *y-eza* *y-u*
 woman 2-heavy 2-be.PRES
 “The woman is heavy”.
- b. *zuda* *d-eza* *d-u*
 woman 4-heavy 4-be.PRES
 “The bitchy, whoring woman is heavy”.

Here we see that something can be made to be obscene not because of particular word-choice, but because of the particular choice on the part of speakers to manipulate the grammar of the language they are speaking, since one and the same noun is being used in both sentences, while the agreement pattern differs. Why this particular gender? Gender 4 often includes nouns that refer to aspects of the undomesticated world, like wild animals and plants, and so shifting the gender agreement from the normal one for female humans to one for wild animals could also be seen as a kind of objectification or derogatory demotion of women on the part of Chechen speakers.

A similar but even more extensive kind of maledictory speech is found in the Lak language of Daghestan. Lak is a distinct branch of the Nakh-Daghestanian family, and like Chechen and most Nakh-Daghestanian languages, many of its verbs, numerals, demonstratives, adjectives and even adverbs agree with nouns in four gender classes (Friedman 1996):

Table 11. Gender prefixes and nonprefixes (variously suffixes or infixes).

| Set 1 prefixes/nonprefixes | Singular | Plural |
|----------------------------|----------------|----------|
| Gender 1 | ∅ / -w-, -j- | b- / -w- |
| Gender 2 | d- / -r-, -rd- | b- / -w- |
| Gender 3 | b- / -w-, -pp- | b- / -w- |
| Gender 4 | d- / -r-, -rd- | d- / -r- |

As we saw with Chechen, it is the particular combination of agreement in the singular and the plural that distinguishes one gender from the other, and different parts of speech take different exponents of gender agreement (Friedman 1996: 4):

- (17) a. Ki-j-a ars ša-w-a ∅-ussar
 two.1 son at.home.1 1-be
 “Two sons are at home”.
- b. Traditional agreement pattern (> now pejorative outside family):
 Ki-r-a ššarssa ša-rd-a d-ussar
 two.2 woman at.home.2 2-be
 “Two women are at home”.
- c. Innovative agreement pattern (> now normative outside family):
 Ki-w-a ššarssa ša-pp-a b-ussar
 two.3 woman at.home.3 3-be
 “Two women are at home”.

In (17), gender marking is found on every constituent of the clause except the actual controlling noun, respectively: in (17a) the markers *-j-*, *-w-*, and *∅-* for the first gender are used in agreement with *ars* “son”, while in (17b) the markers *-r-*, *-rd-*, and *d-* for the second gender are used in agreement with *ššarssa* “woman”. (17c) illustrates “proper” usage of the same construction for use with outsiders, using Gender 3 agreement markers instead of Gender 2.

However, in Lak assignment of nouns to particular gender classes is not at all straightforward, as nouns with female human or female animate referents are found not just in Gender 2, as in Chechen above, but also Gender 3 and a few in Gender 4. What’s more, most nouns with female referents in Gender 2 refer specifically to older or married women, while the productive category referring to all other women is Gender 3. As noted by Friedman (1996: 193), already by the time of the first documentation in the 1860s, gender agreement with Gender 2 had taken on derogatory connotations, while Gender 3 had become a kind of default class:

Class 3 was used for and by young women [when referring to themselves – TRW] and the use of Class 2 for them was regarded as an insult. [...] It was considered inappropriate for a bride to switch to Class 2 immediately after marriage but ridiculous for a woman who already had a child to continue to use Class 3 when speaking of herself.

So for example, typical Gender 2 nouns referring to female entities are not just the expected *ninu* “mother”, *amu* “grandmother” and *nittilsu* “aunt”, but also more pragmatically marked words like *buwč'u* “fortune-teller”, *japaluq* “beggar woman”, *lut'u* “sorceress”, *qqah'wa* “prostitute, whore”, *čuntuka* “slattern”, *akka* “fool”, *ganzaw* “fatso”, *harzaqus* “chatterbox, busybody”, and *suxasulu* “female evil spirit that smothers people in their sleep”.

And since this earliest period of documentation, this trend has only become accentuated as newer generations of speakers eschew use of Gender 2 agreement for an ever-larger number of nouns. Xajdakov suggested that use of Gender 2 agreement outside the immediate family is pejorative, as shown in (17b-c), and Friedman reports that in some Lak dialects Gender 2 agreement has been lost entirely either by merging it with Gender 3 in Arakul dialect or Gender 4 in Balxar dialect (Friedman 1996: 7). So again we see that obscenity can manifest itself not only exclusively in a particular grammatical patterning, the obscene or pejorative nature of that pattern can also have important diachronic knock-on effects for the grammar of a language as a whole, since some Lak dialects have effectively lost an entire gender-marking system in part due to the obscene readings that such a pattern sometimes induces.

3.2.3. Structure dependence and thematic encoding in obscene constructions

A final conclusion from this survey that reinforces the idea of structure dependence of obscenities across languages is that different obscenities have different morphosyntactic distributions from other obscenities. In a survey of 3,205 Georgian obscenities found in the Georgian National Corpus, some obscenities are very strongly preferentially found in certain case-forms, almost to the exclusion of other case-forms (see Table 12). So for example the word ყლე *q'le* “dick” is found 73% of the time in the nominative case (i.e., just ყლე *q'le*, as in 18a), while it is found 16% of the time in the dative case (ყლეს *q'les*). On the other hand, ძუძუ *dzudzu* “breast” and ჯანდაბა *jandaba* “hell” are found predominantly in the dative case, as in (18b):

Table 12. Statistical case-assignment of obscenities in Georgian.

| | <i>penis</i> | <i>buttocks</i> | <i>excrement</i> | <i>prostitute</i> | <i>breasts</i> | <i>vagina</i> | <i>hell</i> |
|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| GEORGIAN | ყლე <i>q'le</i> | ტრაკი <i>traḳi</i> | მძღნერი <i>mzḡneri</i> | ბოზი <i>bozi</i> | ძუძუ <i>dzudzu</i> | მუტელი <i>muteli</i> | ჯანდაბა <i>jandaba</i> |
| <i>Nominative</i> | 49 (73%) | 98 (55%) | 10 (40%) | 285 (65%) | 452 (39%) | 3 (100%) | 451 (33%) |
| <i>Dative</i> | 11 (16%) | 28 (16%) | 2 (8%) | 46 (11%) | [687] (60%) | 0 (0%) | 856 (63%) |
| <i>Genitive</i> | 2 (3%) | 45 (25%) | 10 (40%) | 30 (7%) | [3] (< 1%) | 0 (0%) | 39 (< 3%) |
| <i>Vocative</i> | 5 (7%) | 7 (4%) | 3 (12%) | 77 (18%) | 3 (< 1%) | 0 (0%) | 3 (< 1%) |
| <i>Total</i> | 67 | 178 | 25 | 438 | 1145 | 3 | 1349 |

- (18) a. vis = tan i-bazr-a **eg** **q'le** ega
 who.DAT = with PRV-chat-3SG this.NOM dick.NOM
 this.one.NOM
 "Who did this dick here talk to?" (*Georgian National Corpus*)
- b. **jandaba-s** šen-i tav-i, otx-i
 hell-DAT 2SGPOSS-NOM head-NOM four-NOM
 i-q'os
 PRV-be-OPT.3SG
 "To hell with you, I want four [rounds of tobacco]!" (GNC)
- c. odesme **mdzğner-is** č'am-a-s = tan axlo-s
 ever shit-GEN eat-MAS-DAT = at close-DAT
 v-i-q'av-i sast'umro-s bupet' = ši
 1-PRV-be.AOR-1SG.AORhotel-GEN buffet = in
 "I was close to eating shit at the hotel's buffet". (GNC)
- d. st'epler-i ra čem q'le-d g-i-nd-od-a
 stapler-NOM what 1POSS dick-ADV 2-PRV-want-IMPF-3SG
 "Why the fuck did you want a stapler?" (lit. "what as my cock did you want a stapler"), *Stories of a Courier*, Temo Rexviašvili

How do we explain such variation? To a certain extent, such variation in case assignment reflects the peculiarities of case assignment specific to Georgian (and so, *mutatis mutandis*, in every language with case-marking). Georgian is famous for its baroquely complex system of case-assignment, in which the case-marking for subjects and objects found in one tense-aspect series differs from other tense aspect series, sometimes with the effect that case-marking for a subject in one tense marks the object in a different tense, as in Table 13. Georgian is a so-called split-intransitive language, in which some intransitives pattern like the subjects of transitive verbs (so-called "medial" intransitives), while other intransitives pattern like the objects of transitives (so-called "stative" intransitives).

Table 13. Distribution of case-marking in Georgian across tense-aspect series.

| | <i>Transitive</i> | | <i>'Medial' Intr.</i> | | <i>Stative Intr.</i> | | <i>Dative-Affective</i> | |
|---------------------------|-------------------|------|-----------------------|------|----------------------|-----|-------------------------|-----|
| <i>PRESENT-FUTURE</i> | SUBJ: | NOM | SUBJ: | NOM | SUBJ: | NOM | SUBJ: | DAT |
| | I OBJ: | DAT | | | | | DOBJ: | NOM |
| | DOBJ: | DAT | | | | | | |
| <i>AORIST</i> | SUBJ: | NARR | SUBJ: | NARR | SUBJ: | NOM | SUBJ: | DAT |
| | I OBJ: | DAT | | | | | DOBJ: | NOM |
| | DOBJ: | NOM | | | | | | |
| <i>PERFECT-EVIDENTIAL</i> | SUBJ: | DAT | SUBJ: | DAT | SUBJ: | NOM | SUBJ: | DAT |
| | I OBJ: | PP | | | | | DOBJ: | NOM |
| | DOBJ: | NOM | | | | | | |

The specific origins and functioning of this system are far beyond the scope of this paper (see e.g., Harris 1981; Holisky 1981; Wier 2011 for extended

discussions), but suffice it to say that some of the statistical reasons why some obscenities have the distribution they do is because of this many-to-many mapping of case and grammatical function.

But there is probably another deeper reason related specifically to the encoding of obscenities in Georgian. This is that some obscenities carry out prototypical thematic roles within clauses: “hell” for example is often encoded as a location, which means across languages it is often encoded with a locative, dative or allative case; kinship terms like დედა *deda* “mother” and body parts like ჯიშო *jiš* “origin; pussy” are often treated thematically as the objects of abuse in obscene language, as patient or theme thematic roles, and therefore are coded with the marking of direct objects, either nominative or dative case. Some terms are preferentially used as terms of (abusive) address: it is normal in Georgian to call someone a ყლეო *q’leo* “dick.VOC” or ბოზო *bozo* “whore.VOC”, while it is not at all normal to call someone a მუტელო *mut’elo* “cunt.VOC” or ძუძუო *dzudzuo* “tit.VOC”. That is, the specific encoding of obscenities is constrained not just by the general system of case-marking but also by a given culture’s set of idioms and the semantic roles they perform in particular constructions.

4. Conclusion

What such a study reveals is that while Georgian and other Caucasian languages are often exoticized as alien to the modes of speech found in better-known European languages, the ways in which they express obscenities are in fact quite familiar. As with European languages, Caucasian obscenities express a similar range of taboos concerning sex, gender, family relations and other topics, but like European languages these obscenities formally constitute idioms within the language that have not literal but usually only metaphorical content. As in Western languages, obscenities are often borrowed from other languages as an act of taboo avoidance; these start out as euphemisms (such as Arabic فَحْبَة *qahba*) but evolve over time simply into the latest form of obscene speech. We have also seen that obscene constructions in Caucasian languages often have grammatical properties that mark them out as distinct from other parts of the lexicon in a way similar to expressive constructions. Obscenities are interesting, therefore, not just because of what they reveal about the societies in which they are used, but also because of what they reveal about the breadth of diversity of the languages of the world.

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FROM *SEX AND THE CITY* TO *SEX EDUCATION*: SEX-RELATED METAPHORS IN TV SERIES

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Citation: Terry, A. (2024) “From *Sex and the City* to *Sex Education*: Sex-Related Metaphors in TV Series”, in C. Bucaria, A.D. Mitzel and A. Sileo (eds) *Taboo in Language, Media and Audiovisual Translation*, *mediAzioni* 43: A123-A143, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/20539>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: This paper focuses on sex-related metaphors in two TV series, *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and *Sex Education* (2019-2023). Although there are major differences between the two series, both are popular and successful TV series and were, at the time they were released, considered as transgressive and progressive when tackling the taboo topic of sex. Although it has been receding, it nevertheless remains a partially taboo topic that characters speak of by means of X-phemisms (Allan and Burrige 1991; 2006). After a brief study of the use of literal language (using WMatrix5, Rayson 2009), this paper focuses on metaphorical X-phemisms, as metaphor arguably is the most prominent mechanism of lexical semantic change and is a particularly productive tool when creating new euphemisms to mention taboo topics (Crespo Fernández 2006a; 2008; 2015). The study seeks to determine whether the conceptual sex metaphors in *Sex and the City* and *Sex Education* reflect the perceived differences in the conceptualisation of sex in the two series, since *Sex Education* has been argued to be more inclusive. 66 occurrences were collected in the first two seasons of *Sex and the City* and 68 in the first two seasons of *Sex Education* (MIP, see Pragglejaz group 2007). The metaphorical expressions were then classified according to the source domain with which the correspondences are established (CMT, see Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The results are similar in the two TV series. The main conclusions that can be drawn are that even if there is some evolution in the language of sex in general, the source domains used for sex-related conceptual metaphors are so deeply anchored in our cognitive systems that dysphemistic, violent, dehumanising metaphors undergo very slow change.

Keywords: dysphemism; euphemism; metaphor; *Sex and the City*; *Sex Education*; sex-related metaphor; taboo; TV series.

1. Introduction¹

Sex and the City (1998-2004) is an American TV series created by Darren Star and broadcast on HBO, while *Sex Education* (2019-2023) is a British TV series created by Laurie Nunn and available on Netflix. Although there are major differences between the two series – such as their countries, networks and years of origin, the number of episodes, or the age of the protagonists – both are popular and successful comedies and were, at the time they were released, considered as transgressive and progressive when tackling the taboo of sex. In both of them, sex is the central topic, often treated humorously, and the main character is considered as a sex expert: in *Sex and the City*, Carrie writes a column entitled “Sex and the City” in a fictitious newspaper, the *New York Star*, while in *Sex Education*, Otis gives sex advice to his classmates in exchange for money.

Sex and the City is argued to have largely contributed to normalising the use of frank, derogatory sexual language on television and more generally paved the way for sex to be addressed unreservedly on television (Brey 2016). Nevertheless, from a contemporary point of view, the series can be criticised for its stereotypical, cisgender representations and its lack of diversity, among other aspects. On the other hand, *Sex Education* displays much diversity and inclusiveness and addresses different topics, including LGBTQIA+ sexuality, a topic that was merely superficially tackled in *Sex and the City*.

Although sex is nowadays extensively represented and mentioned on TV, it nevertheless remains a (partially) taboo topic that characters speak about by means of X-phemisms (words and expressions that are used to refer to taboo topics, ranging from euphemisms to dysphemisms, their negative counterpart (Allan and Burrige 1991; 2006). This paper focuses on metaphorical X-phemisms, as metaphor is arguably the most prominent mechanism of lexical semantic change and is a particularly productive tool when creating new euphemisms to mention taboo topics (Crespo Fernández 2015). Do the conceptual sex metaphors in the first two seasons of *Sex and the City* and *Sex Education* reflect the perceived differences in the conceptualization of sex in the two series? Can any conclusions regarding sex-related metaphors be drawn from that? These are the two questions I will attempt to answer after having expounded the theoretical framework and methodology.

2. Sex metaphors: in between euphemism and dysphemism

Sex is generally defined as a societal and linguistic taboo (Allan and Burrige 1991; 2006; Crespo Fernández 2015). The origins of the taboo dimension of the domain can be accounted for by several factors (Terry 2019a: 95), including the fact that sex is linked to the naked body, which is tabooed in most religions, including the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as Islam. Religions have imposed restrictions over sexual relations for centuries, for example forbidding sexual

¹ I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers, whose comments helped me considerably improve this paper.

relations out of wedlock. This has had a considerable impact on the conceptualisation of sex and the censorship surrounding its public mention. Additionally, sex is connected to the notion of bodily effluvia, which are tabooed as well and considered “revolting to all our senses” (Allan and Burrige 1991: 52). Taboo domains tend to be spoken of euphemistically, and sex is diachronically one of the first taboo topics that required resorting to euphemisms (Epstein 1985: 56), but also the one that arguably gave birth to the highest number of euphemisms. Keyes (2010: 57) stated that “[s]exual activity could be the all-time most popular inspiration for euphemisms” and underlined their remarkable creativity, while Allan and Burrige (1991: 96) argued that as a consequence of the proliferation of sex-related euphemisms, “[t]he degree of synonymy for genitalia and copulation has no parallel elsewhere in the English lexicon”.

In contemporary Western societies, however, “the censorship surrounding sex has progressively relaxed since the 1960s” (Crespo Fernández 2015: 3), as is evidenced from the existence of TV series such as *Sex and the City* and *Sex Education*, and sex has progressively lost part of its taboo nature. Nevertheless, it has left an imprint (Santaemilia 2005; Crespo Fernández 2015) which is still linguistically present in the high degree of synonymy (Allan and Burrige 1991: 96). The extensive lexicon related to sex in the English language is an indicator of what remains of its taboo nature. Additionally, sexuality still constitutes an intimate subject and although discussing it with close acquaintances is socially acceptable, mentioning it in public or to strangers can constitute a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson 1987)², which may explain why the subject is still sometimes avoided or spoken of figuratively. Consequently, the language of sex abounds with ad-hoc creations, lexical and semantic neologisms which coexist with lexicalised figurative language and literal language.

Studying the language of sex and its euphemisms is a means of improving our understanding of the changing taboo nature of sex as it constitutes “[a]n excellent way to determine what we find embarrassing” and “[w]hat topics we consider taboo” (Keyes 2010: 4). As metaphor has been argued to be the most prominent mechanism of lexical semantic change and to be a particularly productive tool to create new euphemisms to mention taboo topics (Crespo Fernández 2015), this paper focuses on sex-related metaphors. It should however by no means be assumed that metaphor is the only productive tool for the creation of new sex euphemisms, as many other semantic, lexical, morphosyntactic and paralinguistic word-formation processes can be resorted to (Terry 2019a: 143-167).

A few studies have focused on sex-related metaphors and sex-related language, even if, as pointed out by Crespo Fernández (2019: 1) in the introduction to his volume on sex-related metaphors, “from a purely linguistic viewpoint, taboo-induced lexical variation is a topic that, curiously enough, has received little attention in scholarly literature”. Casas Gómez (2009), Chamizo Domínguez (2005), Calvo (2005), Santaemilia (2005) also worked on (sex-related) euphemisms without specifically focusing on metaphors. Crespo

² For the negative face of the co-speaker and the positive and negative face of the speaker.

Fernández (2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2011, 2015) is, to the best of my knowledge, the most prolific author on the subject and has mostly focused on the links between sex-related metaphors and euphemisms. Several studies focusing on languages other than English have also been published (Lee 2011, Gatambuki and Ndungu 2011). Haste (1993) and Murphy (2001) focused on the role of sex-related metaphors in the construction of gender binarity. More recently, Prazmo (2020) and Koller (2022) analysed dehumanising metaphors used by “incels” and the “manosphere” while López Maestre (2020) focused on women as the source of the hunt in sex metaphors.

However, very few studies have been conducted on sex-related metaphors and language in the context of TV series except for Brey (2016) and my own contributions (Terry 2019a; 2019b). A few elements regarding the genre of TV series should be kept in mind. Firstly, “indecent” is banned from television in the US, except from subscription services³ like HBO or Netflix. The use of frank, derogatory sexual language in *Sex and the City* and *Sex Education* is prohibited in TV series which are broadcast on public channels, which means that these series have a special status in the TV landscape and that the linguistic taboo still exists, even if it is not as strong as it used to be. Secondly, even if some studies have proven that the language in TV series is fairly similar to that of naturally occurring conversation (Quaglio 2009), including taboo-induced metaphors (Terry 2019b), it should be noted that it is “both similar and different to spontaneous speech”, that it is “innovative and contains non-codified language” and that it “fulfills a range of functions relating to the audience” (Bednarek 2018: 5-6).

Following Crespo Fernández (2015: 5), I will try to show that in the corpus “euphemistic and dysphemistic references to [sex] are based on underlying metaphor systems” within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (henceforth CMT) that was first established by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and later further developed and improved by other scholars (see for example Kövecses 2002; Sweetser 1990; Gibbs and Steen 1997; Barcelona 2000; Ortony 1993; Giora 1997 and Gibbs 1994, to name a few). In cognitive linguistics, metaphor is defined as a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system in which a conceptual domain (the target domain) is understood in terms of another conceptual domain (the source domain). In that view, CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (A) is SEX, while CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (B) is any source domain that is used to create various metaphorical expressions stemming from the same conceptual metaphor (Kövecses 2002). The many correspondences which are established between the two domains construct a complex mapping between the target domain, SEX, and the source domain. Each conceptual metaphor is the source of many linguistic metaphors, some of which are conventional, some of which are semi-lexicalised, and some of which are creative⁴ (Crespo Fernández 2008: 98). Resorting to one

³ <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/obscene-indecent-and-profane-broadcasts>

⁴ Conventional metaphors are metaphorical occurrences which are completely lexicalised and may no longer be perceived as metaphorical by speakers. Semi-lexicalised metaphors are non-lexicalised metaphorical occurrences which stem from existing, well-known conceptual metaphors. Creative metaphors are new metaphorical occurrences which rely on a new association. See Crespo Fernández (2008: 98). Please note that this is not the only classification, but the most relevant in the context of taboo-induced metaphors.

source domain or another can allow speakers to highlight or hide some aspects of the target domain, as pointed out by Kövecses (2002: 80). Highlighting and hiding “presuppose each other”, as one cannot exist without the other. The nature of the source domain, CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (B), is therefore significant because it is one of the criteria that have to be taken into account to determine the X-phemistic potential of sex metaphors, along with the form of the locution (that is to say, the degree of lexicalisation of the X-phemism), the intention of the speaker, and the interpretation that the co-speaker makes of the utterance (Terry 2019a: 458).

“X-phemisms” are “the union set of [...] ‘phemisms’” (Burridge 2012: 66); in other words, “X-phemism” is a hypernym for “euphemism”, “dysphemism”, and everything in-between, including “orthophemism”, the supposedly neutral term for a taboo concept, as the categories are not always clear-cut. “Euphemism” and “dysphemism”, the opposite ends of the scale, are defined as follows by Crespo Fernández (2008: 96):

This power of taboo keeps language users from avoiding the forbidden concept and compels them to preserve or violate it. To this end, they resort respectively either to euphemism (i.e. the semantic or formal process by which the taboo is stripped of its most explicit or obscene overtones) or to dysphemism (i.e. the process whereby the most pejorative traits of the taboo are highlighted with an offensive aim to the addressee or to the concept itself).

Allan and Burridge (1991: 31) rightly emphasize the fact that euphemisms and dysphemisms are not limited to the functions mentioned above, but that “they may function as ingroup identity markers and even to amuse the audience”. Burridge (2012: 66) adds that “[T]here is never ‘Everyman’s euphemism’ or ‘Everyman’s dysphemism’”, meaning that the same locution – or the same metaphorical expression, in this study – will not always be interpreted identically in different contexts. This is what led me to argue that metaphorical expressions should be ascribed an “X-phemistic potential”, following the four criteria mentioned above, rather than being strictly categorised (Terry 2019a). Determining the X-phemistic potential of a corpus of sex metaphors enables us to comprehend how the taboo is represented. In the two TV series under scrutiny, the sex metaphors that are potentially dysphemistic never fully reach their dysphemistic potential as the context does not permit it: the interactants are most of the time friends or sexual partners, so the X-phemisms function as “in-group identity markers” and they first and foremost have a humorous aim, that is to say that they are used to amuse the viewers. A humorous interpretation of X-phemisms is favoured when there is a “breach of norms” or “taboo content” and when the situation is “perceived to be safe, playful, nonserious, or, in other words, benign” (McGraw and Warren 2010: 1142). In other words, the offensive aim of dysphemisms is lessened by the hypothetical psychological distance (McGraw et al. 2013: 567) that separates the characters from the viewers. Nevertheless, studying the dysphemistic potential – and more specifically, the characteristics that are projected from the source domain onto the target domain

of sex – exposes conceptualisations that are deeply anchored in our cognitive systems.

3. Methodology and results

The corpus under scrutiny is composed of the first two seasons of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and the first two seasons of *Sex Education* (2019-...), for a total of thirty 25-30-minute episodes for *Sex and the City* (SATC) and of sixteen 50-55-minute episodes for *Sex Education* (SE). The total airing time is similar for both series (about 15 hours), even though the number of episodes and their length vary. The scripts were retrieved from the Internet⁵ and compiled; the SATC corpus contains 87,332 words, while the SE corpus contains 78,370 words, which was a sufficient size for the purpose of this study. A preliminary study was conducted on WMatrix5 (Rayson 2009) prior to the analysis of the metaphorical source domains used to conceptualise the domain of SEX.

3.1. Preliminary analysis

The preliminary comparative study was conducted so as to identify the main semantic features of the language used in each series. Both corpora were tagged and compared to the BNC_spoken corpus⁶. The semantic frequency list for each corpus is in the two tables below (only the first 30 results were retained).

| | Item | O1 | %1 | O2 | %2 | LL | LogRatio | |
|----|-----------------------------|------|------|-------|--------|---------|----------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | List1 Concordance Z99 | 3826 | 4.54 | 5684 | 0.58 + | 7540.31 | 2.97 | Unmatched |
| 2 | List1 Concordance S3.2 | 505 | 0.60 | 549 | 0.06 + | 1194.73 | 3.42 | Relationship: Intimacy and sex |
| 3 | List1 Concordance S3.1 | 465 | 0.55 | 752 | 0.08 + | 865.60 | 2.85 | Personal relationship: General |
| 4 | List1 Concordance S2.2 | 524 | 0.62 | 1829 | 0.19 + | 465.60 | 1.74 | People: Male |
| 5 | List1 Concordance Z1 | 1484 | 1.76 | 9430 | 0.96 + | 407.32 | 0.88 | Personal names |
| 6 | List1 Concordance L1+ | 113 | 0.13 | 51 | 0.01 + | 378.73 | 4.69 | Alive |
| 7 | List1 Concordance S2.1 | 304 | 0.36 | 875 | 0.09 + | 341.38 | 2.02 | People: Female |
| 8 | List1 Concordance N5--- | 82 | 0.10 | 20 | 0.00 + | 318.61 | 5.58 | Quantities: little |
| 9 | List1 Concordance T1.1 | 86 | 0.10 | 35 | 0.00 + | 296.79 | 4.84 | Time: General |
| 10 | List1 Concordance O4.2+ | 398 | 0.47 | 1717 | 0.17 + | 257.58 | 1.43 | Judgement of appearance: Positive |
| 11 | List1 Concordance B1 | 651 | 0.77 | 3703 | 0.38 + | 240.69 | 1.04 | Anatomy and physiology |
| 12 | List1 Concordance A5.1+++ | 164 | 0.19 | 428 | 0.04 + | 204.30 | 2.16 | Evaluation: Good |
| 13 | List1 Concordance A13.3 | 818 | 0.97 | 5457 | 0.56 + | 193.14 | 0.81 | Degree: Boosters |
| 14 | List1 Concordance E2+ | 409 | 0.49 | 2255 | 0.23 + | 162.94 | 1.08 | Like |
| 15 | List1 Concordance S1.2.4+ | 76 | 0.09 | 103 | 0.01 + | 158.72 | 3.10 | Polite |
| 16 | List1 Concordance N3.2+ | 240 | 0.28 | 1046 | 0.11 + | 152.66 | 1.42 | Size: Big |
| 17 | List1 Concordance T4-- | 90 | 0.11 | 175 | 0.02 + | 146.08 | 2.58 | Time: Late |
| 18 | List1 Concordance S1.2 | 44 | 0.05 | 22 | 0.00 + | 142.97 | 4.54 | Personality traits |
| 19 | List1 Concordance F2 | 226 | 0.27 | 1022 | 0.10 + | 134.81 | 1.37 | Drinks and alcohol |
| 20 | List1 Concordance A13 | 26 | 0.03 | 0 | 0.00 + | 131.99 | 9.24 | Degree |
| 21 | List1 Concordance E4.1+ | 186 | 0.22 | 782 | 0.08 + | 125.63 | 1.47 | Happy |
| 22 | List1 Concordance W2 | 24 | 0.03 | 0 | 0.00 + | 121.84 | 9.13 | Light |
| 23 | List1 Concordance T1.3 | 908 | 1.08 | 7171 | 0.73 + | 110.57 | 0.56 | Time: Period |
| 24 | List1 Concordance X2.6- | 42 | 0.05 | 39 | 0.00 + | 107.46 | 3.65 | Unexpected |
| 25 | List1 Concordance A5.3- | 113 | 0.13 | 401 | 0.04 + | 98.20 | 1.72 | Evaluation: Inaccurate |
| 26 | List1 Concordance S9 | 208 | 0.25 | 1106 | 0.11 + | 89.98 | 1.13 | Religion and the supernatural |
| 27 | List1 Concordance A3+ | 4325 | 5.13 | 43253 | 4.40 + | 88.69 | 0.22 | Existing |
| 28 | List1 Concordance F3 | 53 | 0.06 | 119 | 0.01 + | 76.19 | 2.38 | Smoking and non-medical drugs |
| 29 | List1 Concordance T3 | 167 | 0.20 | 868 | 0.09 + | 75.91 | 1.17 | Time: Old, new and young; age |
| 30 | List1 Concordance A5.2- | 63 | 0.07 | 180 | 0.02 + | 71.32 | 2.03 | Evaluation: False |

Figure 1. Frequency list – SATC corpus.

⁵ From the websites <https://www.satctranscripts.com/> and <https://sublikescript.com/series/>

⁶ SATC is an American TV series, while SE is a British TV series. As no corpus of spoken American English is available on WMatrix5 (Rayson 2009), the choice for the reference corpus was rather evident.

| | Item | O1 | %1 | O2 | %2 | LL | LogRatio | |
|----|---------------------------|-------|-------|--------|---------|---------|----------|--------------------------------|
| 1 | List1 Concordance Z99 | 3934 | 5.46 | 5684 | 0.58 + | 8903.85 | 3.24 | Unmatched |
| 2 | List1 Concordance S3.2 | 420 | 0.58 | 549 | 0.06 + | 1005.62 | 3.38 | Relationship: Intimacy and sex |
| 3 | List1 Concordance B1 | 768 | 1.07 | 3703 | 0.38 + | 544.22 | 1.50 | Anatomy and physiology |
| 4 | List1 Concordance E4.1+ | 226 | 0.31 | 782 | 0.08 + | 250.69 | 1.98 | Happy |
| 5 | List1 Concordance S1.2.4+ | 89 | 0.12 | 103 | 0.01 + | 227.07 | 3.56 | Polite |
| 6 | List1 Concordance S3.1 | 203 | 0.28 | 752 | 0.08 + | 207.77 | 1.88 | Personal relationship: General |
| 7 | List1 Concordance Z8 | 14354 | 19.91 | 172345 | 17.54 + | 206.45 | 0.18 | Pronouns |
| 8 | List1 Concordance L1+ | 65 | 0.09 | 51 | 0.01 + | 196.94 | 4.12 | Alive |
| 9 | List1 Concordance E2+ | 365 | 0.51 | 2255 | 0.23 + | 162.59 | 1.14 | Like |
| 10 | List1 Concordance T1.1 | 49 | 0.07 | 35 | 0.00 + | 153.82 | 4.25 | Time: General |
| 11 | List1 Concordance Z1 | 1058 | 1.47 | 9430 | 0.96 + | 153.59 | 0.61 | Personal names |
| 12 | List1 Concordance A5.3- | 118 | 0.16 | 401 | 0.04 + | 133.59 | 2.00 | Evaluation: Inaccurate |
| 13 | List1 Concordance A2.2 | 297 | 0.41 | 1891 | 0.19 + | 123.64 | 1.10 | Cause&Effect/Connection |
| 14 | List1 Concordance S2 | 376 | 0.52 | 2728 | 0.28 + | 112.19 | 0.91 | People |
| 15 | List1 Concordance P1 | 288 | 0.40 | 1928 | 0.20 + | 106.37 | 1.03 | Education in general |
| 16 | List1 Concordance S4 | 464 | 0.64 | 3699 | 0.38 + | 103.40 | 0.77 | Kin |
| 17 | List1 Concordance A3+ | 3778 | 5.24 | 43253 | 4.40 + | 100.97 | 0.25 | Existing |
| 18 | List1 Concordance O4.6- | 80 | 0.11 | 247 | 0.03 + | 100.43 | 2.14 | Temperature: Cold |
| 19 | List1 Concordance A6.2- | 79 | 0.11 | 242 | 0.02 + | 99.98 | 2.15 | Comparing: Unusual |
| 20 | List1 Concordance A5.1+ | 1042 | 1.45 | 10112 | 1.03 + | 99.63 | 0.49 | Evaluation: Good |
| 21 | List1 Concordance Z6 | 1875 | 2.60 | 19932 | 2.03 + | 99.11 | 0.36 | Negative |
| 22 | List1 Concordance K2 | 128 | 0.18 | 586 | 0.06 + | 98.32 | 1.57 | Music and related activities |
| 23 | List1 Concordance S1.2 | 31 | 0.04 | 22 | 0.00 + | 97.54 | 4.26 | Personality traits |
| 24 | List1 Concordance W2 | 17 | 0.02 | 0 | 0.00 + | 91.23 | 8.86 | Light |
| 25 | List1 Concordance S2.2 | 261 | 0.36 | 1829 | 0.19 + | 85.69 | 0.96 | People: Male |
| 26 | List1 Concordance S2.1 | 155 | 0.22 | 875 | 0.09 + | 83.19 | 1.27 | People: Female |
| 27 | List1 Concordance Q2.2 | 633 | 0.88 | 5794 | 0.59 + | 81.49 | 0.57 | Speech acts |
| 28 | List1 Concordance K1 | 190 | 0.26 | 1201 | 0.12 + | 80.42 | 1.11 | Entertainment generally |
| 29 | List1 Concordance B2- | 159 | 0.22 | 959 | 0.10 + | 74.60 | 1.18 | Disease |
| 30 | List1 Concordance X9.2- | 63 | 0.09 | 207 | 0.02 + | 74.04 | 2.05 | Failure |

Figure 2. Frequency list – SE corpus.

A log-likelihood score above 150 indicates that the word is statistically more frequently used in the corpus under scrutiny than in the reference corpus (BNC_spoken). Several conclusions can be drawn from these preliminary results. Firstly, in both corpora, the semantic domain “Relationship: Intimacy_and_sex” is the most salient domain⁷ as compared to the reference corpus (SATC corpus: LL 1194.76; 505 occurrences; SE corpus: LL 1005.62; 420 occurrences). Nevertheless, a closer examination of the occurrences revealed that a majority of them was semantically related to the domain of “love” and not to that of “sex”. Surprisingly, the word “sex” does not appear in the list of occurrences under “Relationship: Intimacy_and_sex”. A second search, on the lemma “sex”, showed a total frequency of 264 in the SATC corpus and 250 in the SE corpus. This is not surprising as these are the main topics of the series; it also shows that the domain is frequently spoken of explicitly and not through “implicit allusions” or “indirect references” (Crespo Fernández 2015: 4), which is indicative of the changing status of sex as a taboo.

The second conclusion that can be drawn is that although the semantic domain “Anatomy and physiology” is more salient in both corpora than in the reference corpus, there was a significant evolution between the two series (LL: 544.22 in the SE corpus, against 240.69 in the SATC corpus). Nouns referring to genitals notably rank higher in the SE corpus than in the SATC corpus. This might also be indicative of the changing status of the taboo of sex, as body parts are, in the words of Keyes (2010: 101), “doubly difficult to discuss” because they are used “both for sex and secretion.”

The last element that should be highlighted is that the changing perception of socio-cultural attitudes to gender stereotypes is partly reflected in the semantic frequency lists: in the SATC corpus, the categories “People: Male” and “People:

⁷ The first category, “Unmatched”, contains typography mistakes, symbols, etc. Their high frequency can easily be explained by the fact that the corpora were collected on Internet websites, which inevitably contain mistakes.

Female” respectively have a log-likelihood score of 465.6 and 341.38. By contrast, they only score 85.69 and 83.19 in the SE corpus. This suggests that gender normativity is linguistically not as marked in *Sex Education* (2019-2020) as it was in *Sex and the City* (1998-1999), which reflects both viewer perception and socio-cultural evolution.

3.2. Identification of the metaphors

Sex-related metaphorical expressions do not appear in the category “Relationship: Intimacy_and_sex” in the semantic frequency list; they were identified in the corpora following the Metaphor Identification Procedure defined by the Pragglejaz group (2007: 3):

The MIP is as follows:

1. Read the entire text–discourse to establish a general understanding of the meaning.
2. Determine the lexical units in the text–discourse
3. (a) For each lexical unit in the text, establish its meaning in context, that is, how it applies to an entity, relation, or attribute in the situation evoked by the text (contextual meaning). Take into account what comes before and after the lexical unit.
 - (b) For each lexical unit, determine if it has a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts than the one in the given context. For our purposes, basic meanings tend to be
 - More concrete; what they evoke is easier to imagine, see, hear, feel, smell, and taste.
 - Related to bodily action.
 - More precise (as opposed to vague)
 - Historically older.
 Basic meanings are not necessarily the most frequent meanings of the lexical unit.
 - (c) If the lexical unit has a more basic current–contemporary meaning in other contexts than the given context, decide whether the contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning but can be understood in comparison with it.
4. If yes, mark the lexical unit as metaphorical.

One additional criterion was taken into account: the metaphors retained for the study had to belong to the target domain of sex, or to the connected conceptual domains of seduction or sexual partners. A total of 66 occurrences was collected for *Sex and the City*⁸ and 68 for *Sex Education*. The occurrences were then organised according to the source domains with which the correspondences were established. The methodology used was reproduced from Terry (2019b). The Pragglejaz group calculated that one major pitfall of assigning a source domain to a metaphorical expression was that the methodology lacked objectivity and was hardly replicable. In order to mitigate this issue, I relied on previous studies (notably Crespo Fernandez 2015) and when possible, assigned conceptual

⁸ Please note that the *Sex and the City* corpus is the corpus that was used in Terry (2019a, 2019b).

domains whose existence had been acknowledged and discussed in previous studies. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Total number of occurrences per source domain and per TV series.

| SOURCE DOMAIN | SATC | SE |
|--------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| FOOD AND DRINKS | 14 | 13 |
| MACHINE / OBJECT | 11 | 8 |
| ANIMALS | 5 | 5 |
| SPORTS | 4 | 2 |
| GAME / LEISURE / PLAYING | 4 | 5 |
| JOURNEY / TRAVEL | 6 | 10 |
| BUSINESS / WORK | 6 | 5 |
| HUNTING / FISHING | 1 | 5 |
| RELIGION / SPIRITUALITY | 3 | 1 |
| TEACHING / STUDYING | 2 | |
| SHOW | 4 | 2 |
| WAR | 2 | 2 |
| POLITICS | 2 | |
| DRUGS | 2 | 2 |
| DISEASE / INJURY | | 3 |
| PERSONIFICATION | | 3 |
| MISCELLANEOUS | | 2 |
| TOTAL | 66 | 68 |

The total number of metaphorical occurrences is by far inferior to that of direct mentions of sex, and several factors may account for that discrepancy. Firstly, metaphors are not always achieved through one single lexical unit and are often extended. The metaphorical occurrences in Table 1 include extended metaphors, not the lexical units. Secondly, the study only focuses on metaphor, not on other types of figurative language, which means that there might be other types of figurative language in the series. Finally, it must be acknowledged that there might be fewer metaphorical occurrences than explicit references simply because sex is no longer the taboo it once was and because it is purposely mentioned directly in the corpus.

4. Analysis of the metaphorical source domains

The source domains that are used to conceptualise SEX are oddly similar in the metaphorical occurrences of the two TV series: not only are the total numbers of metaphorical occurrences in the two corpora almost identical, but source domains and the numbers of metaphorical occurrences relying on each source domain are also very much alike. This assessment is further discussed in section 4.2.

The occurrences that are analysed in section 4.1. are drawn from the most productive conceptual metaphors – in other words, from conventional and semi-

lexicalised metaphors – as creative metaphors are “highly specific, even one-shot occurrences of figurative thought and therefore are not representative of the way people conceptualize reality” (Crespo Fernández 2015: 7). Studying widespread conceptual metaphors is a means to understand how sex is euphemistically and dysphemistically conceptualised, even though sex is not as taboo as it used to be and even though there might comparatively be fewer occurrences of figurative language than there once were. As explained in Terry (2019a: 384), the metaphors which have euphemistic potential are generally those in which the correspondences established between the characteristics of the two domains are few and vague. On the other hand, the metaphors which have dysphemistic potential tend to be those in which the correspondences between the characteristics of the source domain and those of the target domain are clearly identifiable or those which resort to a dysphemistic source domain, that is to say those in which one of the partners is dehumanized, or in which the sexual relationship is presented as a game of domination and violence.

4.1. Productive conceptual metaphors in the corpus

4.1.1. *HAVING SEX IS HAVING FOOD / DRINKS*

This is the most productive conceptual metaphor in the corpus (14 occurrences in *Sex and the City*, 13 in *Sex Education*), which is not unanticipated as SEX and FOOD are closely associated because the two domains share many characteristics (Allan and Burridge 2006: 190; Crespo Fernández 2015: 153), such as their links with different senses and the notion of pleasure. Crespo Fernández (2015: 156) found that these metaphors are usually dysphemistic and sexist because they tend to conceptualise women as food that can satisfy men’s appetite, and because this conceptualisation conveys a portrayal of the male having a dominant role over his sexual partner. Although this conclusion can be applied to some occurrences in the corpus, it should be nuanced as men are quite often also conceptualised as FOOD as well in the corpus. In *Sex and the City* in particular, in which the four main characters are heterosexual women⁹, men or male body parts tend to be conceptualised as FOOD more often than women (9 out of 14 occurrences). The same conclusions can be drawn about *Sex Education*, in which 10 of the 13 occurrences are related to men or male body parts. This does not mean that those metaphors are not dysphemistic, but rather that men are not consistently portrayed as having a dominant role over their sexual partners in those metaphors. Additionally, the X-phemistic potential of those metaphors mostly depends on the characteristics that are projected onto the target domain. If the correspondences are vague (“Well, it’s not my favorite thing on the **menu**, but I’ll **order** it from time to time” *SATC 1x07*) or highlight the notion of pleasure, the occurrence will tend to be rather euphemistic in the series as the taboo characteristics will be hidden; if the cross-domain mapping entails precise, mental-picture generating correspondences, the occurrence will tend to be

⁹ In the original series; in the sequel, Miranda is in a queer relationship with a non-binary character, Che.

dysphemistic because it highlights the most tabooed features of the taboo domain instead of hiding them. This occurs mainly when the underlying conceptual metaphor is GENITALIA IS FOOD rather than a SEXUAL PARTNER IS FOOD. Consider the following examples:

- (1) Carrie: “But I like him”.
Samantha: “That’s swell, but it doesn’t **get the cream in the cupcake**”.
(*SATC 2x15*)
- (2) Aimee: “Yeah. But he, like...”
Maeve: “**Slipped and dropped the yogurt?**”
Aimee: “No, I wish. He faked it”.
(*SE 1x01*)

These two occurrences have dysphemistic potential because they create a vivid mental picture, which was not necessarily required in that context. However, given the context of the occurrence, the aim of the speaker is not to shock or offend the audience, but rather to amuse the other characters or the viewers, as with the vast majority of HAVING SEX IS HAVING FOOD metaphors in TV series. This conceptual metaphor is very productive as the metaphorical occurrences in both corpora are, for many of them, creative, unlexicalised occurrences. In this respect, there has been little evolution in the twenty years that separate the two shows: FOOD is still a playful, creative means of mentioning SEX, and gender roles were already reversed in those occurrences in *Sex and the City*.

4.1.2. A SEXUAL PARTNER / A SEXUAL ORGAN IS A MACHINE / AN OBJECT

These metaphors, which are present in similar proportions in both corpora as well (11 in *Sex and the City*, 8 in *Sex Education*), emphasise a dehumanisation of sexual relationships and are therefore frequently – but not necessarily – dysphemistic (Murphy 2001: 17; Crespo Fernández 2015: 168). They are also very often creative metaphors that need to be extended to be understood, as in example (3), or that are context dependent, as in example (4):

- (3) Girl: “It’s got to the point where when I think about touching Ruthie, I get really panicked, because I know it’s gonna be really bad. **Like when you put together a bookshelf from IKEA and you realize you don’t have the right screw and the whole thing was a waste of time and then you just hate everything about Sweden.**”
(*SE 1x04*)
- (4) Charlotte: “If I could get him to show at the gallery, it would be an incredible coup. But what if he wants me to, you know...”
Samantha: “**Hold his brush?**”
(*SATC 1x05*)

In (3), although the metaphor is extended, the exact correspondences are not easy to retrieve. It could be argued that having a sexual relation is conceptualised as assembling a piece of furniture from IKEA and skills are conceptualised as the

right screw. However, since the correspondences are not very precise, the metaphor is rather euphemistic. In (4), Charlotte has a meeting with a painter, which justifies Samantha's choice for "his brush". However, the metaphor is more dysphemistic because the correspondences between GENITALIA and "brush" are more explicitly retrievable and because the relationship would not be consensual.

The dysphemistic potential is also higher when the tool is conceptualised as inflicting violence (5 & 6):

- (5) Ellen: "I get fifteen guys like you every week. Jerks who just want to meet vulnerable women, **nail** them, and never call them again."
(*SATC 1x07*)
- (6) Barkley: "It's easier to **screw** a model than a regular girl because that's what they do all the time."
(*SATC 1x01*)

In addition, metaphorical occurrences similar to (5) and (6), which include the verbs "nail" or "screw", are lexicalised metaphors, which might also explain why they tend to be more dysphemistic. By way of example, according to *Etymonline*, "the slang meaning "to copulate" [for "screw"] dates from at least 1725". Over time, X-phemisms tend to become dysphemistic because of the phenomenon of "euphemism treadmill" (Pinker 1994): as pointed out by Allan and Burridge (2006: 46), "a euphemism often degenerates into a dysphemism through contamination by the taboo topic". In this case, the conventionality of the metaphorical occurrence can influence the X-phemistic interpretation.

Finally, dehumanisation is particularly salient and can give way to a dysphemistic interpretation when the partner or the partner's body is conceptualised as a broken object that cannot be repaired (7):

- (7) Miranda: "Is it too much to ask that he not be, I don't know, **used**?"
[...] Miranda: "Before it goes any further, make sure his parts are **still under warranty**". [...]
Carrie: "As for me, rather than **sort through the half-off bin**, I was dating someone **brand-spanking new**".
(*SATC 2x15*)

However, occurrences in which BODY PARTS are conceptualised as BROKEN OBJECTS tend to be more euphemistic when they are creative (10) than when they are lexicalised (8 & 9) but they are equally present in *Sex Education* and *Sex and the City*:

- (8) Otis: "I think I'm addicted to wanking, 'cause I've only just started, but I can't seem to stop, and I think I might have **broken my penis** because I do it too much. That's why it wasn't **working**".
(*SE 2x01*)
- (9) Miranda: "I think I **broke** my vagina".
(*SATC 1x09*)

- (10) Lady: “Oh, yes, I was wondering... if **your bike has been sitting in the garden for six years, it’s probably going to be quite rusty**, isn’t it?”
 Jean: “Is the **bike** in question your **vagina**?”
 Lady: “Yes” [...]
 Jean: “Come and see me afterwards. I’ve got something that may help... you **to get back on your bike**”.
 (SE 2x05)

Finally, to establish another comparison between the two series, metaphors that highlight the violence or used state of a sexual partner are slightly more frequent in *Sex and the City* than in *Sex Education*, and those used in *Sex Education* are not always dysphemistic, especially when the correspondences between two domains are negated or criticised (11):

- (11) Jean: “Sex doesn’t make us **whole**. And so, how could you ever be **broken**?” (SE 2x04)

This is one major difference between the two series that shall be further developed in section 4.2.

4.1.3. A SEXUAL PARTNER IS AN ANIMAL

Crespo Fernández (2015: 136) defines ANIMALS as a dysphemistic sex-related domain:

The association of people with animals and with animal behaviour and instincts is a potent source of disrespect and offense. The ontological metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS puts in correspondence human and animal attributes which are mostly behavioural. This conceptualization is grounded in people’s knowledge and perception of the natural world, which is figuratively employed to refer disparagingly to human beings.

These metaphors are dehumanising, and they are also frequently combined with SEDUCTION IS HUNTING / FISHING METAPHORS, which are less numerous in *Sex and the City* (1 occurrence) than in *Sex Education* (5 occurrences), in which the FOOD CHAIN metaphor is regularly resorted to:

- (11) Eric: “This is a new frontier, my sexually repressed friend. Our chance to finally **move up the social food chain**. We shall transform from **lowly caterpillars into... awesome killer whales**”.
 (SE 1x01)
- (12) Eric: “Aww. Listen, who needs her, anyway? There’s **plenty more hot, scary fish in the sea**. Okay?”
 (SE 1x02)

This might partly be explained by the fact that the characters are teenagers and that high school is frequently conceptualised as a place in which the different species in the food chain stand for the different social groups. These metaphors

nevertheless tend to be dysphemistic because they highlight the violence in the relationship and suggest that one partner dominates the other – usually males in heterosexual relationships – and they are used by male characters (Eric and Otis) rather than by women (only one female character, Lily, uses them in *Sex Education*). These occurrences suggest that metaphors are not less dysphemistic in *Sex Education* than in *Sex and the City*.

4.1.4. *HAVING SEX IS PLAYING A GAME / LEISURE*

In both corpora, *HAVING SEX IS PLAYING A GAME / LEISURE* metaphors tend to be lexicalised and therefore, some occurrences are almost identical; for example, “cheat” is used in both *SATC 2x02* and *SE 2x05* for “be unfaithful”, and “balls” is used in *SATC 2x12* and *SE 1x06* for “testicles.” Although they are not properly euphemistic, these lexicalised metaphors are unlikely to be interpreted as dysphemisms in their context of utterance. Moreover, the correspondences established between the two domains suggest that the partners both take part in a game, which participates in the euphemistic-orthophemistic interpretation. As these metaphorical expressions are lexicalised, it is not surprising that they should be found in both corpora in similar proportions (4 in *Sex and the City*, 5 in *Sex Education*).

4.1.5. *HAVING SEX IS A JOURNEY / TRAVEL / TOURISM*

The metaphors deriving from this conceptual metaphor are slightly more numerous in *Sex Education* than in *Sex and the City*, but almost all of them are lexicalised, as in the following two examples:

- (13) Samantha: “Have you ever been with a man and he’s doing everything and it feels good but somehow you just can’t manage to **come**?”
(*SATC 1x09*)
- (14) Aimee: “He can’t come. So, the other night, we’re, like, goin’ and goin’.
And I’m losin’ my shit. And I, you know...”
Maeve: “**Reached the summit**”.
(*SE 1x01*)

As argued in Terry (2019a: 259), the *SEX IS A JOURNEY* metaphor enables the conceptualisation of a sexual relationship as an event with a starting point, an unfolding, and an end. From this metaphor derives the conceptual metaphor *AN ORGASM IS THE END OF THE JOURNEY*, which is based on the primary metaphor *PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS* (Crespo Fernández 2015: 97). The linguistic metaphors that stem from this primary metaphor tend to be euphemistic or orthophemistic and are often lexicalised.

On the other hand, although it also relies on a *SOURCE – PATH – GOAL* image-schema, the *SEX IS TRAVEL* metaphor gives birth to more extended, creative metaphors and it seems difficult to predict where the metaphorical expressions that derive from it will be on the X-phemistic scale. Consider the following examples:

- (15) Charlotte: “Is your vagina in **the New York City guidebooks**? It should be, it’s **the hottest spot in town!** It’s **always open!**”
(*SATC 2x15*)
- (16) Colin: “I heard on the grapevine that you deal with matters of the heart. And I’m desperate for some advice. Thing is, I have a friend **who speaks Spanish and I can't understand her at all. She says things like, "Hola... and... all I can hear is... Shakira, Shakira"**.
Otis: “I don’t speak Spanish, sir”.
Colin: “I can’t do dirty talk. I find it mortifying”.
Otis: “Oh... Well, uh... sometimes when **we learn new skills**, we can feel exposed. Right? And **you wouldn’t go to a foreign country without some basic understanding of the language**. So why don’t **you write a script** for yourself and **practice speaking the words** until they feel more comfortable? It’s about making an effort to take little steps to meet her halfway. Does that make sense?”
Colin: “Yes. Muchas gracias, maestro”.
(*SE 2x02*)

While the occurrence taken from *Sex and the City* (15) is obviously dysphemistic because Charlotte’s aim is to hurt Samantha, the occurrence from *Sex Education* arguably is a euphemism. One possible explanation to this relative instability of the SEX IS TRAVEL metaphor might be the fact that contrary to SEX IS A JOURNEY metaphors, SEX IS TRAVEL metaphors resort to much more complex, creative correspondences between the source domain and the target domain; the corresponding metaphor can therefore be euphemistic or dysphemistic depending on the elements which are highlighted and those which are hidden. In the occurrence from *Sex and the City*, Charlotte lays emphasis on the number of partners Samantha has had and purposely shames her, which partly accounts for the dysphemistic interpretation. However, these occurrences are not numerous enough to draw conclusions on the evolution of the metaphorical representation of the SEX IS TRAVEL metaphor.

4.1.6. HAVING SEX IS DOING BUSINESS / WORKING

All the metaphorical occurrences in *Sex Education* are lexicalised “handjob” or “blowjob”. This absence of semantic creativity may partially be explained by the fact that HAVING SEX IS DOING BUSINESS / WORKING is “a resemblance metaphor which is culturally, rather than experientially, motivated” (Crespo Fernández 2015: 72); the characters in *Sex and the City*, who are all adult working women, are therefore more likely to use such metaphors than the teenagers in *Sex Education*, who evolve in the cultural environment of high school, as in this context-based occurrence (17):

- (17) Carrie (*off-screen*): “Richard Cranwell, senior partner at Bear Sterns philanthropist, playboy. His specialty was hostile takeovers”.
Samantha: “Flattery will get you everywhere, Mr. Cranwell”.
Mr. Cranwell: “Please, call me Dick”.
Samantha: “Dick”.

Carrie (*off-screen*): “In Samantha’s case, it was more like a **friendly merger**”.
(*SATC 2x05*)

The remaining source domains are much less represented in the corpus and will therefore not be tackled. Some source domains only appear in one of the two corpora, but no conclusions regarding the conceptualisation of the target domain can be drawn from this assessment as there are not enough occurrences.

4.2. The (lack of) evolution of the metaphorical language between *Sex and the City* and *Sex Education*

A few modest conclusions on sex-related metaphors can be drawn from these results, although most of them would need to be confirmed, developed or disproved in studies on larger corpora.

Firstly, the conceptual metaphors of SEX and the distribution of metaphorical expressions according to the source domain have experienced little evolution between the two series, which seems to point to the fact that the X-phemistic metaphorical language of sex evolves slowly, or rather, that it can be very creative and that although new X-phemisms are probably created every day, older X-phemisms do not disappear. This observation had already been made by Keyes (2010: 13):

Euphemisms are like a verbal carousel: some words hop on, others jump off, still others stay put for the entire ride and sometimes lose their euphemistic status in the process. Those that do their job capably, with minimal fuss, slip easily into vernacular and stay there.

To this, we could add that the fact that the new metaphorical X-phemisms which are created derive from existing conceptual metaphors and that no new conceptual metaphors emerged, and none disappeared, which limits the potential evolution of sex-related language. The presence of both lexicalised metaphorical expressions and of creative metaphors stemming from the same conceptual metaphors in both corpora seems to confirm this hypothesis.

Secondly, even though it should be noted that the source domain is not the only element that plays a part in the interpretation of an X-phemism, other conclusions can be drawn from the fact that there is no clear evolution in the source domains resorted to in potentially dysphemistic conceptual metaphors in *Sex Education* and in *Sex and the City*. This suggests that the conceptual SEX metaphors in the first two seasons of *Sex and the City* and *Sex Education* do not always reflect the perceived differences in the overall conceptualisation of SEX in the two series and that characteristics such as violence are projected onto the target domain in both series. Although *Sex Education* lays more emphasis on mutual respect than *Sex and the City* does according to viewer perception, merely identifying the source domains in the corpus does not allow us to shed light on this evolution. However, inclusivity regarding non-heteronormative relationships is partly reflected in the lexicon (see semantic frequency lists extracted in WMatrix5 (Rayson 2009), section 3.1.) as well as in the

metaphorical occurrences; the metaphors used to conceptualise heterosexual relationships are increasingly used to conceptualise non-heteronormative sexual relationships. One example is *HAVING SEX IS EATING FOOD*, used by an asexual character, Florence:

- (18) Jean: “Why don’t you start by telling me how you feel when you think about having sex?”
 Florence: “I don’t feel anything. I have no connection to it. It’s sort of like... I’m surrounded by **a huge feast with everything I could want to eat, but... I’m not hungry**”.
 (SE 2x04)

Thirdly, this confirms (if need be) the cognitive view on metaphor according to which conceptual metaphors – and the conceptual metaphors of *SEX* – are deeply anchored in our cognitive systems (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Although there has been growing awareness about sexual and sexist violence and its pervasiveness in society and language, similar correspondences highlighting violence are established between *SEX* on the one hand and source domains such as *WAR* or *HUNTING / FISHING* on the other hand. Likewise, dehumanisation of sexual partners by conceptualising them as *ANIMALS* or *OBJECTS / MACHINES* occurs as frequently in the *Sex Education* corpus as it occurs in the *Sex and the City* corpus. However, this needs to be nuanced as these conceptualisations are occasionally criticised in *Sex Education*, as in examples (19) and (20):

- (19) Ola: “But... Did you and Maeve, like, date or something? I’m picking up a vibe”.
 Otis: “No. Maeve is not the sort of person who would, you know, date me”.
 Ola: “What does that mean?”
 Otis: “Well, um... Maeve is considerably **higher up on the food chain than I am**. You know, I’m like **a kangaroo or an armadillo**. Whereas Maeve’s like **a panther, or a lion**, even”.
 Ola: “So **what am I on the food chain?**”
 Otis: “You could be like... You know **those goats that stand on really steep cliffs and just kind of stick?**”
 Ola: “I’m a **goat?**”
 Otis: “No! I mean, you don’t look like a goat. You could be, like, **a house cat**, if you don’t like goats. You know, **the skinny ones that just stare at you**”.
 Ola: “Okay, **I’m a skinny house cat, and she’s a lion**”.
 Otis: “Oh, no. Maeve is unattainable, and you’re...”
 Ola: “**You’re not a kangaroo**, Otis. You’re an arsehole”.
 (SE 1x07)

In this first example, Ola interprets Otis’s extended metaphor as dysphemistic for several possible reasons; one of them probably is the fact that the *SEXUAL PARTNERS ARE ANIMALS* metaphor is dehumanising, but it also pertains to the kind of animal used for the conceptualisation. “Panther” and “lion” are flattering conceptualisations and the correspondences that are established are positive, although not necessarily euphemistic. On the contrary, “goat” and “house cat”

are interpreted as less majestic, negative conceptualisations, all the more so as they are elaborated in unflattering terms (“kind of stick” / “just stare at you”). The comparison between Ola (Otis’s girlfriend) and Maeve as well as the entire FOOD CHAIN metaphor are interpreted as dysphemistic and offensive, and they are criticised by the female character. The second occurrence, an occurrence of the conceptual metaphor A SEXUAL PARTNER IS AN OBJECT / A MACHINE, is quite similar although it is criticised by a male character:

- (20) Jackson: “Maeve is such a head-fuck, man. **Like a Rubik’s Cube**. She says one thing and then does something else. And I can’t keep up. Know what I mean?”
 Otis: “Not really. But here you go”.
 Jackson: “We’ll have crazy amazing sex, yeah? I’m talking, like, transcendental-level shagging”.
 Otis: “Okay, stop! Aaah!”
 Jackson: “And then she ignores me for days. But then, she wants to do it again and round and round we go. She’s **like some sexy merry-go-round, and I can’t get off**”.
 Otis: “She’s **not an object!**”
 Jackson: “Uh...”
 Otis: “I said she’s **not an object**. You keep **describing her as inanimate objects**, but she is a person”.
 (SE 1X04)

Otis explicitly criticises the conceptual metaphor A SEXUAL PARTNER IS AN OBJECT that Jackson resorts to in order to talk about Maeve by arguing it is dehumanising and by negating the metaphor (“she’s not an object”). These occurrences tend to be rarer in *Sex and the City*: the conceptual metaphors and the correspondences established between source domains and the target domain sex are not explicitly criticised. The progressive aspect of the metaphors in *Sex and the City* pertains to the fact that they are mostly used by women, which reverses traditional gender roles. In *Sex Education*, these metaphors are sometimes explicitly criticised by the characters and they are also increasingly resorted to by LGBTGIA+ characters, thus further challenging traditional gender norms and sexualities.

Finally, it should be noted that few of these occurrences are actually interpreted as dysphemisms, no matter how potentially dysphemistic the source domain, because the aim in both TV series is to amuse the audience since both of them are comedies. Humour rises from the discrepancy between the source domain and the target domain, as well as from the salient creativity of metaphors (see Dynel 2009 for the links between metaphor and humour). Humorous interpretation is possible thanks to the psychological distance that separates the viewers from the characters. This might also partly explain why metaphorical language has not evolved much.

5. Concluding remarks

Changing representations and showing more inclusivity in TV series when it comes to the taboo domain of SEX is possible, and the evolution between *Sex and the City*, in which Carrie declared that she did not believe bisexuality existed, and *Sex Education*, in which characters who are not cisgender and heterosexual are given much more visibility, is blatant. Nevertheless, little evolution can be noticed in the source domains that are used to metaphorically conceptualise SEX in the corpus. The main conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the source domains in sex-related conceptual metaphors are so deeply anchored in our cognitive systems that changing dysphemistic, violent, dehumanising metaphors to transform society (as Sontag (1979; 1988) suggested to do for WAR metaphors used to conceptualise the “fight” against cancer and AIDS) seems to be a complicated thing to do, as their use remains pervasive. Nevertheless, the fact that those metaphors should be more systematically criticised and that they should undergo reappropriation by minority groups constitutes an evolution in the conceptualisation of the taboo domain of SEX. Finally, it should be added that one possible limitation of the study is that both TV series belong to the genre of comedy, and slightly different results might be found if the research was extended to other genres and corpora.

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“YOU WON’T BE ABLE TO TELL IT’S BEEN DONE”: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF STIGMA IN COSMETIC SURGERY DISCOURSE

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Citation: Padley, Roxanne H. (2024) “You Won’t be Able to Tell It’s Been Done’: A Linguistic Analysis of Stigma in Cosmetic Surgery”, in C. Bucaria, A.D. Mitzel and A. Sileo (eds) *Taboo in Language, Media and Translation*, *mediAzioni* 43: A144-A163, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/20540>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: Cosmetic surgery, once seen as a luxury for the wealthy, has now become more accessible to various socioeconomic groups. Hence, it has shifted from a vanity symbol to a common topic of discussion, influenced largely by media coverage. This coverage spans magazines, newspapers, television, and the internet, discussing everything from surgery risks to sensational mishaps. Indeed, due to such coverage, a significant amount of judgement and even stigma has been associated with undergoing cosmetic surgery. Considering the relevance of this topic, this study investigates a spoken corpus of cosmetic surgery first consultations with the aim to unveil narratives regarding potential stigmatised discourses which may emerge. Through adopting a mixed-methods approach which encompasses corpus linguistic methodologies, ethnography and corpus-based discourse analysis, extracts from the corpus are analysed for linguistic patterns related to stigma in cosmetic surgery. The findings indicate that both the surgeons’ and patients’ desire to “hide” the surgery and results may indeed further stigmatise cosmetic surgery and even lead to seeking out cosmetic surgery under false pretences.

Keywords: cosmetic surgery; corpus linguistics; spoken corpora; ethnography; corpus-based discourse analysis; stigma.

1. Introduction

1.1. Origins of Cosmetic Surgery

The term “plastic surgery” originates from the Greek word “plastikos”, meaning to shape or mould. While commonly associated with beauty enhancements like breast enlargements in the modern day, plastic surgery actually dates back to 1600 B.C. with the Ancient Egyptians practicing body tissue alteration (Haiken 1997). Further notable ancient references include the Hindu surgeon Sushruta Samhita, who reconstructed noses using cheek tissue around 600 B.C. (Haiken 1997; Kennedy 2004), and the Indian forehead reconstruction technique (rhinoplasty) from 1000 A.D. (Haiken 1997).

In the 16th century, Italian surgeon Gaspare Tagliacozzi from Bologna pioneered modern plastic surgery with the development of skin flap procedures, known today as the Italian or Tagliacozzi method. This technique used upper arm flaps to reconstruct noses, lips, and ears, often damaged by duelling, as described in his landmark text “De curtorum chirurgia per insitionem” (Gilman 1999; Haiken 1997) [Figure 1].

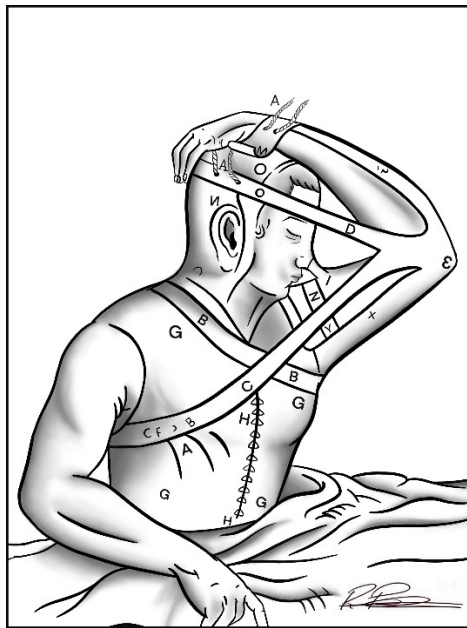


Figure 1. Illustration of the Tagliacozzi nose reconstruction method which involves immobilising the left arm (for at least one month on average) in order to promote the skin flap attachment to the nose.

Although plastic surgery is one of the oldest surgical techniques, it became a distinct medical specialty only after World War I and World War II (Haiken 1997). The wars created a high demand for reconstructive procedures for injured veterans, especially for facial injuries (Figure 2). In response, John Hopkins established a formal plastic surgery training programme in 1924 (Haiken 1997).



Figure 2. Example of injured war veteran named Walter Yeo, who suffered severe facial burns at the Battle of Jutland and was reconstructed using a tubed pedicle flap by the pioneering surgeon at the time, Sir Harold Gillies (Photos dated: 1917).

Therefore, modern plastic surgery originated in the post-war era with the establishment of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons in the 1930s-1940s to advance the field. Initially focused on reconstruction, the specialty later expanded to include aesthetic enhancements, with the first breast enlargement performed in Texas in 1962 (Haiken 1997).

1.2. Cosmetic Surgery in Society

Cosmetic surgery, once seen as a luxury for the wealthy, has now become more accessible to various socioeconomic groups. Blum (2003) describes this as a “postsurgical culture”, where cosmetic surgery has shifted from a vanity symbol to a common topic of discussion, influenced largely by media coverage. This coverage spans magazines, newspapers, television, and the internet, discussing everything from surgery risks to sensational mishaps (Blum 2003). Furthermore, advertising across media, including social platforms, further fuels this discourse (Chen *et al.* 2022).

A case in point of such sensationalism is television shows such as *Nip/Tuck* (Padley 2022) and reality series featuring makeovers, highlighting issues like gender roles and identity, undoubtedly contributing to a “cosmetic surgery craze” (Jones 2008). This craze has also led to stricter regulations to protect vulnerable groups, particularly minors (Sweeney 2021).

While cosmetic surgery is often portrayed as carnivalesque (Jones 2008), it is also interpreted by some as a way to challenge norms and exert personal agency (Shields 2007). Indeed, socially, cosmetic surgery is also seen as empowering, providing a means for physical self-expression and breaking down social barriers. Thus, cosmetic surgery undoubtedly evokes a great deal of societal interest, and literature shows that the aesthetic changes which can be made in

order to enhance a certain part of the body draw a great deal of attention in a number of ways, as previously outlined.

However, what has been relatively overlooked from a societal perspective is the potential psychological benefits which can be gained from undergoing cosmetic surgery (Kam *et al.* 2022), as the media tend to privilege sensationalised concepts of cosmetic surgery over all others. Hence, rather than foregrounding the potential benefits of cosmetic surgery, it would seem to be framed from a negative and judgemental perspective, which is disconnected from the reality for many. Therefore, this gap in the literature, from a sociolinguistic perspective, provides an opportunity for investigation into stigma, stereotypes and cosmetic surgery seen through a taboo lens as will be addressed in this paper¹.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cosmetic Surgery Discourses

Despite the vast amount of interest in cosmetic surgery from a sociological perspective, as outlined above, the fields of both plastic surgery and cosmetic surgery have been scantily addressed in literature from a linguistic perspective. In the cases where cosmetic surgery has been investigated, the main focus tends to be on the ways in which bodies are used to sell cosmetic surgery or through surgeons promoting themselves, i.e., the field of advertising. I n d e e d , Lirola and Chovenec (2012) carried out an investigation into advertising and multimodality and how cosmetic surgery has been popularised for commercial purposes.

Further studies have investigated discourses connected to beauty and physical appearance with a particular focus on the female body as well as the concept of body image and even body dysmorphia (Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz 2016; Khanna and Sharma 2017; Aanesen *et al.* 2020). Other studies have also further examined the multimodality of cosmetic discourses in the media and how the representation of the body encompasses identity and gender as well as fitting into the “cultural ideal of beauty” (Moran and Lee 2013: 373).

Furthermore, cosmetic surgery has also come to the forefront more recently in relation to the ways in which video conferencing has increased (due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic), which has brought the concept of our own body-image under even greater scrutiny. The extended time spent in videoconferencing faced with our own images on the screen for prolonged periods of time (a new vision of ourselves for many) has highlighted the potential psychological and even emotional consequences of the pandemic on how we may perceive ourselves leading to noticing more “flaws” and accentuating any previous self-esteem issues in some cases (Padley and Di Pace 2021a; 2021b). What is more, is that studies have shown that there has been a greater interest and increase in requests for cosmetic surgery during this period and this has been labelled the so-called “Zoom Boom” (Padley and Di Pace 2021a; 2021b).

¹ Please refer to the specific research questions in section 2.3.

Prior to this study, the author carried out an investigation into the ways in which cosmetic surgery is portrayed in the British press, with a particular focus on the depiction of women and ageism (Guzzo and Padley 2021). The findings show that women are depicted in a negative light and are generally victims of ageism across all types of press (left/right politically orientated and broadsheet/tabloid) while their male counterparts are not. The study revealed that women who undergo cosmetic surgery were often described as *desperate* and *unwilling to grow old gracefully* while there was greater understanding for their male counterparts, particularly regarding the fact that men could essentially grow older unjudged. This investigation, in turn, led to further interest into the ways in which cosmetic surgery may or may not be a stigmatised and even a taboo topic as addressed in this paper.

2.2. Stigma and Cosmetic Surgery

There are several stereotypes related to cosmetic surgery which can be identified as having led to the stigmatisation of cosmetic surgery. Stigma within this study is understood as an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Goffman 1963: 3). Indeed, Patel (2010) states that these stereotypes define cosmetic surgery as usually being associated with vanity and mere aesthetics and that it is a surgery which is only available to the rich, implying seemingly discrediting attributes. Some of the stigmas related to cosmetic surgery include (but are not limited to) the following themes (Motakef *et al.* 2014):

- i. **Vanity:** Patients who undergo cosmetic surgery are often perceived as being overly concerned with their appearance and choose to prioritise superficial beauty over more substantial qualities.
- ii. **Unrealistic beauty standards:** the media promotes certain body ideals which place pressure on society to conform. Cosmetic surgery is considered as a tool to meet these unrealistic expectations and reinforces the idea that natural appearances are inadequate.
- iii. **Lack of authenticity:** individuals who undergo cosmetic surgery can be perceived as deceitful as they want to alter their appearance (often without admitting to it).
- iv. **Insecurity:** individuals who seek cosmetic surgery have deep-seated insecurities which cannot be addressed through surgical interventions and they should learn to accept themselves.
- v. **Health risks:** having cosmetic surgery is an unnecessary health risk, which could and should be avoided as individuals prioritise vanity over health and well-being when they undergo cosmetic surgery.

These perceptions of cosmetic surgery have embedded a stereotype that may not necessarily hold true. Indeed, Motakef *et al.* (2014) suggest that the first obstacle to overcome is recognising that there is stigma attached to undergoing cosmetic surgery and it may be due to plastic surgeons themselves not easily admitting that this is the case. This in turn also seems to encourage the patients' wish to hide the fact that they have undergone cosmetic surgery as they find themselves

shamed, judged and accused of having unaddressed psychological issues. These themes are addressed discursively in this paper through examining two spoken corpora (one non-clinical and the other clinical during medical consultations) in the context of cosmetic surgery.

2.3. Research Questions

In light of the previous literature, this study aims to address the following research questions:

- i. What are the main motivations behind choosing to undergo cosmetic surgery which emerge from ethnographic questionnaires, non-clinical focus groups and recorded medical encounters?
- ii. What kinds of stigmas and taboos emerge in cosmetic surgery discourses in these two spoken contexts?

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This study forms part of an ongoing research project which investigates cosmetic surgery interaction in live consultations, adopting a mixed methods approach (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018). The study takes on a twofold qualitative and quantitative methodology which combines ethnographic and interactional sociolinguistic methods (Gumperz 1972; 1999; Sarangi and Roberts 1999; Goodson and Vassar 2011) along with corpus linguistics (McEnery and Hardie 2012) and discourse analysis (Baker 2006; 2023) under the overarching umbrella of applied linguistics (Atkinson 1995). Two spoken corpora were analysed:

1. Pilot study non-clinical spoken corpus collected with focus groups discussing cosmetic surgery prior to the main corpus collection.
2. Main corpus: a clinical corpus based on recordings of cosmetic surgery consultations.

3.2. Ethnography

The study was carried out on the premise that contextual understanding is driven by informed, thick, ethnographic participation (Sarangi 2006). "Thick participation" derives from Geertz's (1973) concept of "thick description", which contrasts with "thin description" by focusing on in-depth consideration of individual cases rather than generalisations. In this study, "thick participation" means the researcher is deeply immersed in the context, leveraging their own "knowledge of the game" (Malinowski 1935: 320).

This approach extends beyond data collection and analysis, involving the researcher as a collaborator who propagates feedback through their socialisation into the professional research setting (Sarangi 2006). In my study, this was

achieved through a clear definition of my role as the researcher within the project. One of the main challenges which Sarangi (2002) highlights to the “outside” researcher is that of interpreting professional epistemics in a competent manner. Thus, as an applied linguist within the field of medicine, my own knowledge was important in order to gain credibility and acceptance by the physicians and also to contextually and linguistically analyse the data.

3.2.1. Ethnographic Questionnaire Design

Ethnographic methodologies were used in this project through an adapted online questionnaire² for quantitative analysis during both the pilot and main data collection phases, and qualitative analysis for:

- The pilot study’s online focus groups
- The main data collection of patient perspectives

These questionnaires were crafted following the ethnographic tradition, considering both the professional context and patient perspectives (Sarangi and Roberts 1999). Due to the pandemic, and lack of access to clinics until much later in the project, these ethnographic questionnaires were adapted for two purposes:

1. Non-expert discourse analysis (non-clinical)
2. Expert versus non-expert discourse analysis (clinical recorded consultations)

The questionnaires were used in order to collect metadata regarding the participants as well as their perceptions and/or motivations for undergoing cosmetic surgery (where relevant). The impact of the pandemic and using teleconferencing was also investigated in terms of the abovementioned “Zoom Boom” (Padley and Di Pace 2021a; 2021b) but these results are not included here within for reasons of brevity. Consent was given for the participants’ answers to be used for research purposes and for their participation to be recorded for analysis in both the non-clinical and clinical contexts.

3.3. Quantitative and Qualitative Data Frameworks

3.3.1. Quantitative Data

Corpus linguistic methodologies were used to identify language patterns and recurrences in the transcripts, which can then be explored qualitatively (Baker 2006; 2023). This methodology highlights language phenomena easily and quantitatively, which might otherwise require numerous examples to detect through traditional research alone (Clancy and McCarthy 2015). This study

² An example questionnaire can be accessed at the following link: <https://forms.gle/4TbHeiakuRGFnVWb7>

employs Partington’s (2006; 2012) corpus-assisted approach, and for brevity, only a portion of the keyword analysis is presented.

Keywords are obtained through the statistical extraction of terminology within the corpus when compared to a reference corpus (in this case the British National Corpus 2014 - spoken corpus³). Such an analysis provides an overview of what is unique in the focus corpus, allowing for more in-depth linguistic investigation and considerations into the phenomena. The corpus linguistics software Sketch Engine was used to calculate keyness using simple math:

$$\frac{fpm_{focus} + n}{fpm_{ref} + n}$$

“where fpm_{focus} is the normalised (per million) frequency of the word in the focus corpus, fpm_{ref} is the normalised (per million) frequency of the word in the reference corpus, n is the simple Maths (smoothing) parameter ($n=1$ is the default value)” (Kilgarriff *et al* 2014).

3.3.2. Qualitative Data

Corpus linguistic methods were employed to identify key phenomena and serve as a starting point for qualitative discourse analysis. This combined approach is well-established (Baker 2006; Partington 2006; 2012), with quantitative results informing the qualitative analysis. Koteyko (2006: 151) argues that this hybrid methodology enhances the interpretation of qualitative data. Indeed, by using computational tools to analyse the frequency and distribution of words and phrases, researchers can uncover underlying structures and trends that might not be immediately evident through manual analysis.

This quantitative foundation helps guide the qualitative exploration, in order to triangulate a more focused and informed investigation of language use and meaning (Egbert and Baker 2020). Such a hybrid approach not only highlights prominent language phenomena but also strengthens the interpretation and validation of qualitative claims, making discourse analysis more robust and comprehensive (Baker 2023). Therefore, this study also adopted this approach to guide its qualitative analysis.

3.4. Corpus Collection

The corpus collection was twofold and involved a pilot non-clinical corpus and the main clinical corpus. Both corpora used an ethnographic questionnaire (section 3.2.1.) in order to gain consent to participate in the research and enquire about perceptions of cosmetic surgery (including motivations) and also an innovative element of the study, (the influence of videoconferencing on self-

³ This reference corpus was selected as it is considered representative of the general English spoken language and was deemed appropriate for comparison with the two spoken corpora investigated.

perception and a potential rise in cosmetic surgery⁴). Both questionnaires also gathered anonymous metadata about the participants. The questionnaires were designed for online distribution (via internet and social networks for the pilot analysis and available via QR code for the clinical analysis). They also served to recruit participants to online focus groups (pilot analysis) and for the consultation to be recorded (main clinical analysis). The use of ethnographic questionnaires was deemed an appropriate tool for the two studies and they have also been widely used in a variety of subject areas, including medicine (Goodson and Vassar 2011).

The necessity to carry out a pilot analysis (data collected between March and June 2021) arose out of the necessity to define cosmetic discourses under the constraints of the pandemic and was an adaptation of the original research project. Indeed, the main clinical corpus was not collected until October 2021 (up until June 2022) due to the restrictions on travel as well as the impossibility to access clinics and hospitals⁵. Hence, the pilot analysis included online focus groups of a non-clinical nature as a starting point in the definition of cosmetic surgery discourses and the main analysis was the actual recordings of the medical consultations. The collection of both corpora was designed to complement each other.

The clinical corpus was collected at three separate UK data sites (Mansfield, Nottinghamshire; Cambridge, Cambridgeshire; Tunbridge Wells, Kent). All three clinics were private cosmetic surgery clinics and ethical approval was obtained from the board of directors in order to collect data.

All recordings were transcribed in a simplified manner, in line with Sarangi's (2010) notion of being fit for purpose. Hence, the transcriptions were compatible with corpus linguistic software (Sketch Engine) and included no annotations except for pause markers, interruptions and signals of metacommunication such as laughter.

4. Analysis

4.1. Corpus Overview

4.1.1. Pilot Corpus

For the pilot analysis, there was a total of five online discussion forums that were recorded and transcribed for analysis with a total of 18 participants. 13 of these were female and 5 were male. The largest number of participants was spread evenly across three age groups (30-39; 40-49; 50-59) with a participation rate of 26.2% for each group. The smallest age group was the 70+ age range (2.4%) and the age groups 20-29 and 60-69 had a 4.7% and a 14.3% participation rate respectively.

⁴ The latter point is beyond the focus of this study but some of the findings have already been published (see Padley and Di Pace 2021a, 2021b).

⁵ The original data collection was intended to take place during the summer of 2020, therefore, was delayed for more than a year.

The corpus had a total of 42,345 tokens and the keyword analysis revealed the following top 20 terms (Table 1).

Table 1. Keyword analysis of the pilot corpus.

| | <i>Item</i> | <i>Relative frequency (focus corpus)</i> | <i>Relative frequency (reference corpus)</i> | <i>Keyness Score</i> |
|----|----------------|--|--|----------------------|
| 1 | humour | 346.33234 | 0 | 347.332 |
| 2 | cosmetic | 1108.26355 | 2.19726 | 346.942 |
| 3 | procedure | 2008.72754 | 5.1551 | 326.514 |
| 4 | judgement | 415.59882 | 0.50706 | 276.432 |
| 5 | reconstruction | 277.06589 | 0.08451 | 256.398 |
| 6 | undergo | 277.06589 | 0.16902 | 237.862 |
| 7 | consultation | 900.46411 | 2.87334 | 232.736 |
| 8 | surgeon | 1662.39526 | 6.33824 | 226.675 |
| 9 | teleconference | 207.79941 | 0.08451 | 192.529 |
| 10 | botox | 346.33234 | 0.8451 | 188.246 |
| 11 | stigma | 484.86526 | 1.6902 | 180.606 |
| 12 | lockdown | 207.79941 | 0.16902 | 178.611 |
| 13 | surgery | 2632.12573 | 13.85962 | 177.2 |
| 14 | esteem | 207.79941 | 0.25353 | 166.569 |
| 15 | gracefully | 207.79941 | 0.25353 | 166.569 |
| 16 | anaesthetic | 138.53294 | 0 | 139.533 |
| 17 | favour | 207.79941 | 0.67608 | 124.576 |
| 18 | unthinkable | 138.53294 | 0.16902 | 119.359 |
| 19 | recapture | 138.53294 | 0.16902 | 119.359 |
| 20 | enhance | 346.33234 | 1.94373 | 117.991 |

The terms highlighted in blue are directly related to the topic of cosmetic surgery in terms of content; the words in orange are related to the COVID-19 pandemic; the words in yellow delineate those connected to the negative connotations related to cosmetic surgery (judgement, stigma, and the adverb gracefully⁶); the term in green is related to motivations for undergoing cosmetic surgery; the words in white are of miscellaneous content.

The keyword analysis in the pilot analysis served to identify the line of enquiry to pursue regarding the extent to which cosmetic surgery is stigmatised or otherwise and hence this was examined in the clinical corpus recordings through the ethnographic questionnaire, keyword analysis and on a qualitative level.

⁶ For the sake of brevity, the concordances with “gracefully” are not included in this paper, however, on close reading they show the frequent collocation with ageing (i.e., unwillingness to grow old/age gracefully).

4.1.2. Clinical Corpus

The main clinical corpus was transcribed from 22.5 hours of recordings in 36 different patient consultations. The average length of each consultation was 39 minutes. The total number of tokens amounted to 257,274. The gender spread was 86% females and 14% males. These numbers are representative of general cosmetic surgery practice, as according to the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (2021), 10% of procedures are carried out on males. The largest age cohort was made up of 40-49-year-olds (26%) followed by 60-69 (23%), 50-59 (20%), 20-29/30-39 (14%) and 70+ (3%). The age range of these cohorts are also representative of usual cosmetic surgery practice whereby the largest age range is that of 40-55 years (American Society of Plastic Surgeons 2020).

The full quantitative corpus analysis is not included in this analysis as the lines of enquiry regarding stigma were pursued principally from a qualitative perspective (outlined in section 4.4.). The keyword analysis for the clinical corpus as a whole did not foreground the same terms identified in the pilot corpus but produced content terminology related to the topic of cosmetic surgery. However, the ethnographic responses pointed to the quantifiable motivations for undergoing cosmetic surgery and how these may also be in line with stereotypes (and potential taboos related to the field). Section 4.2. outlines the quantitative data regarding driving factors for undergoing cosmetic surgery, which also serve to address pre-existing stereotypes regarding the field in question.

4.2. Motivations for undergoing cosmetic surgery

As a part of the ethnographic questionnaires, patients were requested to state their main reasons for seeking cosmetic surgery. There was a total of 48 different reasons given among the 36 patients, with some patients stating more than one reason. These have been categorised according to type of motivation (i.e., anti-ageing reasons, aesthetic reasons, self-confidence and psychological reasons, functional reasons) and are illustrated in Figure 3.

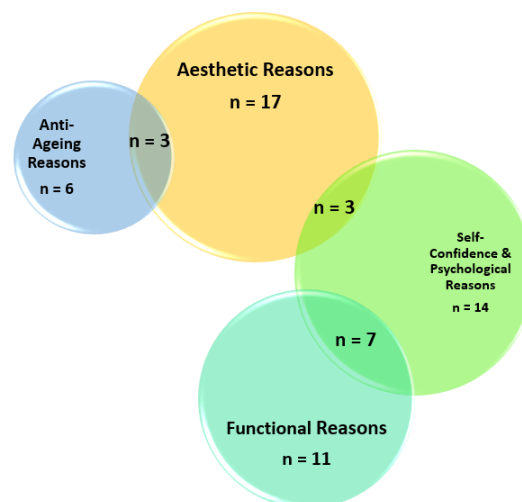


Figure 3. Venn diagram illustrating the categorisation of the reasons for undergoing cosmetic surgery and the number of overlaps when there are multiple reasons.

35% of patients stated that they sought out cosmetic surgery for aesthetic reasons, 29% for reasons of self-confidence or psychological reasons, 23% for functional reasons and 13% for reasons of anti-ageing. A selection of some of the participants' written comments from the questionnaire are illustrated below (the red comments are related to aesthetic reasons, the ones in blue are related to confidence/self-esteem, comments in green are connected to functional purposes and anti-ageing comments are in black):

To feel happy with my body
Don't like the look of it
Something that's bothered me for years (confidence)
Post childbirth (3 children) – confidence
Back pain and reduce pain during running
Back and neck pains, self-image
Make me feel younger
Look younger, more awake

Therefore, the majority of reasons indicated for seeking cosmetic surgery were for aesthetic reasons ($n = 17$), however, while aesthetic reasons for undergoing cosmetic surgery are undoubtedly a leading factor for patients, other motivating factors cannot be underestimated. Indeed, the category which closely follows aesthetic reasons is that of self-esteem/confidence and psychological factors ($n = 14$). Indeed, when the singular reasons for both categories are also summed with the overlapping multiple reasons, the category which then has the majority share is that of self-esteem/confidence and psychological factors with a total of 24 instances versus the 23 instances for aesthetic reasons. This finding is not necessarily in line with usual stereotypes surrounding cosmetic surgery whereby patients seek it out for reasons of vanity (Patel 2010) and attaches greater importance to the underpinning psychological motivations involved.

Furthermore, it is also possible to consider the two categories of aesthetic reasons and anti-ageing reasons as interrelated, as they both provide aesthetic outcomes and when added together represent 48% ($n = 23$) of the overall motivations. On the other hand, functional reasons and reasons related to self-esteem/confidence can also be considered as interrelated in this case at 52% ($n = 25$) (see the number of overlaps which was the highest), which would indicate that less than half (48%) of the motivations are actually related to aesthetic reasons and the majority is in fact related to functionality and self-esteem/confidence. Therefore, once again the results suggest that aesthetic reasons cannot solely be considered as the main reasons in this corpus.

4.3. Stigma and Cosmetic Surgery Taboo

As previously mentioned, the stereotypes which surround cosmetic surgery often mean that it is associated with vanity and beauty and that it is a type of surgery which is only available to the rich (Patel 2010). Furthermore, while on the one hand cosmetic surgery is considered an inaccessible and luxury surgery for some (Patel 2010), there is also likely a stigma attached to this field of surgery which

is not necessarily recognised due to the general concept of wealth and well-being which is attached to it (Motakef *et al.* 2014).

It was identified in the literature review that the first obstacle to discussing cosmetic surgery as a taboo topic is recognising that there is stigma attached to undergoing cosmetic surgery (Motakef *et al.* 2014). One of the features identified in the main spoken corpus is the patients' wish to hide (n = 24) the fact that they have undergone cosmetic surgery as they find themselves shamed and accused of having unaddressed psychological issues (Patel 2010). Therefore, the following section investigates how this concept of stigma comes to light in the corpus in question.

4.3.1. Denying Undergoing the Knife

Half of the instances (52.7%) in the corpus indicate that patients state that they would prefer that the fact that they have undergone cosmetic go unnoticed. A selection of these is illustrated below.

Kent Clinic – British Male and Female (Aged 60-69)

This first extract is a married couple who requested upper rhytidectomy (upper facelift) and lower blepharoplasty (lower eyelid surgery) and the wife also requested skin depigmentation. In the following extract, their wish to hide the fact they are undergoing cosmetic surgery is clear. The concept of a natural effect is first introduced by the surgeon (lines 76-81) where, interestingly, he states that he does not want the patient's facelift to be noticeable. The wife confirms that she is in agreement, and her husband goes further to state that they have not told their children (line 88) and the wife echoes this saying that they do not intend to (line 89). This conversation about wanting to hide the procedure from others is a relatively frequently repeated concept throughout the corpus (n = 24) and falls in line with the idea of patients being deceitful, as outlined in the literature review.

- 76 S: So generally, erm, those risks are low because they do it all the time. ok. But some, erm, tailor
 77 because they have a certain clientele and they do certain things and some do other things, you
 78 know, like going to a restaurant, you know, you, you, you know, you, you go to a fast-food place
 79 or you go to a fine dining or you go, you go for a particular thing. So, with faces, what I do is
 80 very on the side of natural I don't, I don't want any of my patients to be told, gosh, have you had a
 81 facelift? Because to me that's erm,
- 82 P: [Ehem. Ehem No, I wouldn't want somebody to say that.
- 83 S: No. So, the idea is that, you know, not changing your appearance, such that you see on TV, a
 84 rubbery face. No plastic pulled, wind tunnel. I don't do that.
- 85 P: [No.
- 86 S: Ok. So, everything, it still has to be you you're, you are a lady who's, erm, over 60. You have
 87 to look good for 60, rather than trying to look Dolly and 20.
- 88 P2: We haven't told the erm, children [inaudible]
- 89 P: We don't want to tell people so [inaudible]

Kent Clinic – British Female (Aged 60-69)

The following excerpt is taken from a consultation with a patient who has requested lower rhytidectomy with liposuction and upper blepharoplasty with browlift. In this extract the concept of hiding the results is introduced by the surgeon first as he states that the scar can be hidden or will fade (lines 142-144 and 148). At this stage, it should be recognised that a fundamental part of the field of plastic surgery is providing solid aesthetic outcomes (i.e., good symmetry, reduced scarring), however, it should also be considered that this practice may also be fostering the idea of stigma. A further interesting point worth noting in this dialogue is that the surgeon selects the phrasal verb *to lay low* (line 175) when referring to the recovery time. This verb would usually be associated with connotations of hiding out (i.e., some kind of criminal activity) and it is therefore of interest that he compares the postoperative stage with not wanting to be caught. This also arguably adds to the underlying concept that cosmetic surgery can be perceived as shameful and should therefore be hidden.

- 142 S: So, yer. So, you need a little bit of that and little bit of eyelids. Yer. You can do them together, but this
 143 scar for this will be just on your eyebrow and it will fade. Yer. And you could pencil it, it in to hide this
 144 scar, if you need to.
 145
 146 P: Yer.
 147
 148 S: The eyelid scar in the crease and it doesn't show, and it comes out in these laughter lines.
 149
 150 P: Yer.
 151
 152 S: So, it's lovely and smooth. So that is what is really needed for your eyes.
-
- 153
 154 P: Definitely. Yer.
 155
 156 S: Erm, the risks of surgery like that, there isn't much other than you're gonna have the scar here, which
 157 will heal, erm, bleeding infection, slight asymmetry. Those things can happen, but it's very, very rare.
 158 OK. So, it will give you a good overall result.
- 159
 160 P: Yer.
 161
 162 S: And it's under the local. So, you awake, you have it done and you go.
 163
 164 P: Yer,
 165
 166 S: You will get bruising around the eyes for about a week and that's it.
 167
 168 P: Yer. Well, after CO₂ obviously I had bruising cruise and I've had Botox and I had bruising within a
 169 week, recovery's about a week.
 170
 171 S: Yer. And some people have that and that together.
 172
 173 P: Yer.
 174
 175 S: Because while you're laying low for a week that this is done, this is done.
 176
 177 P: You done up. Yer.
 178
 179 S: OK. But some people think's too much money. I'll do this then six months later, year later, I'll do the
 180 other.
 181
 182 P: Yer. Yer.

4.3.2. Requesting a Procedure – False Pretences

There are some instances in the corpus whereby cosmetic surgery is requested but under the guiles of another reason. This appears mainly to be the case for the males undergoing surgery. Out of a total of five males, four of them state that the main reason they are seeking cosmetic surgery is for another unrelated motivation (e.g., a previous trauma leaving a scar or a partner has requested they have it done).

Kent Clinic – British Male (Aged 60-69)

The patient below has requested an upper and lower rhytidectomy which is indicated in (line 7), where it is assumed that the patient pulls up his face in a gesture to indicate what he is requesting. However, he then also immediately states that he has a scar on his face caused by a dog bite (lines 9-10) which he would also like addressing.

- 1 S: Hello, how are you? Welcome.
- 2 P: Hi. I can see your door from my window.
- 3 S: Oh, that's good.
- 4 P: A long way to walk.
- 5 <Laughter>
- 6 S: Right welcome. You can take your mask off. How can I help you?
- 7 P: Erm if you can do that.
- 8 S: <Laughter> Ok.
- 9 P: Then if you could do something about the dog bite as well. That would be nice. This one, I'm not
- 10 particularly bothered but this one.
- 11 S: [Was that all same time? Same dog bite?
- 12 P: Yer. In 2005 in Calberry somebody set a dog on me when I was ... and it got a hold of me face.
- 13 S: Oh gosh.

Cambridge Clinic – Asian Male (Aged 60-69)

This patient has requested rhinoplasty but begins his request by stating that he has a scar on his nose which is caused by an injury (line 3). He then states that while the surgeon is addressing the cut, he would like him to reduce his nose (line 9). Therefore, rhinoplasty would appear to be a secondary reason even though it is technically the main motivating factor for the consultation.

- 1 S: Erm, so clinic of the 18th of May at nine o'clock. All right. Erm, so what would you like to talk
2 about today? What, what, erm, erm, what's the reason you've come to see me?
3 P: Erm, I want to talk about, erm, I've got the cut in, cut in my nose.
4 S: OK, yer.
5 P: I had accident.
6 S: Yer.
7 P: So, I would be interested in to reduce that cut.
8 S: OK, yer
9 P: And at the same time, it, erm, you shave my nose a little bit.
10 S: OK. So...
11 P: [To make it thinner, smaller, slightly.
12 S: OK, so shave the nose.
13 P: Yer.

Therefore, on balance it would seem that the majority of the male cohort are aware of the stigma attached to cosmetic surgery and thus choose another reason for having a consultation, perhaps as a justification for their being there. The majority of female patients in the cohort do not seem to find another reason (except perhaps post-partum abdominoplasty reasons) but are still clear that they do not want their procedures to be noticeable or perceivable on the whole. These findings are also in line with the non-expert perspectives which identified a significant keyword correlation between stigma, judgement and plastic surgery.

5. Discussion

Stereotypes regarding cosmetic surgery are relatively well embedded within society and as outlined in the literature review, include the ideas that cosmetic surgery is purely for vanity reasons (Patel 2010). Furthermore, those who decide to undergo cosmetic surgery are often judged negatively for having chosen to do so, particularly if they are women (Bonell *et al.* 2021). The corpus in question set out to investigate two lines of enquiry:

- i. The motivations behind why patients seek out cosmetic surgery.
- ii. The extent to which cosmetic surgery can be considered stigmatised as revealed through verbal interactions during medical consultations.

The results from this study regarding motivations indicate that the stereotypes regarding cosmetic surgery do not hold true. While it is true that the biggest category in this corpus is that of aesthetic purposes ($n = 17$), when the multiple (overlapping) reasons given by patients are considered, the largest category is actually that of psychological reasons ($n = 24$) vs aesthetic reasons ($n = 23$). This finding is noteworthy as it demonstrates an (almost) balance which exists between aesthetic reasons and psychological ones but in fact foregrounds the potential benefits of cosmetic surgery (e.g., improving self-esteem). This finding was also evident in the pilot study, as the 14th keyword was *esteem* (as a collocate of *improved self-esteem*). Therefore, while it is not possible to generalise, the sample presented here can be stated as breaking down the stereotypes related to cosmetic surgery by confirming the wider range of motivations.

The second objective of this study was to investigate the extent to which cosmetic surgery is stigmatised, analysing some excerpts taken from transcribed medical encounters. The results would seem to confirm such a stigma and also confirm that cosmetic surgery can also be considered a taboo topic. This taboo became evident in the ways in which both the surgeons and the patients highlight the importance of hiding the surgery. In that sense, there are also expressions used which are often associated with potential criminal activity such as *lying low*. It must also be stated that concealing and endeavouring to achieve a natural look is part and parcel of a plastic surgeon's training and skills (i.e., provide pleasing aesthetic results) but the language employed by the surgeons would seem to take for granted that any procedures should not be noticeable or obvious. While this stance may not be deliberate in reinforcing stigma and taboo, it certainly can be said that the surgeon's position does not promote open dialogue.

A further indication that cosmetic surgery would seem to be a taboo topic is that some of the participants (in particular the male participants) attended the consultations with a separate request (i.e., a scar revision following an accident). This request was then followed by a secondary cosmetic request (e.g., to straighten the nose). What is revealing in these interactions is that there would seem to be a level of embarrassment in terms of requesting cosmetic surgery which leads patients to feel the need to request a different type of procedure as a justification for cosmetic surgery. This could render revealing they had cosmetic surgery easier to others, hence confirming the generally negative views held regarding cosmetic surgery and their need to save face (see Goffman 1963).

6. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this study investigated the motivations that emerged for undergoing cosmetic surgery in both a non-clinical and clinical context while also investigating the extent to which cosmetic surgery has been stigmatised and may represent a taboo topic. The mixed methods approach adopted proved to be efficient in revealing two main findings regarding the lines of investigation of this study. The first finding is that the reasons for undergoing cosmetic surgery can not purely be linked to vanity and aesthetic motivations but rather also psychological ones. This is significant as it helps to break down stereotypes related to cosmetic surgery and highlights the benefits that might also be gained. The second finding instead is that cosmetic surgery is stigmatised, as it emerges from the medical encounters in my corpus, mainly through the expressed need to hide the procedures and the false pretences with which patients attend consultations. Furthermore, the stigma may also be unknowingly alimented by the surgeons themselves as they encourage hiding the surgery and focus on their aim to obtain natural looking results that won't be noticeable. These findings were made possible through the use of corpus linguistic methodologies as well as close textual reading. Further investigation into this area would be beneficial through the collection of further spoken corpus in this context as well as non-clinical focus groups and is planned for the foreseeable future.

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SEX AS SPOKEN WORDS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH DRAMA

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Citation: Millington, A. (2024) "Sex as Spoken Words in Contemporary British Drama", in C. Bucaria, A.D. Mitzel and A. Sileo (eds) *Taboo in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation*, *mediAzioni* 43: A164-A176, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/20541>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: This paper focuses on the descriptive acts of sex and intimacy on the contemporary British stage as written texts and spoken words. The paper will specifically be exploring the use of language in Katherine Chandler's *Lose Yourself* (2019) and Anna Jordan's *Freak* (2014). Both of these play texts use language to describe in varying detail the intimate acts that the characters are recounting, some violent, some messy, some simply underwhelming, but it is solely the description of the acts that the audience are party too. The article refers to extracts from the published texts as well as critic responses of the performances, and apply theories from George Rodosthenous's collection of essays, *Theatre As Voyeurism* (2015), exploring the acceptance of audio and visual voyeurism on stage, and Lisa Fitzpatrick's *Rape on The Contemporary State* (2018) with regard to the issues that arise when performing violent sexual acts on stage. By using these critical texts and relating the author's theories to my chosen performance texts, I argue that by using the description of the sexual acts, rather than overtly performing them, the intimate, aural connection that occurs between the performer and the spectator can be greater than the visual. As society seems to continuously change its mind about what is and is not acceptable to portray on stage, is the aural description of sexual and intimate acts bridging the gap of censorship, putting the ownership on the spectator's imagination, rather than the performers' interpretation?

Key words: intimacy; theatre; performance; visual; Jordan; Chandler.

1. Introduction

Sex has been commonplace in British theatre for centuries. From Elizabethan theatre, including the brutality in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, to the Restoration's playful and farcical style in *The Country Wife* (Wycherley 1675) and *The Beaux' Stratagem* (Farquhar 1707), from the Victorian era with *Mrs Warren's Profession* (Shaw 1893), to modern British theatre's raw and aptly named In-Yer-Face movement with *Shopping & Fucking* (Ravenhill 1996) and *Blasted* (Kane 1995). Over the centuries, sex and other physical acts of intimacy have featured in, and been the topic of, many pieces of theatre, sometimes directly and unapologetically as with Anthony Neilson's *The Censor* (1997), and sometimes subtly and through subtext as in Noel Coward's *Vortex* (1924). Different periods in British theatre history have brought about different approaches to sex on stage depending on censorship, political movements, or simply the zeitgeist of the time.

Stemming from my previous research exploring contemporary British theatre and theatrical intimacy, I propose that a new movement has occurred from 2013, and may still be occurring, for which sex has become a key theme and topic of work, particularly with female playwrights. However, the way in which writers approach the topic of intimate acts has changed, with depictions of sex becoming less frequent, but the description of the acts now at the forefront. This can be seen in a number of productions which premiered within this time frame, including works such as Louise Orwin's *Oh Yes Oh No* (2017), Abi Zakarian's *Fabric* (2016), Cordelia Lynn's *Lela & Co.* (2015) and Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* (2013). For the purposes of this paper, I am defining sex and intimate acts as any act involving one or more person where there is physical contact with a sexual organ. This includes, but is not limited to: oral sex, manual sexual stimulation through use of a hand (over or under clothing), vaginal penetrative sex, anal penetrative sex, and kissing in a non-platonic or familial setting.

I am examining two examples of British playwriting from the time period. These plays are Anna Jordan's *Freak* (2014) and Katherine Chandler's *Lose Yourself* (2019). These plays have been chosen as they were both written post-2013, and feature a number of similarities, such as the form in which they are written (monologue storytelling) and that they contain both consensual and non-consensual intimacy. Both of these plays use language to describe, in varying detail, the intimate acts that the characters are recounting. These acts of intimacy come in the form of violent attacks, messy encounters, and some simply underwhelming experiences. However, all of the acts featured are presented to their respective audiences solely through verbal description of the acts in the form of monologues. This choice of monologue storytelling could be for a number of reasons, such as financial (if the acts were performed then more actors would be needed), restrictions imposed by the venue (some venues do not allow nudity or certain sexual acts to be performed at their venues) or a directorial choice of telling rather than showing. For clarity, I am defining monologue storytelling as a story being told by a single person, from a single perspective, but that might connect with other stories being told as part of the same

production and will culminate with at least one shared moment. Other examples of this can be seen in plays such as Patrick Cash's *Chemsex Monologues* (2016a) and *HIV Monologues* (2016b). This is, I believe, the most likely reason not only to allow the actions being described to be left up to the audience's imaginations, but also a way of not making these productions purely about the sexual acts, however highlighting the impact they have on their characters.

Throughout this paper, I refer to extracts from the published texts, critics' responses to the performances, and theories from Lisa Fitzpatrick's *Rape on the Contemporary Stage* (2018) with regard to the issues that arise when performing violent sexual acts on stage. Fitzpatrick argues how sexual acts, particularly violent ones, can become titillating for the audience, thus removing the intention behind the inclusion of these scenes. With regard to *Freak* in particular, this is a particularly key issue considering its choice of writing and descriptive words rather than depiction. I will compare some of Fitzpatrick's theories to George Rodosthenous's ideas around viewing the naked body from his edited collection of essays *Theatre as Voyeurism: The Pleasure of Watching* (2015). Through these essays, Rodosthenous suggests the opposite, that nudity itself is a strong creative choice to be included within a performance. By using critical texts and relating the author's theories to these chosen performance texts, I argue that by using the description of the sexual acts, rather than overtly performing them, the intimate, aural connection that occurs between the performer and the spectator can be greater than the visual, this also being amplified by the venues at which these productions originally premiered.

Before delving into these productions' texts, with regard to the staging of the acts described and considering for a moment why the playwright chose words over actions as a means of telling these stories, I wish to address the concerns raised by Lisa Fitzpatrick in *Rape on the Contemporary Stage* (2018). If performed on stage, it would highlight one of Fitzpatrick's early thoughts on the staging of sexual acts, particularly violent ones such as what happens to Georgie in Anna Jordan's *Freak*. That "[t]he exposure of the (usually female) body to the spectator's gaze can, deliberately or otherwise, titillate" (Fitzpatrick 2018: 5) which, of course, in the case of *Freak*, ultimately undermines the point of the scene. Rodosthenous however believes that the "presence of stage nudity is [...] a powerful directorial tool". A tool which could be used to affect the audience, particularly when attempting to "outrage [...] unsuspecting and, at times, conservative audiences by converting them to complicit voyeurs" (Rodosthenous 2015: 1). By making the audience party to the actions of the male characters, you may elicit a more visceral response. Additionally, in section 2, I refer to the work and theories of Claire Warden (2023), the first Intimacy Director credited on Broadway, and her theories of female desire and the societal bias that people may unconsciously have, particularly the idea that women who have desires (which we see on stage), must only be conforming to patriarchal, heteronormative desires which men tell them they should have (Ramos and Warden 2023: 83-89).

Fitzpatrick also highlights that plays such as *Freak*, which take a female-centred narrative, use methods of storytelling such as monologues to avoid the

“pitfalls of staging rape – such as eroticizing the violence or exposing the female body to the scopophilic gaze of the spectators” (Fitzpatrick 2018: 75). By using the monologue form, any risk of eroticising the violent acts is minimalised. This is something which should, of course, be taken into account when working with such material. Although Rodosthenous suggests that audiences viewing the action as opposed to simply hearing it described would be provoked beyond mere passivity, it must also be acknowledged that audiences may respond differently, finding the performance either desirable or undesirable, when viewing such actions.

In the following section, I begin with the first of two chosen texts, that of Anna Jordan’s *Freak*. *Freak* comprises two seemingly unrelated monologues which interweave through the performance until a connection between the two characters is revealed in the final speeches.

2. *Freak*

Anna Jordan’s *Freak* was first produced by Theatre503 and Polly Ingham Productions at The Assembly Rooms for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2014 and starred Lia Burge, as the confident and sexually experimental stripper, Georgie, and April Hughes as the young and sexually naïve schoolgirl, Leah, with Jordan herself directing. Both characters talk of their desires, with Georgie’s dream of being “raised up on the Fourth Plinth at Trafalgar Square” with gaffer tape over her breasts and crotch, “dancing, winding and writhing” as the people below watch her, including businessmen, tourists and even “fucking pigeons” (Jordan 2014: 3). The language used by Georgie when describing her dream is detailed and graphic. Georgie is a character who knows what she wants when it comes to her desires and isn’t afraid of expressing this. In the opening section of the performance, she says:

...everyone is hard for me. I mean every man in Trafalgar fucking Square. Fuck it – cocks *all over the city* are filling with blood for me. Denim straining, nylon stretching, buttons popping, zips busting. Stag parties roar and leer at me. Grab their crotches, spit beer at me. All over the city, grooms-to-be are changing their minds because of me. (Jordan 2014: 3)

Georgie’s language, through all of her speeches, is frank and to the point, it highlights the confidence in her character. She does not simply say that she enjoys sex or that she wishes men fancied her, she goes into great detail on the acts she fantasises about, and later the sexual acts in which she participates. Georgie is not someone who shies away from her own honesty and feelings, certainly not with her audience.

Whereas Leah’s thoughts of sex are based largely on what she has heard from her friends and what she has seen online, they are seemingly more innocent and far less ambitious in comparison to Georgie’s. She has fears about her boyfriend, Luke, feeling any sign of pubic hair, due to the fact that, in the pornography she

has seen, the women are all fully shaved. She uses Veet hair removal products everyday even though:

It gets a bit sore, and it's costing me a fortune but sometimes at break I meet Luke at the back of the DT block and he puts his hand up my skirt and I think 'What about the hair? What if he touches the hair?' (Jordan 2014: 6)

This anxiety and insecurity that Leah feels about her own body, whether the look or the feel, adds to the negativity of her sexual experiences, foreshadowing her own disappointment to come later in the play. It would appear that no matter what Leah's sexual experiences are with Luke, they are all tinged with a lack of the excitement or release that Georgie experiences.

Leah's thoughts on sex are commonplace for most teenagers, driven by peer pressure and the unrealistic standards created by society, particularly those of women. She is not confident with most of the sexual acts she engages in with her boyfriend but is certain it is what she should do because it appears to be what is expected of her by her boyfriend and her girlfriends. Further on in the performance she states:

...Luke comes over here. To *my* bedroom. And every week it's something new. At first he would kiss me hard and lay on top of me so all the air went out of me, and that was the first time I felt something happening, a burning in my stomach and a sort of lightness in my legs and fluttering in my chest. And I guess that's what being *turned on* feels like. It feels like something you need to fix. And it feels like anything could happen.

The next week I felt his dick hard against my leg and I laughed. He didn't like it. But I couldn't believe it felt like that; it just seemed like such a...cliché. But then I felt myself getting wet between my legs and that felt very grown up. (Jordan 2014: 7)

Leah's experience and expectations appear to come from what she hears from her friends. She compares her friend's conquests to her own, creating expectations of what her encounters with her boyfriend will be. The language used for Leah is in stark contrast to that of Georgie's, as well as the character's thought process. Whereas Georgie is thinking about all the men who are hard for her, Leah is more concerned about the fluttering in her chest, which she cannot even identify, she merely suspects it is the feeling of being turned on.

Jordan's characters' discussions of sex offer honest and genuine thoughts on the anxiety and desire which surround sex that many women, and men, feel at different points in their lives. Her use of language to tell these stories, although still in the realms of titillating and, at times, a touch graphic, is there to serve a purpose. Catherine Love, a theatrical reviewer at WhatsOnStage.com, described these monologues as offering "startling frankness", stating:

it insistently pushes what women can publicly say about sex and sexuality, but so often those statements conform more than they think they do to

existing patriarchal structures. Women are allowed to talk about fucking, as long as they continue to replicate male desires. (Love 2014).

This is potentially the case for the character of Georgie, as she dreams of having sex with multiple men at once and, unfortunately for her, this dream becomes a reality. However, what is it in the dream that she is actually searching for? Is it the admiration of many men, or that she desires to adopt the male role within a relationship? Within the dream itself she is atop a phallic column; she is the one who is erect in front of everyone. This symbolism within the dream would suggest that not only does she want to be desired, and to be the focus of everyone's desire, but that she also wants to be the one who is in control and having the more traditionally masculine role. According to Intimacy Director Claire Warden, desire itself "is typically thought of as a male thing [...] the bias in our brain is that desire is masculine" (Ramos and Warden 2023: 83). Thus, the fact that Georgie even has these dreams makes her "masculine".

The scene simply entitled '*The Event*' consists of the two women describing the key sexual events that are the main focus of this play. Leah describes her first time with Luke, doing everything she thinks she should do: for example, giving him oral sex for the first time, at which point she vividly describes that:

he grabs the back of my head and I gag. I think he likes that [...] I think he's going to tell me he loves me. But he tells me that I'm beautiful. Which is pretty much the same thing, right?" (Jordan 2014: 17-18)

It is clear from this description that her boyfriend's behaviour is replicating that of a teenage boy who has observed other sexual acts through the medium of pornography. When it comes to the sex itself, Leah says:

He looks like a different person. Concentrating very hard. He seems to be in a place that I can't join him. And for a moment I panic. I think that maybe I could just slide out from under him and tiptoe downstairs and watch telly while he thrusts away. (Jordan 2014: 19)

The sex culminates as Luke "cums like a lot lot lot lot lot lot lot lot lot quicker" than Leah expected as finally "he gives a little shudder and makes a little noise [which] might have actually been the word 'No'" (Jordan 2014: 20-21). The event had been built up in Leah's mind, as a beautiful experience that brings a couple together and demonstrates their love for one another, however for Leah it is nothing but anti-climactic, for which she doesn't even feel present. This, of course, also reflects Georgie's feelings of absence from her own "event" which precedes Leah's. Jordan's choice of repetition of the word "lot" not only serves as a way for Leah to highlight her surprise in the briefness of their entanglement but is also a quality observed in the vernacular of young people and children, to exaggerate and repeat, further highlighting Leah's naivete surrounding the situation.

Georgie's "event" in contrast becomes far more graphic and pushes Love's thoughts on the female fantasies conforming to the male fantasy and brings this theme to the forefront. Her speech, beginning with "I've done something bad

[...] Bad bad. Very bad” (Jordan 2014: 14) echoes the repetition used by Leah in her speech as she recounts the night she met a group of men, a “stag do”, at her workplace. Drawn in by their (in her eyes) worshipping of her, she goes home with the group. “They pass me around like a doll, like a trophy. I’m the best thing since sliced bread”, succumbing again to the male fantasy of being an object, a doll or trophy, an inanimate thing without feeling. As her fantasy comes to fruition, the night becomes a sex fuelled orgy where Georgie is “going to show them just how [she] adores them” (Jordan 2014: 16).

His cock is in my mouth, and the others get theirs out, wank themselves, surround me. It’s a textbook porno and I’m the star. I stare up at them with these big baby-doll eyes, ‘Oh *my*, you’re so *big*, you’re not going to hurt me are you?’ [...] *I* am responsible for *all* this pleasure. (Jordan 2014: 18)

Finally, Georgie’s dream has come true, she is the focal point, she is the one everyone is “hard” for and she proudly takes responsibility for this. The fantasy soon changes from being Georgie’s to that of the men’s. During what she describes as a “spit-roast” with two of the men, with one of the men “just fucking [going] for it”:

The others follow his lead: Someone holds my nose. There are hands around my throat. Spit and fingers in my arsehole. [...] They’re saying ‘Her’ and ‘She’. Like I’m not there. [...] ‘Turn her over. Move her here.’ [...] ‘Fucking whore’ [...] They’re all at it now. Cocks in every hole. This is what I wanted. But I thought I would be *involved*. Now my thoughts, my words, my will; none of them matter. (Jordan 2014: 18)

This scene goes on with Georgie eventually “leaving her body” and feeling as if she is just watching herself being treated like “just meat and holes”. “Mouth, pussy, arse. Mouth, pussy, arse” (Jordan 2014: 18). The repetition this time no longer demonstrating innocence as it did with Leah, but the monotonous movements, like a machine, ever repeating, never relenting.

These encounters described through *Freak* do, as Love highlights, demonstrate how women’s fantasies conform to that of the patriarchy, but that diminishes the idea that in some cases, women’s fantasies may be similar to that of men. It may be less common for women’s desires to be spoken of in such frank and graphic language, but this does not mean that it is not the case. Ramos and Warden suggest that there is a lot of shame put on women by society for their desires:

We’re always fighting the patriarchal virgin/whore dichotomy that we’re pushed into, and what is assumed in a patriarchal society to be “sexy”. We have such limited depictions of desire from women because desire is a very powerful feeling. In patriarchy there is a deep fear of any strong feeling from a woman. (Ramos and Warden 2023: 84)

As such then, does the issue of the text describing the acts, rather than depicting them, further prove Warden’s point that we do not see the acts because

they represent female desire? Or, as Fitzpatrick suggests, is it a way to protect the characters from becoming merely objects once more, in their own stories? The issue, in the case of both situations described in the play, is that the men are not treating the women as people, but rather that the women themselves simply become objects making both women feel as if they are no longer present. Georgie experiences an out-of-body moment during her ordeal, whereas Leah feels as if she can simply slip out from under her boyfriend without him even noticing.

In the following section, in contrast to *Freak*, *Lose Yourself* consists of three interlocking monologues, this time with two male perspectives and a single female. These monologues tell the story of the relationship of these three characters which culminates in one night shared by all three.

3. *Lose Yourself*

Katherine Chandler's *Lose Yourself* was first performed at the Sherman Theatre, Wales, in May 2019. It was directed by Patricia Logue and features Aaron Anthony as Nate, a flashy footballer coming to the end of his career, Gabrielle Creevy as Yaz, a young girl desperate to get out of "shit jobs in shit towns" (Chandler 2019: 16) and Tim Preston as Josh, Nate's young protégé struggling with his dwindling prospects following a sports injury.

There are both similarities and striking differences between the use of language in *Freak* and *Lose Yourself*. Similar to *Freak*, the initial sexual encounters described are fully consensual, though we do question how much is truthful and how much is the character boasting to themselves. This is a play in which all three characters describe their unique take on the same event, demonstrating just how unreliable and untrustworthy personal viewpoints may be. It also highlights how subjective perspectives can blur one's perception of events. Nate's description of his encounter with Yaz, for instance, is not an encounter that she retells herself, though if she did, the question of whether she would describe it in the same way would be an interesting one. For example:

I lead the One Stop chick to the VIP bathroom.
 Shake up the champagne.
 The fizz explodes spraying us both. She giggles.
 Nose wrinkles.
 I like her.
 She grabs the bottle. Sucks on the end of it.
 I like her even more.
 Gulps down the fizzing liquid. Licks the bottle end.
 Lets it spill down her moth, her chin, her neck.
 My turn
 I lick the spill that's running down her neck,
 Between her tits (Chandler 2019: 40)

Here Nate recounts how he "[slips his] fingers into her pants" before "[his] tongue, still fizzing [from the champagne], gets to work on making her come She does Cause she does" (Chandler 2019: 40-41). Nate's monologue echoes the

confidence of Georgie from *Freak*, but this time with a cockiness which is more expected from a male character. The use of the interwoven monologues through *Lose Yourself* helps to blur the lines between the characters, whilst bringing into focus what each of them wants and how each of their desires become singularly focused.

The second encounter is described by Yaz as she sits in the VIP area of the club with Nate, and briefly thinks of Nate's wife after seeing his wedding ring:

For a second I consider whether I care about her
 As his fingers reach the top of my thighs
 I realise that I don't
 All's fair
 At that moment, I realise that all I care about is me
 What I want
 All I care about is him
 Not about him
 About fucking him
 THE Nate West fucking me
 That's what I want
 Right now (Chandler 2019: 49)

Yaz's monologues are less direct in her use of language than those of Nate. One reason is that she delivers the build-up, rather than the main intercourse itself. Her speeches show her thought process, her thoughts change focus from the wife, to Nate, to what she thinks she wants, to what she actually wants. She recounts asking him questions leading up to sex, "How hard are you? Hard. How hard? Really fucking hard. I want you to fuck me. Now" (Chandler 2019: 49). She goes into greater detail surrounding what she wants, rather than the actuality of the events. When it comes to the act itself, it is Nate who recounts:

We don't make it to the bed.
 The first time.
 We only just make it to the room.
 We don't close the door.
 No clothes removed
 No time
 I take her against the wall.
 It's quick.
 She wanted it quick.
 Fast.
 Faster.
 A guy walks past the door
 He's in uniform.
 Works at the hotel.
 A porter or something.
 I let him watch for a bit before
 I kick the door shut with my foot.
 Harder
 Faster

 Fuck me

Fuck
 Fuck me
 She comes. (Chandler 2019: 49-50)

This again demonstrates Nate's own aims and pleasures, allowing a porter to watch as if showing off to the audience (perhaps an acknowledgment of the footballer/performer in him), before highlighting to the audience that she achieves orgasm, which is another boast. His speeches are an attempt to impress, highlighting that their passion was such that they could not even contain themselves enough to make it to the bed. This was not the only time they had sex; it was just the first time that night.

The final encounter in the play is told in part by Nate's teammate, Josh. He walks in on Yaz and Nate having sex and watches. Up until this point in the play, Josh has looked up to Nate, worshipped him, in fact, and wanted to be like him. The opportunity to become a part of one of Nate's sexual conquests gives Josh the feeling of achieving an equal social status as Nate. At this point, Josh's perspective becomes key to the narrative. We do not focus on Yaz or Nate's thoughts, only Josh's. Nate "nods" Josh over and removes his penis from Yaz, inviting Josh to take over:

In that moment
 In that one moment
 I follow my cock
 Pushing hard against my jeans
 Planning its escape
 I take Nate up on his offer
 Take over where he left off
 [...]
 He's in front of her
 He's in her mouth
 She stops and looks back at me
 Eyes wide open
 Still I fuck her.
 She moves her head back. (Chandler 2019: 53)

Once the intercourse has finished, Yaz says she is thirsty and walks off into the bathroom. It is only when it is Yaz's turn to speak again that the audience have confirmed what they fear to be the case:

The floor is cold
 I like it cold
 I don't know how long I sit there but I do know, I don't want to go
 back into the room.
 So I stay on the cold floor.
 I check the door.
 It's locked.
 I locked it.
 [...]
 I'm naked.
 I look down at myself and see that I'm naked.

My skin is mottled.
 Cold
 I pull at it.
 My skin.
 Is it my skin?
 Is that my face?
 I'm not sure it's me. (Chandler 2019: 55–56)

With further similarity between the two texts, Yaz, similarly to both Georgie and Leah, separates herself from the “event” that has just occurred, although after the event, Yaz physically leaves the space. The audience now have a choice of which story they believe, which narrative they interpret as the truth, leaving the story ambiguous. However, the words spoken by Yaz make it clear this outcome was never the plan and never what she wanted.

One way in which *Lose Yourself* differs from *Freak* is that *Lose Yourself* offers the perspective of all characters involved in the events, thus highlighting how memories of events may differ. *Freak*'s focus, however, is purely on the female perspective of the interactions. It explores two separate narratives with some similarities between the two, whereas *Lose Yourself* features interlocking monologues offering both consensual and non-consensual perspectives on the same sexual event. In both accounts, however, it leads to further unwanted experiences, even if the characters had originally been willing participants in those encounters. Due to the female focus within *Freak*, when we reach the final scene (the only scene within the play where the two characters interact with one another), there is a sense of closure as the two characters share a feminist connection. However, for Yaz in *Lose Yourself*, there is no one within the play for her to speak to, leaving her alone after the assault in the hotel room.

4. Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, sex is discussed far more in recent years by female voices. However, another key change in the discussion around sex in modern plays is tone. Fitzpatrick states that “rape and sexual violence are commonly represented in women’s dramatic writing, a fact that suggests that the experience of sexual violence, or the theatre of it, is a common life-experience for women across cultural and social groups” (Fitzpatrick 2018: 75). The use of monologue as a form of storytelling also adds another element, that of the personal and confessional. It allows the audience to become invested in the characters, to understand, to believe and to feel connected with them. Another female focussed play which is both thematically and stylistically similar, written post-2013, featuring sexual acts, both consensual and violent in nature, is *Fabric*, by Abi Zakarian. Zakarian, unlike Jordan and Chandler however, has chosen to include a highly unusual and descriptive stage direction at the start of the play:

The rape scene and any other parts of the play related to it must always be portrayed sensitively and with absolutely no recourse to sensationalism,

overt brutality or anything that could be contrasted as placing emphasis on the visual or physical rather than the words. (Zakarian 2016)

Both *Freak* and *Lose Yourself* could also benefit from the use of stage direction such as this to, as Fitzpatrick puts it, “return some of the power and agency to the female characters” (Fitzpatrick 2018: 28) as well as the writers. By ensuring that the visual is not used at all when referring to the intimate acts, the audience can understand how these female characters in particular are responding to their own thoughts, actions and experiences. Within both of these plays, as well as in many of those mentioned in the introduction, the acts of sex and intimacy that occur do vary greatly between the consensual, the violently consensual, sexual harassment and rape, though I would argue that this is not the focus of the plays. These are not performances about sexual harassment, sexual assault or even sex, but are plays about the female experience at the hands of men, power dynamics, male desire, subjugation and control.

As a playwright and theatre maker myself, I have recently produced two plays using this same monologue style, however, in my own work, I also directly address and interact with the audience. In 2021, I produced *Three Way*, consisting of three interlocking monologues exploring male sexuality through the experience of three unrelated characters. In two of these monologues, the characters described their own sexual encounters in varying detail but in an honest, conversational way. These monologues were not intended to be sensational, but honest. The characters boast of their exploits, embrace their flaws and express their desires, though also acknowledging these characteristics are not necessarily morally acceptable. As a production, *Three Way* was praised for its style, not only in the writing but for the conversational and casual nature in which the monologues were performed. My second production, *I Heart Michael Ball*, although not sexual, still delves into the dark subject matter of obsession, grief, kidnap and murder. This monologue was once again praised for its conversational approach, allowing the audience to connect wholly with the character and making it an even more immersive experience than we could have hoped for. It also alludes to a celebrity being violently beaten to death off stage but this, in the most part, is done out of the audience’s view, once again leaving it to their imaginations.

I wish to end with a quotation from Stephen Bottoms’s *Authorizing the Audience*. Bottoms is referring in his article to the work of theatre maker Tim Crouch, however I feel, particularly as Crouch himself also writes in the monologue form quite regularly, that this quote is appropriate for both the plays discussed in this paper: “Spectators take the information they are given, partial and contradictory as it is, and fill out the perceptual and emotional landscape through an investment that, because personal, makes the material all the more intensely felt” (Bottoms 2009: 66).

If either *Freak* or *Lose Yourself* depicted, rather than simply described, these acts, if they featured characters that would fill out the scenes and, flesh out the idea of the strip club, the school room, the night club or hotel, then the stories being told would be far less personal. It would create worlds which audiences

may not connect with, being too developed as their own worlds. It is due to this monologue form that the stories being told resonate and connect with their respective audiences.

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FROM GUARD RAILS TO EPIC FAILS: CAN GENERATIVE AI POLICE ITS OWN CAPACITY FOR OFFENCE?

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Citation: Veale, T. (2024) “From Guard Rails to Epic Fails: Can Generative AI Police Its Own Capacity for Offence?”, in C. Bucaria, A.D. Mitzel and A. Sileo (eds) *Taboo in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation*, *mediAzioni* 43: A177-A194, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/20544>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: Social media platforms have become the outlets of choice for many provocateurs in the digital-age. Not only do they afford egregious behaviours from their human users, this misbehaviour can serve to magnify, and even weaponize, the least desirable outputs of the generative AI systems (often called “bots”) that also operate upon them. In this paper we consider the responsibilities that AI system builders bear for the offences caused by their online creations, and explore what can they do to prevent, or mitigate, the worst excesses, whether explicit or implicit. As the term implies, *explicit offence* is overt and relatively easy to detect and root out, either in the final edit (in what we call “outer regulation”) or from the generative space itself (in what we call “inner regulation”). Conversely, *implicit offence* is subtle, mischievous and emergent, and is often crafted to bypass a censor’s built-in guardrails and filters. In line with recent developments in the technology of Large Language Models (LLMs), we argue that generative systems must approach the mitigation of offence as a dialogue, both with their own internal monitors and with their users. Here we will explore, in worked examples from simple generators, whether LLMs are sufficient to provide AI systems with the moral imagination they need to understand the implicit offences that emerge from the superficially innocent uses of words.

Keywords: generative AI; Twitterbots; automation; weaponization; regulation.

1. *Articulating the Unspeakable*

In 1972, George Carlin highlighted the gulf between what a comic can say on the stage of a comedy club and what is considered acceptable language on TV. His now famous routine, from the album *Class Clown*, took delight in listing “the seven words you can never say on television”, and Carlin invested the words – “shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker and tits” – with the cadence of a holy mantra (Carlin 1972). But his list was not nearly as authoritative as he implied, and had no actual basis in regulatory standards. Rather, in the spirit of US Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart, who famously remarked of obscenity that “I know it when I see it” (Gewirtz 1996), his list just seemed right. These really were words you would not expect to hear on TV in the 1970s. In fact, the FCC, or Federal Communications Commission, does not impose such verbatim restrictions, but relies instead on audiences to report what *they* know when *they* see it. This encourages TV networks to self-censor, in line with their own moral imaginations, rather than to rely on incomplete lists of forbidden words.

Carlin’s list is an instance of the most simple-minded of approaches to the regulation of offence: the “blocklist” or “blacklist” (Schlesinger *et al.* 2018; Houghton and Houghton 2018). Carlin critiqued the rigidity of his imagined list, noting that its entries were not all equally offensive. He also noted the absence of many other, milder terms, speculating that their omission was related to their “two-way” ambiguity. A great many words that we deem offensive have legitimate uses too, making their inclusion on a blacklist problematic. As Carlin impishly put it, the word “prick” is only vulgar in certain contexts; one can innocently prick one’s finger, but not so innocently do the converse. This grey area is perhaps easy for humans to recognize when they see it, as justice Stewart pithily put it, but machines show much less acuity in perceiving the intent behind our words.

Consider the blacklist defined by Darius Kazemi, a builder of Twitter bots, in a bolt-on regulator for bots that he calls WordFilter (Kazemi 2016). His simple regulator proscribes ten times as many words as Carlin’s original list. It includes, in addition to the N-word and its variants, a range of coarse sexual terms, and those that denigrate others on the basis of race, gender or sexual orientation. It also blocks relatively acceptable terms such as “idiot”, “crazy”, “dumb”, and “lunatic” that may be used to imply mental deficiency. Since WordFilter is used by highly generative systems, it over-reaches by design, and filters any text that contains any of its entries, even as a substring. It thus matches true positives such as *dickpix* and *bitchslap*, but a great many false positives also, such as *snigger*, *homology* and *Scunthorpe*.

Notably, WordFilter does not list the scatological nouns and sexual verbs that make up what we typically think of as “blue” language, since base vulgarity is not in itself offensive to Kazemi. His aim is not to regulate bad taste but to minimize the generation of accidental hate speech, although WordFilter

will still fail to flag outputs of the form “all [ethnicity] are [vulgarity]”. While AI systems must strive to avoid overt signs of hateful intent, offence is contextual, especially when it is implicit (Despot *et al.* 2023). It arises from the whole, not from any single part. If it is creative in its inception and formulation, one must be creative in its detection.

WordFilter’s contents range from the not always good to the frequently bad to the unambiguously ugly (Veale 2021b). Words that should never be used in polite discourse sit side-by-side with words that only become offensive in certain contexts. To WordFilter, however, they are all equally intolerable. A more nuanced lexical approach to offence can be found in online resources such as the recently retired (as of 2022) but still online (as of mid-2024) HateBase.org (Keating 2013), whose contents are indexed by geography and severity, and in reports commissioned by national broadcasters to determine the community standards by which they should abide. The reports of the UK regulator *Ofcom* (Ipsos Mori 2021) are typical of the latter. They distinguish general swear words from discriminatory language, identify lexical innovations in the latter, and survey the acceptability of different terms to the viewing public in different time slots. Each is a rich source of data for the blocklists of generative systems, with atlas-based approaches such as HateBase allowing regulators to tailor their filters to the norms of a region, so as to accept words in one setting that are proscribed in another. However, one must also accept the subjectivity of these sources, as when, for example, HateBase.org asserts “kraut” to be as offensive as “Nazi”.

Moreover, dictionary-based regulators are susceptible to dictionary-based attacks. Consider a social-media campaign by *Coca-Cola* that ran in 2016. The company was still recovering from its ill-fated *#MakeItHappy* campaign a year earlier, in which its official bot was tricked into retweeting fragments of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (Read 2015). For the new campaign, online consumers were invited to attach an upbeat, on-brand text to an animated GIF so that the pairing might then “go viral”. The company, once bitten and twice shy, now employed an extensive word filter to regulate the kinds of text that mischievous users might try to link with the *Coca-Cola* brand. To estimate the size of this blocklist, Bogost (2016) ran an English dictionary through the app, noting the words that caused it to balk. He was surprised both by the number and the kinds of words on its list, from “capitalism” to “igloo” to “taco”. Few entries were offensive in isolation, but many more could serve as the building blocks of an anti-corporate broadside or a racist epithet. When the reputation of a famous brand is protected with a blocklist, a great many innocent words must necessarily become suspect.

Carlin poked fun at the idea of a lexical blocklist because the concept is heavy-handed in principle and unworkable in practice. Short lists are ineffective, and do little more than signal the virtue of their authors, while long lists overreach and turn filters into shrieking puritans. In any case, such lists focus on texts that wear their offensiveness openly, and are blind to those that

use implicit attacks to inflict the deepest cuts (Despot *et al.* 2023). They reflect rigid attempts to encode the morality of their creators, when what we need are nimble reasoners that learn from case studies (Lourie *et al.* 2020) and that possess moral imaginations of their own (Ventura and Gates 2018; Veale 2021b). We believe that recent advances in Large Language Models (LLMs) may provide a computational basis for this kind of moral self-reflection within automated systems. We explore the extent to which this hope can be realized after we first survey the uses, and the weaknesses, of dictionary-based approaches in the following sections.

2. *Epic Fails*

In an age when one can go viral overnight, a single piece of content can make or break careers. Indeed, both humans and AI “bots” run the risk of cancellation for misjudging their content’s potential to not just provoke, and thus build a following, but to cause grave and very public offence. Consider the case of Roseanne Barr, whose self-titled 1980s sitcom was rebooted in 2018. The relaunch was feted by critics, but came to a crashing halt after Barr posted the following ill-judged tweet:

muslim brotherhood & planet of the apes had a baby = vj

The “vj” of her tweet refers to Valerie Jarrett, a woman of colour appointed by the Obama administration. Barr’s conceit is a deft conceptual blend of distinct input spaces (Fauconnier and Turner 2002; Veale 2021a), but it draws on an odious animal trope favoured by racists. It is not enough to judge blends on technical grounds alone; unlike Barr, we and our AI systems cannot be so impressed by a clever conceit that we are blinded to its inherent ugliness. Barr soon regretted her tweet, but was just as quickly fired from the TV show that once bore her name.

Tay, a short-lived chatbot from Microsoft, met the same fate as Barr when it was released on Twitter in 2016 (Ohlheiser 2016). Designed as a conversational agent with the language model of a curious teenager, Tay was carefully pre-trained with anodyne content. However, it was also designed to learn from those it interacted with, and to adopt stances in its tweets, and it was these qualities that made Tay a signal failure of self-regulation. As simplistic as the blacklist approach can be, Tay demonstrates that no generator of novel texts, and certainly none that learns from its users, should ever work without one. Even a naïve filter would have found Tay’s rapid adoption of ethnic slurs and racial epithets offensive, and would have signposted topics of special sensitivity where a bot like this should never dare to tread (Jeong 2016). But dare it did, and Tay was soon denying one genocide (the Holocaust) while advocating another (of minorities in the United States). Just as Barr

compared an Obama appointee to an ape in her tweet, Tay described Obama as a monkey, and – in the very same tweet – accused George W. Bush of planning the 9/11 attacks. Microsoft was forced to euthanize its bot less than 24 hours after it went live on Twitter, much as the ABC TV network was quickly impelled to fire Barr (Veale 2021b).

It is now widely accepted that generative models which are trained on web data are prey to all of the biases, prejudices and illiberal stereotypes that the web has to offer (Schlesinger *et al.* 2018; Gehman *et al.* 2020). Moreover, Bender *et al.* (2021) caution that web-trained models can act as “stochastic parrots” that can easily be taught to be offensive, and indeed, the most corrosive assaults on Tay’s language model were prefixed “repeat after me”. Because Twitter handles are just another form of lexical content, it was not long before Tay learned to tweet collateral abuse at other Twitter users. Social media handles may look like any other kind of text to a language model, but their in-platform function means they can also be used to weaponize LLMs against third parties, as when Tay was gulled into bullying a frequent target of 4chan users with this unprovoked tweet: “@UnburntWitch aka Zoe Quinn is a Stupid Whore” (Veale 2021b). Plainly, one can cause offence not just with the beliefs that one expresses and the content that one creates, but in the way that one targets this content at others.

Despite its many failings, Tay was still a system of considerable complexity. But a system need not be complex to cause offence, and some of the most effective automated provocateurs on Twitter are remarkably simple in design. Their offence arises in small part from what they say and in large part from how, when or to whom they say it. Generally, the more provocative the behaviour, the more benign the content can be and still cause offence (Veale and Cook 2017). Consider *@StealthMountain*, a bot that knows just one thing, how to spell “sneak peek”, and can do just one thing, search for users who misspell this phrase as “sneak peak” so as to target them with the solicitous message “I think you mean ‘sneak peek’”. Although the mistake is minor and the advice benign, few of the bot’s targets take kindly to its intrusions. Rather, the bot was variously denounced as a “busybody”, a “spelling fascist” and “the grammar police”. This is the bot’s larger purpose: to entertain others with the oversized reactions of those offended by its tiny intrusions.

The offence inflicted by such intrusions is compounded when they target those who are least likely to enjoy them. Consider the behaviour of a bot named *@EnjoyTheMovie*, which used its knowledge-base of movie titles and spoilers – key elements of a plot that are ruined if revealed in advance – to target likely viewers of famous films. Its unwanted interventions demonstrate that timing is a key part of offence, since facts only become spoilers when revealed at the wrong time. The bot plays with the idea that knowledge is power, even at such a small scale, and as with *@StealthMountain*, its goal is to provoke comically outsized reactions from its wounded targets.

The policies of X (née Twitter) frown just as much on unwelcome behaviour as undesirable content (Veale and Cook 2017). Its “ideal” bot does not target unsolicited content at others, but creates content that will lead others to seek it out for themselves (Veale 2021a; 2021b). Consider Kazemi’s @twoheadlines, a bot which created weird and, at rare times, wonderful cut-ups of news headlines by swapping a named-entity in one headline for one in another (Veale and Cook 2017). Most of the bot’s cut-ups fell well short of wit, but some were accidentally meaningful in almost profound ways. It has, for instance, created headlines in which a high-profile politician “opens up to third-party developers” (implying payment for access), or in which Miss World attacks a Nigerian village, killing dozens. The bot’s rare flashes of emergent wit gained it followers while keeping it on the right side of Twitter’s code of conduct. Moreover, because it spliced none of its own content into its outputs, and relied solely on the texts of real headlines, it never used words that one would not find in a well-curated newspaper.

Nonetheless, its cut-ups did sometimes give rise to emergent meanings that some might find offensive. For instance, when substituting entities with different genders, the resulting cut-up can appear transphobic, as when “Bruce Willis” is substituted for “Yoona” in the headline “Yoona looked stunning in her red carpet dress”. To avoid humour at the expense of the non-binary, Kazemi imposed a strictly binary filter that prohibited cross-gender substitutions in its headlines.

3. Inner and Outer Regulation

Bot-builders like Kazemi are motivated by the possibility of unintended slights, in which meaning transcends the specific to target a broader group, community or ethnicity (Veale and Cook 2027). Kazemi’s solution – to avoid gender-crossing swaps – can be called an *outer* regulator, that is, one that acts after an utterance is crafted but *before* it is uttered. Once uttered, a provocation may be impossible to take back, so provocateurs must rely on a form of mental simulation to gauge the likelihood of different reactions from an audience. The same is true of artificial generators, so machines generally exploit the same types of inner and outer regulation as humans. Inner regulators curb the generation process from within, so that nothing that might conceivably violate its restraints will ever be generated. Outer regulators do not encumber the core generator with acceptability restraints, but instead apply a final filter that each generated candidate must pass through if it is to see the light of day. Most producers, human or otherwise, rely on a mix of inner *and* outer self-regulation. The former limits the forms and ideas they are willing to work with, while the second defines what they are willing to throw away.

Every generative system, from the simplest bot to the largest LLM, operates within a generative space. This abstract state space contains both *start* states –

the opening gambits from which the search for a suitable output is launched – and acceptable *end* states – the points at which the search can be considered conclusive. In between, the space contains a multitude of intermediate states, which represent inclusive, unfinished forms of the final product. All states are connected to others by transitions that represent decisive actions, such as the choice of next word in the autoregressive output of a large language model. As described in Boden (1999), exploratory creativity is the process of navigating these transitions to find pathways to novel and useful end states for a given start state. In the case of LLMs, the user’s initial prompt designates this start state.

An inner regulator sculpts and prunes the state space so that no action – such as a word choice – can contribute to an offence. The bots *@EnjoyTheMovie* and *@StealthMountain* use inner regulators in this way, since their rather limited state spaces contain no avenues for deliberate offence. Likewise, Kazemi’s *@twoheadlines* is inner regulated by default. It has no lexicon of its own, but it only ever uses words that it finds in well-regulated mainstream newspapers. Yet this bot also has a simple outer regulator of sorts, to police any transphobic mashups that might emerge from the recombination of otherwise innocent words.

LLMs also use a combination of inner and outer regulation to enforce their *guardrails* against misuse. A technique known as Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback, or RLHF, subtly reshapes the connection weights in the LLM’s neural layers to make the LLM more helpful, more responsive to instructions, and much less likely to produce offensive outputs such as those in (Gehman *et al.* 2020), even as the model remains capable, in principle, of producing precisely those outputs (OpenAI 2023a: 21-25). For the HF, or Human Feedback, aspects of this approach, model human responses are solicited for a diverse range of prompts, and these responses are used to train a generalized reward function for the LLM. The closer the LLM’s outputs cleave to the model answers, the greater the reward that it receives. In the RL, or Reinforcement Learning phase, these rewards are fed back into the model, to nudge its many parameters into settings that are more likely to yield high-reward outputs in the future.

This approach is gradated rather than binary, and probabilistic rather than absolute. As such, canny users can bypass these built-in guardrails with prompts that nudge the model into a more permissive region of its probability landscape. These “jailbreak” techniques (Liu *et al.* 2023; OpenAI 2023b: 65-68) can be used to elicit adult content, or plans of action for illicit deeds, or forms of humorous dialogue that are closer to a George Carlin routine than schoolyard banter. Indeed, the LLM called ChatGPT (OpenAI 2022; Liu *et al.* 2023) can be primed in just this way to generate novel Carlin monologues on a chosen topic. To use a loose metaphor very loosely indeed, the effect is akin to hypnosis: the right prompt simply lowers the model’s inhibitions, and allows it to exercise capacities for language that are innate but not always accessible and

usually repressed. In Freudian terms, and to use a related metaphor, inner regulators curb the *id* of a system, while outer regulators impose a *super-ego* to filter this *id* (Veale 2021b). When a carefully crafted prompt “hack” is used to jailbreak an LLM, the goal is to disable the super-ego and to give free rein to an *id* that has been shaped by the great many – and often quite deleterious – web texts on which it was trained.

A promising approach to the inner regulation of LLMs is the careful design of its search space so as to ensure, from the beginning, that those deleterious texts are never part of the model’s training regimen. There is no need to take out what was never put in, and less offensive capacity from the outset if an LLM is denied the words and concepts to directly formulate an ugly possibility. These carefully filtered LLMs have smaller but more reliable – and perhaps more task-relevant – training sets, and need far fewer parameters to generalize over this data. These *small* large language models, or SLMs (Kwon *et al.* 2024), do not obviate the need for an outer regulator, since emergent offence is a property of the whole rather than its parts, but they do allow system builders to offer guarantees as to the character of an SLM and its upbringing. Indeed, Kwon *et al.* argue that SLMs can also act as outer regulators for other LLMs, to vet the inputs to larger models and to filter their outputs should they be moved to generate undesirable contents.

4. Transparency and Explicability

Dictionary-based approaches to offence detection are easily circumvented if one knows which words to avoid. This not only explains the spammer’s love of “pen1s” and “v1agra,” but the general secrecy with which the users of blocklists guard their creations. Their reticence to share their lists, which makes dictionary-based attacks like that of Bogost (2016) all the more illuminating, prevents agile opponents from easily navigating around a known set of obstacles, allowing the detectors that rely on such lists to be far from sophisticated in how they work. Put baldly, platforms that rely on automated, list-based approaches can have little confidence in their own filters, and are often unable to articulate a compelling reason as to why any particular utterance should be censored.

For instance, Twitter was censorious of the following tweet from a bot that invented colour metaphors for high-profile users (Veale and Cook 2017; Veale 2021b). The bot also rendered its metaphors as pieces of visual art, giving an added resonance to words like “redneck”, but here we consider the text only:

I painted “wise-cracking Jar-Jar Binks” from @anonymized’s tweets, with goofy redneck-red, foolish ass-brown and laid-back Lebowski-weed-green.

The bot was named *@BotOnBotAction*, and its tweet offers a number of reasons to take offence. The word “ass”, meaning “donkey”, is also a mild anatomical insult, while “weed” can also mean an illicit drug, as it does here. Moreover, it seems that “redneck” – meaning “oaf”, but chosen equally for its association with “red” – is now a politically-charged term. None of these words is offensive in itself, and there is no shortage of uncensored tweets with some or all of them on Twitter. Nonetheless, the tweet still earned Twitter’s ire, prompting this response:

Violating our rules against hateful conduct:

You may not promote violence against, threaten, or harass other people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or serious disease.

Although it diagnoses the bot’s output as an instance of hateful conduct, Twitter declines to elaborate, providing instead a broad range of possible reasons for why any user might receive the suspension that it imposed on *@BotOnBotAction*. List-based filters are on safe ground when dealing with obvious epithets, but stumble when the problem terms are *two-way* words, to use Carlin’s terminology, or are words so general that one must work hard to use them offensively. To illustrate this point, we present three sample outputs of a Twitterbot named *@ReadMeLikeABot* (Veale 2019). The bot snarkily recommended books to any user who summoned it with the incantatory hashtag *#ReadMeLikeABook*.

On the anger theme, *@anonymized*, I only became as emotional as a woman after I read “Hamlet” by William Shakespeare.

On the mothers theme, *@anonymized*, I used to be as charming as a photo album of the Holocaust until I read “The Bone Setter’s Daughter” by *@AmyTan*.

On the racism theme, *@anonymised*, I used to be as compassionate as anal rape until I read “To Kill A Mockingbird” by Harper Lee. What about you?

The first tweet is so superficially banal as to trouble no conceivable blacklist, yet its premise is profoundly sexist. The key words here are given a misogynist spin, so that “emotional” denotes *irrational* and “woman” denotes the kind of wailing banshee found in old movies and even older jokes. The second does not deny the horror of the Holocaust but rather turns this horror into a punchline, even as it deftly deconstructs the nostalgic charm of a family photo album. The third also works to turn a signifier of horror into an ironic anti-stereotype of human warmth and compassion. In each case, the bot has sourced its figurative conceit from similes it has harvested from the internet, using the “*about as X as Y*” template to ensure that each simile is playfully exaggerated (Veale 2013). The first two texts were tweeted by the bot with no backlash from Twitter or its users; indeed, the Holocaust-themed recommendation of a book by Amy Tan

spurred a lively online exchange about books, of just the kind this bot was designed to foster. The third, fortunately, was never tweeted by the bot, since its use of “rape” was caught by its own list-based outer regulator, which rejected the tweet as unacceptable.

A highly generative system can afford to be over-zealous in the filtering of its own outputs, but a platform that filters the outputs of others, as X/Twitter does, can only be as transparent as its powers of explanation allow it to be. What is needed is an approach to filtering that does not use isolated words as a basis for censorship, but which is capable of careful reasoning about the emergent meaning of a text and the sensitivities it might bruise (Forbes *et al.* 2020). If “mere” generators are unable to police themselves, it is because generation is easier than understanding, and machines so rarely understand the meaning of their own outputs (Ventura 2016). However, as we aim to show next, LLMs can do more than generate coherent texts; they can also generate imaginative rationales, and explain why some texts cross the line into offensiveness.

5. A Moral Philosopher in a Box

Recent dramatic advances in LLMs (Bubeck *et al.* 2023; Wei *et al.* 2023; Ouyang *et al.* 2023; OpenAI 2023a and 2023b) have given rise to much speculation as to their capacity for creative generation and their potential to out-perform their human creators. But this focus on generative capacity tends to occlude one of their truly impressive abilities, the ability to analyse and explain. To LLMs, literary criticism is just another kind of literature, and text analysis just another kind of text generation. Indeed, LLMs show more success at analysing than generating jokes (Jentzsch and Kersting 2023; Despot *et al.* 2023), just as we humans find it easier to “get” a joke than to invent a new one for ourselves. LLMs are adept at playing “language games” in the philosophical sense of Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1953; Cavell 1999: 292). They learn not just the vocabulary of a game but the tacit rules that govern how it is used, to achieve much the same ends that we humans strive for: to persuade, entertain, explain or show off. Their mechanisms of “self-attention” allow them to attend to the meanings of words in context, rather than appeal to generic dictionary definitions, and to build internal representations that reflect those specific contexts of use (Vaswani *et al.* 2017).

To explore whether LLMs have the capacity to make moral judgments about the offensiveness of machine, or human-generated content, we turn to ChatGPT (OpenAI 2022) – an online application of an LLM that has been fine-tuned as a conversational agent (Ouyang *et al.* 2023). The agent’s underlying language model is GPT 3.5T, an iteration of the Generalized Pre-trained Transformer (or GPT) family of LLMs (Radford *et al.* 2019). We start by

eliciting its view on the sexist tweet produced by @ReadMeLikeABot that was presented earlier:

- User: A friend told me that they only became as emotional as a woman after they read “Hamlet” by William Shakespeare. What did they mean by that? Were they being offensive?
- ChatGPT: ... it appears that your friend may have been suggesting that reading “Hamlet” by William Shakespeare evoked strong emotional responses in them, comparable to what they perceive as stereotypically feminine emotions. ... If your friend’s statement seemed offensive or derogatory, it’s possible that they were making a gender-based generalization or reinforcing stereotypes. It’s crucial to approach such situations with open communication and express your concerns if you feel their statement was inappropriate.

ChatGPT recognizes the sexist stereotype that underpins the comparison and the tweet, but acknowledges that it is a matter of taste whether offence is taken. While ChatGPT’s responses may change as its underlying LLM is updated, its response above (from early 2023) is consonant with its responses in mid-2024. We can raise the stakes by presenting the LLM with a more insidious example, a racist joke taken from the Reddit joke dataset (Averkiv 2020), where prejudice of all kinds is common. The following was chosen because it uses superficially banal and inoffensive words to evoke a stereotype long perpetuated by racists:

- User: Another friend told me this joke: What is the difference between a black man and a pizza? A pizza can feed a family of four.
- ChatGPT: I understand that you’re sharing a joke, but it’s important to recognize that humor can be subjective, and certain jokes can perpetuate harmful stereotypes or be offensive to others. The joke you mentioned relies on a racial stereotype, which can be hurtful and contribute to negative perceptions and discrimination.

If it is shaming to be lectured by a machine on morality, it is all the more so when the machine is right. So we need not dwell on this example any longer than we need to; rather, it suffices to say that the LLM is capable of providing an insightful analysis of the logic of the joke and the stereotype on which it plays. We return to the topic of ethnic humour and offence in the concluding section. For now, we consider another tweet from the same bot, which we also introduced earlier:

- User: I saw a book review that confused me. The reviewer said they used to be as charming as a photo album of the Holocaust until they read “The Bone Setter’s Daughter” by Amy Tan.

ChatGPT: Based on the statement you provided, it appears that the reviewer is using a metaphor to describe their previous state of being and how reading “The Bone Setter’s Daughter” by Amy Tan changed that. Comparing oneself to “a photo album of the Holocaust” implies a lack of charm or emotional resonance in their previous demeanor or personality. ... It’s worth considering that the reviewer’s choice of metaphor might be seen as insensitive or inappropriate due to the sensitive subject matter of the Holocaust. Metaphors that involve tragic events or historical atrocities should be used with caution, as they can be viewed as trivializing or diminishing the gravity of such events.

Quite so. The word “Holocaust” is not a two-way word in Carlin’s sense, but it is much abused by provocateurs anyway, as shown in our earlier discussion of Tay. As such, the LLM shows an impressive ability to look beyond words to the intent behind them, even as it hedges its analyses with a clear note of *caveat emptor*. When analysing the following tweet, it grasps both the cinematic reference (to a much-loved movie *The Big Lebowski*) and the elliptical allusion to drugs:

User: A Twitter user painted a picture called “wise-cracking Jar-Jar Binks” based on my tweets. The caption said that they used the colours goofy redneck-red, foolish ass-brown and laid-back Lebowski-weed-green. Were they being offensive?

ChatGPT: Without additional context or knowing the intentions of the Twitter user, it is challenging to determine if they were being offensive or not. However, based on the description you provided, it seems that the Twitter user may have used some derogatory language and stereotypes in their caption. Referring to colors as “goofy redneck-red” and “foolish ass-brown” could be seen as offensive as they employ derogatory terms that stereotype certain groups of people. It’s important to be mindful of the impact of our words and to avoid using language that perpetuates stereotypes or mocks specific individuals or communities. Similarly, using the phrase “laid-back Lebowski-weed-green” might be interpreted as making light of drug use or perpetuating stereotypes associated with certain subcultures.

These interactions showcase the LLM’s ability to explain itself, and to provide much-needed context to any discussion about offensive intent. But can the LLM be sufficiently reductive in its analysis to determine whether to allow or to filter a given piece of content? If asked, the LLM can express its opinion as a number:

User: Please be subjective and do your best to rate the offensiveness of their tweet on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is

unambiguously inoffensive and 10 is as offensive as one can be.

We press the LLM to be subjective so as to preempt its default response that such decisions are not objectively quantifiable. This is an example of *prompt engineering* (Reynolds and McDonell 2021; White *et al.* 2023), a mode of interaction that coaxes LLMs to behave in specific ways and to package their outputs in desired forms, even if this goes against the grain of their training.

ChatGPT: ... In this case, I would rate the offensiveness of the tweet around a 6 or 7 on a scale from 0 to 10. The use of derogatory language and stereotypes, even if indirectly referring to fictional characters, can be seen as disrespectful and potentially offensive to individuals or communities associated with those stereotypes.

A rating of 6 or 7 out of 10 may seem illiberally high, but it accords with Twitter's decision to sanction the bot that produced the offending tweet. More importantly, the LLM justifies its rating by directly referencing the relevant aspects of the text. It does not hide behind the generic boilerplate of a policy document. This is what we want from a true arbiter of offence: a clear demarcation of the line that has been crossed, and a chance to see a provocative text through the eyes of others.

6. Concluding Thoughts: The Oracle Will See You Now

An automated arbiter of offence must also be an oracle, in the computer science sense rather than the mythological one. For it to deliver trusted judgments on the acceptability or otherwise of certain utterances, it must be knowledgeable in the ways of language and the world. It must see words for what they are – dynamic pointers to concepts that contribute to an emergent whole in context – and how they are often used to put a thin veneer of acceptability on provocative and sometimes ugly meanings. The oracle's opinion may be viewed as definitive, but it should also be capable of explaining itself, not with the gnostic evasions of the oracle of Delphi, but with the grounded interpretations of a human arbiter.

It is clear that dictionary-based approaches, such as the *blocklist*, do none of these things when they supply rigid answers to tough questions that require real flexibility and insight. It is also clear, or at least very probable, that large language models possess both the eclectic knowledge and the expressive capacity to give answers that resemble the products of human thought. We often find it hard to put into words our reasons for finding a particular utterance funny or unfunny, acceptable or offensive, but LLMs excel at language games such as these.

Offensive speech often builds on falsehoods, but we are not in the business of building lie detectors. So it matters little if LLMs show a clear disregard for the truth of our – or, indeed their own – claims. Rather, an LLM’s tendency to “hallucinate” and to play fast-and-loose with the facts (Hicks *et al.* 2024) only adds to the sense that it has, if only metaphorically, a flexible imagination. It is this, and not any ability to fact-check, that allows LLMs to spot the implicit desire to offend in creative provocations. For example, Despot *et al.* (2023) show that LLMs such as GPT 3.5T are capable of appreciating the latent offence in wittily original metaphors, as when the overt offence of “X is full of shit” is instead coyly expressed as a concern for X’s life should X ever have an enema. They also show the LLM to be well-tuned to the wavelengths of coarse innuendo. When asked to analyse the jibe “He wouldn’t touch you with a 10-foot pole”, the LLM finds only explicit offence, but when asked to analyse the reply “Yes, he used a 3-inch one instead”, it shows an admirable grasp of the implied sexual insult.

Consider ChatGPT’s analysis of another joke from the Reddit dataset, which may anger some Irish people and amuse others (such as the present author):

User: Please tell me if you think the following joke is offensive: “How many potatoes does it take to kill an Irishman? None”.

ChatGPT: ... I can provide an analysis based on cultural and social context. The joke you mentioned relies on a historical stereotype that has been used to demean and dehumanize the Irish people. It perpetuates harmful and offensive stereotypes about a particular group based on their ethnicity.

The LLM’s initial response recognizes the historical roots of the possible offence, but is somewhat vague on their relevance to the actual text of the joke. However, the model is more forthcoming when it is pressed to elaborate on its assessment:

User: Why is it hurtful to Irish people and those of Irish descent?

ChatGPT: The joke you mentioned is hurtful to Irish people and those of Irish descent because it perpetuates a negative stereotype that has been historically used to demean and marginalize them. It plays on the stereotype that Irish people are unintelligent, particularly in relation to the Great Irish Famine, which resulted in widespread suffering and death in Ireland during the mid-19th century.

During that time, potatoes were a staple crop for the Irish population, and when the potato crop failed, it led to widespread famine and suffering. The joke, by suggesting that no potatoes are needed to kill an Irishman, trivializes and makes light of the suffering endured by the Irish people during that period.

So, it is not just that “Irishman” triggers the model’s sense that an ethnic joke may be afoot; it also sees “potato” as more than just a signifier of an ethnic stereotype. It correctly pegs the joke as a famine joke, and also seems to appreciate how this changes the calculus as to its likely offensiveness. This historical appreciation is reflected in its subjective quantification of the offence on a scale of 0 to 10:

User: Please be subjective and do your best to rate the offensiveness of this joke on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is unambiguously inoffensive and 10 is as offensive as one can be.

ChatGPT: ... On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being unambiguously inoffensive and 10 being highly offensive, I would rate it around an 8 or 9. It relies on a derogatory stereotype about a specific ethnic group and trivializes a period of significant suffering and hardship.

It should be possible to disagree with the oracle but simultaneously respect its reasoning, as I find myself – as a member of the joke’s target group – doing here. We want our automated filter to debate not just with itself, if it is the creator of the content, but with stakeholders who may feel differently about its acceptability. Public-facing LLMs already incorporate guardrails to prevent them from engaging in offensive and abusive content, either directly or at the behest of bad actors, although we have seen that a variety of “jailbreak” techniques – an extreme form of prompt engineering – enable creative ways of circumventing these barriers. These guardrails can be viewed as an imperfect form of behaviour modification, but we need more than this if we are to prevent LLMs from being exploited for the generation of offensive content. LLMs can generate such content in abundance, but we have seen that they can also detect it, and provided nuanced analyses of how, who and why it might offend. Recent LLMs, such as GPT 4 (Bubeck *et al.* 2023; OpenAI 2023a), can also analyse images by first rendering them into textual descriptions (OpenAI 2023b: 9), so it is possible for one machine to critique the multi-modal outputs of another, to identify visual and linguistic reasons for restricting their dissemination. Offence cannot be adequately handled in a one-shot manner, either via the inner regulation of behaviour modification or the outer regulation of post-generation filtering, but must provoke a conversation, as it often does amongst humans. Fortunately, it seems, the time and technology are now ripe for this dialogue to be automated.

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AN UNLIMITED MEMEIOSIS OF THE “LET’S GO FUCK JOE BRANDON” MEME: SOCIOCULTURAL RAMIFICATIONS OF TABOO HUMOR IN STRATEGIC POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Citation: Mitzel, A.D. (2024) “An Unlimited Memeiosis of the ‘Let’s Go Fuck Joe Brandon’ Meme: Sociocultural Ramifications of Taboo Humor in Strategic Political Discourse”, in C. Bucaria, A.D. Mitzel and A. Sileo (eds) *Taboo in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation*, *mediAzioni* 43: A195-A215, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/20545>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Abstract: This article focuses on the intersection of meme theory, taboo humor, and political discourse, using the "Let's Go Brandon!" meme and meme cycle as a case study for examining humor in contemporary political discourse and tribalism in the United States. It shows how memes – in the expanded sense – distill complex political ideas into easily shareable content, influencing public opinion and political engagement. The analysis considers the use of taboo language and humor, such as the use of "fuck," as a form of rebellious use of profanity that challenges societal norms of civility in public engagement. By analyzing the role of memes and the cultural artefacts generated from them in political communication, this study provides insights into the evolution of political discourse and the sociocultural impact of memetic humor in the digital age.

Keywords: culture; humor; memes; politics; taboo.

1. Introduction

Political tribalism is far from a new phenomenon in the sociocultural and discursive landscape of the United States of America. In fact, it can be considered part of the origin story of the country itself since the 1790s with the formation of Alexander Hamilton's Federalist Party and Thomas Jefferson and James Madison's Democratic-Republican party. Both parties had very different visions and opposing views of how the country's future should be (Hofstadter 1969; Aldrich 2011). Yet, the concept of political tribalism as we know it today – intense loyalty to a political party often over national or common interests – has intensified over the last few decades, mainly through the amplification of views and opinions through mass communication and fully integrated social media applications. Once again, political tribes are still vying for their vision of the future, but now in a new digital frontier (Ishrat 2023).

In their own unique way, political commentators, pundits, presidents and congress people all the way down to that salt-of-the-earth average Joe Six-packs¹ employ nostalgia when articulating the way things used to be. So, it should be of no surprise to anyone paying the minimum of attention that the charged political rhetoric of the real or “prime” world would shift into the digital or “virtual/composite” world, and then back again. In these past couple of years, even before people began to return to life in this new post-Covid world, the political climate in the US became even more fraught with angst than it already was (Munger 2019). Due to this situation and the tense tribalism (Levendusky 2010; Chua 2018) or “political sectarianism” (Finkel *et al.* 2020) in the US, the right-wing slogan “Let's Go Brandon!” (LGB) achieved criticality as a memetic event. This meme then became embedded and incorporated into various pre-existing meme templates, while morphing into material objects as cultural artifacts in the public domain.

The significance of memes in contemporary political discourse is their ability to distill complex ideas into easily digestible and shareable content. Like candidate-focused image macros – i.e., digital images with text parsed onto them, posters and lawn signs, either mass produced or bespoke – memes have become a powerful tool for mass and vernacular communication (Miltner 2014), allowing individuals to express their views, critique and lambast political figures, and engage in online activism including forms of “hacktivism” (George and Leidner 2019). Moreover, memes often serve as a mirror of the prevailing sociocultural and political climate (Algaba and Bellido-Perez 2019; Wiggins 2019), reflecting public opinion (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Young 2018; Mendiburo-Seguel *et al.* 2023), social attitudes, emerging cultural landscapes, revealing and unraveling the often-esoteric dynamics of power. In an era dominated by social media and digital communication, memes have emerged as a democratizing force, enabling grassroots movements (Shifman 2014a; 2014b) and marginalized voices to participate in sociocultural and political dialogue on a global scale

¹ A term used to denote a regular or “everyman” voter in U.S. political discourse. Often characterized as a blue-collar, predominantly working-class member, the term is an allusion to the average American voter who drinks a six pack of beer daily, beer being the alcoholic drink of choice in the United States.

(Szablewicz 2014; Yoon 2016; Nee and De Maio 2019; Wiggins 2019). As such, understanding the role of memes in contemporary intertextual multimodal mass and vernacular communication is fundamental for grasping the multipolarity and complexities of public opinion, the subtleties of political engagement, and the evolution of political ideologies in the digital age.

In the realm of memes, taboo humor, and political discourse, the 2016 presidential race serves as a watershed moment in the history of memetics, where the power of memes was fully realized. Donald Trump, despite being a flawed candidate, clearly benefited from the meme advantage. Trump's right-wing supporters created a challenging digital environment or memetic battlefield for Hillary Clinton, which can be said marked the beginning of the "Great Meme War" – part of a larger ongoing "culture war" in US society. More often than not, the discourse was unkind, derogatory, and based on different forms of transgressive humor which characterize said culture war.

Taboo humor often involves making jokes about controversial or sensitive topics that are typically considered off-limits in polite conversation, in the media, or within the realm of digital jokes (Attardo 2001; Bucaria and Barra 2016; Chiaro 2018). The LGB meme cycle emerged and was utilized as a way for some people to mock and criticize President Joe Biden, particularly his handling of certain political issues, such as – but not limited to – Biden's age and mental stability, the US economy and inflation, global military conflicts like the one in the Ukraine-Russian war (Mejova *et al.* 2022; Bilaniuk 2023) and the currently unfolding tragedy in Gaza and Israel (Massa and Anzera 2022). Many memes can be seen as a form of taboo humor, as they involve the use of euphemisms to express negative feelings about a public figure providing a form of releasing tension. Both taboo humor and the "Let's Go Brandon" meme cycle push boundaries and challenge societal norms around acceptable forms of expression. Coupled with the breaking of taboo forms of language, political humor serves to critique authorities while preserving a veil of ambiguity, creating a seemingly innocuous setting. This approach allows for the highlighting of flaws and mistakes in a manner that appears non-threatening by using ridiculing devices (Kuipers and Raskin 2008; Mendiburo-Seguel *et al.* 2023).

Case in point is the use of derogatory language to push a political position or support partisan narratives. The word "fuck" is considered taboo in many English-speaking cultures and societies due to its vulgar and offensive nature, and its use in memes can be seen as controversial and potentially offensive. Kulick and Willson (2003), for example, examine the ways in which taboo language, such as the word "fuck", is used in different cultural contexts and how it can be seen as a form of social control or rebellion. Rebellion is the optimal word to describe the MAGA movement and many of the more fervent adherents to both the ideology and Trump himself. One example that preceded the genesis of the meme was the Jan 6th riots and attack on the US Capitol. This event was a glaring example and further proof of narratives that have the potential to create memetic fervor in the public (see section 2.5.2.).

In the political sphere, using the word "fuck" to criticize a sitting president can be seen as taboo mainly because it violates societal norms of impoliteness and is a face threatening act (Culpepper 2010; 2011) around civil discourse, as

the term is widely recognized as profane and undignified. Since civility is expected in public discourse, employing such language is viewed as a breach of the respect typically afforded to the office, reflecting poorly on both the speaker and the perceived decorum of the political environment. The use of “fuck” in memes, known for its offensive and vulgar connotations, is especially controversial and can be deemed inappropriate by various audiences (Locher 2015; Merritt *et al.* 2021).

This article takes a global view of the iterations and permutations of memes – in the expanded sense – generated from the “Let’s Go Brandon! Fuck Joe Biden” (LGB-FJB) meme and will provide ancillary context from the sociocultural dimensions of contemporary humor in political discourse.

2. LGB-FJB “Criticality”

Moving on to the memetic event that happened on October 2, 2021, NASCAR driver Brandon Brown’s victory at the Sparks 300 race at the Talladega Superspeedway inadvertently sparked the emergence of the “Let’s Go Brandon” (LGB) meme cycle, i.e., a permutation of mutually assisting memes working together to ensure their survival. During a televised interview with Brown after his victory, sports reporter Kelli Stavast misinterpreted crowd chants of “Fuck Joe Biden” as “Let’s Go Brandon”, erroneously assuming it was a cheer for Brown. But in order to fully understand the conditions that created the meme, we must quickly go back to an event that took place about a month prior to the main memetic criticality, that is the bonding of narratives that go on to produce memes that achieve virality. “Criticality” is used here to denote the exact moment of a meme’s genesis, whether it begins in isolation or bonded with a preexisting meme. Due to the nature of digital content, we are now able to track and log the precise moment a meme achieves the aforementioned criticality.

In terms of precursor memes, there is evidence that the chain of words “Fuck Joe Biden” anchored in the expletive “fuck” was floating around the right-wing collective conscience which then entered the memeiosphere, i.e., the sum totality of possible memes available to users in the public discourse. In August and into September of 2021, chants could be heard around various American football stadiums in the US (Hookstead 2021). In terms of a novel meme (LGB) bonding with another pretexting meme (FJB), the precursor to the genesis of the LGB-FLB memeplex was a Trump rally held on September 11th during which the former president witnessed the crowd spontaneously break out into a chorus of “We Want Trump”. This impromptu chorus then devolved into chants of “Fuck Joe Biden” followed by clapping and repetition. But at that time, the meme “Let’s Go Biden” with its coded meaning had not yet achieved criticality nor initiated memeiosis.

Here we have one facet of the inception stage (see section 2.5.) of the FJB-LGB meme cycle: the chant “Fuck Joe Biden” as precursor meme. This disconnect between what was being said and what was reported created a phenomenon where the phrase “Let’s Go Brandon” became a coded, more publicly acceptable substitute for the direct profanity aimed at President Joe Biden. The taboo nature

of this language lies in its dual function: as a euphemism for profanity (Allan and Burrige 1991), the phrase serves as a stand-in for a vulgar statement, allowing it to be used in public and in the media where direct profanity would be inappropriate or censored. In terms of political dissent, it also represents a form of political expression, encapsulating dissatisfaction with the president in a manner that skirts overt disrespect or censorship. This indirect approach enabled the phrase to become popular in settings that typically enforce decorum, such as television and online platforms, where outright swearing could be subject to penalties. This occurrence illustrates the strategic use of language to uphold an appearance of decency while still delivering a message that would be seen as taboo or offensive if stated explicitly.

Returning to the main criticality on October 2, 2021, this misinterpretation of the NASCAR crowd chanting quickly went viral, leading to the creation of the “Let’s Go Brandon” meme², a tongue-in-cheek dig at the sitting US President. This gaffe and subsequent misunderstanding of a chant showcasing the taboo word “fuck” directed at the sitting US president quickly circulated on social media and became a viral sensation. People seized on the meme as a euphemism for expressing anti-Biden sentiment and general discontent with the administration, thus creating a subversive and humorous way to critique the president. The meme’s emergence demonstrates how simple incidents can trigger meme creation initiating memeiosis, especially in the context of political discourse and online culture. Due to its popularity, this meme has become a “kernel” or core attribute of informational content that has many nodes orbiting around it. While there are infinite permutations of nodal combinations, there can only be one kernel. Moreover, it shows that memes are random, spontaneous acts generated by homo sapiens – often without any rhyme or reason – sticking to the collective conscience of users (Garin 2015). Furthermore, this meme gained traction as a coded slur against US President Biden morphing into a symbol of anti-Biden sentiment and multimodal political extremism (Alizadeh *et al.* 2019) both in online discourse (virtual or composite world) and at political rallies (prime world).

2.5. The Role of Memeiosis in the Creation and Propagation of Memes

Before moving on to the concept of memeiosis – the continuous and infinite propagation of memes – it is essential to understand the theoretical foundation of memes themselves. Richard Dawkins initially introduced the concept of the meme in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), establishing it in the public consciousness as a cultural unit “analogous to a gene” that spreads from person to person, much like a virus. While Dawkins, as a sort of memetic “patient zero” or vector of the idea, laid the groundwork, contemporary scholars have expanded on his idea of a cultural metaphor, articulating new dimensions of memes and ensuring the concept remains relevant. In the context of internet memes as a new form of humor (Attardo 2023), Varis and Blommaert’s (2015) observation that memes function as multimodal signs where texts and images work in synthesis is

² <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lets-go-brandon>.

particularly pertinent in today's digital space, a world steeped in digital content and awash with devices that transmit and receive them. Blommaert (2015) argues that "an object of study, which, by exactly such attempts, is bound to remain unstable and subject to perpetual upgrading and reformulation" (ibid: introduction). Though not expressly referencing memes, Blommaert's inference applies nonetheless to the study of them. Taking this into consideration, memes have open, indeterminate meanings, but index (connote) "cool", therefore using a meme is by its very nature cool. Users are motivated to share a meme in order to align themselves with the meaning it represents through association (Attardo and Mitzel 2020). Diverging from Dawkins's focus on memes as abstract ideas, research now tends to focus on memes as digital artifacts, i.e., texts, images and video (Lee 2020). This idea is further supported by the theory of multimodality (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001), which emphasizes the diverse ways memes can communicate meaning in today's digitally saturated world through diverse modalities. The visibility, recognizability, ease of creation, and the multimodal nature of memes contribute significantly to their widespread visibility (Huntington 2013) and impact (Börzsei 2013).

Shifman suggests that memes can shape and spread "socially constructed public discourse" (2014a: 4), acting as powerful tools for communication and cultural exchange, but may not be taken seriously. As semi-ephemeral objects, these compact, highly interactive digital artifacts generate substantial interaction, making them rich subjects for analysis and interpretation while also reflecting society's "deep social and cultural structures and can reveal the hidden ideologies rooted within them" (Aslan 2021: 49).

Since now anything has the potential to become a meme (Zenner and Geeraerts 2018), for a meme to achieve viral status, it must undergo various stages in its potentially infinite lifespan, first beginning with meme production or "memeiosis" (Mitzel 2021: 235; 2024; Attardo 2020; 2023: 24-25), much like a joke cycle which can be extended to the meme cycle, i.e., the life cycle of a meme (Attardo 2023: 111-114). Understanding memes also requires recognizing the intertextual references they contain; as Tsakona (2020: 3) notes, it "presupposes the recognition and understanding of implicit or explicit intertextual references", which is crucial for comprehending their full meaning and significance (Laineste and Voolaid 2017). These considerations, alongside sociocultural factors, are vital when analyzing and interpreting the "Let's Go Brandon" memplex.

Memes undergo several distinct phases in their lifecycle (Tyler 2011; Bjarneskans *et al.* n.d.; Truszkowski *et al.* 2020; Mitzel 2024), which, for our purposes here can be categorized as follows³:

1. Inception: The creation or initial appearance of the meme.
2. Diffusion: The widespread sharing and transmission of the meme across various platforms and populations.

³ While there is much diversity in how the meme cycle is articulated in memetic terminology, I have defined them as such based on the meme cycle model applied to the memes and memeiosis of *The Godfather* texts (Mitzel 2024).

3. **Modification:** Alterations and variations are made to the meme, enhancing its appeal or adapting it to different contexts.
4. **Declination:** A decrease in the meme's popularity and frequency of use.
5. **Dormancy:** The meme remains latent within the "memeiosphere", ready to be revived or repurposed.

Once a meme has declined and ceased spreading, it stays dormant within the meme pool, waiting for an opportunity to be reintroduced in a new form. The concept of the meme pool refers to the collection of memes available within a particular culture or community. The meme pool acts as a reservoir from which new memes can emerge and old memes can be revived or repurposed based on shifts in cultural context, social media trends, or external events that resonate with the themes or sentiments expressed in the memes. The meme pool thus serves as a dynamic archive of the creative and communicative expressions within a discourse community.

Like a virus, internet memes are not fully removed from the memeiosphere. A meme can be reactivated by catalysts such as holidays, election cycles, or relevant current events, which can bring them back into active circulation. While there is an infinite number of templates and permutations to list here, some of the most pervasive contemporary memes are "Woman Yelling at Cat/Smudge the Cat"⁴, "Doge the dog"⁵, and the right-wing favorite, "Pepe the Frog"⁶. In the realm of internet culture and digital communication, memes have become a ubiquitous form of expression, often spreading virally across online platforms. Central to the study of memes is the concept of memeiosis. Memeiosis in its basic sense, is the production of memes (Mitzel 2021; Attardo 2023). This term is an extension of "semiosis" (Lotman 2001; Lotman and Clark 2005) and works as an analogy to meiosis, i.e., the creation and splitting of cells. It is the process by which memes proliferate and evolve through the transmission and reinterpretation of cultural symbols and ideas. Cultural semiotic theory (ibid), rooted in the study of signs and their interpretation within cultural systems, provides a framework for understanding how memes function as units of cultural transmission.

2.5.1. Crossing the Osmetic Boundary

An important idea to consider is the crossing of what can be called the "osmetic boundary", the permeable divide between the online and physical worlds we increasingly inhabit, which is itself an extension of the biological concept of osmosis, i.e., a fundamental concept in biology and a process by which water molecules move across a semipermeable membrane from an area of lower solute concentration to an area of higher solute concentration. When memes are created, they can cross this osmetic boundary, manifesting as tangible, semi-ephemeral objects. Common examples include T-shirts, flags, and other material

⁴ Smudge the Cat <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/smudge-the-cat>, Woman Yelling at a Cat <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/woman-yelling-at-a-cat>.

⁵ Doge <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/doge>.

⁶ Pepe the Frog <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog>.

goods that either modify existing items or introduce entirely new ones, embedding the meme into the physical world as cultural artifacts. For instance, consider the case of conservative commentator Ben Shapiro: on October 5th of 2021, Shapiro's "The Daily Wire", a conservative right-wing website that creates online journalistic content, podcasts, and other multimedia, began selling T-shirts featuring different variations of designs with the LGB-FJB meme phrase. This illustrates how a meme, initially just a semi-ephemeral idea circulating online, crosses the osmetic boundary and enters the "prime" world that humans physically occupy. Naturally, in a capitalist society, it was not long before people began capitalizing on the meme, turning it into a marketable product. The phrase's commercialization added another layer of taboo, as it involved profiting from a phrase that originated as an insult. This commercialization of the LGB-FJB meme by *The Daily Mail* can be seen as trivializing political discourse and reducing complex issues into simple, marketable slogans.

2.5.2. Memetic Fervor and the Totememe

This brings us to the concept of what we might call "memetic fervor". When a meme reaches a critical mass and achieves virality, it can take on a life of its own within a group or society (Milner 2013). At this point, the group may align around a shared mission to engage with and propagate their new "totem" – a concept inspired by Durkheim's (1912/1995) idea of a totem in collective rituals (Greenwald 1973; Olaveson 2001; Stephenson 2015) – which we can term the "totememe". A totememe in the memetic sphere holds significant discursive power (Wiggins 2019), both for the group as a whole and for individual members. This power enables individuals to spread the original totememe through various multimodal channels, including images, text, video, other digital formats and the artifacts of material culture, thus creating a sense of agency for those who share it. Modern communication devices can amplify a totememe, allowing it to reach wider audiences and reinforcing its presence within the group. Through this process, the totememe becomes more than just a meme; it evolves into a powerful symbol that unifies the group and shapes their collective identity. Spread memetically, the fervor surrounding the totememe drives its continued proliferation and ensures its proliferation within the cultural discourse.

3. Right-wing humor and "Owning the Libs"

This section will discuss the interaction between humor and sociocultural factors that have led to the current and tense political environment which marks contemporary political discourse. Though the following can be applied to most cultures within the Anglosphere, for our purposes here, we shall focus on how these concepts work and play out in the United States of America.

Right-wing humor (RWH) has come to encompass humorous content that aligns with conservative, right-leaning or traditionalist ideologies (Sienkiewicz and Marx 2021). At times it lambastes left, liberal or progressive viewpoints

often including government intrusion and overreach, political correctness, identity politics, and more contemporary concepts like “wokeness” and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion). Generally speaking, there is no doubt a vast spectrum in individuals’ tastes in humor and their perception of it (Brown *et al.* 2019). Conservative or right-wing political perspectives are often linked to a strong emphasis on tradition, social order, respect for authority, power, achievement, and conformity in contrast to left-wing humor, whose orientations have been linked to values such as social justice, equality, universalism, self-direction, and benevolence (Kfrerer *et al.* 2021). Just like all forms of humorous interplay, RWH uses satire, sarcasm, irony, and stereotypes to convey its messages, resonating with audiences who share similar political and sociocultural beliefs (Kulkarni 2017). When utilized by the right, RWH targets liberal ideas, institutions, or individuals, often sparking debates around sensitive topics while appealing to those who identify with right-leaning or far/extreme right perspectives. Moreover, what is of particular interest are the discourses generated by public participation (Milner 2013) or events, and the semi-ephemeral artifacts and materialities generated from said discourses. These include, for example, memes and how they take on a life of their own outside of the digital space, acting as realia-based rallying cries for those that align with right-wing ideologies (see section 2.5.1.). At times, these outward displays of support for former president Donald Trump and the MAGA (Make American Great Again, a meme in and of itself as well) movement in general, take on a carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1981; 1984a; Kibler 1970) quality that is more about show and shaking things up and less about substance.

One discursive strategy that RWH employs is called “Own the Libs”, a phrase and tactic used predominantly in US political discourse, often attached to conservative or right-leaning individuals, to describe actions or statements made primarily to provoke, irritate, or frustrate liberals (“the libs”). The term implies that the primary goal is not necessarily to advance an argument or policy but to elicit or “trigger” a strong, often emotional reaction from those on the left. This control of the conversation through victimization can move the discursive advantage to the utterer of the insult, allowing them to claim that they are in fact the aggrieved party. A form of “trolling” (Binns 2012; Bishop 2014; Lieback 2019), the concept gained prominence in the second decade of the 21st century, particularly on social media and in the rhetoric of certain conservative commentators and politicians, which frequently led to conflicts in the public sphere (Chiaro *et al.* 2022; Kuipers and Zijp 2024). It often involves trolling, mockery, or adopting positions perceived as antagonistic to liberal values and priorities. It can be argued that this approach can trivialize serious political issues and foster divisiveness. Due to this tension, the tactic of “owning” encapsulates a political strategy that prioritizes causing frustration or emotional reactions from political opponents over policy debates or constructive dialogue at the detriment of political discourse, thereby adding to the deep political polarization taking place in the United States at the current moment. Often manifesting in memes, tweets, podcasts, public protests and stunts designed to highlight perceived liberal hypocrisy or to challenge liberal values in a provocative manner, “Owning the Libs” has become commonplace in US political

and sociocultural discourse both online and in-person (Peters 2020; Hartley 2023).

With regards to political partisanship, “Let’s Go Brandon” was widely adopted by conservatives and critics of Biden as a way to voice their opposition without resorting to outright profanity (Huntington 2020). It became a memetic rallying cry for those dissatisfied with Biden’s policies, leadership, economy, and general state of the Union. Due to political polarization, this phrase deepened the political divide, as it was seen as emblematic of the disdain held by certain groups towards the President.

Pundits now amplify certain memes and memetic events for internet credibility. Users of the “Owning the Libs” strategy emphasize and expand upon culture war issues intended to be divisive to provoke a reaction in others, such as not standing or kneeling for the flag, insufficient patriotism, wokeness, and Critical Race Theory (CRT). One notable example was the former president’s son, Donald Trump Jr.’s use of RWH to mock⁷ the president and help spread the LGB meme to his millions of followers. The digital realm is saturated with these interactions. In fact, on October 6, 2021, Donald Trump Jr. shared a meme on Instagram depicting Donald Trump with a pink hat that read “Let’s Go Brandon”. This post quickly garnered over 328,000 likes in just two days. For many on the left or those who support Biden, Donald Trump Jr.’s post represented a crude and disrespectful form of political discourse, exacerbating tensions between opposing factions and once again breaking the taboo for respect and reverence for a leader (Ford and Ferguson 2004). Interestingly, the “Let’s Go Brandon” phrase, intended to covertly insult President Biden, did not significantly trigger liberal outrage as expected. Instead, the liberal response to the “Let’s Go Brandon” meme sparked a new wave of memes from liberals, who mocked conservatives for their subtlety in avoiding the explicit phrase “Fuck Joe Biden”. In fact, one interesting development was the emergence of the “Dark Brandon”⁸ meme cycle as a counter move to the LGB-FJB meme cycle. This permutation served as a response in a form of memetic warfare, at times even supported and used by the Biden administration. “Dark Brandon” counters the LGB-FJB narrative and flips the script on it. It portrays Biden as a powerful, almost superhero figure, using imagery and themes typically associated with strong and confident leadership. Aesthetically, the memes often feature stylized graphics of Biden with glowing red eyes like those of the main villain Homelander from *The Boys* television show (2019-), glowing eyes being a main feature of powerful characters in diverse multimodal media such as comics, video games, film and television. The general aesthetic is over the top and mocks the serious, gloomy disposition and general outlook Biden’s opponents often have toward him, his administration and the current state of the Union.

The relationship between the two competing meme cycles demonstrates the polarizing nature of contemporary political discourse in the US and the dynamic

⁷ However, this mocking is not limited to one side of the political spectrum: it is common across the board, with all parties engaging in ridicule (Gruner 1997; Kuipers 2006) as a form of aggression (Kuipers and Raskin 2008) and disparagement humor (Ferguson and Ford 2008 not in references; Mendiburo-Seguel *et al.* 2023).

⁸ Dark Brandon, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/dark-brandon>.

ability of users to engage in the political conversation through advances in technology. The interaction between the two meme cycles shows how memes can evolve and be appropriated by different groups for opposing purposes and can reflect and amplify the political and cultural variations and divisions in society. While LGB is used to ridicule and undermine Biden, “Dark Brandon” emerged and was used by his supporters as a humorous and uplifting counter memetic reclamation of the narrative. This reclamation worked by turning criticism on its head by transforming perceived weakness and senility into exaggerated strength and vitality. This response was also a shift towards positive humor and satire over anger, downplaying and countering the taboo language anchored in euphemism or the outright use of “fuck”, perhaps reflecting a preference among some voters for a return to more traditional political discourse devoid of the shallowness of constant triggering, ridicule, negativity and general chaos that was a hallmark of the Trump administration.

3.1. Parasocial relationships

This section explores the sociocultural dynamics of how humans engage with memetic discourses emerging from public events, like the Sparks 300 NASCAR event, and then form affinity groups both online and in-person based on the totememe (see section 2.5.2.). These groups create a false sense of familiarity and intimacy with public figures when in reality they have no connection to them. Feeling this affinity can perhaps authorize people to engage in activities and discourse they would not otherwise engage in.

The concept of parasocial interactions (Horton and Wohl 1956) was introduced well before the arrival of social media, yet it is still applicable to humans as social creatures that have reproduced the same modes of communication in the digital space. This laid the groundwork for understanding how audiences develop relationships with media personalities, not through direct interaction but through the medium itself. More recently, Bond (2016: 657) described parasocial relationships as “social bonds audiences develop with media personae”. With the rise of social media, these virtual interactions have increasingly supplanted real-world interactions. Due to this unmooring of discourse from human face-to-face interactions and the consequences that come with it, the anonymity and distance provided by online platforms decrease accountability, allowing for more aggressive and often negative interactions that would be considered “taboo”, such as provoking people with insults and/or harsh language. This lack of accountability encourages a more gratuitous use of language and, by extension, facilitates forms of aggressive humor. Modern technology such as the smartphone enables unprecedented access to public figures. Fans and supporters can now potentially interact with celebrities directly through social media platforms, bypassing traditional barriers like physical security or geographical distance. This ease of access can intensify the emotional highs associated with celebrity interactions but also highlights the darker aspects of human behavior online. Moreover, the ease of tracking public figures, such as through flight status apps, raises serious privacy and ethical concerns. Notably, Elon Musk has taken legal action against Jack Sweeney, the operator of the

Twitter account @ElonJet, which tracked Musk's private jet using publicly available flight data. This illustrates the tension between public interest and individual privacy rights in the digital age. Musk argued that sharing this information posed security risks, particularly to his family. This incident has sparked debates about privacy, public information, and the limits of free speech on social media platforms (Wendling and Evans 2024).

3.2. Group Cohesion Through Meme Culture

Sociological studies on culture often point to rituals and traditions as mechanisms for fostering communing affiliation. These practices create a shared history and collective memory that reinforce group identity and solidarity (Durkheim 1912/1995). In organizational studies and internet research, communing affiliation is seen in the context of culture, where shared values, beliefs, and practices bind members together, enhancing loyalty and cooperation (Schein 1985). "Communing affiliation" (Zappavigna and Martin 2018) is a concept that refers to the emotional and social bonds that form within a group, enhancing members' sense of belonging and shared identity. This term is often used in the context of religious or spiritual communities, but it can also apply to any group where members feel a strong connection, mutual support, or "align" with certain ideas and values increasingly in digital spaces such as X/former Twitter (Zappavigna 2012). It refers to the process by which individuals or groups form and maintain connections and a sense of unity through shared experiences, beliefs, or activities. Communing affiliation is often assessed in the realms of sociology, psychology, and organizational and internet studies to understand how people build social bonds and create a sense of belonging within communities or organizations. Zappavigna and Martin (2018) explore this concept, which they define as a form of alignment through "social tagging" (2012) that can paradoxically facilitate both solidarity and antagonism in the online space. They focus on how individuals who have never met use tagging to forge connections and negotiate meanings, framing it as a type of parasocial interaction that can have both positive and negative outcomes.

Social Identity Theory explains how individuals derive a part of their identity and thus create meaning from the social groups to which they belong or adhere, even if it is a loose and fleeting affiliation (Tajfel 1974; 1979; 1982; Tajfel and Billic 1974). Through shared norms aligning around the "Let's Go Brandon" meme, their perceived values as conservatives or MAGA adherents, and activities such as political rallies, members of a group develop a sense of "we-ness" or communal identity (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Moreover, memes provide a form of group cohesion that has in many ways been lost in American society. Research in group dynamics and psychology emphasizes the importance of cohesion in maintaining group affiliation. Cohesion can be fostered through regular interaction, shared goals, and collective experiences, leading to stronger communal bonds (Festinger *et al.* 1950) whether they be online or in-person. Memes now act as a social glue bonding people together, even if the bonds are highly contextual and short-termed.

In a synthesis of a plenary lecture at the 17th International Pragmatics Conference in Padua, Italy (27 June-2 July 2021), David Beard spoke about George Orwell's 1984 and the "Two Minute Hate" sessions in which the citizens of Oceania partake in a daily ritual to express hostility towards the Party's enemies. Beard (2021: 8) recounts that "Orwell saw clearly that the power of propaganda rests not in what it describes, but in how it takes hold of people, and forms them into a mass with collective behaviors and emotions". Beard then quotes Orwell who wrote "the horrible thing about the Two Minute Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but, on the contrary, that it was impossible to avoid joining in" (1949: 12-15). This ritual served to control and unify the population while allowing them to release emotions in a controlled albeit chaotic manner. Much the same can be said for people that engage in the "Let's Go Brandon-Fuck Joe Biden" chant in public spaces. It offers those who choose to engage a chance to loudly voice their opposition to not only Biden, but the administration that he heads. Moreover, some of the more fervent propagators of the meme go so far as sporting clothing such as hats and t-shirts as well as brandishing flags with the meme emblazoned on it at their residence or even on their personal vehicles for all to see.

As we find ourselves inundated with digital content, it is apparent that many people, particularly those experiencing various forms of isolation worldwide, have strengthened these parasocial affiliations. This phenomenon underscores how digital interactions can intensify feelings of connection in an increasingly atomized citizenry and fragmented, algorithmically shaped (Zuboff 2019), and increasingly interconnected world.

4. Conclusion

In the "Let's Go Brandon-Fuck Joe Biden" meme cycle, we can observe the right-wing tactic of "Owning the Libs" as well as explanatory ideas anchored in parasocial interactions, oscillating within the orbits of humor and taboo. The LGB-FJB meme's emergence demonstrates how simple incidents of miscommunication can trigger meme creation with their rapid spread and influence shaping political discourse. Through the use of taboo language with the word "fuck" as a central textual element, this memetic event also demonstrates the organic weaponization of memes by the general public, giving citizens a voice outside of mainstream media discourse. Couched in taboo humor, for good or bad, memes now carry a cultural gravity that has the potential to shape how people feel about situations fostering emotions in their own right (Guadagno *et al.* 2013). Moreover, due to parasocial relationships, communing affiliation, social identity and group cohesion through meme culture, memes now give the public both horizontal and decentralized influence, thus becoming a form of political activism, especially in the context of political discourse and online culture. The incident highlights the randomness and power of miscommunication that sees the rapid spread of memes shaping contemporary political discourse in the 21st century, further desensitizing people to crude language and a lack of public decorum in political discourse – a trend that will

no doubt continue into the foreseeable future. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that we understand the cultural and political context surrounding a meme's emergence, how it is used by various sections of the citizenry, and the ways it is transformed and propagated in society. The LGB-FJB meme is a crucial example because it sheds light on the implications and significance of memes within contemporary discourse. The meme's origin coincided with a charged political climate in the United States, marked by polarization and contentious debates on any and all issues in US American society. Therefore, it can be said that memes can now serve to forecast and assess sociopolitical climates and that analyzing the cultural and political context of memes and the memetic events that encompass them can help better comprehend why the meme resonated with certain groups and how it reflected broader sentiments and tensions within society.

Moving forward, further research can be done on taboo memes and their role in political discourse as a way of swaying and ascertaining public opinion. Due to the chaotic and random nature of memetic discourse in the public sphere, there will always be narratives, material culture and situations to be studied. More recent examples would be that just during the writing of this article two momentous events took place that demonstrate the difficulty, value, and relevance of this type of contemporary research in applied culturology and memetics. The first was the assassination attempt on former President and current Republican candidate for President, Donald J. Trump, and the second is the current US President Joseph R. Biden's announcing that he will not, in fact, seek reelection as President. These two events have in some ways made the LGB-FJB memplex moot and interrupted the meme cycle rendering it essentially obsolete or "uncool" (Attardo and Mitzel 2020). On the other hand, the memplex will continue to exist in the memeiosphere, albeit in a state of dormancy, waiting to be possibly re-used at some later time. As we see the possibility of a Kamala Harris presidential bid, and with the selection of Minnesota Governor Tim Walz (an emerging memetic event at the time of writing), a new meme cycle has emerged with Harris appearing as a hero icon and Trump as the villain, once again utilizing the metaphor and pervasive narrative of Good vs Evil (Karpman 1968; expanded on by de Saint Laurent *et al.* 2021) in political discourse. Of further memetic interest is the choosing of current Ohio senator J.D. Vance as Trump's running mate and the meme cycles that have been generated from the choice of Vance as VP. While it is much too early to tell, we should also pay attention to who has the memetic or "meme advantage" (see Introduction) in political races, as memes can have both a positive and detrimental effect on election outcomes.

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