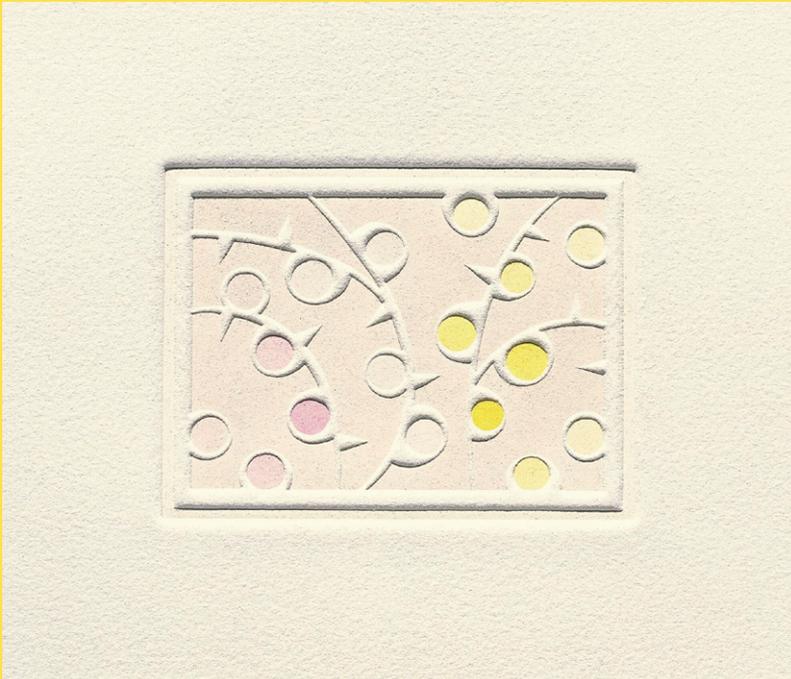


English
Language
Overseas
Perspectives and
Enquiries



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Journal Editors: Smiljana KOMAR and Mojca KREVEL

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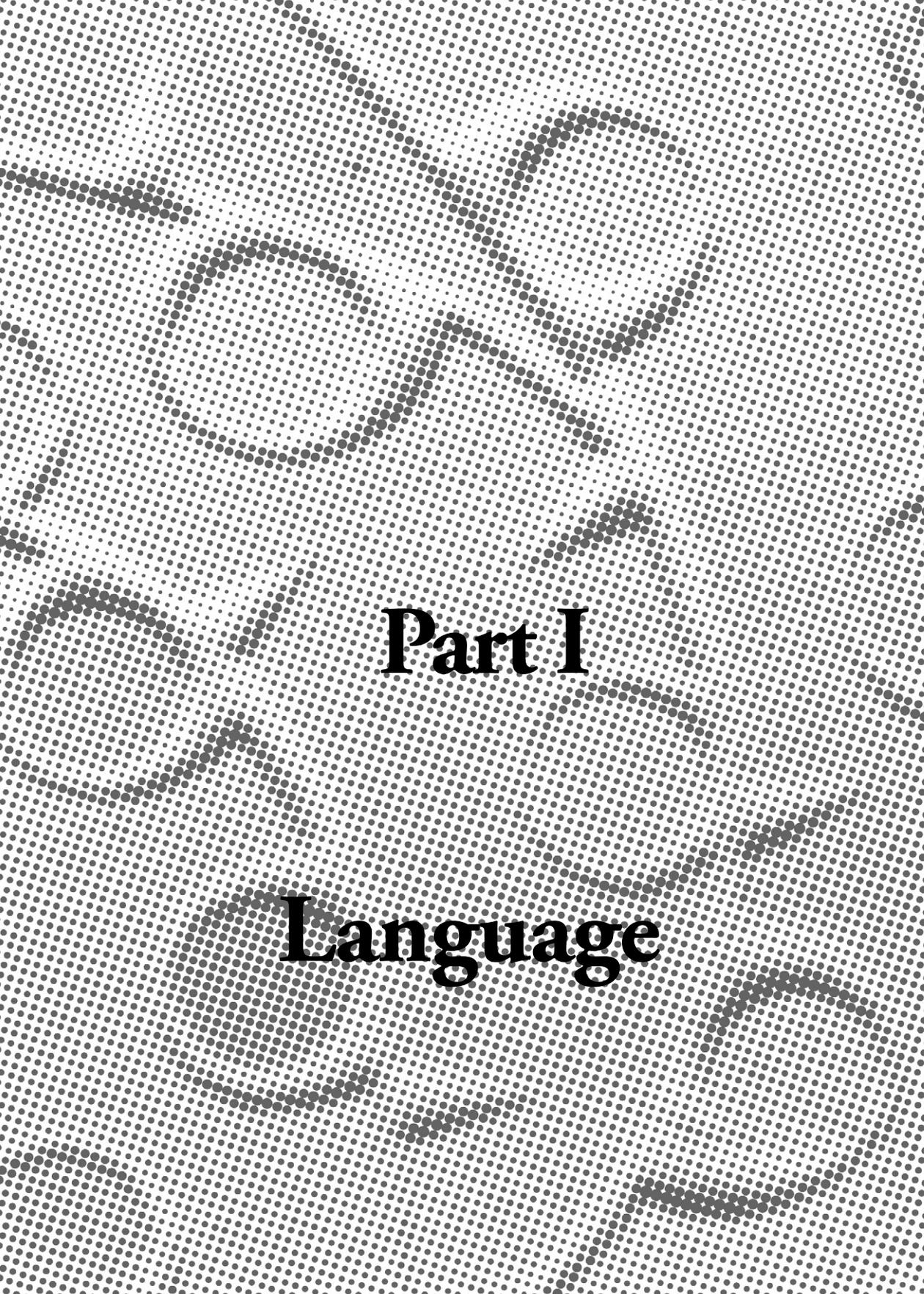
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Part I

Language

(In)formal Requests in Students' Emails in an Academic Context

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to provide an overview of the rhetorical strategies found in university students' emails when they write to faculty members. The analysis is based on a self-compiled corpus of 100 emails written in English and sent to the author by the English major students at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana over a one-year period. More specifically, the paper examines the sample for the use of forms of address and request strategies, such as the level of directness, internal modification and request perspective. The findings reveal a preference for conventionally indirect strategies and a significant use of consultative devices and subjectivizers. The results highlight the students' awareness of formality and politeness in academic email communication, reflecting in most cases their sensitivity to the hierarchical nature of the student-teacher relationship.

Keywords: students' emails, academic settings, forms of address, requests, Slovenia

(Ne)formalne prošnje v študentski e-pošti v akademskem okolju

IZVLEČEK

Prispevek ponuja pregled retoričnih strategij, ki jih študenti uporabljajo v svojih e-poštnih sporočilih učiteljem. Analiza temelji na lastno sestavljenem korpusu 100 e-poštnih sporočil v angleščini, ki so jih študenti angleškega jezika na Filozofski fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani v obdobju enega leta poslali avtorici prispevka. Preučuje uporabo nagovorov in strategij v prošnjah, kot so stopnja neposrednosti, notranja modifikacija in perspektiva prošnje. Ugotovitve kažejo na prevlado konvencionalno posrednih strategij ter izrazito uporabo posvetovalnih sredstev in subjektivizatorjev. Rezultati poudarjajo študentovo zavedanje formalnosti in vljudnosti v akademski e-poštni komunikaciji, kar v večini primerov odraža njihovo občutljivost za hierarhično naravo odnosa med študentom in učiteljem.

Gljučne besede: študentska e-pošta, akademsko okolje, nagovori, prošnje, Slovenija

1 Introduction

Email has become a prevalent and preferred medium of communication for both business and private purposes. It is popular due to its easy and rapid exchange of information, simple use and low cost, resulting in greatly simplified communication (Sproull and Kiesler 1991, 84–91). According to Statista (2023), approximately 333.2 billion emails were sent and received per day worldwide in 2022, which equates to around 3.8 million emails per second. This number has been projected to increase by 12% by the end of 2025.

Although there are no exact sector-specific statistics available on the number of emails circulating in the educational sector, teachers do tend to receive a considerable number throughout the day, especially at the tertiary level, since students often need extra information and opt for email as the quickest and most convenient way of contacting university staff members. In a small-scale online study (Teacher Tapp 2021), around two-thirds of primary and secondary school teachers surveyed said they receive between five and 20 emails per day, but this number is usually higher in tertiary settings, especially before and during exam periods.

However, compared to the well-codified rules of formal letter writing, it seems there are few predetermined standard email writing rules that are explicitly taught, which can cause uncertainties regarding style and politeness strategies (Biesenbach-Lucas 2006), and can also cause misunderstandings because of the lack of well-developed and generally accepted practices (Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire 1984). Moreover, the expansion of social networking and instant messaging has influenced the degree of formality and politeness that is expected, making email correspondence less formal and more spontaneous. In fact, it has been claimed that email has made professors not only much more approachable, but too accessible, erasing boundaries that traditionally kept students at a healthy distance (Glater 2006). Complaints from faculty teaching staff regarding students' emails range from unreasonable requests, impolite tone and sentence fragments to inappropriate informality, inappropriate salutations, abbreviations and the use of emoticons (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Glater 2006; Vuković and Bratić 2012).

For that reason, some educational institutions have decided to issue official guidelines for appropriate email communication to help both their students and teachers. These mainly concern email etiquette and explain when and when not to write an email, what types of messages will not be answered, how to use appropriate language and tone, and how messages should be drafted, along with templates for different objectives (e.g. personal requests, feedback on assignments, etc.). However, these rules are not generally accepted, and may vary across universities and countries. In addition, the student-teacher relationship can play a significant role when it comes to the level of appropriateness in email correspondence. As Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) states, less formal formulae may become common with more contact hours between students and their lecturers. While some teachers tolerate informality in emails, others include specific guidelines in their syllabi regarding email etiquette and explicitly state they will not respond unless the email is checked for spelling, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary use and proper structure. The attitude and tolerance depend on the teacher, as different teachers have different reactions to student emails and may interpret the

same message in different ways. Fraser and Nolen (1981, 96) argued half a century ago that no sentence is inherently polite or impolite, since the conditions under which sentences and expressions are used determine the judgement of politeness. Furthermore, Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, 85) determined that direct requests are typically perceived as more polite “if they are considered appropriate for a given situation depending on role expectations as well as rights and obligations of interaction participants”.

Since this paper focuses on emails written in English by non-native speakers, it should be highlighted that writing “status-unequal emails”, such as student-faculty emails, is a task that is demanding both linguistically and culturally, because there are culture-specific norms and values reflected in these high-stakes emails (Chen 2006, 36).

2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in Speech Act Theory (SAT), originally proposed by the philosopher John L. Austin (1962). He established the relationship between *form* (the set of lexical units that make up sentences) and *function* (the possibility to fulfil the communicative intention of the speaker and perform various actions by uttering these sentences in a given situation). In addition to the meaning, all utterances contain a dynamic communicative element that maintains interaction between speakers (Thomas 1995, 31), which is the postulate of SAT.

A speech act is the basic and minimal unit of communication, which consists of (a) *a locutionary act* (the utterance of a well-formed, meaningful sentence), (b) *an illocutionary act* (the communicative force of the utterance, e.g. promising, warning, denying, etc.), and (c) *a perlocutionary act* (the effect of the utterance on the hearer / reader) (Yule 1996, 48–49). In other words, language and speech are used to act, since we influence others through what we say. Speech acts can be *direct*, when there is a connection between the meaning of a linguistic structure and its function, and *indirect*, when there is no such connection, as in hints, insinuations, irony, or metaphor (Yule 1996, 54–56), where the speaker’s intention can only be established based on context.

According to Searle (1975) and Cohen (1996), speech acts can be classified into five groups based on their functions. These are:

- i. *Declaratives*: speech acts that perform the proposition of declaration (e.g. baptism, marriage, blessing, etc.);
- ii. *Representatives*: speech acts that describe a state of affairs (e.g. assertions, statements, claims, etc.);
- iii. *Expressives*: speech acts that indicate the speaker’s psychological state or attitude towards the proposition (e.g. admiration, contempt, apology, etc.);
- iv. *Directives*: speech acts that cause the reader / hearer to perform a certain action (e.g. instructions, advice, orders, requests, etc.);
- v. *Commissives*: speech acts that commit the speaker to a future action (e.g. promises, oaths, threats, etc.).

This paper focuses on requests, i.e. directive speech acts, in which the speaker attempts to make the hearer carry out a particular action in response to what has been said. According to the politeness theory established by Brown and Levinson (1987), requests are considered to be face-threatening acts (FTAs), because the speaker can affect the needs and desires of the hearer's face, as their freedom is affected. Therefore, the speaker should minimize or mitigate the threat by using politeness strategies. For language learners, making requests is a challenging task, as they need extensive cultural and linguistic knowledge to realize this speech act successfully and not threaten the recipient's face (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984).

The analysis of the requests is based on the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) framework, proposed by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper's (1989), which was later modified by Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, 2007) and tailored to the email context. According to them, requests consist of three main parts:

- i. the *alerter*, i.e. an opening element, which can include items like attention getters (e.g. *Pardon me...*) and terms of address (e.g. *Mrs. Smith*);
- ii. the *head act*, i.e. a minimal linguistic unit that can function independently as a request; and
- iii. the *supportive moves*, i.e. modifications that precede or follow the head act and serve the purpose of either mitigating or aggravating the force of the request.

Within the head act, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) proposed a continuum of request strategies based on the level of directness encoded in the head act. Three main levels are distinguished in this continuum:

- i. *direct strategies*, which explicitly express the speaker's intention (e.g., imperatives, want statements, or performatives such as *I'm asking you to...*);
- ii. *conventionally indirect strategies*, in which the request is framed through socially shared linguistic conventions such as ability or willingness queries (e.g., *Could you open the window?*); and
- iii. *non-conventionally indirect strategies*, often realized as hints, where the desired action must be inferred from the context (e.g., *It's really hot in here* as a hint for opening a window).

Apart from the level of directness, the head act can also vary in terms of research perspective. A request can be *speaker-oriented* (emphasizing the agent, e.g., *Can I have it?*), *hearer-oriented* (focusing on the recipient, e.g., *Can you do it?*), *inclusive* (involving both, e.g., *Can we start cleaning now?*), or *impersonal* (avoiding specific actors, e.g., *It needs to be cleaned*). These perspectives carry different social meanings, especially since requests are inherently imposing.

Beyond the head act itself, the CCSARP framework also emphasizes the role of modification in shaping the force and acceptability of requests. Internal modification occurs within the request sentence, often through syntactic and lexical downgraders such as interrogative forms, modal verbs (*could*, *might*), or mitigating adverbs (*just*, *maybe*). These devices soften the impositive force without changing the central illocutionary intention. External modification,

on the other hand, consists of supportive moves that occur before or after the head act, such as grounders (justifications for the request), preparators (signals preceding a request), and disarmers (acknowledgements of potential inconvenience).

In applying this framework to authentic email data, Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, 2007) identified several challenges that necessitated modifications to the original taxonomy because of pragmatic and medium-specific constraints. For example, she added certain request realizations that were not addressed in CCSARP and omitted those that did not occur in email requests. She also highlighted the inconsistent coding of strategies like *want* and *need* statements. While CCSARP classifies them as direct, she demonstrated that in emails they can also be coded as indirect or as hints, depending on pragmatic interpretation. These modifications underscore the need to expand and refine the coding in order to adequately take into account distinctive features of request realization in the email medium.

Taken together, the CCSARP framework provides a powerful lens for analysing requests as complex pragmatic acts that combine strategy choice, linguistic form, and social meaning. By distinguishing between levels of directness and types of modification, the model makes visible the cultural variability in the way speakers manage face and negotiate social relationships through language. It also lays the groundwork for the study of cross-cultural pragmatics, as learners often transfer request strategies from their first language, leading to patterns of overuse, underuse, or pragmatic failure in the target language. In this way, the theoretical framework for requests not only illuminates cross-cultural variations, but also deepens our understanding of the pragmatics of second language use and learning.

3 Previous Research

Student-teacher email correspondence at university level has gained increasing attention in recent years, especially because this means of communication has largely replaced face-to-face enquiries about study matters, changing the interaction in academic contexts drastically. Initial research studies were triggered by the necessity to regulate chaotic and random language use in student emails, which was described as a mixture of written and spoken language and leaned towards informality, and to pinpoint and address the problem of students improperly addressing their teachers and forming their requests inappropriately.

Using either discourse-completion tests or authentic emails, previous research studies on email requests have predominantly explored rhetorical strategies in relation to the level of imposition and the cultural dimension, but also investigated differences between native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers of English (NNSs) and teachers' (recipients') attitudes towards the received emails.

First, the level of imposition of the request may determine the degree of directness or indirectness. Low imposition requests require little or no preparation on the part of the teacher (e.g. asking for routine information, asking for additional material, informing about absence, etc.), while high imposition requests are intrusive in terms of teachers' time and workload (e.g. extending a submission deadline, asking for feedback on the paper during holidays, etc.). Students will usually select more direct strategies for lower imposition requests, but not

for the highest imposition requests (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996). However, this is not always the case. According to Tseng (2016), Taiwanese students, regardless of their English proficiency, frequently opt for direct strategies for high imposition requests, particularly by using ‘expectation statements’ (*I hope that...*) and ‘want statements’ (*I would like to*). These students do not perceive these strategies to be impolite, as the same realizations in Chinese are modest and humble. In addition, Tseng concludes that Taiwanese students prefer more explicit and concise requestive head acts to avoid ambiguity and to urge the teacher to respond favourably.

Another key factor in email communication is the cultural dimension of power distance, connected to the distribution of power and authority in certain cultures. In educational settings, this dimension directly concerns the student-teacher relationship. High power distance (HPD) cultures favour a strict hierarchy and foster inequality, which means that teachers are seen as authority figures with higher social power who thus should be treated with respect. In contrast, low power distance (LPD) cultures are egalitarian and based on teacher-student equality. Students from relatively HPD cultures are more likely to use formal alternatives in their email openings and closings (Bjorge 2007). However, Salazar Campillo (2018) investigated the openings in emails written by Spanish students in both English and Spanish. Although the sample was small, the results showed that these students did not transfer the expected behaviour to email, as the forms of address used did not match the HPD index for Spain. Most of the students did not use markers of politeness in openings in either of the languages, and addressed their lecturers using their first names.

When it comes to the difference between NSs and NNSs, it seems that NSs use more mitigators (Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996), more modal constructions and hedged expressions (Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth 2000), and employ a higher frequency and a wider variety of politeness strategies (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Chen 2001; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008, 2010; Félix-Brasdefer 2009). These research studies showed that NNS students’ emails are characterized by significant directness, an absence of lexical/phrasal downgraders and a common use of want statements, imperatives and performatives. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) found that NNSs use on average less than one politeness marker, largely relying on the marker ‘please’. They rarely use internal modifications to soften the imposition of requests, and more frequently turn to the use of external modifications, i.e. giving reasons or explaining a problem (Balman and Lee 2020; Hassall 2012).

Finally, the limited range of lexical and syntactic modifiers in non-native English-speaking students’ emails has an influence on how they are perceived by their teachers. Since NNSs used fewer politeness strategies and mitigating devices, their requests were seen as less effective by their teachers (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Savić 2018). Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) highlighted that NNSs mentioned personal time needs more frequently and were self-centred in their communications, rarely acknowledging the imposition on faculty members, which led to a negative perlocutionary effect on the faculty member. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011, 3209) argues that such emails can cause pragmatic infelicities “as they appear to give the faculty no choice in complying with the request and fail to acknowledge the imposition involved”.

Previous interlanguage research on email requests indicates that non-native English-speaking students, regardless of their proficiency level, struggle when writing emails to their university professors to a large extent because of a lack of appropriate pragmatic knowledge and awareness of the politeness conventions used in the asymmetrical student-professor relationship (cf. Economidou-Kogetsidis, Savić, and Halenko 2021). For example, Tseng (2016) noted that students often choose more direct request strategies in the false belief that their professors will act promptly if their messages sound urgent. This can be attributed to varying cultural backgrounds and transfer of politeness markers from their L1, which are perceived by their professors as inadequate in the target language, English.

4 Methodology

The participants in all the above-mentioned research studies were graduate students from different countries (e.g. Indonesia, Spain, United Arab Emirates, Taiwan, China, Japan, Greece, Norway, the UK, and the USA) attending various study programmes. The English language proficiency for non-native speakers ranged from pre-intermediate to advanced. Zhu (2012), on the other hand, compared English majors and non-English majors at a university in China by using a discourse completion test to elicit emails for a given situation.

This research aims to be more specific, investigating email writing among South-Slavic speakers who are English-majors. The data were comprised of 100 student-initiated emails written in English by 73 undergraduate students of English at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana (71% female, 29% male). On average, there were 65 words per email. All the students are native speakers of Slovene, who at the time attended the first or the second year of their studies. In terms of English language proficiency, the majority were at B2–C1 level (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – CEFR). Although no placement test was administered prior to enrolment, they all presumably reached the B2 level at their Matura exam upon finishing secondary education. It is presumed that these students were also equipped with sufficient cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries and were eager to embrace these norms. As future English experts, they were likely to have a certain level of pragmatic awareness of what is and is not appropriate when writing in English.

The emails were collected over the course of two semesters, from October 2020 to June 2021. The messages were produced in an academic context by non-native speakers of English belonging to the same cultural background and were sent to the non-native teacher. Only the initial emails in a conversation were considered for the analysis, and not replies and responses to the teacher. All the emails were low imposition requests, with the students enquiring about office hours, notifying the teacher of their absence or asking to swap groups.

Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper's speech act analysis and their CCSARP coding scheme (1989, 275–89), later modified by Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, 2007), was adapted in this paper to analyse email requests, following the methodological steps in Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011). After the analysis of salutations, i.e. opening and closing phrases, any emails containing requests were further investigated in terms of language and structure. There were requests in 72 emails. Each request was examined for request modification strategies, in particular: (1) the level of directness, (2) internal modification, and (3) the request perspective.

The study centres around the following research questions:

- i. What opening and closing phrases are used by Slovene students writing emails in English?
- ii. Which request strategies do they use when writing email requests?
- iii. Which lexical/syntactic modifiers do they use when writing email requests?
- iv. To what extent do they use internal modifications as mitigating devices to soften the force of their requests in emails?
- v. Which request perspective do they most frequently select?

The next section focuses first on forms of address, i.e. openings and closings, and then further analyses the students' requests in terms of the level of directness, internal modification and request perspective.

5 Findings and Discussion

5.1 Forms of Address

Although some authors in the past claimed that openings and closings are optional elements in email communication (Crystal 2006), forms of address perform an important social role in teacher-student formal correspondence as they establish the social relationship between the sender and the recipient and their omission may result in impolite messages (Salazar Campillo 2023, 322). The use of opening and closing phrases shows a degree of respect to the teacher. According to Hofstede (2001), Slovenia is a high-power society and culture, which means that people accept a hierarchical order and do not question authority. In academic communication, students would be expected to use formal and polite language to address teachers. Table 1 lists the phrases found in openings in the students' emails.

TABLE 1. Opening phrases in students' emails.

The opening phrase	The frequency (%)
Dear + academic title (Professor/Prof./Dr.) + surname	31
Dear + academic title (Dear Professor/professor)	28
Hi/Hello/Greetings	14
Dear + non-academic / general title (Ms) + surname	11
Dear + marital status (Mrs, Miss) / madam + surname	8
Good morning/afternoon/evening	3
Dear + academic title + first name	3
Other (only surname, only Dear)	2

All the emails used an opening phrase. The most frequent salutations (59%) employed a pragmatically and grammatically acceptable combination of the use of 'dear' followed by the academic title and/or the surname. Some openings were acceptable, but not formal (14%), including *Hi*, *Hello* and *Greetings*. Others could be seen as offensive due to the employment

of an incorrect title, i.e. a general title (11%), or even the use of a title associated with the person’s marital status (8%). A minority of the emails (8%) were pragmatically inadequate, as they used the first name or the greeting for a particular time of day or an abrupt use of only the surname and an unexpected sole use of ‘dear’. Although an analysis of spelling, punctuation and capitalization is outside the scope of this paper (cf. Lan 2000), it should be noted that an exclamation mark was used quite frequently after formal phrases, which is not common in English (e.g. *Dear Professor!*)

As Table 2 illustrates, when it comes to closings, the majority opted for formal closing phrases, including *Kind regards* and *Best regards* (60%). Almost a fifth of the emails ended with less formal phrases, such as *Best*, *All the best* and *Best wishes*. One in ten emails did not use any phrase, but only a pre-closing move, such as *Thank you*, *Have a great weekend* or *Wish you a nice day*. A typical ending for letter writing (*Yours*) *Sincerely* was sporadically found (8%). Finally, only 2% of the emails had an abrupt ending, with the students only signing their name and omitting a closing phrase.

TABLE 2. Closing phrases in students’ emails.

The closing phrase	The frequency (%)
Kind/Best regards	60
No phrase (only a pre-closing move)	10
Best	9
Sincerely / Yours sincerely	8
All the best	6
Best wishes	4
No sign-off	2
Respectfully	1

Greetings and closings in emails are regarded as essential variables in “maintaining politeness and showing respect towards the addressee” (Hallajian and David 2014, 86). These findings reveal that more than a half of the students show a high degree of sensitivity towards the use of formal expressions used as forms of address at the beginning and end of their emails. However, a significant proportion of the future English language experts in our sample still used less formal or even informal phrases. It remains unclear whether other factors influenced formality, such as, for example, the teacher’s academic title or age, or even the low degree of imposition of their requests.

In similar studies in two other high power distance cultures, the results were different and did not corroborate Hofstede’s results (2001). In a Spanish academic setting, Salazar Campillo (2018) analysed the emails written by Spanish students enrolled in a master’s programme. The students’ level of proficiency was above B2 CEFR in English. Although almost all of the emails included opening and closing formulae, the vast majority used informal openings (68%), with a greeting followed by the lecturer’s first name. Interestingly, 52% of the emails included a pre-

closing move of thanking together with a leave-taking formula. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) conducted research with Greek Cypriot university students enrolled in various undergraduate and postgraduate study programmes. Their English language proficiency varied from lower intermediate to advanced (A2–C1 CEFR). The results revealed an unexpectedly high number of emails without an opening (83.5%) and without a closing (77%).

We can conclude that the results of this research study reflect the students' awareness of the unequal relationship with the teacher, as very few emails employ informal phrases.

5.2 Levels of Directness

The requests in the student emails analysed in this study had a relatively low degree of imposition. They included students asking to enrol in one of the study groups, to swap groups, to attend another group's class or to choose a topic for a presentation. Low-imposition requests do not require much preparation on the part of professors, as students are asking for routine information (Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996, 60). However, since any request is a face-threatening act, even for low-imposition requests students need to use specific politeness strategies to mitigate the threat.

A total of 86 request heads were identified in the dataset. As was previously mentioned, a head act is the core part of a request sequence which realizes a request (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989, 17). Table 3 summarizes the use of different request strategies with three levels of directness: (a) direct, explicit level, (b) conventionally indirect level, and (c) non-conventional indirect level (known as hints).

TABLE 3. The use of different request strategies.

Directness levels	Request strategies	%
DIRECT	Want statements	21
	Imperatives	8
	Performatives	7
	Direct questions	2
	Expectation statements	1
CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT	Query preparatory	55
HINTS	Strong hints	6

The most frequent strategy in the corpus is query preparatory (55%), at the conventionally indirect level. According to Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989, 280), a conventionally indirect request is an utterance which contains a reference to a preparatory condition for the feasibility of the request. It is also called query preparatory, as the speaker often questions the presence of the chosen condition. Although some findings point to NNSs usually selecting more direct requests than NSs (e.g. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996), conventionally indirect strategies were dominant in this dataset.

In the students' emails, willingness and permission were typical conditions, realized by the use of modal verbs, such as 'could' in example (1) or 'would' in examples (2) and (3):

- (1) *Could you add me to one please?*
- (2) *Would you be so kind to explain this to me one more time?*
- (3) *Would it be possible to change groups?*

As can be seen from the table, 39% of requests employed direct request strategies, most commonly a want statement (21%). This statement conveys the speaker's wish for the event in the proposition to happen, usually with the use of the phrase 'would like to' as shown in example (4) or the verb 'want' in example (5):

- (4) *I would like to attend the Wednesday's class.*
- (5) *I want to kindly ask you to assign me to a group that is still free.*

The students generally avoided direct questions and expectation statements in their requests. Sporadically, the requests were also realized by the grammatical mood, exclusively the imperative, almost always with the polite marker 'please' as shown in example (6). The performative is illustrated in example (7), where the illocutionary verb 'ask' is used:

- (6) *Please find attached my worksheet for tomorrow's presentation.*
- (7) *I am kindly asking you if this week I can attend class with the group B.*

Finally, hints were rather rare and were found in only 6% of requests. This request strategy is characterized by an implicit illocutionary intent, as in examples (8) and (9):

- (8) *I was told by my classmates to send you an email in order to get enrolled into one of the groups.*
- (9) *It says that the enrolment is disabled or inactive.*

In both examples, the students do not explicitly state the intended illocutionary act, but the utterance implies a request, since the students are implicitly asking to be enrolled. Although politeness is usually considered to be positively correlated with indirectness in English cultures, Blum-Kulka (1987, 144) claims that the most indirect request strategies, i.e. hints, may also be associated with a lack of politeness, because they "testify to a lack of [a speaker's] concern for pragmatic clarity".

5.3 Internal Modification

According to Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989, 60), internal modifiers are lexical and syntactic elements within the head act that modify request realization but do not affect the pragmatic force of a request. In other words, their presence is not essential for the utterance to be understood as a request. In the present study two categories of internal modification will be further analysed: (1) syntactic downgraders, and (2) lexical/phrasal downgraders.

5.3.1 Syntactic Downgraders

Syntactic downgraders modify the head act by the use of different syntactic structures, such as past tenses, aspect markings, embedded clauses and interrogatives. According to the results (Table 4), not all the students exploited syntactic modifiers. However, almost two thirds of requests were realized with the use of embedded clauses (34%) or interrogatives (27%).

TABLE 4. Syntactic downgraders in students' requests.

Sub-category	%
Embedded clauses	34
Interrogatives	27
Progressive aspect	16
Past tense	13

Although listed separately above, the past tense and progressive aspect were usually combined, as shown in example (10). In this analysis, past tense forms were viewed as downgraders if they were used with a present time reference and the durative aspect marker as a mitigating device, if this formulation could have been replaced by a simple form.

- (10) *I was wondering if it would be possible for me to put my signature down on the list.*

This request also illustrates the combined use of an embedded conditional clause, which further mitigates the request. A greater degree of formality and politeness was often achieved with the conditionals, as in examples (11) and (12). They served as distancing elements, making a request more formal and polite:

- (11) *I would greatly appreciate it if I could join the class.*

- (12) *I would like to ask if there is any other way to enter the classroom.*

5.3.2 Lexical/Phrasal Downgraders

Lexical/phrasal downgraders are additional elements which mitigate the force of the request by modifying the head act with the use of specific lexical and phrasal choices (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989, 283). Table 5 summarizes a quantitative analysis of these choices in the students' requests.

TABLE 5. Lexical/phrasal downgraders in students' requests.

Lexical/phrasal choices	Devices	%
Consultative devices	<i>would you mind, is it possible, is there a chance</i>	56
Subjectivizers	<i>I wonder, I think/suppose</i>	37
Marker 'please'	<i>please</i>	13
Downtoners	<i>possibly, perhaps, just</i>	1

The results indicate the dominant use of consultative devices (56%), which is in sharp contrast with the findings of Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011). These expressions are used to directly engage the hearer and seek their cooperation, shown in example (13). Furthermore, subjectivizers were the second most preferred modifiers (37%), almost exclusively realized by

the verb ‘wonder’. According to Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989, 284), subjectivizers are elements conveying the speaker’s personal opinion about the situation, thus lowering the assertive force of their request. In example (14), the student softens the request by introducing the subjectivizer and further mitigates it by employing the past progressive form.

(13) *Is there any chance I could be placed in any of the “faculty groups”?*

(14) *I was wondering if I can still take the exam.*

Although the marker ‘please’ seems to dominate in many studies (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Faerch and Kasper 1989; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996), it was only sporadically used in the requests in our corpus (13%). Finally, the downtoner ‘possibly’, a sentential or propositional modifier that can modify the impact of a request, was used only once.

It should be highlighted that the downgraders were sometimes used in combination; for example, the requests sometimes included the combination of a consultative device and the marker ‘please’, as seen in example (15), or a consultative device and a subjectivizer, as in example (16):

(15) *Would you mind helping me out, please?*

(16) *I wonder if it would be possible for me to attend the practical class on Tuesday.*

According to the analysed dataset, the Slovenian students were well aware of the formality level and avoided understaters (*a bit, a sort of*), cajolers (*You know, You see*) or appealers (*will you?*), which are considered inappropriate in written discourse.

5.4 Request Perspective

The study also analysed the request perspective adopted by the students. Depending on the perspective, requests can be (a) speaker-oriented, (b) hearer-oriented, (c) inclusive-oriented or (d) impersonal (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989, 284). Languages differ in their general preference for the orientation perspective.

In this dataset, there was no instance of inclusive orientation, as shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6. Research perspective in students’ requests.

Perspective	%
Speaker-oriented	68
Hearer-oriented	25
Inclusive-oriented	/
Impersonal	7

The most frequent orientation pattern was speaker- (or student-) orientation (68%), such as *Could I come to your office hours this Monday?* which can be interpreted as a request for permission. Gordon and Ervin-Tripp (1984, 308) note that speaker-perspective is considered

to be polite since the hearer is given the option of approving the speaker's wish. On the other hand, one quarter of the requests were hearer- (or teacher) oriented, including the examples: *Could you please send me an alternative for your office hours to discuss the presentation?* which directly imposes an action on the part of the hearer. Finally, only 7% of the requests were impersonal, without explicitly addressing either of the sides, such as *Would it be possible to change groups?*

6 Conclusion

Previous findings have suggested that NNSs from different language backgrounds modify their requests through external modifiers rather than internal modifiers, overuse direct strategies and choose the hearer-oriented request perspective. Also, in order to compensate for their limited linguistic resources, they favour the marker 'please', a strategy also found to be used by students from Asian backgrounds, including Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Thailand (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007), by Arab university students in the UAE (Deveci and Hmida 2017) and by Greek Cypriot students in Cyprus (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011).

Unlike in the above-cited studies, this research revealed that Slovene undergraduate students majoring in English use different devices to soften the impact of requestive force in their emails. Since politeness is associated with indirect strategies, the presence of syntactic and lexical modifiers and non-hearer-oriented request perspective, it can be concluded that the majority are equipped with sufficient pragmatic competence to facilitate formal and polite communication with a professor in academic contexts. This competence may to a large extent be attributed to the cultural and linguistic knowledge acquired throughout their studies. Zhu (2012), for example, compared the requestive strategies used by English majors and non-English majors, and revealed that English majors employed significantly more indirect requestive strategies and used more syntactic mitigation in the request head acts. On the other hand, the occasional use of less formal or informal phrases suggests some variability in students' adherence to formal email etiquette and potentially, a transfer of speech act norms from their native language use, as was argued by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007).

This research, however, has several limitations. The results cannot be generalizable, as the emails were received by only one teacher during a limited period of time. Future research could include emails received by other teaching staff and identify the relationship between the requesting strategies and the seniority and status of the addressee. Another interesting idea could be to investigate netiquette in institutionalized email communication with the emergence of AI-generated texts and compare them with findings from the pre-AI period. Finally, future studies could investigate potential gender differences in email communication practices and how these may affect perceptions of politeness and formality (cf. Salazar Campillo 2023). These future research directions could provide a deeper understanding of the factors influencing email communication practices in a second language and contribute to the development of teaching strategies for enhancing students' pragmatic competence in academic and professional settings.

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Hedging and Boosting Criticism in Dissertation Thesis Reviews

ABSTRACT

Dissertation thesis reviews within the Czech academic context are, unlike journal article peer reviews, non-blind, non-anonymous, publicly available texts. The key feature of these reviews is evaluation, and they require a substantial amount of facework aimed at both the direct and the potential indirect participants. The present paper focuses on the critical comments, their content, strength, directness, and manner of formulation in a corpus of 32 reviews of technical university dissertations. All instances of criticism were analysed in terms of the use of hedges and boosters as important interactional metadiscoursal devices. These were then further scrutinized with regard to their lexical and syntactic properties. The results indicate that the reviewers are highly aware of the face-threatening nature of the genre and tend to shy away from direct criticism. The main aim of the present research is to enhance the awareness of the genre itself and the linguistic and metalinguistic evaluative features.

Keywords: dissertation review, reviewer, hedging, boosting, criticism, facework

Blažitev in krepitev kritike v ocenah doktorskih disertacij

IZVLEČEK

Recenzije doktorskih disertacij v češkem akademskem kontekstu so, za razliko od recenzij člankov v strokovnih revijah, javno dostopna besedila, ki niso podvržena slepi in anonimni recenziji. Ključna značilnost teh recenzij je ocenjevanje, zato zahtevajo precejšnjo mero jezikovne previdnosti do neposrednih kot tudi potencialno posrednih udeležencev. Ta članek se osredotoča na kritične pripombe, njihovo vsebino, moč, neposrednost in način formulacije v korpusu 32 recenzij doktorskih disertacij tehniških univerz. Vsi primeri kritike so bili analizirani z vidika uporabe izrazov za ublažitev (ang. *hedges*) in okrepitev (ang. *boosters*) kot pomembnih interakcijskih metadiskurzivnih sredstev. Ti so bili nato nadalje preučeni z vidika njihovih leksikalnih in sintaktičnih lastnosti. Rezultati kažejo, da se recenzenti zelo zavedajo značilnosti tega žanra, ki lahko ogroža ugled, in se zato izogibajo neposredni kritiki. Glavni cilj te raziskave je povečati ozaveščenost o samem žanru ter o jezikovnih in metajezikovnih vrednotenjih.

Ključne besede: ocena disertacij, ocenjevalec, blažitev, poudarjanje, kritika, jezikovna previdnost

1 Introduction

Evaluation is the key element of the genre of dissertation reviews, the purpose of which is to responsibly assess the work of PhD students and thus contribute, or not, to their further professional development. The present paper focuses on criticism, i.e. negative assessment as expressed by the reviewers, and its targets, force, and directness as found in these highly evaluative academic texts.

In the Czech academic context, dissertation reviews are freely available (together with the respective dissertations) from universities' electronic archives, as mandated by Czech law. They are, therefore, non-anonymous, public texts, which evaluate the dissertation in question according to the criteria posed by the university, typically including topicality, originality, methodology, results, impact, presentation, and language accuracy. The reviewers, usually two highly accomplished scholars in the given field from outside the university, are also encouraged to formulate questions for the candidate to discuss in the course of the defence (also called a viva). A compulsory part of the review is the recommendation (or lack thereof) of the dissertation for defence if it displays the qualities expected of dissertations in the given field. At the defence, which is a public event, the candidate is required to present their findings to the defence committee, explain the decisions taken in the course of the research and answer the questions posed by the reviewers.

Due to the fact that dissertation reviews are official, generally available and, ultimately, publicly discussed documents, a lot is at stake for the reviewers. They have to reaffirm their positions as experts, act as fair gatekeepers, and provide the candidates with constructive feedback (Starfield et al. 2017, 58–59) without causing too much damage to their negative face, i.e. the desire not to be impeded upon (Brown and Levinson 1987, 61) and, at the same time, avoid sounding too harsh in order to protect their positive face, i.e. the desire to be accepted and approved of (Brown and Levinson 1987, 61). This facework concerns all parties involved: their own, the candidate's, the candidate's supervisor's, and the university's. The tension between all these roles becomes especially pronounced when criticizing various aspects of the dissertation. The question we ask in this paper is: what aspects of technical dissertations are the most common focus of criticism and how is this criticism expressed?

From previous research it appears that private and anonymous article peer reviews feature much more direct criticism than signed and open article and book reviews due to more pronounced face concerns in public academic discourse. Hedging and prefacing criticism with praise seem to be the most common mitigation strategies among English-writing reviewers within both genres. To the best of our knowledge, no study so far has explicitly focused on the (in)directness of criticism within PhD thesis reviews.

With regard to the focus of criticism, article reviewers frequently discuss language-related issues in articles of suspected L2 users of English, and provide comments on how to improve the manuscript if it is to be published. Although editorial comments are very common within PhD thesis reviews, other areas, such as the design of the study or the analysis of the results, are commented on more frequently.

2 Prior Research

Prior research on evaluative language in scholarly reviews has primarily focused on the occluded genre (Swales 1996, 47) of the blind peer review of manuscripts submitted to academic journals and on the publicly available academic book reviews published in such journals. The research questions typically concern the aspects of the article/book that are the focus of praise/criticism and the strategies the reviewers use to convey their evaluation. In addition, several articles have investigated differences between various scientific disciplines (e.g. Hyland 2004; Fortanet-Gómez and Ruiz-Garrido 2010) or between “accept” and “reject” reviews (e.g. Gosden 2003), while others analysed intercultural differences (e.g. Larina and Ponton 2020) and the impact of English language dominance (Belcher 2007; Lillis and Curry 2015). Unsurprisingly, a large number of these articles refer to Brown and Levinson’s notion of facework (1987). In contrast, face concerns seem to be of little interest in the still relatively small number of studies focusing on PhD thesis reviews through a linguistics lens.

2.1 PhD Dissertation Reviews

The research on PhD dissertation reviews to date has focused on the wider implications of the review process in terms of fairness, clarity, and transparency, rather than on politeness considerations on the part of the reviewers. In other words, the question of what is being evaluated within the reviews has received more attention than the ways of politely conveying the message.

Johnston (1997, 336, 339) reported frequent comments, both positive and negative, on the language and editorial aspects of the reviewed theses. She also noted that “a great deal of consideration was given to the tenor of the report provided, particularly when the report was largely negative” (Johnston 1997, 344), but did not conduct a more in-depth analysis of this phenomenon.

Other studies (Holbrook et al. 2004, 104; Bourke 2007, 1048) have also noted that editorial issues were commented on in over half of the reviews examined. In these studies, however, this category was surpassed by comments on the analysis and reporting of findings, the significance of the thesis, its approach, and its scope. These comments appeared in a greater number of reviews and took up a larger proportion of the text than editorial comments. Holbrook et al. (2004, 107) also observed that reviews of theses considered by the reviewers to be of low quality tend to be significantly longer and contain more editorial comments than reviews of high-quality theses (2004, 108). Both Holbrook et al. (2004, 107) and Bourke (2007, 1048) examined the relationship between the frequency of the first person being used and the final recommendation of the reviewer, showing that it was more frequent in positive reviews, while in negative ones “examiners are more likely to distance themselves from it by commenting in the third person” (Bourke 2007, 1049).

Finally, Starfield et al. (2017) investigated the roles that the dissertation reviewers took upon themselves by virtue of the grammatical and lexical choices they made, as well as the aspects they focused on in their evaluations. Apart from the role of the examiner (who evaluates the thesis based on the criteria given by the university), other roles included institution,

expert, editor, supervisor (providing formative comments and posing thought-provoking questions), peer, evaluator, reporter, commentator (voicing opinions), and viva examiner (posing questions that require the candidate to explain, clarify or reflect on their work). The study, however, did not provide the frequency distribution of these roles within the corpus.

2.2 Journal Article Peer Reviews

The now fairly extensive body of research on the language of journal article reviews provides a more detailed insight into how academics approach the various face-threatening speech acts (FTAs) associated with the genre.

One of the first studies investigating blind peer reviews seems to be that by Kouřilová (1998), in which she discussed FTAs and the targets of criticism in peer reviews of Slovak medical doctors' manuscripts submitted to Anglo-American journals. She reported a high number of unmitigated commands and blunt critical items (Kouřilová 1998, 110) and noted the fact that 30% of reviews in her corpus contained only criticism and no praise, despite the fact the articles had been accepted for publication (Kouřilová 1998, 113). The most frequent target of criticism was omission, and specifically the omission of data and references, while the most severe criticism (albeit much less frequent) was that of unjustified conclusions (Kouřilová 1998, 111–12). Based on her data, Kouřilová (1998, 113) concluded that peer reviews provided “an example of on-record criticism which appears to be rather exceptional in other written communication”. In a related study concerning peer reviews of medical manuscripts written by L2 users of English based in Italy, Mungra and Webber (2010, 47) also reported a high prevalence of negative comments (95%) in their corpus of predominantly “revise and resubmit” reviews. Here, 56% of the reviewers' comments concerned the contents of the articles (primarily incomplete literature, unsubstantiated claims, procedural problems, and a lack of explanation), and 44% concerned various aspects of language use. English language use was negatively commented on in 26 out of 29 reviews in Belcher's (2007, 8) study, and was also foregrounded in over half of review histories analysed by Lillis and Curry (2015, 133–34), who focused on articles written by L2 users of English.

Gosden's (2003) study analysed peer reviews of short technical articles. He categorized the comments into three groups according to Halliday's (1985, quoted in Gosden 2003, 95–96) metafunctions of language: *ideational* (comments on the absence of or an error/confusion in a technical detail), *interpersonal* (doubts about the originality of the research or significance of the claims, criticism of inadequate discussion, and pointing out problems with references), and *textual* (problems with the format and organization of the paper). The analysis indicated that it was not the technical details that the reviewers were most concerned about, but rather the interpersonal items. Language use problems were commented on in almost half of the peer reviews under investigation (Gosden 2003, 99).

Hewings (2004) adopted a quantitative lexical approach to the analysis of the aspects evaluated by peer reviewers. He generated concordances for evaluative adjectives occurring in his corpus of 228 peer reviews of *English for Specific Purposes* articles, and identified the evaluated entity within these concordances. The entities were then categorized into nine classes: *paper*, *expression*, *claim*, *analysis*, *goal*, *evidence*, *literature*, *procedure*, and *knowledge*.

Of these, the first four accounted for about 20% of evaluative acts each. The *paper* category comprised mostly positive evaluative acts, while *expression* and *claim* mostly negative ones (Hewings 2004, 260). The evaluative adjectives were then grouped into eight categories according to their core meaning, with the categories of *interest*, *suitability*, and *importance* featuring mostly positive ones, whereas the categories of *comprehensibility* and *sufficiency* mostly negative ones (2004, 265). The author concluded that “[t]he reviewers expressed their preference for papers to be written accurately and in an understandable way” (2004, 268). Hewings (2004, 270) also noted that “revise and resubmit” papers received longer reviews due to the fact that the reviewers took it upon themselves to assist the authors in improving their manuscripts. Unfortunately, the study design did not consider hedging/boosting devices within the concordances as ways of softening/strengthening praise and criticism expressed by the adjectives.

Fortanet-Gómez and Ruiz-Garrido (2010), however, did explicitly focus on attitude markers and hedging and boosting devices in their investigation of business organization and linguistics articles reviews. In both subcorpora, attitude markers were the most numerous ones, followed by hedges and then boosters, with the linguistics subcorpus featuring a slightly higher occurrence rate of both (2010, 247). When the authors compared their results to those of Hyland (2005, quoted in Fortanet-Gómez and Ruiz-Garrido 2010, 248), they noted a lower occurrence of hedges and higher occurrence of boosters and attitude markers in reviews as compared to actual research articles in both fields. This indicates that blind reviews do indeed feature more direct and personal language than is the norm in public academic genres. This finding was further corroborated by the study of Nobarany and Booth (2014), who were interested in strategies that the reviewers used to mitigate criticism in the corpus of 165 open (i.e. signed and publicly available) peer reviews from the field of ICT. The vast majority of critical comments (85%) were mitigated by at least one politeness strategy as described by Brown and Levinson (1987), and only 15% were bald on-record; of these, half concerned minor writing issues (1987, 1053–54). Two thirds of critical comments were mitigated by at least one negative politeness strategy (most commonly hedging), 45% by at least one positive politeness strategy (most commonly complimenting), and about 4% by off-record politeness strategies (Nobarany and Booth 2014, 1054–56). This study clearly showed that once the reviews were not “occluded”, on-record criticism decreased sharply.

One of the most comprehensive linguistic studies of blind peer reviews to date is that by Paltridge (2017), who examined 97 reviews submitted to the journal *English for Specific Purposes*, discussing, among others, the typical sequencing of moves, praised and criticized features, politeness strategies, stance markers, and roles taken on by the reviewers as observed in four types of reviews: Accept, Minor Revisions, Major Revisions (the longest on average), and Reject. Overall, in agreement with Belcher (2007, 8), *topic* was the most frequently praised feature of the reviewed articles, while *methods*, *results*, *language use and style*, *discussion/significance*, and *clarity* were the most common targets for criticism, especially within the Major Revisions and Reject reviews (Paltridge 2017, 56–62). As far as the politeness strategies utilized within the reviews are concerned, the most common positive politeness strategy was approval. In many cases, approval was used as a mitigating device to soften the impact of

the forthcoming criticism (102, 105, 107). Criticism/disagreement was also found to be frequently mitigated by indirectness – with the exception of Reject reviews. These reviews, along with Major Revisions, also contained the smallest percentage of hedging devices (108), which Paltridge (2017, 131) interpreted as the desire of the reviewers not to appear uncertain about their judgments.

2.3 Scholarly Book Reviews

In contrast to blind peer reviews of journal articles, scholarly book reviews are signed public evaluations presented both to the author of the book and to the wider research community within the field. Facework is therefore a much more serious concern (Hyland 2004, 41).

In his seminal book on academic discourses, Hyland (2004) investigated the expression and distribution of praise and criticism in an extensive corpus of 160 book reviews from eight fields. Within this corpus, praise appeared to be more frequent (58%) than criticism (this was especially notable for the fields of electrical and mechanical engineering) (2004, 49), which is in contrast to findings reported on blind peer reviews. Hyland (2004, 46–47) noted, however, that praise was frequently associated with global features of the work, while criticism tended to target more specific issues. When a book was being criticized on a global level, the reviewers utilized various strategies to mitigate this extremely face-threatening act, most frequently hedging (especially using modal verbs and *seem*), personal attribution and praise-criticism pairs (2004, 48, 55). Furthermore, criticism almost never appeared at the start of the review and closed the review in only 20% of the cases (2004, 52, 53).

Itakura and Tsui (2011) compared praise and criticism strategies in book reviews published in English and Japanese linguistics journal. In the English subcorpus, the proportion of mitigated and unmitigated criticism was identical (2011, 1372) to that found by Hyland (2004, 55); the Japanese subcorpus showed a lower proportion of unmitigated criticism and featured some strategies that did not appear in the English one at all, such as rhetorical questions, self-denigration, and recasting problems as potential for future research (Itakura and Tsui 2011, 1373–75). In both subcorpora, hedging was by far the most common mitigation device (2011, 1372). This was not so for Italian book reviews, as analysed by Diani (2017, 72), which not only featured very few instances of hedged criticism but also a much lower number of critical comments in total as compared to Diani's English subcorpus.

3 Hedges and Boosters

When Lakoff (1973, 471) first applied the term “hedge” to expressions like *sort of*, he also compared and linked the use of hedges, or “deintensifiers”, to “intensifiers”, as exemplified by *very*. From the very beginning, then, hedges and boosters have been considered related devices which, however, have the opposite function in expressing the degree of certainty.

Hedges are usually listed among typical features of academic discourse. Their role is to mitigate the impact of a statement, express uncertainty, contribute to politeness, or indicate a lack of commitment to the content of a proposition, its truthfulness or accuracy (Hyland 1998b, 162–84). They are also often used with the intention to soften the impact of potentially

confrontational or assertive claims, to acknowledge a different point of view or “to adopt a less threatening authorial voice” (Hyland and Diani 2009, 11). Typical examples of hedges used in academic discourse are modal verbs like *may*, *might*, or *could*, adjectives (e.g. *probable*), and adverbs (e.g. *perhaps*, *seemingly*).

Boosters, on the other hand, emphasize the speaker’s confidence, assertiveness, or conviction in the truthfulness or accuracy of a statement (Hyland 1998a, 350), thus making it more impactful and persuasive. Boosting is often expressed by extreme adjectives like *supreme*, *unique*, or *outstanding*, or adverbial modifiers (e.g. *very*, *exceptionally*, *undoubtedly*).

When investigating the types of hedging used in PhD reviews, a good starting point is Hyland’s (1996, 477–90) widely used classification of hedges as content- and reader-oriented. Within this taxonomy, content-oriented hedges are further subdivided into accuracy-oriented (of attribute or reliability) and writer-oriented. For the purposes of the present research, though, a slight alteration proposed by Dontcheva-Navratilova (2016, 166) seems more suitable. Both hedges and boosters can be classified as either content-oriented or participant-oriented. The former reflect the accuracy and reliability of the proposition, the latter the interaction between the sender and receiver, thus including both reader- and writer-oriented expressions.

It can be safely stated that the vast majority (if not all) of the hedges and boosters identified in critical comments within this corpus are participant-oriented, as criticism is in its nature a type of interaction between the discourse participants.

4 Methodology

4.1 Corpus Description

The corpus for the present investigation consists of 32 dissertation thesis reviews written in the English language, with a total size of 28,950 words. The reviews were selected from a publicly available digital archive of a Czech technical university based on their recency (all reviews are from early 2020s) and with subject diversity in mind. They were categorized into five groups by field: M (Mechanical Engineering), E (Electrical Engineering), H (Chemical Engineering), I (Information Technologies), and C (Combined research). The number of reviews in each group is not equal, but it reflects the number of English-written dissertations and reviews in the given field at this university.

The 32 reviews concern a total of 20 dissertations, since some dissertations featured two reviews in the English language and some only one. All the reviews were positive in tone (five lacked criticism altogether), recommending the respective dissertations for defence, with one notable exception in which the reviewer judged the dissertation to be only slightly above the acceptability line.

The average length of a review is 905 words, with the shortest review being 315 words and the longest 2,090 words. Three were written in the form of a letter, 15 represented a filled-in form (typically provided by the technical university), and 14 were a plain text.

As far as we were able to ascertain from various internet sources, the reviewers represent 15 different nationalities, four of them being L1 users of English with four different national standards. The majority (28) of reviewers are EFL users of various nationalities and countries of residence (including Anglophone countries). This is consistent with and reflective of the status of English as the lingua franca of science and the high global mobility of academic workers.

One review had to be excluded from this research project due to its limited comprehensibility caused by the reviewer's unorthodox approach to the English language: in many cases it was simply impossible to interpret the illocutionary force of the utterance and identify it as praise or criticism.

4.2 Procedure

The procedure of corpus analysis for the purposes of the present article is best described as iterative. Working independently of each other, the two authors first identified instances of praise¹ and criticism (together with accompanying boosting and hedging devices) concerning any aspect of the dissertation and/or its author² in a subsample of four reviews. We then compared and discussed each other's findings, settling any differences in opinion and drawing a preliminary typology of areas frequently evaluated in the reviews. The same procedure was followed with the remaining 28 reviews with the additional step of identifying the evaluated aspects according to the previously proposed typology. Upon subsequent discussion the typology was further refined and amended, and the whole corpus was rechecked for consistency in terms of the refined typology.

4.3 Typology

With regard to the type of problems which were addressed by the reviewers, 11 different categories were identified. The category of IET (Institution, Equipment, and Research Teams) featured only praise, and is therefore not included in the present analysis. The categories and their descriptions along with typically criticized (or praised) features are shown in Table 1.

5 Results and Discussion

As already mentioned in the Methodology section, the corpus consists of 32 reviews with an average length of 905 words per review. The total number of critical remarks identified within the corpus was 345, i.e. 10.8 per review on average. The resulting figure is influenced by two kinds of extremes: five reviews contained no criticism at all and some others only very few instances of it; by contrast, the number of critical remarks in the review C5 was very high, at 63. Even so, this particular review was a positive one, and the aim of the reviewer seemed to have been to help the PhD candidate hone the resulting text to perfection before its publication, as most of the critical comments centred around minor language and typographical errors.

¹ Analysis of praise in dissertation reviews is outside of the scope of the present paper.

² The rare instances of evaluation aimed at entities unrelated to the scientific work of the candidates and their institutions were excluded from the analysis.

TABLE 1. Categories of praise and criticism.

Category	Description	Features criticized / praised
CTO	Choice of Topic, Topicality, and Originality	topicality and originality choice of the research topics and their significance <i>e.g. the ideas behind these are not entirely new</i>
MP	Methods and Procedures	assessment of the methodology and procedures comparison of the utilized methods against conventional practices as well as the latest trends prevalent in the field innovativeness of the procedures degree of methodical precision and systematicity <i>e.g. For example, choosing [...] would have resulted in a very different outcome.</i>
RR	Research Results	results obtained, their novelty and significance for the given research domain placing findings within a relevant framework effectivity of the investigation and data gathering <i>e.g. results are somewhat confusing</i>
DA	Data Analysis	candidate's ability to work with the obtained data data interpretation and contextualization <i>e.g. analysis of resulting performance figures is also quite minimal</i>
AFD	Applicability and Further Development	potential for future development and further research practical applications <i>e.g. nor provides any advice for the followers</i>
CP	Candidate and Publications	publication of the results at conferences, in journals and conference proceedings candidate's personal and professional qualities, abilities, and expertise <i>e.g. journal [...] with not a good reputation in the field</i>
LS	Language and Style	spelling, grammar, readability <i>e.g. occasional grammatical and spelling errors</i>
TSF	Thesis Structure and Form	formal aspects of the dissertation – formatting, citations, graphs, tables, figures, and images structural integrity of the work, coherence <i>e.g. formatting not always consistent</i>
FEI	Factual Errors and Inconsistencies	omissions, inconsistencies, lack of clarity, and incompleteness of information factual errors <i>e.g. parameter [...] is sometimes omitted in the conditioning</i>
DT	Dissertation Thesis	quality of the dissertation as a whole meeting the objectives, requirements, standards, and norms validation of the hypotheses formulaic expressions of defence recommendations <i>e.g. such a text [would be] also more interesting</i>
IET	Institution, Equipment, and Teams	affiliated institution equipment funding research teams and supervisors no criticism identified, only praise

Table 2 below provides the results as to the number of reviews in each field within the corpus, the number of critical comments identified, and the area of assessment these comments relate to.

TABLE 2. The number of critical remarks identified within the corpus by the fields and categories.

Field (No. of reviews)	Criticism (ApR ³)	CTO	MP	RR	DA	AFD	CP	LS	TSF	FEI	DT	IET
M (8)	96 (12)	2	6		3	1	2	5	15	61	1	
E (5)	56 (11.2)		12	3	6		1	1	6	25	2	
H (6)	29 (4.8)							7	12	8	2	
I (5)	44 (8.8)	1	9	1	1			1	4	26	1	
C (8)	120 (15)		5		9		3	36	8	58	1	
Total (32)	345 (10.8)	3	32	4	19	1	6	50	46	177	7	0
Percentage	100%	0.9%	27.8%	1.2%	5.5%	0.3%	1.7%	14.5%	13.3%	51.3%	2%	0%

Comparing the different fields of study represented in the corpus, the field of Chemical Engineering (H) appears to deviate from the others in that all critical comments fell within only three of 11 observed categories, as Table 2 shows. It is also markedly less numerous than other groups. The opposite can be observed with regard to the Combined Research (C) field, in which criticism was by far the most common, albeit not aimed at the choice of topic and originality, research results, and potential for further development.

The differences in the resulting numbers and their proportions in the individual categories only confirm the initial impression formed upon the first cursory reading of the reviews, namely that the texts within this genre are much more varied and far less formalized and stylized than one might be led to expect, thus further corroborating previously reported findings as to the “idiosyncratic” nature of the genre (Lovat et al. 2002, para. 3; Johnston 1997, 336).

By far the most frequent category in criticism was FEI (Factual Errors and Inconsistencies), as slightly over half of all critical remarks (177, representing 51.3%) identified in the corpus fell within this category.⁴ The problems discussed by the reviewers ranged from rather formal inconsistencies in numbering and formatting to factual errors. Consequently, the severity of the criticized items varied from the isolated oversights, which seemed to be mentioned not as a form of reproach but rather as a suggestion for further improvement before the publication of the thesis, to instances of omissions which the reviewers found rather vexing and, therefore, in need of clarification, explanation, and additional details.

Figure 1 below clearly shows how FEI dominates not only in the number of critical remarks, but also in the number of reviews in which this category features, at 24 out of 32.

The second most numerous category was Language and Style (LS, 50, representing 14.5%), immediately followed by Thesis Structure and Form (TSF, 46, i.e. 13.3%), as visualized

³ An average per one review.

⁴ The percentages were rounded to one decimal place.

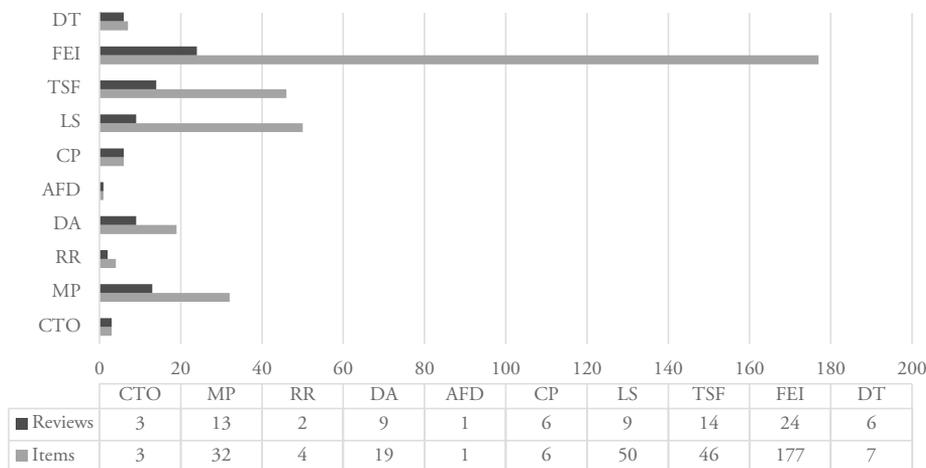


FIGURE 1. The number of occurrences of individual categories in the corpus and the number of reviews in which they feature.

in Figure 1. Some of the comments regarding the language use and style were very general, merely mentioning the fact that some errors and typos occurred, as examples 1 and 2 show,

- (1) *Generally, the thesis is full of grammar problems and typos*
- (2) *occasional grammatical and spelling errors that can be easily corrected*

others specifically indicated the expressions which the reviewer found problematic (examples 3 and 4):

- (3) *I would recommend rephrasing the term [...] with one of the terms mentioned above.*
- (4) *The author should have paid better attention to [...] using the correct form of irregular past tense (not grinded but ground)*

It needs to be mentioned, however, that 30 out of 50 occurrences of LS criticism (mostly very minute ones) were found in one particular review, somewhat skewing the results presented in Figure 1. In this review, the reviewer chose to point out all the individual occurrences of formal and language imperfections and suggested improvements. After some consideration, we decided not to exclude it from our corpus because, while it may represent an outlier, we cannot be sure how (in)frequently this very detailed language editing work really occurs. In other words, we do not know which way the sampling error goes (should we label it as such). Previous research on reviews suggests that this genre tends to be very idiosyncratic and that language-related comments are frequent (e.g. Johnston 1997). That said, we are aware that this particular review could potentially represent a confound, and for the sake of transparency believe it important to note here that were it not included in the corpus the percentage of LS criticism would decrease from 50 (14.5%) to 20 (7.1%),⁵ as seen in Figure 2 below.

⁵ The resulting numbers in TSF would, in such case, also differ from those presented here. The proportions, however, would not be as significantly influenced as in LS. The percentage of TSF in the whole corpus would even increase from 51.3% to 53.5%.

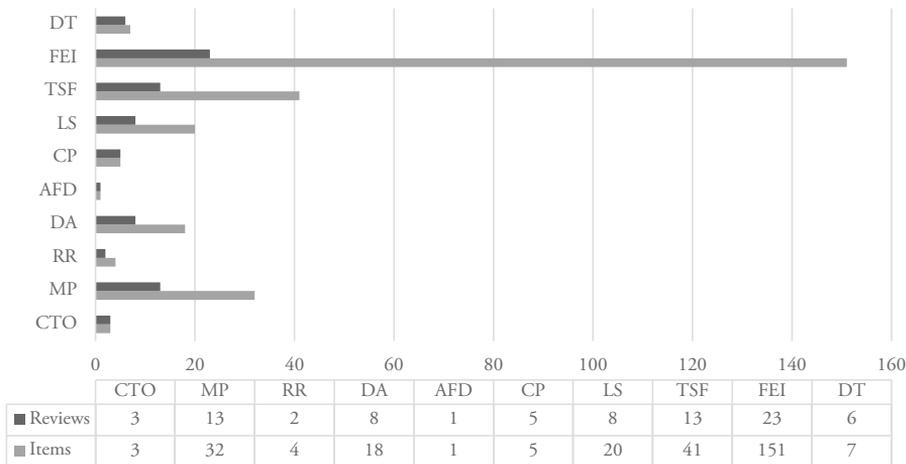


FIGURE 2. The number of occurrences of individual categories of criticism in the corpus, C5 excluded.

The criticism of formal and structural integrity of the theses (TSF) was also relatively frequent, as shown in Table 2, representing 13.3% of the items observed in 14 reviews. In MP the reviewers scrutinized the methods and procedures and in 13 reviews they expressed their reservations, utilizing 32 critical items (9.3%). The process of data analysis (DA) was considered as lacking in 19 items (5.5%). The research results (RR) were critically commented on in only four instances (1.2%), three of which occurred in one review. Interestingly, the second review of the same thesis did not contain any such objection.

The categories relating to the candidates' knowledge, publications and qualities (CP) and the dissertation theses as a whole (DT) were not frequently criticized, with six items (1.7%) in six reviews and seven items (2%) in six reviews, respectively. Quite surprisingly, two critical remarks on DT were identified in one rather positive review containing only 11 objections altogether.

The least common categories in criticism were the choice of topic (CTO), with only three instances (0.9%), and applicability (AFD), which was commented on only once (0.3%). The category of IET, in which praise related to the institution, research teams, equipment and funding was identified, did not occur in the criticism at all (see Table 2).

Regarding the distribution of the categories within the corpus, critical comments related to factual errors and inconsistencies (FEI) appeared in the majority of reviews, with the exception of those with no occurrence of criticism at all (five altogether) and three reviews in which the sparse criticism was related to other categories, as Figure 2 shows.

One such review featured a single critical comment:

(5) *the ideas behind these are not entirely new*

which is even more marked for belonging to choice of topic, topicality, and originality (CTO) – a category which involved only three instances of criticism in the whole corpus.

In another review, only one DT-related item and one MP-related item were criticized:

- (6) *The thesis dissertation is relatively short, but complete*
- (7) *Why the [instrument] is not used directly [...]*

and in yet another the reviewer commented on thesis structure and form (TSF):

- (8) *Why are the articles you attached [...] not given in the PhD thesis [...]*

5.1 Hedges and Boosters

Most of the critical comments (61.7%) were hedged, and only very rarely did the reviewers opt for a boosted expression. To put this in numbers, direct criticism was observed in 30.7% of the cases, 4.3% of the critical comments contained both hedging and boosting, and just 3.2% of critical comments were boosted only (Figure 3 below).

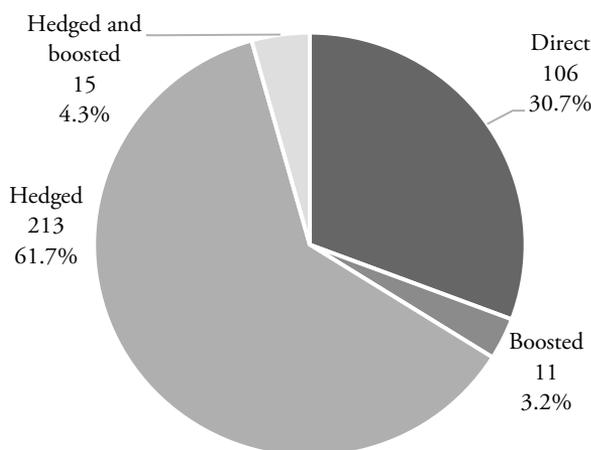


FIGURE 3. Proportion of hedged and boosted items in the criticism.

Table 3 below displays the frequency of hedging and boosting for individual categories of criticism. The only two categories for which direct criticism was more common than hedging were Language and Style (in line with previous findings) and Candidate and Publications. In CP the criticism was in some cases surprisingly forthright:

- (9) *[Candidate] does not make full use of this knowledge*

In one instance, it was aimed at publication in a disreputable journal:

- (10) *Negative aspect is the authorship of three papers in [...], which is a journal with dubious review process and with not a good reputation in the field*

Here, the reviewer criticized the poor standards of the journal as well as the candidate for having selected this particular venue for publishing otherwise good quality research.

In the category of LS, the ratio was 27 direct to 18 hedged items. However, the resulting numbers were strongly influenced by the above-mentioned outlier review C5, in which 24 items out of 30 were direct and only six hedged. Criticism of those minute spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors was probably not considered threatening enough by the reviewer to warrant the use of hedging. If C5 were not included, however, the resulting ratio would be three direct to 12 hedged critical items (i.e. a lower ratio than for the corpus as a whole), indicating that when language and style are criticized as a whole rather than on a per item basis, the perceived severity of face threat is greater, leading to the use of mitigating devices.

TABLE 3. Proportion of hedged and boosted items in criticism by category (in brackets with C5 excluded).

Category	Criticism Total	Direct	Boosted	Hedged	Hedged Boosted
CTO	3			3	
MP	32	1	1	29	1
RR	4			4	
DA	19 (18)	4	1	14 (13)	
AFD	1		1		
CP	6 (5)	3		2 (1)	1
LS	50 (20)	27 (3)	1	18 (12)	4
TSF	46 (41)	16 (14)	3	25 (22)	2
FEI	177 (151)	54 (38)	4	113 (103)	6
DT	7	1		5	1
IET	0				
Total	345 (282)	106 (64)	11	213 (192)	15

5.1.1 Hedges: Modal Verbs

Modal verbs represent a significant group of hedging expressions utilized within the corpus – on average 36% of critical remarks contained a modal verb. Slightly over half (54%) of all hedged criticism utilized modal verbs.

By far the most numerous modal verb used to mitigate the impact of a critical remark was *would*, with 55 occurrences, followed by *should* (33), *could* (20), *can* (7) and *may* (6). The least common was *might* (3), indicating the lowest degree of certainty (see Figure 4).

The average number of critical remarks in one review was 10.8, out of these 7.1 were hedged and in 3.9 instances modal verbs were used as hedging devices. Table 4 shows the number of items identified along with the average numbers for the individual disciplinary fields and the whole corpus.

In addition to a very low occurrence of criticism in the Chemical Engineering reviews, on average only 4.8 occurrences per text, most of them (86.2%) were hedged and 60% of these involved a modal verb.

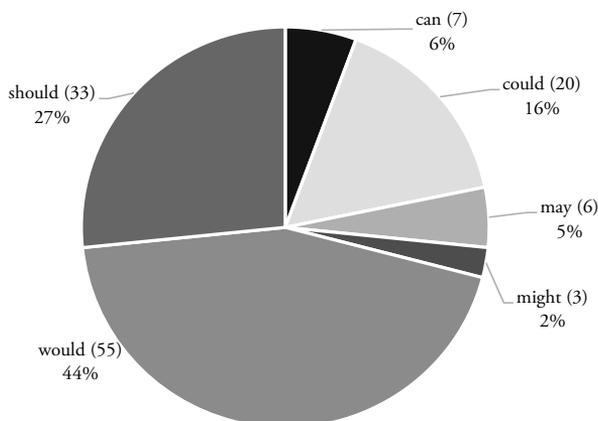


FIGURE 4. Proportion of modal verbs used as hedging devices in the corpus.

The distribution of modal verbs among the individual reviews is very uneven. The most obvious explanation seems to be the personal preferences of the reviewers. However, zooming in on the reviews with a markedly high number of hedging modal verbs, we found out that the reviewers were either L1 users of English or affiliated at a university in an English-speaking country.

In C5, which is in many respects exceptional, we identified an extremely high number of occurrences of *should* used as a form of recommendation for the improvement of the text, and possibly as a guidance for the author’s future publishing endeavours:

- (11) *The sentences [...] should be reworded.*
- (12) *A sentence should not start with a number.*

TABLE 4. Distribution of modal verbs in the texts.

Field	Criticism	Hedged / Boosted Hedged	can	could	may	might	would	should	Modal Verbs Total
M (8)	96	65/8	3	10	3	2	19	2	39
M (ApR)	12	8.1/1	0.4	1.3	0.4	0.3	2.4	0.3	4.9
E (5)	56	34/8	0	1	0	0	6	3	10
E (ApR)	11.2	6.8/1.6	0	0.2	0	0	1.2	0.6	1.3
H (6)	29	25	4	4	0	0	3	4	15
H (ApR)	4.8	4.2	0.7	0.7	0	0	0.5	0.7	2.5
I (5)	54	36/3	0	3	2	0	13	4	22
I (ApR)	10.8	7.2/0.6	0	0.6	0.4	0	2.6	0.8	4.4
C (8)	120	53	0	2	1	1	14	20	38
C (ApR)	15	6.6	0	0.3	0.1	0.1	1.8	2.5	4.8
Total (32)	345	213/15	7	20	6	3	55	33	124
Total (ApR)	10.8	6.7/0.5	0.2	0.6	0.2	0.1	1.7	1	3.9

⁶ An average per one review,

5.1.2 Hedges: Questions

The strength of criticism was frequently mitigated not by means of lexical resources but by grammatical ones. One of the most prominent among these was the use of interrogative sentences, which, therefore, had to be carefully contextualized (sometimes even researched) and discussed in the process of corpus analysis. Some of the interrogative forms were interpreted as showing genuine interest and encouraging discussion or “thinking aloud”. These “questions of the supervisor role” (Starfield et al. 2017, 61) were not considered to be hedged critical items:

- (13) *The study was performed in water-based electrolyte. [...] How would the results [...] change in solid biological tissue?*

Other questions, however, indicated that the reviewer did not consider the information sufficiently detailed, required clarification, or pointed out inconsistencies and errors:

- (14) *What is the correct form of the equation?*
(15) *Perhaps [parameter] would yield a better agreement?*

The ambiguity associated with posing a question like (15) above rather than stating the criticism directly provides both the reviewer and the candidate with face-protective manoeuvring space. Consequently, although questions are often backgrounded in the studies focusing on hedging expressions (e.g. Malášková 2009; Hyland 1998b), they were included here.

Altogether 47 questions which were used to soften the impact of potentially confrontational statements were identified in the whole corpus, usually suggesting that a piece of information was missing. Looking at their distribution in more detail, their utilization seems to depend on the personal preferences of each reviewer. For instance, in one review all but one hedged expression was modified by the use of the interrogative form of the sentence, as exemplified in (16):

- (16) *Why is PP2 placed in front of the [object]?*

Similarly, in another review, questions represented more than a half of the hedged criticism, with an example shown in (17):

- (17) *How were constants [...] selected to prevent oscillations [...]*

whereas in a similar review from the same field, only two out of 26 items were hedged with a question.

The above-mentioned instances fall within one field, namely that of Mechanical Engineering, in which questions as hedging devices were used more frequently (on average 2.4 instances per review), but not very markedly so in comparison to the average of 1-1.4 hedging questions per review in other fields. Moreover, the analysis of the rest of the corpus suggests that tendencies towards using or not using interrogatives to hedge the propositions are to a large extent a matter of personal style.

5.1.3 Words with Positive and Negative Connotations

As already mentioned above, not all questions within the corpus were used as a form of criticism. This was one of the reasons why it was not deemed appropriate to analyse the corpus in any way other than manually. In addition, words with positive connotations were sometimes used to criticize, as (18) shows, where two intrinsically positive words *interesting* and *knowledge* were used to criticize the lack of detail, while some words usually associated with a negative evaluation were applied as praise, e.g. in (19), in which the expression *reservations* carries a negative connotation but is used to express praise:

(18) *it would have been interesting to get deeper knowledge about the development*

(19) *I have no methodological reservations.*

Once the critical remarks found in the corpus were compiled, it became clear that words usually perceived as positive are often used in criticism, mainly in its hedged form. Among these the most numerous were *detail(ed)* with 17 occurrences across the whole corpus, *clear(ly) / clarify / clarity* (10 occurrences), and *correct(ly)* (nine occurrences). Other expressions identified included: *useful, fundamental, advisable / advice, insight(ful), interesting, readable, appreciate(ation), adequately, new, elaborate(d), like, (re)solve / solution, prefer, good, better, improve(ment), fluent, exactness, significant, consistent, intensively, opportunity, correspond, appropriate, help(ful), enrich, fruitful, optimal, benefit(cial), proper(ly), careful(ly), efforts, fine, complete(ness), relevant, importance, agree(ment), state-of-the-art, valid and valuable.*

In order to elicit a negative evaluation from positively connoted words, they were either combined with a putative expression, e.g. *might have been useful, it would be advisable, I would appreciate*, and *author could elaborate more on that*, or with negation, e.g. *the ideas behind these are not entirely new* and *it is not clear*, since “the use of negation has complex pragmatic implications, often related to the need for mitigation when a face-threatening act is expressed” (Giannoni 2009, 20).

It may seem rather surprising that negatively connoted words are used for criticism in the reviews less frequently than intrinsically positive words, the rate being 116 (positive) to 86 (negative) occurrences. The variety of expressions was also different, with positive expressions exhibiting a slightly greater range (45 to 37). The most common expressions with a negative connotation were *miss(ed)ling* (15 occurrences across the corpus), followed by *problem* (seven), and *difficult(y)* (six). The rest of the expressions, such as *mistake, misleading, mismatch, minimal, error, typo, deficiency, lack(ing), limit(ed)ing/ingtion, negative, merely, confuse(ing)ion,* and *omitted* were less common. Many expressions occurred only once in the corpus: *sadly, inaccuracy, criticism, weakness, neglect, poor, dubious, overestimate, corrupted, discrepancy, hurdle, awkward, inconsistency, inconclusive, rudimentary, unclear, semi-relevant, unwanted, odd, expense, and suspicion.*

In general, criticism containing a positively connoted word combined with a modal verb or a negation seems to be considered more appropriate by the reviewers than criticism featuring a hedging expression and a negatively connoted word.

5.1.4 Hedges: Personal Pronouns

Even though reviewing dissertation theses should ideally feature a high degree of objectivity, the act of evaluation is always highly personal. In addition to being indicators of subjectivity, the personal pronoun *I* and possessive *my* (see examples 20 and 21) were interpreted as hedging by personal attribution, as identified by Hyland (1998b, 181–82). The use of *I* / *my* limits the range of criticism to one person – the reviewer – and indicates that other readers may think otherwise (Hyland 2004, 57).

(20) [...] *in my opinion*, [method] *is not completely new*

(21) [methodology] *is less clear to me*

While the possessive *my* occurred only twice within the whole corpus, and that only in one review in the expression *in my opinion*, there were 39 instances of the personal pronoun *I* and one of *me*, see (21) above, used as a mitigator of criticism in 11 reviews. Judging by the irregularity of its distribution within the corpus, hedging by personal attribution using *I* seems to be subject to personal preference and idiolect of the reviewer.

In some cases, *I* was the only hedging device in the utterance:

(22) I *miss the list of symbols and abbreviations.*

Elsewhere it was combined with other devices, e.g. hypotheticals:

(23) *I would have liked to see more about [...].*

or adverbs:

(24) I *find the description of [phenomenon] rather brief.*

5.1.5 Boosters

As already mentioned above, boosted disapproval was very rare, and only eight reviewers resorted to using it. Only 26 instances distributed across the categories were found in the whole corpus, out of which 11 were boosted and 15 were both boosted and hedged (see Figure 3 above). The motivation for the latter could be the feeling of strong disagreement combined with the sense of necessity to mitigate the impact on the candidate and, possibly, other potential readers:

(25) Sadly, *the efforts of the candidate [...] seem rather minimal.*

in which the impact of the strong adjective *minimal* is softened by two hedging expressions: *seem* and *rather*.

The most frequently occurring boosting devices were adverbs: *very* (6), *even* (2), *certainly*, *much*, *clearly*, and *only*:

(26) [a parameter is] clearly *outside the range defined*

(27) *the latter one is only generically presented*

In addition, some reviewers used emphasizing parallel structures:

(28) *yet it gives the reader neither a good overview nor provides any advice*

(29) *such a text would not only be better readable, but also more interesting*

6 Conclusion

Within the corpus of 32 dissertation thesis reviews representing five distinct fields at a Czech technical university, all instances of criticism related to the PhD thesis or the candidate were identified and categorized by the features criticized. Then each critical item was considered in terms of the use of hedging and boosting devices. The category of modal verbs and the use of positively and negatively connoted words were scrutinized more closely.

After a careful analysis, it became clear that hedging prevails not only over boosting, but also over direct expressions of criticism. This is motivated by the fact that neither the reviews nor the candidates are anonymous, and unmitigated disapproval, possibly accompanied by direct requests for correction and clarification, therefore presents a serious face threat (Brown and Levinson 1987) to all parties involved. The reviewers strive to provide as objective evaluation as possible without acquiring a reputation of a hypercritical person, and often attempt to prevent the unpleasantness of a direct confrontation. At the same time, the reviewer may recognize the candidate as a professional and future colleague, and therefore wish to avoid offending them (positive face concern) or imposing on them (negative face concern). Lastly, the review is not aimed at the candidate alone, but also at the affiliate institution and, in particular, the supervisor, whose responsibility it was to advise and guide the PhD student on their research journey and approve of the resulting manuscript. Very often the reviewer and supervisor come from the same research community, have met at conferences, read each other's papers, and perhaps even cooperated in the past: "the academic world is a small one and it may be prudent not to antagonize those within it" (Hyland and Diani 2009, 9). All the above concerns contribute to the decision to mitigate critical comments by hedging expressions in order to cater to the face needs of all parties involved.

Our results correspond to the findings of previous studies concerned with evaluative language of scholarly reviews, namely that signed reviews tend to mitigate critical remarks to a much greater extent than anonymous ones (Kouřilová 1998, 110; Nobarany and Booth 2014, 1054–56). The use of hedging devices is also prone to be subject to the personal and cultural preferences of the reviewer. The fact that boosted expressions of criticism were so much rarer confirms that on the interpersonal level it is preferred not to criticize directly, not to mention enhancing the criticism with a booster.

Interesting results also arose from the quantification of the occurrences of critical remarks within individual categories. Factual errors and inconsistencies seemed to be the main concern of the reviewers, which may be of interest to future candidates when writing their theses. The second most numerous group of critical remarks was associated with language and style. The reviewers did not shun direct criticism so much, as the weaknesses in this category were not likely to lead to the rejection of the thesis. In mentioning the errors, they inherently offered their assistance in improving the text before publication, which is in line

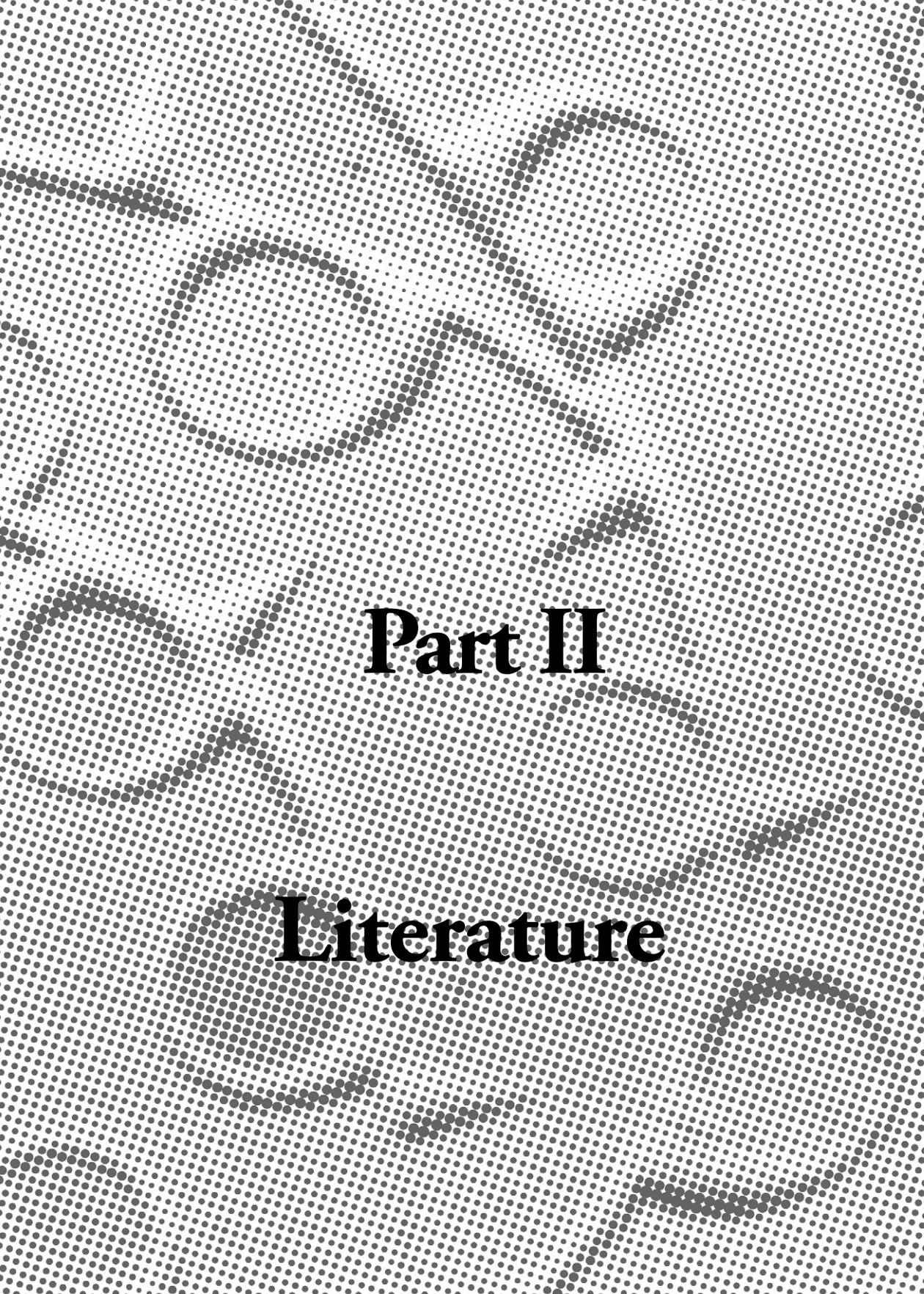
with previous findings regarding both thesis and article reviews. In the future, it will be interesting to compare how these results correlate with the instances of praise within the same corpus.

In accordance with the initial expectations, the hedges and boosters used in the reviews were participant oriented. The texts are supposed to be evaluative and it is obvious that expressing criticism cannot be entirely avoided, unless, of course, the dissertation is deemed brilliant and absolutely flawless. Such instances are, however, comparatively rare. The very purpose of the given genre is to communicate praise or criticism, agreement or disagreement, and acceptance or refusal. By means of this study and future research we would like to enrich the discussion and research on different academic genres by highlighting the features of the texts which are, in our opinion, crucial for the researcher's professional success. At the same time, the (ir) regularities discovered here may also serve as a source of information and inspiration for the reviewers whose concern is, perhaps, not linguistics, but instead to produce comprehensible, balanced and well-formulated texts.

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Part II

Literature

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Traumatic Memory in Eve Ensler's *The Apology* (2019)

ABSTRACT

Eve Ensler's memoir *The Apology* (2019) traces Ensler's growing up with an abusive father who raped her during her childhood and never apologized for the damage he caused. Ensler, now a successful woman in her sixties, thus imagines her father's apology and details everything she was going through. Unlike Caruth's theory of traumatic *aporia* where painful experiences are inherently contradictory and can never be grasped completely, Ensler's act of writing the unspoken words of her father points to the fact that trauma can be healed through writing. As Richard McNelly and Joshua Pederson claim, it is precisely through writing that the victim can gain control over the act of recalling, helping the survivor to remake the self. Thus, in Ensler's memoir, Caruth's traumatic amnesia is replaced by the power of remembered and written detail to enact healing. This essay addresses issues of incest and rape through the lens of more recent trauma theory by paying attention to an imagined act of the perpetrator's apology. By evoking pseudo memories, Ensler tries to understand her childhood trauma and how it affected her as a person. She establishes herself as a truth-teller and the survivor of intergenerational trauma with the ability to break the cycle of abuse, which is exactly what she does by writing *The Apology*.

Keywords: concept of time, memory, childhood trauma/pain, dissociation, art as a form of self-expression

Travmatični spomin v *The Apology* (2019) Eve Ensler

IZVLEČEK

Avtobiografija Eve Ensler *The Apology* (2019) opisuje njeno odraščanje z nasilnim očetom, ki jo je v otroštvu posilil in se nikoli ni opravičil za škodo, ki jo je povzročil. Zato si avtorica, zdaj uspešna ženska pri šestdesetih, predstavlja očetovo opravičilo, v katerem podrobno opisuje vse, kar je prestala. Za razliko od Caruthove teorije travmatične aporije, po kateri so boleče izkušnje v osnovi protislovne in jih ni mogoče v celoti dojeti, Eve Ensler z zapisovanjem neizrečenih besed svojega očeta pokaže, da je travmo mogoče pozdraviti s pisanjem. Kot trdita Richard McNelly in Joshua Pederson lahko žrtev prav z pisanjem pridobi nadzor nad spominjanjem, kar ji pomaga ponovno oblikovati svoje sebstvo. Tako v avtoričinih spominih Caruthovo travmatsko amnezijo nadomešča moč zapomnjenih in zapisanih podrobnosti, ki omogočajo ozdravitev. Ta esej obravnava vprašanja incesta in posilstva skozi prizmo novejše teorije travme, pri čemer se osredotoča na domišljjsko opravičilo storilca. Z vzbujanjem »psevdo« spominov poskuša avtorica razumeti svojo otroško travmo in kako je ta vplivala nanjo. S pisanjem knjige *The Apology* se avtorica vzpostavi kot vir resnice in kot žrtev travme, ki je sposobna prekiniti začarani krog zlorab.

Ključne besede: pojem časa, spomin, otroška travma/bolečina, disociacija, umetnost kot oblika izražanja sebe

1 Introduction

Eve Ensler is an American playwright, feminist and activist who is best known for her extraordinary play *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) which she first performed off-Broadway as a one-woman show. She told an American journalist, Patt Mitchell (28 February, 2018), that she wanted to

focus on Valentine's Day as being a day that is safe and honoring and loving to women – and invite activists anywhere to perform *The Vagina Monologues* and whatever money they raise from the performance, stays in their communities supporting survivors.

Within a year, V-Day was created with a bold mission: to end violence against women and girls globally. Ensler is also known as an activist for women's rights in the aftermath of the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kenya, and her related TED talks have been viewed by hundreds of thousands of viewers. Her activism for women's rights is partly the consequence of betrayal and abuse she suffered as a little girl, something she writes about in *The Apology* (2019).

Her memoir traces the life of a girl who has to learn how to embrace herself after repeated sexual abuse by one of her closest family members. This little girl is Eve herself, and she recalls living with an abusive father who raped her from the age of five to the age of 16 and never apologized for the damage he caused. Therefore, she dedicates her memoir “to every woman still waiting for an apology”. For Ensler, the apology is a humbling act – it is “an act of intimacy and connection which requires great self-knowledge and insight” (2019, 9). Ensler knows that her father is long dead and he would never say these words to her. So the apology must be imagined in order to forgive her father and come to terms once and for all with the feelings of shame and guilt. She thus represents herself through the imagined eyes of her father, and her own memories are represented as her father's. She imagines how he must have felt when she was born, when he held her in his arms for the first time and when he started abusing her. This essay aims to address the issues of incest and rape through the lens of recent trauma theory, recognizing the thin line between a traumatic identity and trauma culture.

Although scholars such as Roger Luckhurst have insisted that we live in a trauma culture where we are continuously exposed to traumatic events on TV and social media, thus participating in the “pathological public sphere”, there is still a lot of controversy about how traumatic experiences are being remembered. One of the crucial terms in trauma studies is the Derridean concept of *aporia*, which is about the process of bringing traumatic experiences to memory, often riven with an inherent contradiction. For Derrida *aporia* is “a blocking of passage, a stalling or hesitation, a foot hovering on the threshold, caught between advancing and falling back, between the possible and the impossible” (Derrida as qtd. in Luckhurst 2008, 6). Trauma theory of the 1990s – with Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman and Dori Laub, to name just a few – relied on poststructuralist theory and embraced the Derridean concept of undecidability, or the inherent contradictoriness of the traumatic experience. In the words of Cathy Caruth (1995, 4–5):

The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in

its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. And thus the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished.

Caruth thus posited that the force of traumatic experience arises precisely in the collapse of its understanding. Caruth and other early trauma theorists were trying to understand how traumatic memories work in the context of the Nazi atrocities, encompassed in the name of Auschwitz. In line with Adorno's famous statement "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbarous!", Western culture is at once contaminated by and complicit with Auschwitz, and traumatic identity lies at the root of many collective identities.

However, in the past 20 years poststructuralist trauma studies have been challenged by a number of authors claiming that the inability to speak about traumatic memories has to do with the wider cultural and social contexts of the victims. Thus, in 2003 Richard McNelly posited that trauma is both memorable and describable, and while "victims may choose not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they cannot" (McNelly as qtd. in Pederson 2014, 334). Lucy Bond and Stef Craps further contend that traumatic memory is slippery and dynamic (2020, 5): "blurring the boundaries between mind and body, memory and forgetting, speech and silence. It traverses the internal and the external, the private and the public, the individual and the collective."

While most trauma narratives represent the *aporetic* experience of trauma survivors, i.e. the undecidability and irrepresentability of the traumatic event, Ensler's memoir is different in that it confronts the gaps and silences of past traumatic memories by filling them up in writing. For example, Toni Morrison in *Beloved*, Pat Barker in *Regeneration Trilogy* or Miriam Toews in *Women Talking*, to name just a few, have tried to imitate the silence, gaps, erasures or unspeakability of trauma through literary genres and devices. On the other hand, Ensler's memoir purports to reveal all the details of her father's sexual abuse in chronological order by filling in the gaps and voicing the silences. Ensler therefore believes in the representability of traumatic experience, and uses realist accounts of her father's and her own lived experiences. She thus points to the intricacies of intergenerational trauma and proves that women should be trusted as truth-tellers and empathized with unconditionally.

2 The Personal as Intergenerational Trauma

Contemporary trauma theory has had very little to say about the mind of the perpetrator. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), her study of traumatic experiences and their consequences, Judith Herman (1992, 54) remembers the legal scholar Hannah Arendt and the scandal when she reported that Adolf Eichmann, a man who committed unfathomable crimes against Jews, had been certified as normal by half a dozen psychiatrists: "The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal." Still, as most studies have shown, in the case of mass killings such as the Holocaust, when "normal" first-time perpetrators are encouraged to participate in mass violence, the experience of killing unarmed civilians "may be associated with terror and horror" (Maguen et al. 2009, 442 as qtd. in McGlothlin 2020,

105) as well as with “physical disgust and moral abhorrence” (Munch-Jurišić 2014 as qtd. in McGlathlin 2020, 105) linked to traumatic stress. The perpetrators thus often suffer from PTSD in the aftermath of the atrocities they have committed. However, Evie’s father had no sense that what he had done was wrong, and this made him a monster with marked psychological pathologies. Such psychological pathologies he owed to his parents’ rejection of his authenticity,¹ and at the beginning of her memoir Ensler reimagines her father’s childhood years to figure out where the seeds of his abnormality lay. She describes him as a lonely child who was adored by his mother (2019, 14):

From the time I was conscious, I was made to believe I was better, smarter, more precious, more deserving than anyone around me. What I didn’t know was why. I still don’t. [...] I was my mother’s salvation. My mere existence would somehow resurrect her miserable marriage and redeem her suffering. I was light. I was darling. I was savior son. The idolized one is above you, beyond you. And so I was lonely. Excruciatingly lonely. The loneliness of the adored. [...] And I was indeed an object.

His father was Austrian and his mother German. Both were raised with the severest discipline and followed the teachings of Dr Schreber, who believed that children should be taught to obey and refrain from crying. Any physical demonstrations of affection like embracing, cuddling, or kissing were to be avoided at all cost. Ensler first introduces the reader to her father’s childhood years as she is trying to explain to herself what forces contributed to his monstrous nature. Apart from his parents’ coldness, his brother abused him by putting drops of alcohol in his eyes, hiding red ants in his underwear and convincing him something was wrong with the shape and size of his genitals. He would lock him in the closet for hours and tie him to the bedposts until his wrists were raw. Ensler thus clearly points out that her father’s trauma was intergenerational – his parents were cold and severe, and his brother clearly abused him, while he was given no protection from any member of his family. He never knew what genuine love and affection looked like.

As much as her father, little Evie was suffering from “betrayal blindness” – Jennifer Freyd’s term used for children being blind to their parents’ abusive behaviour (2020). Children, Freyd claims, cannot process the information that their parents, who are supposed to protect them, have in fact betrayed them in a significant way. In a normal situation the betrayed person could confront the one in power or escape from them, but the child is in the situation of voluntary and necessary captivity where neither fight nor flight is possible. Children are dependent on their parents for love and support and, when abused by them, repress the traumatic experiences. Her father repressed his childhood abuse by becoming an abuser himself, while Ensler repressed the horrible experiences of her father’s rape and torture until

¹ One of the most influential readings of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Barbara Johnson’s “My Monster/Myself” (1992), claims that the Creature’s monstrosity comes as the consequence of parental neglect and the rejection of the Creature’s authentic self. Reminiscent of the story of Oedipus whose parents cast him out to die, Victor Frankenstein suffers at the sight of his ugly creation, unaware that he is a kind and gentle soul, and is willing to let him die in the wilderness. The Creature is trying to establish contact with his life-giver but is repeatedly told that “there can be no community between me and you; we are enemies” (Chapter 10). Therefore, he turns into a serial killer, the perpetrator of the most atrocious crimes.

the age of 61, because repression is a form of motivated forgetting. Instead of becoming an abuser like her father, Ensler embarked on a path of healing through the writing of her memoir and the usage of pseudo memories as a healing device. In line with what Pederson and McNelly contend about the wider social context influencing the desire and the ability to speak about being abused, Ensler had to wait for the time to be right in order to tell her story (for her to be strong enough to be able to talk about it, and for the fourth wave of feminism to take place with other women's open testimonies of sexual abuse). She thus proves that traumatic experience is never just a matter of the perpetrator's psychopathology,² but also of a wider patriarchal social discourse which views men as arbiters of truth and power. Her father was born in the late 1920s and grew up surrounded by images of Hollywood actors like Errol Flynn, Gary Cooper, and Rudolph Valentino, all of them strikingly handsome and charming. Suddenly he realized that a charming man could get away with any behaviour, and charm became his fortification. He tried to leave "the tortured man" of his childhood behind, but eventually he resurfaced (2019, 24):

I drank him away. But all the while, Shadow Man plotted, seethed and stewed. His sense of betrayal, his bitterness, his rage grew like volcanic lava bubbling beneath the surface of my skin. He would not emerge until much later.

As Judith Herman confirmed in her numerous case studies, "the formation of a malignant negative identity is generally disguised by the socially conforming 'false self'" (1992, 80). It is obvious that Evie's parents were both hiding their authentic selves behind a façade. From the outside, they looked like a happily married couple with three children, Evie being the eldest. It is difficult to say whether they were in love, but they were certainly embracing their marriage as a performance: everything looking fabulous on the outside, while actually being a total wreck on the inside (2019, 26):

We were two solo performers who joined our strength in a crowd-pleasing duet, Arthur and Chris. So when people later made constant reference to us as Cary Grant and Doris Day, we knew we had arrived. We were pure invention, confection. We existed only in performance, and in those early years, our act was working.

When Evie was growing up in the suburban environment of the 1950s United States, where patriarchal values were prevalent and her parents were playing out a "a perfect couple", what happened within the home stayed within the home, so as not to jeopardize the public performance. It was a time when women were taught to look feminine and behave in feminine manner, to drop out of college and get married, to devote their lives to their families. It is

² With the advent of highly acclaimed series on Netflix such as *Monsters: The Lyle and Erik Menendez Story* (released September 19, 2024) about two brothers who shot their parents after being raped by their father and not protected by their mother, or *Baby Reindeer* (released April 11, 2024), in which a comedian is stalked by a woman, herself a victim of parental abuse, there has been an increasing interest in the psychology of the perpetrator. In both series human monstrosity happens as the direct consequence of parental abuse, and the viewers have access to the perpetrators' memories of their own childhood abuse. Intergenerational trauma plays out in both series: Lyle and Erik Menendez's father was emotionally, psychologically and sexually abused by his mother, while Martha, the woman who stalks Donny Dun, a Scottish comedian, was a neglected child who would often witness parental fights.

possible to imagine that Evie's mother was caught up in this trap of being a "perfect wife and mother" with no desires of her own. As Betty Friedan explained in her essay "The Problem that has No Name" (1963), published around the same time when Evie was born, women were generally

taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets, physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights – the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. (1963, 3)

Thus, in 1960s America, the happy American housewife was in fact anxious and depressed because she had given up on her purpose as an authentic human being with more to offer than being a good mother and wife. It is possible to imagine Evie's mother being caught up in this patriarchal narrative which taught women that they have no purpose whatsoever beyond devotion to their household and servitude to their husbands. Her father was a CEO and her mother had been his secretary; Ensler imagines that their sex must have been "perfunctory, a performance too" (2019, 27).

Upon Evie's birth, the Shadow Man woke up again, "his rapacious hunger charged with the fury of a thousand wild horses rushing the winds of their freedom" (2019, 30). But he waited until Evie was five years old when her limitless love and tenderness towards him became an intoxicant, feeding the 52-year-old Shadow Man inside him. This is when he started to make secret visits to her bedroom at night when "dream and memory are indecipherable" (2019, 39). Thus, by exerting coercive control, the father becomes the most powerful person in Evie's life until the age of 16 when she rebels for the first time and runs away from home. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, one of the staple works for poststructuralist approaches to trauma, Bessel Van Der Kolk asserts that "trauma is primarily remembered not as a story, a narrative with a beginning, middle and end, but as isolated sensory imprints: images, sounds, and physical sensations, that are accompanied by intense emotions, usually terror and helplessness" (2014, 70). Instead, Ensler weaves a teleological narrative of progression where details are slowly revealed – the "motivated forgetting" of her earlier years is now transformed into an imagined memorizing of all the details of her father's sexual abuse: first pretending to be her doctor and to soothe her to sleep by his inappropriate touches, and then violently raping her from the age of nine until one day, at the age of 16, she froze in bed like a possum protecting herself from a predator. That was the point when he stopped visiting her room at night, as he could not make love to her frozen, almost dead body. He was a paedophile but not a necrophiliac. Herman claims that such repeated abuse is "passively experienced as a dreaded but unavoidable fate and is accepted as an inevitable price of a relationship" (1992, 81). Later on, the survivor of such continuous abuse would have "profound deficiencies in self-protection" (Herman 1992, 81) choosing abusive partners. Thus Ensler's understanding of why she was suicidal in her early teens, why she ended up being in relationships where she would be the second best, why she enjoyed violent sex and why she struggled with alcohol and drug addiction, only comes in middle-age. Though she remembers only pieces of events, objects and fragments, her older-self is filling in the gaps of what her younger-self could not have understood.

3 Women as Truth-Tellers

Memoir, as a type of autobiography, or the story of that part of a person's life which was the most significant in building up their present self, presupposes an experience which is authentic and unique. Furthermore, it relies on the concept of intentionality – the writer talks about their life experiences with an honest intention, the intention of telling the truth. As early autobiographies from St Augustine to Rousseau have shown, to tell one's truth means to engage the readers in the act of identification. Rousseau hopes to gain acceptance within his community by exposing all the events of his private life, as he believes that one's truth has certain redemptive qualities. He will no longer be judged, but instead will be sympathized with. So, the early autobiographers participated in a representative structure in which one may stand for many. If on occasion they spoke about incidents and minor traumatic events, their lives were not affected by any serious traumatic experiences. On the other hand, the proliferation of traumatic experiences in the media today make it seem as though representing traumatic experience is easy, while it actually involves a paradox of intensified representativeness. As Gilmore (2001, 19) asserts, autobiography and trauma stand on opposite ends:

when self-representation and the representation of trauma coincide, the conflicting demands potentially make autobiography theoretically impossible: How can the exploration of trauma and the burden it imposes on memory be representative? How can the experience of a survivor of trauma stand for many? How can one tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, when facts, truth and memory combine in the representation of trauma to undermine rather than strengthen representativeness?

Enslér's *The Apology* shows how traumatic memories jeopardize the basic requirements of male/white/bourgeois Enlightenment autobiography in the sense that it does not ask the reader to identify with the narrative voice. Instead, she pleads for an empathic reader who would try to understand what she went through. Moreover, her intention to tell the truth is corroborated by the difficulty of representing traumatic experience.

Although the history of masculine autobiographical accounts taught us to trust the male voice, in the face of narratives of sexual abuse, we must suspend that trust. Women are indeed truth-tellers to be trusted, but in a patriarchal society they are often seen as liars. Within such society women are seen as liars even by other women, and the male truth is still the most powerful one (2019, 68):

I was brought up in a time when men were praised for controlling and withholding their emotions. They were admired for their steely steadfastness and knowing the way. They never apologized. They never asked questions. They never explained. They never revealed their hand. They didn't speak. [...] I see now that this particular notion of manhood is highly questionable, as great violence is always required to preserve it.

Sadly, as this passage is an imagined introspective reflection by her father, the real man would never come to terms with his toxic masculinity. From his childhood, tenderness and kind-heartedness were mistaken for fragility and unmanliness. Furthermore, if Evie was betrayed

by her father, she experienced another type of betrayal from her mother. She came from a poor, Midwestern household, and fashioned a personality based on studying divas in the movies. Her much older husband provided for the household and had an incredible charm, which made her admire him and never question his sanity. She was aware that American culture was based on a fantasy, and was willing to support the fantasy her husband had created. They travelled and dined in New York City's most celebrated circles, but when alone had nothing to say to each other. When children came, they were just props for their evolving lifestyle. As Evie started having vaginal infections and changed her behaviour from a happy, extroverted child to a violent, introverted girl, her mother knew something was wrong yet did nothing to protect her. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Herman posits that the reenactment of traumatic scenes is most apparent in the repetitive play of children: "The everyday childhood is free and easy. It is bubbly and light-spirited, whereas the play that follows from trauma is grim and monotonous...As opposed to ordinary child's play, post-traumatic play is obsessively repeated" (1997, 28). Evie started avoiding play as the other children in school felt her internal horror (2019, 50): "Other children could smell your desperation and avoided you like the plague or teased and taunted you." In one of her later interviews, Ensler said that she confronted her mother with the truth, and her mother told her that she had to sacrifice her – Eve – to keep peace in the house: she had two other children who could have been abused, too, if Eve ever stopped being her father's "favourite". In *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* (2001), Phyllis Chesler argues that in patriarchal societies, women always replace other women. In that sense, as daughters "we have replaced or are merely different from our mothers. Psychologically, daughters are unconsciously guilty about both facts" (2001, 173–74). In that sense, Evie is a scapegoat for the toxic dynamic between her parents, a sacrificial lamb denied a happy childhood so that her two siblings could grow up untainted by abuse. She is there to preserve family life as it appears on the outside – a masquerade of a happy, middle-class American family, living in the suburbs, with a spacious house and a car, great relationships with the neighbours, going on holidays and having interesting hobbies. We thus see that the abuse of women by men is woven into the broader narrative of systemic oppression which posits that the nuclear family should be preserved at all costs – even if it gives legitimacy to parental abuse.

When the father could no longer sexually abuse his daughter, he started battering her, and the family despised Evie instead of him for her "reckless" behaviour (2019, 42):

In that sense I set you up to be hated. And that would come to be part of what destroyed you. They couldn't blame me. I was the husband. I was the father. They needed me. So they blamed you. You were the reason I was angry. You stole my heart. You banished them to darkness. Your name was Eve and you brought the fall onto the family. You were five.

These last words indicate the psychopathology of her father's thinking that Ensler understands in the present moment: how could she have brought the fall upon the entire family at the fragile age of five? The narrative voice is continuously subverting the male voice as the truth-teller: the more he stands firm in his cold, rational and possessive masculinity, the more we distrust him.

By placing herself in the perpetrator's shoes, Ensler documents her father's incestuous desires, which upon her first rejection turn into hatred and the withdrawal of all support. He will not congratulate her on the feminist speech which she gives in front of the entire college at graduation, and she will be the only one excluded from his will. Though Ensler's experience seems to be deeply personal, nowadays we read the personal experiences of sexual abuse in a different way. In the aftermath of the #MeToo movement which started in 2006 when Tarana Burke spoke publicly about being sexually assaulted, we could say that Ensler's *The Apology* shows the magnitude of this persistent, global issue. Ensler's personal experience is easily recognized as an intergenerational, systemic and global problem.

4 Reading Narratives of Parental Sexual Abuse

This last point opens up the question of how we read accounts of traumatic experiences and how we handle the fact that the family and the community trust the perpetrator and distrust the victim. In *The Cut*, a psychology journal, Katie Heaney published an article (Heaney 2021) about Jennifer Freyd's parents' reaction to their daughter accusing the father of sexual abuse. They discredited her by founding the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in 1992, accusing her of wanting to achieve fame on false grounds; the foundation was later dissolved in 2019, the year *The Apology* was published. Significantly, "false memory syndrome" has been promoted by motivated parties to discredit testimony by survivors, to pathologize memories of sexual abuse in children and to stigmatize therapies related to this abuse. Often, parents want their abused child to accept the "official" family narrative – as far as s/he is a dissident from the narrative of family normalcy and harmony. The question of who is to control the family narrative is thus a game of power where memory plays a crucial part. Are children allowed to remember and are we to believe them? Children should never be excluded from the family narrative. Though we are aware that at the heart of self-representation lies the process of self-construction, a mixture of memory and invention, Ensler shows that literary accounts of trauma are narratives of resistance and an important path to healing, where the reader plays a crucial role in this process.

More than 50 years have passed since the publication of Georges Poulet's seminal essay "Criticism and the Experience of Interiority" (1972), which suggested that the act of reading involves the coming together of two consciousnesses – the writer's and the reader's – when the reader can hardly explain "the facility with which I not only understand but even feel what I read" (1972, 60). In the years after this, structuralists and poststructuralists convinced us that the role of the reader is insignificant, with nothing to look for "outside the text", to paraphrase Derrida. In the last decade, with the rise of affect theory, the role of the reader has been re-established and Poulet's ideas resuscitated. For example, Dominick LaCapra warns us about the possibility of identification between the victim and the reader, in which "to confuse self and other, and collapse all distinctions" in the act of identification of self and victim is more dangerous than feeling empathy, which preserves a certain distance (LaCapra as qtd. in Luckhurst 2008, 4). Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth claim that "affect accumulates across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness" (2010, 2), where the affected reader acquires in turn the capacity to affect. The affect plays a vital role in reading trauma narratives, and the reader can take various positions. Some of the possible readings of trauma

narratives include: *the symptomatic reading* which embodies a reading effect that will in its turn emerge as a symptom (Rooney 2017, 127); *the empathic reading* as a response founded in empathy which involves “intellectual interest, active imagination, emotional investment” and – crucially – “ethical engagement” (Assmann 2018, 216) or *the implicated reading*, where the reader is a participant in a system that generates dispersed and unequal experiences of trauma and well-being simultaneously (Rothberg 2019, 12). In the symptomatic reading, Rooney underlines “the problem of form as an effect of reading” (2017, 129) where “the work of form entails the play on words, the rendering of form as reading’s effect” (2017, 135). Though, as we have already noted, the confessional style of *The Apology* is disparate from previous confessional narratives because it is voiced through Ensler’s father’s imagined voice, the reader trusts her intention to reveal her childhood traumas with truthfulness and sincerity. The symptomatic reading, which recognizes the confessional style as possibly suspect, thus turns into an empathic reading as the reader becomes emotionally invested in Ensler’s traumatic confession. Empathy is not identification, but this divide is constantly under threat of being overrun so the position of the reader is far from an easy one. The memoir is difficult to read for people who were victims of sexual abuse, for whom the identification with Ensler’s experiences might be triggering. Herman claims that “avoiding the traumatic memories leads to stagnation in the recovery process, while approaching them too precipitately leads to a fruitless and damaging reliving of the trauma” (1992, 125). It is possible that the reading of such a traumatic narrative causes intrusive symptoms in a survivor of sexual abuse, so it is essential to monitor the symptoms “so that the uncovering work remains within the realm of what is bearable.” (Herman 1992, 125). To a certain extent, Ensler is the emphatic reader/writer of her own traumatic experience.

Writing thus becomes crucial in building up Ensler’s older self, and it enables her to find solace in her vulnerability. Her father will never show his vulnerability but at least she is able to imagine his apology, as a successful writer and activist in her sixties (2019, 112):

Eve,

Let me say these words: I am sorry. I am sorry. Let me sit here at the final hour. Let me get it right this time. Let me be staggered by your tenderness. Let me risk fragility. Let me be rendered vulnerable. Let me be lost. Let me be still. Let me not occupy or oppress. Let me not conquer or destroy. Let me bathe in the rapture. Let me be the father.

Let me be the father who mirrors your kind-heartedness back to you. Let me lay no claims. Let me bear witness and not invade.

Eve, I free you from the covenant. I revoke the lie. I lift the curse. Old man, be gone.

In line with Michael Rothberg’s idea of “an implicated subject”, all of us who are “participants in histories and social functions that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator” (2019, 1) should feel partly guilty for the abuse of children in their families. Most of us do not play out clear-cut roles, but are still implicated in the crime simply by living in positions of power and privilege and pretending that sexual abuse would never happen in our household. However, an implicated reading of Ensler’s memoir gives us agency to spread her story and talk about the sexual abuse of children with the goal of creating conscious and empathetic community.

5 Conclusion

As Anne Whitehead noted, “[t]he rise of trauma theory has provided novelists with new ways of conceptualising trauma and has shifted attention away from the question of what is remembered of the past to how and why it is remembered” (2004, 3, as qtd. in Bond and Craps 2020, 5). Unlike Caruth’s theory of traumatic *aporia* – where painful experiences are inherently contradictory and can never be grasped completely – Ensler’s act of writing the unspoken words of her father points to the fact that trauma can be healed through imagining the perpetrator’s motives. As Joshua Pederson claims, it is precisely through writing that the victim can gain control over the act of recalling, helping the survivor to remake the damaged self. Thus, in Ensler’s memoir, Caruth’s traumatic amnesia is replaced by the power of remembered and written detail to enact healing through the perpetrator’s eyes. Thus Ensler’s memoir addresses the contradictory nature of traumatic memory, showing that the imagined *Apology* was needed for establishing peace, not with her father’s crime, but with herself. Furthermore, her exploration of parental abuse challenges patriarchal structures and gendered violence, as she shows that the abuse of women by men is woven into the broader narrative of systemic oppression.

The 21st century reader is definitely more inclined to sympathize with young Evie, the more so because she is a woman speaking her truth. Her personal experience is therefore empowering for many women who have been victims of sexual abuse and have been implicated in the collective trauma culture. Moreover, our position as implicated subjects (Rothberg 2019) gives us the opportunity to spread somebody else’s truth and actively engage in sharing and caring for the victims.

In one of her powerful TED Talks, which took place in India in 2009 (TED Talk: Embrace your inner girl 2010), Ensler introduced the term “girl cell” and explained it in the following manner:

I want you to imagine that the girl is a chip in the huge macrocosm of collective consciousness. [...] And then I want you to imagine that this girl cell is compassion, and it’s empathy and it’s passion itself, and it’s vulnerability and it’s openness and it’s intensity and it’s association and it’s relationship and it is intuitive. And then let’s think how compassion informs wisdom and that vulnerability is our greatest strength, and that emotions have inherent logic which lead to radical, appropriate, saving action. And then, let’s remember that we’ve been taught the exact opposite by the powers that be, that compassion clouds your thinking, that it gets in the way, that vulnerability is weakness, that emotions are not to be trusted, and you’re not supposed to take things personally. I think the whole world has essentially been brought up not to be a girl. [...] I actually think that being a girl is so powerful that we’ve trained everybody not to be that.

By revealing the traumatic truth of her growing up, Ensler is trying to influence our collective consciousness: vulnerability is strength and being a girl is powerful. But even more than that, as empathetic and implicated readers, we owe our community to hear the stories of sexual abuse and act accordingly.

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Systemic Violence and Precarious Masculinity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*

ABSTRACT

Going by African ideals of hegemonic masculinity, a man must be financially buoyant, powerful, and able to fulfil the provider role in his home. Ifemelu's (unnamed) father in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* defies this cultural expectation. With critical investigations of this character lacking in the literature, this study, through a qualitative analysis built on the concept of systemic violence, complimented by the transitivity system in Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics and stylistic devices of negation, repetition, and value-laden language, investigates how the character's varied experiences, especially his job loss, leads to his emasculation. The findings reveal that the socio-economic workings of the nation prevent Ifemelu's father from actualizing his aspirations while empowering the privileged to oppress him. In this way, the systemic violence endemic to the workings of the system is responsible for Ifemelu's father's financial distress, loss of power and fatherly authority, inability to fulfil provider role at home, and thus his eventual emasculation.

Keywords: systemic violence, hegemonic masculinity, third-generation Nigerian writing, Chimamanda Adichie, *Americanah*

Sistemsko nasilje in negotova moškost v romanu *Americanah* Chimamande Adichie

IZVLEČEK

Glede na afriške ideale hegemonistične moškosti mora biti moški finančno uspešen, močan in sposoben izpolnjevati vlogo skrbnika v svojem domu. Ifemelujin oče v romanu *Americanah* Chimamande Adichie se zoperstavi takim kulturnim pričakovanjem. Ker v literaturi primanjkuje kritičnih raziskav tega lika, ta študija s kvalitativno analizo, ki temelji na konceptu sistemskega nasilja v povezavi s Hallidayevim sistemom prehodnosti in stilističnimi sredstvi negacije, ponavljanja ter vrednostno obremenjenega jezika, raziskuje, kako različne izkušnje lika, zlasti izguba službe, vodijo do njegove izgube moškosti. Ugotovitve kažejo, da družbeno-gospodarsko delovanje države Ifemelujinemu očetu onemogoča uresničevanje njegovih ambicij, hkrati pa privilegiranim omogoča, da ga zatirajo. S tem je sistemske nasilje, ki je endemično za delovanje sistema, odgovorno za finančno stisko Ifemelujinega očeta, izgubo moči in očetovske avtoritete, nezmožnost izpolnjevanja vloge skrbnika v domu in njegovo končno kastracijo.

Ključne besede: sistemske nasilje, hegemonistična moškost, nigerijsko pisanje tretje generacije, Chimamanda Adichie, *Americanah*

1 Introduction

Third-generation Nigerian writing, described as “texts born into the scopic regime of the postcolonial and the postmodern” (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005, 15), usually critique the nation’s leadership crisis and system failure with “the emphasis on deprivation, on the denial of individual human rights and aspirations, and on the degradation of social relations under a series of increasingly despotic and corrupt regimes” (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005, 11). While third-generation Nigerian writers appear to have been significantly influenced by the works of their immediate predecessors – the second-generation writers like Buchi Emecheta, Femi Osofisan and Niyi Osundare whose interests transverse the subjects of disillusionment and other matters bordering on the failure of post-independent governance (Dalley 2013, 17) – their connection to the works of the first generation (Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Gabriel Okara, Wole Soyinka, etc.) who are said to be preoccupied with “an undue eurocentrism, deviationism, obscurantism and private esotericism” (Aiyejina 1988, as cited in Anyokwu 2015, 2) seems remote.

While disparate events shape the literary oeuvre of third-generation Nigerian writers, Adegoju and Udoeka (2016, 12) hold that the years of military rule (1966–79; 1983–99) are the most impactful because of how the military rulers “literally ran the country’s economy aground with large-scale corrupt practices, rising debt profile, increased poverty level, unemployment, decayed infrastructure, and government’s insensitivity to the provision of basic social amenities for the people” (Adegoju and Udoeka 2016, 4). In a similar way, Egya (2007, 112) avers that the years of military dictatorship exerted oppression on Nigeria in such a way that “poverty and hopelessness became the lingering realities for suffering Nigerians and Nigeria is yet to recover from the dispossession, suppression, and oppression that came with those regimes.”

Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013), like many other third-generation texts set in the military era, say Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) and Chris Abani’s *Graceland* (2004), addresses the oppressive socio-political conditions of the system during this time, among other concerns. Accordingly, *Americanah* explores the postcolonial Nigerian nation as a site of trauma and precarity where oppression, suppression, and repression of the masses reign supreme. As is characteristic of third-generation Nigerian writing, *Americanah* portrays characters’ disillusionment, poverty, psychic breakdown, widening and imbalanced social gaps, economic disadvantage, and their inability to satisfy basic need for survival, well-being, identity, and freedom. Adichie captures this grim reality of the precarious situation of the country through young Ifemelu’s reflexive thought about her cousin, (Aunty) Uju, after she had just graduated from medical school:

Only weeks before, she had been a new graduate and all her classmates were talking about going abroad to take American medical exams or the British exams, because the other choice was to tumble into a parched wasteland of joblessness. The country was starved of hope, cars stuck for days in long, sweaty petrol lines, pensioners raising wilting placards demanding their pay, lecturers gathering to announce yet one more strike. (2013, 45–46)

This provides an insight into Adichie’s literary commitment in *Americanah*, which, among other preoccupations, is to protest Nigeria’s systemic breakdown. This, arguably, underlies her

coinage of “choicelessness” as a value-laden term that encodes the traumatizing realities of the socio-economic and socio-political conditions of the postcolonial Nigerian nation and sheds light on how to read meanings into the text.

“Choicelessness” first occurs in Obinze’s reflexive thought, while ruminating on the violence of the socio-political structures of the Nigerian state which denies its citizens their aspirations and forces undesired and undesirable choices on them:

[...] all understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but *they would not understand the need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness*. They would not understand why people like him, who were raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else, were now resolved to do dangerous things, illegal things, so as to leave, none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty. (2013, 275; emphasis added)

Just like the newly graduated medical doctors who wish to seek greener pastures in either Britain or America rather than waste away in Nigeria, the uncertainties within the system also push Obinze to Britain. For Adichie, who has a similar experience herself, even though the citizens of other nations may not understand how violent the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness is, it is nonetheless a valid form of violence that needs to be escaped from. This is what pushes Ifemelu to migrate to America, to escape from the precarious Nigerian university education for the non-precarious one in America (Rogatis 2022, 34).

In the same way, Uju – who has earlier tried to convince Ifemelu of her resolve to stay in Nigeria, unlike her classmates who are bent on migrating to either Britain or America – soon becomes disoriented by the stark reality of poverty and systemic inequality. Subsequently, she abandons her goal of establishing her own clinic and enters a relationship with The General before finally escaping to America. Obinze, too, migrates to Britain and plans a sham marriage to avoid being deported. When the fake marriage is foiled, and Obinze is deported to Nigeria, the need to overcome his precarity compels him to front shady deals for The Chief. Against this background, Uju’s reflection on the Nigerian state can be interpreted as the authorial voice critiquing the problems within the system:

[...] we live in an ass-licking economy [...] The problem is that there are many qualified people who are not where they are supposed to be because they won’t lick anybody’s ass, or they don’t know which ass to lick or they don’t even know how to lick an ass. I’m lucky to be licking the right ass. (2013, 77)

Here, the authorial voice critiques the system for the mismatch between citizens’ potential/aspired selves and their actual selves. A grimmer image of the precarity within the system is painted with the transformation of Uju, a qualified medical doctor, to an “ass-licker”, having been forced to make her relationship with The General her alternative means of survival. The situation recalls Slavoj Žižek’s (2008) concept of “systemic violence” and Johan Galtung’s (1969) idea of “structural violence”, where the smooth functioning of the social, economic, and political systems comes at the detriment of the masses.

For this reason, Uju, Ifemelu, Obinze, Ifemelu's mother, and many other characters in *Americanah* employ various strategies to navigate the depressing difficulty of realizing their aspirations. Unlike these characters, however, Ifemelu's father – who remains unnamed – poignantly stands out because he is unable to navigate his sudden and unjust job loss. While the circumstances leading to this are indicative of systemic violence, the violence is more pronounced in his economic powerlessness in a culture where maleness means economic independence and the ability of a man to provide for the members of his household. Ifemelu's father's defiance of this cultural expectation foregrounds him and calls for his critical investigation. Although *Americanah* has received many critical responses around the experiences of violence, the investigations have often revolved around female characters, while there is much less inquiry of the male characters' experiences of violence. Equally, of the investigations which have focused on male characters in the text, none has undertaken an in-depth investigation of Ifemelu's father. This gap in the literature is what this study tries to fill by examining Ifemelu's father's transgressive experiences and their effects on his masculinity. To accomplish this goal, the study will attempt to answer two questions: (i) How does the socio-political structure of Nigeria constitute systemic violence? (ii) How does the systemic violence endemic in the socio-political workings of the Nigerian nation crush Ifemelu's father's hegemonic masculinity?

2 *Americanah*: A Contextualized Synopsis

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) is a transnational and transcultural narrative that centres primarily on Ifemelu and her childhood sweetheart, Obinze. At the background of the migratory experiences of Ifemelu and Obinze, however, is the systemic failure which plagues postcolonial Nigeria, as a result of military misrule in the country. For this reason, young people will do anything to escape from the constrained daily-life, seeking the fulfilment of their aspirations.

At the heart of the novel lies the emotional and structural erosion of the traditional African family, embodied in the quiet, tragic decline of Ifemelu's father, whose principled obstinacy in a corrupt civil service system catalyses both ancestral dislocation and his daughter's eventual migration. Ifemelu's father, a principled civil servant, is fired at the federal agency where he has worked dutifully for 12 years, for refusing to call his new boss "Mummy". Though the act signals moral courage in the face of oppression, it emphasizes her father's symbolic irrelevance, which subsequently leads to economic precarity and domestic instability for him. The loss of his income emasculates Ifemelu's father within the family unit, turning him into a passive, withdrawn figure who increasingly loses authority and emotional presence. His fall is not just occupational but existential; he becomes a shadow of himself, a man defeated not by failure but by a system that mocks principle and subverts dignity.

This domestic collapse deeply informs Ifemelu's decision to leave Nigeria. Her migration is not merely an educational or aspirational venture – it is a response to the slow implosion of her family and the absence of dependable paternal guidance. As the nuclear family disintegrates under socio-economic strain, the home ceases to function as a site of moral grounding or emotional refuge. Ifemelu's departure becomes a bid for self-possession in a context where

neither her father nor mother (lost in spiritual misunderstanding and religious thought) can offer stability or vision.

Through Ifemelu's flight from Nigeria and her complex experiences in America, Adichie reflects not just the diasporic search for identity, but also the emotional residue of leaving behind a home hollowed by economic and patriarchal failure. The nuclear family, traditionally imagined as the bedrock of social continuity, is here portrayed as a fragile institution undone by political dysfunction, gendered expectations, and emotional estrangement. *Americanah* thus does not merely tell a migration story, but instead stages the slow unravelling of household virtue and the necessity of a painful departure.

3 Literature Review

3.1 Previous Critical Investigations of *Americanah*

The dominant issues in many of the critical responses to *Americanah* are migration and trans-nationalism. Suárez-Rodríguez (2024, 142) describes the novel as one of the most widely discussed of the last decade because of its cultural significations, especially the reality of racism in the US. However, Suárez-Rodríguez (2024, 143) later notes that *Americanah* is an Afropolitan novel because of its central diasporic themes mirroring (Africans') global mobility. For Idowu-Faith (2014, 1), the novel is a melting pot for different subject matters like race, skin colour and identity, love and romance and hair politics, with migration being the window through which these issues are projected. Central to Ndaka (2017), Egbung (2018), Dias and Pinto (2019), Tunca (2021), Bello and Alrefaee (2022), Jaseel and Gaur (2023), and Nawaz and Aziz (2024) is the designation of *Americanah* as a transnational, diasporic, or migration novel which intersperses with many other socio-cultural issues.

In addition to the migratory and transnational issues the novel considers, some critics devote attention to the violence in the work. For example, Choirin (2023) evaluates Ifemelu's varied experiences and concludes that she is a victim of both direct and cultural violence in the US. Tunca (2021), using a methodological framework she calls a "grammar of violence", investigates sexualized violence in the novel and finds that there are many categories of violence which easily evade categorization in *Americanah*. This uncategorized violence is relevant to Ifemelu's experience with the tennis coach in Ardmore which, according to Tunca (2021, 63–64), has been variously termed "prostitution" (Amonyeze 2017; Raboteau 2013), "self-prostitution" (Lyle 2018), a "sexual encounter" (Suárez-Rodríguez 2019), and an "exchange of sexual intimacy for money" (Terry 2020). Tunca (2021) also identifies Uju's slapping of Ifemelu's face and Obinze's foiled sham marriage with Cleotilde as instances of violence that have escaped critics' investigations. In the conclusion to her study, Tunca (2021, 76) remarks that these instances of subtle violence obscure the lines of agency and victimhood, strip victims like Ifemelu and Cleotilde of their vulnerability and downplay the perpetrators' violence – making it barely perceived as violence. This study relates to these previous investigations of violence in *Americanah* but differs from them in that rather than focus on female characters, it instead examines Ifemelu's father's story as an instance of male characters' experience of violence in the text.

The few investigations of the male characters in *Americanah* have mainly centred on Obinze. In their work, Ere-Bestman and Brown (2023) compare the agency of Ifemelu and Obinze. Their study reveals that Obinze's hegemonic masculinity is renegotiated through role reversals that ascribe sexual agency, assertiveness, and financial independence to Ifemelu, while Obinze is vulnerable and powerless. This, for Elkateb and Amara (2024), counts as Obinze's emotional vulnerability in relation to Ifemelu, which betrays hegemonic masculinity and deviates from the stoicism and emotional detachment often associated with dominant forms of masculinity. Notwithstanding this, Elkateb and Amara (2024) believe that Obinze still conforms to hegemonic masculinity because he strives to fulfil his provider role in the home.

While Jaseel and Gaur (2023) aver that Obinze experiences precarious masculinity that drives him to seek riskier and potentially illegal means of achieving stability, Musagasa (2022) claims that Obinze demonstrates progressive masculinity and could even be labelled as a "New Man", which is an emerging masculine identity in African literature. Being a New Man, Obinze recognizes the liminal space between the existing hetero-patriarchal masculinities and the emergence of an elevated female character like Ifemelu who is educated, career-oriented, strong-willed, independent and agentive, and does not fit into the stereotype of the conventionalized domestic woman. Obinze's liberated mindset is thus responsible for his ability to exhibit normalized male dominance, stay active in the domestic space, and live harmoniously with his female counterparts. In this sense, it is Obinze's exposure to transnational and transcultural cultural realities that helps him to readjust his normalized masculine notions of self and identity to survive and stay afloat in a changing world. Coincidentally, Ifemelu's father lacks this experience, and is thus open to suffer from the precarity that plagues Nigeria.

3.2 Dominant African Hegemonic Masculinity

Masculinity is a set of sociocultural expectations which guide what it means to be male in a society (Raji 2017; Elkateb and Amara 2024; Gbadegesin 2024). Rather than being a fixed construct, masculinity is dynamic and shifts in line with the traditions of specific societies. Nonetheless, as Raji (2017, 103) argues, hegemonic masculinity remains a dominant cultural yardstick for constructing the ideal manhood that every male within any society is expected to attain, but which none can achieve in full. This inability to attain the ideals of maleness places significant pressure on boys and men. Raji (2017, 104) further asserts that heterosexuality is crucial to African hegemonic masculinity, since both males and females are under pressure to attain masculinity or femininity as prescribed in their culture. The male is not just the "daddy" to everybody, but also the embodiment of power and the repository of authority (Raji 2017, 104). As a repository of power in the home, the man, according to Gbadegesin (2024, 242), must be self-reliant, hardworking, fearless, decisive, virile and the breadwinner in his family. Clarifying this point of view further, Gbadegesin (2024, 242) submits that when a man lacks any of these qualities it becomes a source of tension for him, his family, and the wider society.

According to Ujowundu (2013, 143), while women in a patriarchal society often undergo different forms of dehumanization – like deprivation, negligence, maltreatment,

marginalization, oppression, subjugation, exploitation, humiliation and even isolation, all of which are embedded within the system – males rarely experience this because they enjoy what Moril (1985 as cited in Ben-Daniels and Glover-Meni 2020, 55) calls “men’s unearned privileges”. For Idowu-Faith (2016, 407), the unearned dividends are males’ unrestrained access to phallogocentric codes like voice, money, materials, women, children, and wisdom. Idowu-Faith (2016, 407) argues further that any time a man lacks any of these phallogocentric codes, he is foregrounded against the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Ifemelu’s father’s lack of hegemonic masculinity thus constructs him as an unusual male, one who demands critical attention.

3.3 Systemic Violence

Slavoj Žižek’s concept of “systemic violence”, as well as Johan Galtung’s idea of “structural violence”, serve as the conceptual model for analysis in the study. In his 2008 seminal work, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian neo-Marxist philosopher, cultural theorist, and most famous associate of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis, is concerned with how contemporary society which, though appalled by various forms of physical violence, is distracted from paying attention to the more silent and invisible violence that energizes physical (subjective) violence. Žižek (2008, 2) calls the silent and invisible violence systemic violence, saying it is “the invisible violence inherent in the ‘normal’ state of things; the catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems”.

In his 1969 paper “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”, Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist and principal founder of peace and conflict studies, establishes how social inequalities can compromise true peace and justice in a society. Although his concerns are primarily about peace studies, the concept has been widely accepted and applied across various fields of research. Galtung distinguishes between direct violence, which involves physical acts of aggression, and structural violence, which is embedded in social structures and often without an identifiable aggressor. By excluding an identifiable actor from the classical definition of violence, Galtung is able to list poverty and the social structures which hinder people from meeting their basic needs and rights as violence. To this end, he defines structural violence as when “human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realization” (Galtung 1969, 168). Further, Galtung (1969, 171) states that structural violence, as a form of social injustice, is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and unequal life chances. This explains why resources are unevenly distributed within societies where income distributions, literacy/education, and medical services are heavily skewed, favouring one set of people (Galtung 1969, 171). On this basis, Ho (2007, 4) defines structural violence as an unequal distribution of power that systematically disadvantages those who do not hold as much power, if any at all. In the same vein, Chrobak (2022, 173) sees systemic violence as an unequal power structure, as

an unjust social system that leads to the creation of such unwished-for social phenomena as: poverty enclaves, an unfair system of remuneration for employees [...] the inefficiency of the health care system towards specific social groups, inequality in access to education, etc. *Therefore, structural violence can be understood broadly as the*

intentional or unintentional violation or limitation of the rights of individuals or groups resulting from systemic conditions. These conditions might occur within institutional, cultural, and social systems. (Emphasis in original)

Systemic violence is not overt like the more conventional direct violence which, according to Žižek (2008, 1), is always at the forefront of concern and refers to physical and mental violations marked by obvious acts of crime, terror, civil unrest, and international conflict attributable to a clearly identifiable agent. In the same way, structural violence is silent, subtle, and invisible, making it difficult to perceive its victims (Galtung 1969, 173). For this reason, Žižek (2008, 2) recommends stepping back from the highly mediated direct violence to be able to identify systemic violence as the normalized form of violence in the world. This, he believes, will facilitate reading citizens' inability to realize their physical and mental potential as violence. Building the analysis in this study on the concept of systemic/structural violence will assist in uncovering the subtle and invisible violence which is responsible for the emasculation of Ifemelu's father.

4 Methods and Theoretical Framework

This study takes a qualitative approach to the interpretation of the character of Ifemelu's father in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* to read him as a victim of the systemic violence embedded within the text's postcolonial Nigerian nation. The qualitative analysis thus benefits from Slavoj Žižek's and Johan Galtung's concepts of systemic/structural violence. The qualitative interpretation of the text is supported with linguistic evidence from the transitivity system of Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics and three stylistic devices of repetition, negation, and value-laden language. The tenets of both the linguistic and non-linguistic frameworks are employed for the analysis of a total of 11 excerpts that are purposively drawn from the text with exact pages indicated after each quotation.

4.1 Transitivity System

The transitivity system is a major system within Systemic Functional Linguistics (henceforth SFL) developed by M.A.K. Halliday. SFL is a social semiotic theory of language which takes language as a natural part of the process of living. The theory holds that every instantiation of language simultaneously performs ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. While the interpersonal metafunction is concerned with the social world and is responsible for the role language plays in enacting and maintaining interpersonal relations, the textual metafunction is concerned with the creation of text and so embodies the text-forming resources of the linguistic system (Halliday 1978, 133).

The ideational metafunction is responsible for construing meaning in relation to human experiences in the world. This metafunction, with the transitivity system as its experiential centre, packages the experiences of the world into figures of events made up of three components: a process unfolding through time; the participants involved in the process; and circumstances associated with the process (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, 220). The three components, as Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, 220) explain, are organized in configurations that provide the models or schemata for construing the experience of what

goes on in particular contexts. The configuration of process combined with participants thus constitutes the transitivity system that circumstances augment temporally, spatially, causally, and so on (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, 221).

Processes, which are usually realized by a verb, have distinct models or schemas for reflecting human experiences as a figure of particular kinds of activity, event, happening, saying, being, etc. Each type of process has its distinct set of participants who are involved in the process and who bring about its occurrence or are affected by it. Within the grammar of language, the transitivity system thus provides a lens for revealing the roles participants play in their experiences of their world. The choice of the transitivity system for analysis will support the close reading of Ifemelu's father with an objective description of his agentive or receptive roles in the unfolding grammar of his traumatic experiences.

4.2 Stylistic Devices

Stylistics studies the ways meaning is created through language in literature as well as in other types of text (Nørgaard, Montoro, and Busse 2010, 1). This way, the discipline fulfils both literary and linguistic criteria, which entail paying attention to the writer's artistic achievement and the linguistic characteristics in which they manifest (Leech and Short 2007, 55–56). The interwoven relationship between the literary and linguistic materials of a text makes it crucial to provide hard linguistic evidence to back up impressionistic statements made about a text. This, as an established principle of objectivity and empiricism in stylistics, will make the analysis “methodical, systematic, empirical, analytical, coherent, accessible, retrievable and consensual” (Wales 2011, 400). Thus, as the transitivity system provides the linguistic model for validating the analysis, the three stylistic devices of repetition, negation, and value-laden language complement the model.

The three stylistic devices selected to complement the linguistic framework tie to the stylistic concept of foregrounding as a long-established model for describing, evaluating, and interpreting texts. Described as salience and prominence in language use, foregrounding helps to uncover the meaningful implications of foregrounded elements in a text. Repetition is thus a kind of foregrounding resident in the violation of the normal rules of usage by over-frequency (Wales 2011, 167). With repetition thriving on the unexpectedness of the sameness of linguistic elements in a text, repeated items are foregrounded, thereby drawing the attention of the analyst. Like repetition, negation is a marked form of polarity in the grammar of language. Hidalgo-Downing (2003, 321) considers negation from a functional perspective and thus describes it as a marked linguistic option that defeats an expectation. With this, the employment of negation discourse defeats expectations and makes negation highly informative (Hidalgo-Downing 2003, 321). As a result, negation naturally makes non-events and non-states more salient.

Value-laden language is described by McIntyre (2006, 49) as an expression of an attitude to whatever is being described or perceived. He explains further that there is a strong relationship between the use of evaluative lexis and Uspensky's (1973) and Fowler's (1996) ideological point of view and what Chatman (1978) refers to as conceptual point of view. The connection between value-laden language and the ideational point of view makes it a

great complement to the transitivity system as the theory of grammar for ideation and the representation of the world and participants' experiences in the world.

5 Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Transgressive Experiences as Systemic Violence

Our first encounter with Ifemelu's father in *Americanah* is about the traumatic experience of him losing his job, because his boss fires him for refusing to call her "Mummy". That he is fired for this reason shows that systemic violence is focused on making life comfortable for those in power, at the detriment of those who lack power. Systemic violence being a subtler form of coercion, Ifemelu's father is open to domination and exploitation by his boss (Žižek 2008, 9). His boss's demand for a respected term of address gives her a sense of satisfaction while it bruises Ifemelu's father's hegemonic masculinity. This underscores the violence in the request. Beyond that, however, the loss of his job opens him to a graver form of violence, as he becomes financially vulnerable and socially despised. For a man who has earlier held that it is wrong for a grown woman to ask a grown man to call her Mummy, the level to which he has been subdued and his masculinity crushed becomes clear when, after failing many times to secure another job, Ifemelu reasons that if her father were given another chance, he would call his boss Mummy.

It is essential to note that Ifemelu's father losing his job is a direct consequence of his inability to get as much education as he wanted, despite his intellectual capacity. Being an unwished-for social phenomenon, his inability to access education is reflective of the systemic violence he and his parents were subjected to (Chrobak 2022, 173). Fundamentally, his inability to get as much education as he wants aligns with Galtung's (2024, 168) definition of structural violence as the variance between potential (what could have been) and actual (what is). His inability to access education consequently limits the kind of job he can secure, and the extent to which he can possess and enjoy financial independence and dominance. As Raji (2017, 104) observes, a man's economic success is a function of acquiring education, having a good career, and/or achieving a breakthrough in a particular business or learned trade. Ifemelu's father possesses none of this, and thus can never experience financial freedom. Moreover, Jaseel and Gaur (2023, 741) also show that Ifemelu's father's job is a precarious one, since it impacts his personal autonomy and interpersonal relationships, and is characterized by low pay, lack of security, and limited access to social benefits.

As an unusual financially vulnerable man, Ifemelu's father contrasts with fathers like Eugene Achike in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* or even Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. These two men are wealthy, powerful, mighty, and godlike fathers in line with the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Placing Ifemelu's father side-by-side these men highlights his failure to measure up to African hegemonic masculinity. Again, Ifemelu's father, unlike these men, lacks authority. Where Eugene and Okonkwo rule their households with an iron hand, Ifemelu's father cannot do the same because he lacks the financial supremacy to do so. His lack of authority is also reflected in how he suffers verbal abuse, what Žižek (2008, 1) calls "symbolic violence embodied in language and its forms", from his wife. Further illuminating his powerlessness, he is forced to get the two-year rent for the house the family lives in from Uju,

although he knows the money must have come from The General, whose relationship with Uju he does not approve of but avoids discussing. This evasive attitude is not characteristic of the ideal father in patriarchal culture and within hegemonic masculinity. This way, Ifemelu's father exemplifies a man whose potential has been constrained by the systemic violence he suffers in his nation. Adichie being a third-generation Nigerian writer creates this powerless and financially vulnerable man to expose the extent to which precarity constrains everyday life in the postcolonial Nigerian nation, including the supposedly powerful and almighty male of hegemonic masculinity.

In addition to the foregoing, the transitivity system also unpacks the representation of Ifemelu's father's job loss as a transgressive experience of a powerless man:

Excerpt 1

(1) SHE SAID, [...] "The devil is a liar. He wants to start blocking our blessing, he will not succeed," (2) when Ifemelu's father lost his job at the federal agency. (3) He was fired for refusing to call his new boss Mummy. (4) He came home earlier than usual, wracked with bitter disbelief, his termination letter in his hand, complaining about the absurdity of a grown man calling a grown woman Mummy because she had decided it was the best way to show her respect. (5) "Twelve years of dedicated labour. It is unconscionable," he said. (Adichie 2013, 46; author's capitalization; numbering added)

Taking a religious perspective, Ifemelu's mother, the speaker identified as "she" in Excerpt 1, views her husband's job loss as the devil's strategy to block their blessings. This view implicates the event as a transgressive experience which the family, as a collective victim, has no power to intervene in. Her view of the event as the devil's strategy to block their blessings indicates that their worst days, especially financially, are ahead. This is a recognition of the fact that the man is the breadwinner, and thus the major source of income at home.

From Excerpt 1, Ifemelu's father can further be read as a victim of systemic violence because he does not deserve to lose his job after putting 12 years of dedicated labour into it. How he moves from an Actor in the adverbial clause (when Ifemelu's father lost his job at the federal agency) who seems to be in control of his situation, to the Goal of sentence (3), the receiver of the action of the Agent, significantly intensifies his construction as a powerless participant in the system:

(3) He	was fired	for refusing to call his new boss Mummy
[Goal]	[Process: Material]	[Circumstance: Reason]

This analysis reveals that Ifemelu's father's job loss is a clear display of power by the powerful boss against her powerless subordinate. Within this sentence, the Circumstance indicates that the boss fired him for no rational or justifiable reason. With "fired", the Process of the sentence, being an intentional transformative Material Process (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, 232; Thompson 2014, 96), the functional reading of sentence 3 reveals the man as a victim of the oppressive exertion of power against the powerless by the powerful. The transformative nature of the Process emphasizes the brutality of the action on the man, as well as its all-

encompassing traumatizing transformative effect. It is therefore not surprising that sentence 4 in the same excerpt records three immediate traumatizing spatio-temporal, mental, and verbal effects of the action of the Agent on the Ifemelu's father: he comes home earlier than usual (spatio-temporal), "wracked with utter disbelief" (mental), and "complaining" about the absurdity of his boss's action (verbal). As an aggravating and traumatic event, the job loss subsequently leads to a mental shock for Ifemelu's father, as recorded by the Mental Process in "wracked with utter disbelief" and the circumstantial Matter of the Verbal Process ("about the absurdity of a grown man calling a grown woman Mummy") since the circumstantial Matter, according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, 271), usually reveals a participant's mental state. As one of the powerless in a space where they cannot alter the decisions of the powerful, the greatest resistance Ifemelu's father could put up against this unjust decision of his boss is to complain about the absurdity of her request to be called Mummy, and to conclude that being fired after 12 years of dedicated labour is unconscionable.

The attendant effects of unsuccessfully hunting for another job on a daily basis, as presented in Excerpt 2 below, contributes to Ifemelu's father's depiction as an emasculated man and victim of systemic violence. As his hope of securing another job fades every day, he soon loses his optimism and sense of personal pride. This ultimately leads to hopelessness and even greater precarity.

Excerpt 2

He went job hunting every morning, teeth clenched and tie firmly knotted [...] but soon he began to stay at home in a wrapper and singlet, lounging on the shabby sofa near the stereo. "You have not had a morning bath?" her mother asked him one afternoon, when she came back from work [...] Then she added irritably, "If you have to call somebody Mummy to get your salary, you should have done so!" (Adichie 2013, 46–47)

Now a despondent man, Ifemelu's father is a shadow of himself. He no longer goes out with his firmly knotted tie and starts to stay at home in a wrapper and singlet, lounging on his shabby sofa. The deployment of "shabby" as a value-laden adjective to qualify the sofa he usually lounges on paints a grim picture of his gradually emerging abject poverty. This, no doubt, explains his wife's irritation and outburst that he should have called his boss Mummy to get his salary. His reaction to his wife's statement, as an emasculated man, is to stay silent.

Another transgressive experience which challenges Ifemelu's father's masculinity is the embarrassing outburst of their landlord at their door, because of his inability to pay the rent, three months after it is due. Just as he remains silent during his wife's outburst, Ifemelu's father also negotiates this embarrassing moment with silence. The landlord's second visit is even more traumatic. because he – the landlord – barges into their kitchen and cuts the source of electricity into their home. Pathetically, when Ifemelu's father describes the landlord's affront as an ignominy, his wife slights and silences him by saying that in fact they do owe the rent. His silence afterwards implies that both the landlord's actions and his wife's slight are experiences of violence and emasculation. Due to the shame and pressure from this experience, he is forced to approach Akunne, a rich relation whom he dislikes and calls "a lurid illiterate and a money-miss-road", and ask for a loan. These events represent an

accumulation of microaggression stressors (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015) that both debilitate and make him fall short of the ideals of masculinity.

To Ifemelu, all of this represents the precarious situation that her father, who has never owed rent before, finds himself in after losing his job:

Excerpt 3

His fingers were unsteady; he was struggling, it seemed, to suppress emotions. Ifemelu hastily looked away, hoping he had not seen her watching him, and asked him if he could explain a difficult question in her homework. *To distract him, to make it seem that life could happen again.* (Adichie 2013, 76; emphasis added)

Ifemelu's empathy for her father pushes her to ask Uju for financial assistance, knowing that her father would never ask, but at the same time never hesitate to collect a gift from Uju. While Ifemelu's father may not have developed the kind of progressive masculinity which bestows financial power on Uju, Ifemelu, following Adichie's call for progressive masculinity, reasons that it is better to ask Uju for the rent than for her father to be indebted to Akunne. For Ifemelu, the landlord's banging on their door during his follow-up visit was simply done to draw their neighbours' attention, hurl insults at her father, and challenge his masculinity by stating that a real man would pay the rent. Within the patriarchal culture, challenging a man this way, either literally or metaphorically, is one of the most grievous forms of emasculation that any man can be subjected to.

Later, as Uju presents the two years of rent to Ifemelu's father, his emasculation is heightened because "She did not look him in the face as she spoke and he did not look her in the face as he thanked her" (Adichie 2013, 77). The rhetoric of parallelism used here juxtaposes the two paratactic clauses making up the event, and also the embarrassment that both Uju and Ifemelu's father face during the exchange. Of course, the characters' embarrassment connects to how Ifemelu's father holds on to hegemonic masculinity rather than having a restructured mindset that can make him stay afloat like Obinze whose progressive mindset allows him to engage harmoniously and equitably with empowered female characters. Ifemelu's father thus represents males who are oblivious of the new socio-cultural realities in a changing world, but hold tenaciously to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Just as the man's adherence to African hegemonic masculinity prevents him from addressing his boss as "Mummy", his failure to seek financial help from Uju causes him financial vulnerability while his eventual collection of the rent from Uju aggravates his emasculation. Unfortunately, his non-adjustment to the cultural reality of the time, in a nation where systemic violence is built into the system, means he will be perpetually open to precarity and emasculation. As he is attached to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity which stereotypically ties the dignity of a man to his ability to fulfil his role as provider in the home, it is apparent that Ifemelu's father sees his collection of the rent from Uju as a failure and a bruising of his masculinity. His embarrassment, which manifests in his inability to look at Uju in the face, indicates that this is a transgressive and emasculating experience for him.

This kind of embarrassment, once again depicting his precarity and emasculation, can also be seen in Excerpt 4, when Uju brings a new television for the family:

Excerpt 4

He pretended not to notice when Auntie Uju brought them a new television. He settled back in his well-worn sofa, reading his well-worn book, while Auntie Uju's driver put down the brown Sony carton.

[...] Ifemelu's mother opened the carton, gently stripped away the Styrofoam packaging.

[...] "Look at how slim it is!" she added. "Look!"

Her father raised his eyes from the book. "Yes, it is," he said, and then lowered his gaze. (Adichie 2013, 75)

Overwhelmed with his sense of being a failed man within hegemonic masculinity, Ifemelu's father's first reaction is to pretend not to notice the TV set by settling back in his "well-worn sofa", "reading his well-worn book". When his wife prompts him to see how slim the television is, all he does is to raise his eyes from the book, mumble "Yes, it is", and then lower his gaze back to his book. This gives the image of an emasculated man. More importantly, Adichie's engagement of the two parallel nominal groups, "his well-worn sofa" and "his well-worn book", is a stylistic strategy that foregrounds the man's precarity and poverty. It is obvious that the well-worn book must have been read over and over by a man who desires so much education, and has the capability to pursue the same, but has been incapacitated by the system. His reading the book over and over again could be because of his undying passion for more education or his inability, financially, to afford a new book. The parallelism thus unearths the disparity between the man's potential for success, demonstrated by his consistent reading of the now well-worn book, and his actual poverty, demonstrated by his well-worn sofa. This emphasizes that as a victim of systemic violence, even his intellectual pursuits are unlikely to lead to financial success.

Further constructed as an emasculated man who has lost his fatherly authority over Uju, she comes around, not too long after gifting the TV, to break the news to Ifemelu's parents that she is pregnant with The General's child:

Excerpt 5

AUNTIE UJU'S PREGNANCY came like a sudden sound in a still night. She arrived at the flat [...], and said that she wanted to tell Ifemelu's parents about it before they heard the gossip.

[...] he sat back, assailed. "You are an adult. This is not what I hoped for you, Obianuju, but you are an adult."

Auntie Uju went over and sat on the arm of his sofa. She spoke in a low, pacifying voice [...]

Ifemelu's father shrugged wordlessly. Auntie Uju put an arm around him, as though it were he who needed comforting. (Adichie 2013, 83–84; author's capitalization)

From Ifemelu's father sitting back assailed on his sofa and defeatedly telling Uju that the pregnancy was not what he had planned for her, to Uju sitting on the arm of his sofa, speaking to him in a low pacifying voice, and he shrugging wordlessly, emerges the image

of a man who has lost his authority at home and in society at large. It is a terrible sign of disrespect within this society for The General to impregnate Uju and not deem it fit to come around, in company of his own relatives, to meet the parents, plead for forgiveness, pacify them with gifts, and discuss his plan to marry her, all in a bid to rectify his wrong of getting Uju pregnant. This is why he resignedly shrugs “wordlessly” when Uju attempts to convince him that The General is a responsible man and will take care of the baby. The adverbial clause which ends Excerpt 5 – “as though he were the one who needs comforting” – intensifies his depiction as a dejected man who has lost everything.

5.2 Violence of Perpetual Lack and Unmet Longings

With Galtung’s (2024, 168) definition of structural violence as the variance between the potential (what could have been) and the actual (what is), Ifemelu’s father’s constant desires and unmet longings translate into systemic violence. It is the fact that his longings are constantly unmet not because he lacks the potential to meet them, but because the workings of the system debilitate and incapacitate him from doing so.

Excerpt 6

Looking at him as he sat mute on the sofa, she thought how much he looked like what he was, a man full of blanched longings, a middle-brow civil servant who wanted a life different from what he had, who had longed for more education than he was able to get. He talked often of how he could not go to university because he had to find a job to support his siblings, and how people he was cleverer than in secondary school now had doctorates. (Adichie 2013, 47)

The textual elements deployed in Excerpt 6 build up a semantic field of unmet desires and foreground the variance between Ifemelu’s father’s actual life and his potential. The nominal group “blanched longings” is a value-laden phrase which evaluates the man’s longings and calls up the image of something pallid and lifeless. The nominal group metaphorically depicts the violence of unequal power distribution and unequal access to the basic needs of life. The imbalances are thus the factors facilitating Ifemelu’s father’s constant longings and hope for survival and well-being.

Besides, the narrator’s presentation of Ifemelu’s father via Ifemelu’s Narrative Report of Thought Act lets readers into Ifemelu’s emotive world, where she evaluates her father’s pitiable condition and inspires readers’ empathy for him. The two appositional nominal groups (NG) which Ifemelu uses to evaluate his present state well present the man as a victim of systemic violence:

<p>NG ...what he was...</p>	<p>= NG a man full of blanched longings</p>	<p>= NG a middlebrow civil servant who wanted a life different from what he had, who had longed for more education than he was able to get</p>
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It is pathetic that long after he has lost his job, Ifemelu, in the second appositional nominal group, still ascribes the Attribute “a middlebrow civil servant” to her father. Since Attributes,

in intensive relational constructions like this, are a central grammatical strategy for assessing and evaluating the Carrier (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, 267), Ifemelu's choice of this Attribute for her father reveals how important the job has been to his identity, and stresses how its loss is a serious traumatic and aggravating experience for him. In the same way, the relative clauses, maintaining a lower hypotactic relationship with the Attribute, construct Ifemelu's father as an assemblage of unmet desires. While the first relative clause in (i) below emphasizes that he wants a life different from the one he currently has, the second one in (ii) reveals that he could not get educated to the level he wishes. Further intensifying the reading of Ifemelu's father as a victim of systemic violence are the adverbial clauses in (iii) and (iv) below. The adverbial clauses, in addition to the two relative clauses, foreground the variance between Ifemelu's father's actual life and his potential life

- i. who wanted a life different from what he had
- ii. who had longed for more education than he was able to get...
- iii. how he could not go to university because he had to find a job to support his siblings...
- iv. how people he was cleverer than in secondary school now had doctorates.

As is the case in Excerpt 6, Ifemelu's Narrative Report of Thought Act in Excerpt 7 also reveals how her father's "formal, elevated English" is a cover for constant absences and what he lacks:

Excerpt 7

But his mannered English bothered her as she got older, because it was *a costume, his shield against insecurity. He was haunted by what he did not have* – a postgraduate degree, an upper-middle-class life – and *so his affected words became his armour.* (Adichie 2013, 47–48; emphasis added)

Ifemelu's father is daily confronted by what he does not have, despite his potential to have it. So he usually hides his constant feeling of lacking something with his formal, elevated English, which Adichie uses two value-laden appositive nominal groups to describe: "a costume" and "his shield against insecurity". In the same way, the relational clause – "so his affected words became his armour" – is a value-laden metaphorical concluding clause that links his elevated English with the post-verbal completive element (his armour) (Morley 2000, 38). Moreover, the value-laden adjective "affected" underscores the artificiality of his elevated type of English as a tool which he uses to hide his inferiority complex. Hence, the description of Ifemelu's father's formal English as a costume, a shield against insecurity, and armour, suggests loss or defeat. Clearly, with Ifemelu's father's intellectual capacity, he would have been better off had the system not failed him, just as it did many others in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, had the system been working well, Ifemelu's father would have had a university degree and even gone ahead to acquire a doctorate. With his desired education acquired, Ifemelu's father would have been empowered enough to have risen above his low social status.

5.3 From Salience to Silence: Muting the Verbose, Grandiloquent Voice

While Ifemelu's father's "desired/envisioned self" has been thwarted by his inability to further his education and acquire a doctorate, he has been able to navigate the traumatic experience

with verbosity and the engagement of formal, elevated English. However, the loss of his job, his most traumatic experience, changes his sense of self and safety in the world (Thompson 2004, 653). The aggravating event transforms Ifemelu's father into a mute no longer interested in talking. His silence thus connects to the damaging effects of the traumatic situation on him.

Ndaka (2017, 103), while leaning on Picard (1948), reasons that silence/silencing in *Americanah* limns every aspect of human life, since silence encapsulates something more than the mere "absence of audible sound". This implies that "expressive activities can be silencing" and "silence can be expressive". On the day his wife returns from work and finds out that he is yet to bathe, and, out of frustration and irritation, remarks that he should have called somebody Mummy to get his salary, his reaction to the embarrassing remark, as verbal violence, is to remain silent:

Excerpt 8

He said nothing for a moment, he seemed lost, shrunken and lost. Ifemelu felt sorry for him. She asked him about the book placed face down on his lap.... She had hoped he would give her one of his long talks [...] But he was in no mood for talk. (Adichie 2013, 47; emphasis added)

His wife's remarks connect to his financial failure as well as his lack of physical attractiveness, which Turner (1999 as cited in Ayodabo 2021) recognizes as crucial ideals of African masculinity. The wife's irritation may also be connected to the fact that while staying at home may be considered normative and acceptable for a woman within the culture, the reverse is the case for a man. This suggests why the man's ego is often scathed by his wife's violent use of language. With his masculinity challenged, this previously bombastic man becomes silent and silenced. Not only does he say nothing, he is also not in the mood to talk or give his usual long speeches. From all indications, his silence not only portrays his emasculation, but also indicates his loss of dignity, authority, and voice. Having his male ego severely bruised this way, he is a perpetual victim of his wife's verbal violence:

Excerpt 9

Her mother's words too easily wounded him; he was too alert to her, his ears always pricked up at her voice, his eyes always rested on her. (Adichie 2013, 47)

The four simple clauses making up Excerpt 9 are highly rhetorical because they describe, with brutal simplicity and clarity (Leech and Short 2007, 177), the effects of his wife's words on him. The four clauses, taken as the reflection of young Ifemelu's simple and naïve narrative of a child, show her sympathetic evaluation of her father's plight. From the angle of logical progression, the clauses identify the offending object and the cumulative actions that led to the offence.

The constant reference to Ifemelu's father's silence is salient for processing meaning. He "sat mute" (Adichie 2013, 47) at one instance, and turned "a steely, silent face" (Adichie 2013, 49) at another. In some other situations, his silence is reflected through the deployment of repeated negations which succinctly contrast his old and new selves. Importantly, Adichie uses negation to foreground the new Ifemelu's father that readers meet after he loses his job.

Excerpts 10 and 11 illustrate how negation defeats expectations and contrasts the old and new versions of Ifemelu's father:

Excerpt 10

Losing his job made him quieter [...] He no longer muttered [...], no longer held long monologues [...], no longer teased her mother. (Adichie 2013, 48; emphasis added)

Excerpt 11

“A braggart of a man,” her father said after the landlord left, and then he said nothing else. There was nothing else to say. They owed rent. (Adichie 2013, 49; emphasis added)

The comparative adjective “quieter” and the three repeated negative adverbial groups “no longer” in Excerpt 10 establish the variance between who Ifemelu's father is now and who he used to be. In the same vein, his employment of just one nominal group for his landlord in Excerpt 11 contrasts with his previous verbosity. Using this single nominal group and falling silent immediately after highlights the event as aggravating and traumatic. The clauses which form the clause complex in Excerpt 11 achieve tighter meaning integration and help to construe the clause “then he said nothing else” as the consequence of the events making up the episode. In addition, the narrator's use of “nothing else” in “he said nothing else” is a negative Verbiage, which specifies the nature (or non-nature) of the Verbal Process and implies that Ifemelu's father's mute posture results from his various experiences of transgressive violence. Moreover, the phrase “nothing else” in the existential clause “There was nothing else to say” is a fact Existing that functions as a conclusion, and brings finality to the evaluation of the series of traumatic events. In the same way, the clause “They owed” in Excerpt 11 is presented in an objective and explicit orientation that brings finality and a definitive closure to the encounter. This means that since Ifemelu's father owes the rent, he falls short of his expected role as a provider within the culture. Ultimately, he has no defence to push forward and must just remain silent. In line with Ndaka's (2017, 103–4) argument that both elected and imposed silence and/or the “unspoken” runs through most of Adichie's fictional oeuvre, it can be concluded that Ifemelu's father's silence is a foregrounded expression of his precarity and emasculation as a result of his various experiences of systemic violence.

6 Conclusion

This study has undertaken a qualitative analysis of Ifemelu's father in Adichie's *Americanah*, using Žižek's idea of systemic violence, as complemented with Galtung's concept of structural violence. Subjective interpretations are supported with linguistic evidence from the transitivity system within Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics, as well as the stylistic devices of repetition, negation, and value-laden language. *Americanah's* preoccupation with the failures of the postcolonial Nigerian state positions the text as a third-generation Nigerian work, where the postcolonial nation is usually presented as a site of trauma and oppression. To this end, Adichie poignantly portrays Ifemelu's father as a victim of the nation's oppressive power imbalances. Ifemelu's father's inability to enact the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, as expected of males in the culture, strengthens the portrayal of the aggravating effects of the systemic violence operative within Nigeria. Equally, that Ifemelu's father can be fired by his

female boss for a baseless reason and without her suffering any repercussions is in conflict with cultural, stereotypic images of powerful males and powerless females. The boss does not only wield power over and against Ifemelu's father for not addressing her as Mummy, but eventually brings him to his knees, as hinted in Ifemelu's reflexive thought that her father would gladly have addressed his boss as Mummy were he given another chance. Bringing him this low emphasizes the overwhelming effects of systemic violence in a nation which denies him access to his much-desired level of education, and subsequently prevents him from getting a job with security or securing another position after being fired. This presents Ifemelu's father as a perpetual, emasculated victim of systemic violence.

In the African culture where naming is highly significant, because it carries a lot of socio-cultural meaning (Adegoju 2012, 131), the refusal to give Ifemelu's father a personal name suggests his powerlessness and insignificance. Osundare's (1995 as cited in Adegoju 2012, 131) position that there is "a lot in a name, the instant summary of the essence and personality of the bearer", implies that Adichie's choice of a non-personality bearing name for Ifemelu's father is a way to present him as a faceless man, someone whose personality has been eroded by his constant subjection to systemic violence and emergent emasculation.

Beyond his namelessness, Ifemelu's father's financial lack, his lack or loss of the authority of a father, and his loss of verbosity and speech, all strengthen his depiction as a man who has been totally conquered and emasculated by the systemic violence embedded within the structures of his nation. With his profound precarity and emasculation, Chimamanda Adichie, as a third-generation Nigerian writer, uses Ifemelu's father to protest the oppressive, suppressive and repressive systemic violence endemic in the social-political structure of the postcolonial Nigerian nation.

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The Re-Creation of the Spanish Civil War in Recent Irish Historical Fiction

ABSTRACT

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) captured worldwide interest, generating a wealth of literature across multiple genres. In Ireland, this conflict sparked fervent debate, reflecting the nation's own history of civil strife, with Irish volunteers joining both sides of the Spanish conflict. While conventional narratives often oversimplify the war as a clash of opposing ideologies, certain authors endeavour to offer nuanced portrayals that transcend binary interpretations. Drawing upon Kate McLoughlin's insights into war representation, as delineated in *Authoring War* (2011), and Laura Saxton's exploration of "accuracy" and "authenticity" in historical fiction, this article analyses three recent Irish historical novels – Dermot Bolger's *The Family on Paradise Pier* (2005), Maurice Leitch's *Gone to Earth* (2019), and Anamaría Crowe Serrano's *In the Dark* (2021) – to explore how they re-create the complexities of the Spanish Civil War, examining their thematic depth, historical accuracy and narrative authenticity.

Keywords: Spanish Civil War, Dermot Bolger, Maurice Leitch, Anamaría Crowe Serrano, historical fiction

Španska državljanska vojna v sodobnem irskem zgodovinskem romanu

IZVLEČEK

Španska državljanska vojna (1936–1939) je pritegnila svetovno zanimanje in spodbudila nastanek bogatega nabora literarnih del različnih žanrov. Na Irskem je ta konflikt sprožil vroče razprave, ki so odražale lastno zgodovino državljanskih sporov, saj so se irski prostovoljci pridružili obema stranema v španskem konfliktu. Medtem ko konvencionalne pripovedi vojno pogosto poenostavljeno obravnavajo kot spopad nasprotujočih si ideologij, se nekateri avtorji trudijo izpostaviti nianse, ki presegajo binarne interpretacije. Na podlagi razprave o upodabljanju vojne *Authoring War* (2011) Kate McLoughlin in raziskave Laure Saxton o »točnosti« in »avtentičnosti« v zgodovinskih romanih, ta članek analizira tri sodobne irske zgodovinske romane: *The Family on Paradise Pier* (2005) Dermota Bolgerja, *Gone to Earth* (2019) Maurica Leitcha in *In the Dark* (2021) Anamaríe Crowe Serrano. Namen članka je pokazati, kako ti romani na novo zarisujejo kompleksnost španske državljanske vojne, ter preučiti njihovo tematsko poglobljenost, zgodovinsko točnost in avtentičnost pripovedi.

Ključne besede: španska državljanska vojna, Dermot Bolger, Maurice Leitch, Anamaría Crowe Serrano, zgodovinski roman

1 Introduction¹

Since its outbreak in July 1936, the Spanish Civil War has captivated the attention of historians, journalists, novelists, poets and intellectuals worldwide. Recognizing its potential for world-historical significance, these diverse voices have produced a substantial body of literature on the subject. Anne Sebba, in her book *Battling for News: The Rise of the Woman Reporter* (1994), aptly described the Spanish Civil War as “the biggest world story” of its time (95). Originating as a military revolt against the Republican government of Spain, this conflict evolved into a brutal civil war with two distinct factions. On one side were the Nationalists, primarily composed of Falangists (Spanish fascists), monarchists, conservative elements, and significant portions of the military, while the Republicans, loyal to the government, comprised urban workers, agricultural labourers, and segments of the educated middle class with diverse political affiliations, including liberalism, socialism, communism, anarchism and nationalism. This conflict has often been portrayed as simply the confrontation between the two ancestral Spains² – clerical, absolutist and reactionary versus secular, constitutional and progressive. Nevertheless, some scholars and writers have moved beyond this reductionist interpretation and introduced the concept of the “third Spain”, which encapsulates a significant portion of the populace who sought to distance themselves from the fervent militancy of either side. These were people of peace, from diverse social backgrounds and ideologies who, nevertheless, endured the war’s devastating consequences.³

The Spanish Civil War also sparked a heated debate in Ireland, initially perceived as a dichotomy between a Christian crusade against international communism⁴ and the defence of modern democracy against international fascism.⁵ This debate echoed Ireland’s tumultuous history, including the eleven-month civil war following the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. Ireland found itself divided once more between supporters of Franco’s rebellion and those sympathetic to the left-wing Spanish Republican government, with Irish volunteers joining both sides of the conflict. In late 1936, the so-called Irish Brigade sailed to Spain to fight alongside Franco’s forces under the command of Eoin O’Duffy (1892–1944), the leader of a paramilitary organization known as the Blueshirts, which cultivated connections with international fascism.⁶ Concurrently, left-wing volunteers, led by former IRA member Frank Ryan, enlisted in the communist-organized International Brigades to support the Republican

¹ The research leading to the publication of this essay was supported by funding from the Ministerio de Ciencia e Investigación under the 2022 programme of grants for research projects (Reference PID2022-140013NB-I00).

² The acclaimed Spanish poet Antonio Machado, in a much-quoted poem written decades before the war, in 1912, warned infant Spaniards that they were born into a divided country and that one of the “two Spains” would freeze their heart (2023, 115).

³ For details about this idea of the third Spain, see the historian Paul Preston’s series of short biographies titled *Las tres Españas del 36* (1998) and Alfonso Botti’s *Historias de las “revencas Españas”* (2023). Similarly, the early collection of stories about the Spanish Civil War by the journalist Manuel Chaves Nogales, *A sangre y fuego* (1937), exemplifies the horrific experiences of victims who suffered from the cruelty of both sides of the conflict.

⁴ For instance, the *Irish Independent*, which gave its political allegiance to the Fine Gael party, reacted to the persecution of the Spanish Church and saw the conflict as a clash between the atheistic Reds and the Church. This position was to become the dominant one in the Irish Free State (Bell 1969, 140).

⁵ See, for instance, Peadar O’Donnell’s chronicle *Salud! An Irishman in Spain* (1937).

⁶ For details about this organization, see Maurice Manning’s *The Blueshirts* (1971), Mike Cronin’s *The Blueshirts and Irish Politics* (1997), and John Newsinger’s article “Blackshirts, Blueshirts, and the Spanish Civil War” (2001).

cause.⁷ Scholars like Sarah Heinz (2012) have examined the interest of twentieth-century Irish writers in the Spanish Civil War, and how their representation of the Spanish conflict mirrors violent struggles at home. Heinz highlights poets such as Somhairle Macalastair and Ewart Milne who sympathized with the Republicans and celebrated the fight in Spain, along with Charles Donnelly's disillusioned perspective in his poems and Neil Jordan's historical novel *Sunrise with Sea Monster* (1994), which "centres on the futility and destructiveness of armed conflict everywhere" (Heinz 2012, 93). In recent years, the Spanish Civil War has resurfaced as a thematic backdrop in Irish historical novels, including Dermot Bolger's *The Family on Paradise Pier* (2005), Maurice Leitch's *Gone to Earth* (2019) and Anamaría Crowe Serrano's *In the Dark* (2021).

These novels reflect meticulous research, with some even including prefaces and acknowledgements citing their bibliographical references, demonstrating a commitment to historical accuracy. This article will examine the representation of the Spanish Civil War in these three recent Irish novels by Bolger, Leitch and Crowe Serrano, exploring how they re-create this conflict and whether they perpetuate simplistic dualistic views of the two Spains or offer fresh perspectives. Are they faithful to historical accuracy, or do they misrepresent the past? What themes do they emphasize, and do they reflect the ideological struggles of Spain's war? Do they advocate for a particular side or political stance? To address these questions, we draw upon insights from Kate McLoughlin's *Authoring War* (2011), which analyses how authors grapple with representing violence and loss in wartime narratives, contending that war resists straightforward representation (2011, 6–7) due to its inherently authorial narratives (2011, 20), wherein rhetoric and ideology wield significant influence. Furthermore, we employ Laura Saxton's framework, distinguishing between "accuracy" and "authenticity" in historical fiction. Here accuracy pertains to the fidelity of a text's representation to available evidence, including the correctness of names, places, dates and events. On the other hand, authenticity refers to a subjective impression readers may derive from background details such as "the characters' milieu, dress, customs, and speech", which contribute to re-create a plausible image of the historical period in question (Saxton 2020, 132).

2 From Idealism to Disillusionment in Dermot Bolger's *The Family on Paradise Pier*

Dermot Bolger, a Dublin native from humble beginnings, has established himself as an esteemed editor, poet, playwright, and novelist. From 1979 to 1992, he spearheaded the Raven Arts Press, providing a platform for a generation of emerging Irish writers such as Patrick McCabe, Colm Tóibín, Sebastian Barry and Sara Berkeley. Bolger's early literary endeavours focused on articulating the experiences of marginalized Irish working-class characters,⁸ while his later historical novels, based on real events, delve into various Irish existences within the context of the twentieth century. In *The Family on Paradise Pier*, Bolger recounts the fate of the Goold Verschoyles, a real Anglo-Irish family from a serene County Donegal village,

⁷ Many studies have discussed the military involvement of Irish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War; see, for instance, Fearghal McGarry's *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (1999) and Robert Stradling's *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War (1936–39)* (1999).

⁸ Michael Pierson describes Bolger as a working-class writer interested in the "voice of the voiceless" (2013, 51).

as they navigate personal and political upheavals from the early twentieth century through the turbulent times of the Irish War of Independence, the Spanish Civil War and World War II.⁹ At its core lies Brendan Goold Verschoyle, a family member who, after embracing communism, departs for Spain at the age of 26 as a radio technician working for the Soviet contingent aligned with the Republican cause. Brendan's journey epitomizes the ideological fervour pervasive among some Irishmen during that era. However, disillusionment soon sets in as he navigates the political intrigues in Barcelona, leading to his incarceration in a Russian gulag as a suspected Trotskyite spy, while his family frantically searches for him.

Bolger adeptly intertwines historical events with intimate familial dramas, offering readers a poignant depiction of one man's quest for meaning amid wartime chaos. Commencing in 1941 with Brendan's transport as a political prisoner to a Russian gulag, the narrative juxtaposes earlier idyllic family memories in Donegal Bay back in 1915 with the stark reality of Brendan's predicament, shaped by his political involvement and experiences in Spain. Despite his initial enthusiasm, Brendan's disillusionment with communist ideology becomes evident shortly after he arrives in Barcelona. Realizing he is being surveilled and manipulated by his own Russian comrades, Brendan is forced to spy on the foreign volunteers arriving in Spain to fight with the Republican forces: "For the past fortnight his movements had been watched, ever since he realised that he had not been brought to Spain for his radio skills but so that he could be used to spy upon new arrivals to the International Brigade" (2006, 320). Unwilling to comply, he quickly arouses the suspicion of his superiors and is arrested. Through Brendan's experiences in Spain and the impact of his absence on his family, Bolger masterfully explores the grim realities of the Spanish Civil War and its enduring repercussions. This war is not simply a clash between ideologies and political parties, but rather the experience of individuals, their loss and suffering. The emphasis on human suffering and other effects of the war takes precedence over ideological positioning. Brendan emerges as another casualty of the conflict – a figure who sacrifices everything for his ideals only to be betrayed by those he sought to assist, inflicting pain on those who love him. Once Brendan is caught in the spider's web of Stalin's terror, the reader knows that he will become one of those voices ignored by history. The author himself, in an interview, confirms this idea when he states that a character like this "never occurs in histories of the Irish left" (De Angelis 2017, 294).

Notably, Bolger's commitment to realism and accuracy in representing the Spanish Civil War is evident throughout *The Family on Paradise Pier*. The novel's appended section "P.S. Ideas, Interviews and Features ...", sheds light on its genesis, rooted in the true-life story of Bolger's friend Sheila Fitzgerald (née Goold Verschoyle), known as Eva in the narrative. Bolger meticulously incorporates details from Sheila's recollections, and extracts from her notebooks and sketchbook, albeit with altered first names for characters. Brendan is based on Sheila's brother, Brian Goold Verschoyle who, despite his family's high-class status, aligned himself with the working class, embraced communism, trained as a radio operator in Moscow, volunteered for the Republican cause in Spain and ultimately "died in a gulag

⁹ Carmen Zamorano Llena (2007) contends that in *The Family on Paradise Pier* Bolger redefines the construct of Irishness through the experiences of this Anglo-Irish family in an international context. *An Ark of Light* (2018) serves as a sequel, chronicling the family's journey from 1948 onwards.

prison camp” (Richards and Saba 2014). Bolger, in an interview, underscores his pursuit of capturing the “essential truth” of this real-life tale, supplementing Sheila’s memories with insights gleaned from MI5 files (De Angelis 2017, 295). The narrative abounds with carefully chosen real dates, places and names, bolstering its historical accuracy. For instance, there are several references to historical figures such as Eoin O’Duffy, with his Irish volunteers training in Caceres, and Frank Ryan, alongside other Irish volunteers fighting with the International Brigades. Brendan encounters an Irish volunteer in Barcelona, Peadar Bourke, who is in the International Brigades and tells him that his brother also serves in Spain with “General O’Duffy’s Irish fascism column” (2006, 323), underscoring the societal divisions prevalent in Ireland at the time.¹⁰ This same Bourke, upon returning from Spain in November 1939, visits Eva to relay news of a family friend, Charlie, who had perished in the Battle of Jarama – a nod to Irish poet Charles Donnelly, a left-wing political activist killed in the 1937 battle.¹¹ The narrative also features André Marty, the French Secretary of Comintern and Political Commissar of the International Brigades, depicted unfavourably during his Barcelona visit: “With froth on his moustache” he would pressure Russian commissars to uncover “another anarcho-sindicalist spy to be executed during his stay” (2006, 321). Marty’s reputation as a stringent disciplinarian, “convinced that ‘Fascist-Trotskyist’ spies were everywhere, and that it was his duty to exterminate them” (Beevor 2006, 181), finds resonance in Brendan’s ordeal when accused of Trotskyist treachery by his own comrades.

The accusation by the Barcelona Russian communist commissars that Brendan was linked to the “Trotskyite of the POUM scum” certainly highlights the differences between the various Spanish left-wing parties fighting on the same side. This confrontation between the Communist Party, followers of Stalin’s policies, and the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista), with Trotskyist ideas, reflects the complex political landscape of the Spanish Civil War.¹² However, despite the nine references to the POUM in chapters 20, 25, 27 and 30, many important details remain unsaid. The political situation in Catalonia during the war was far more complex than depicted in Bolger’s narrative. This “war within a war”, vividly portrayed in George Orwell’s eyewitness account *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) and Ken Loach’s film *Land and Freedom* (1995), involved the control of the government both in Catalonia and Madrid. The communists backed the more moderate elements of the Republican government, supporting a bourgeois democratic Spain against the anarchists and the Trotskyites of the POUM, whose influence was dominant in Catalonia. They favoured maintaining the social revolution that occurred shortly after the failure of the military rebellion in Barcelona (Esenwein 2005, 186). In fact, during the so-called “May Days” of 1937, both Republican factions engaged in street battles in Barcelona, resulting in the outlawing of the POUM and the execution of some of its leaders by their own comrades. While these gaps in the narrative might affect readers’ understanding of Brendan’s arrest, the inclusion of excessive detail could potentially obscure the narrative. As observed by McLoughlin in

¹⁰ Christopher Bland’s novel *Ashes in the Wind* (2004), an epic story interweaving the destinies of two Irish families, one Catholic and the other Anglo-Irish Protestant, also features a similar situation with the two protagonist friends fighting on opposing sides in Spain.

¹¹ Further insights into Charles Donnelly’s life can be found in the biographical note included in Bradley’s anthology of *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1980, 140).

¹² According to communist propaganda, the POUM collaborated with Franco’s fascist allies (Bolger 2006, 409).

her “Introduction” to the *Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, “[...] omissions are both inevitable and intriguing” (2009, 1).

Even though *The Family on Paradise Pier* is not a biography and Bolger is not writing a history book, but a work of fiction, in the section “P.S.” where Bolger explains the origin of the novel, he acknowledges that “Fiction can never tell the full truth, yet perhaps it can tell altered but equally important truths” (2006, 4). In essence, the author aims to achieve a certain authenticity as understood by Saxton (2011, 129). The verisimilitude of the plot, characters and atmosphere fosters a sense of credibility, reinforcing the air of truth. Readers accept Brendan’s biographical events, along with his motives and emotions. An omniscient narrator draws the reader closer to the character, enhancing the narrative’s truthfulness. For instance, Brendan’s feelings during his arrest by Russian agents in Barcelona vividly come to life: “And he knew that his ribs were broken and three or four more kicks would hopefully edge him towards the mercy of oblivion” (2006, 336). Furthermore, precise background period details also contribute to creating a plausible image of the moment. For example, a waiter in a café on the Ramblas in Barcelona is described as wearing a brown boiler suit with an anarchist neckerchief (2006, 316), capturing the revolutionary atmosphere of Catalonia during the early months of the war, when militias took power and confiscated land, factories, transport and even shops and cafés. In fact, the café on the Ramblas “was now a collective enterprise since the owners fled” (316).¹³ The cumulative effect of seemingly accurate period details, coupled with a depiction of the war highlighting the laws and excessive violence on both sides that exacerbate the suffering of individuals, whether or not they participate in the conflict, enhances the novel’s authenticity.

3 The Haunting Past in Maurice Leitch’s *Gone to Earth*

Born into a working-class Protestant family in County Antrim, Northern Ireland, Maurice Leitch entered the world of writing after spending six years teaching in a rural primary school. Subsequently, he joined the BBC in Belfast as a radio producer and writer, publishing his debut novel, *The Liberty Lad*, in 1965, just before the onset of the Troubles. However, the narrative already reflected the prevailing social and moral challenges of the era. Departing Belfast for London in 1970, Leitch continued his career with BBC radio while simultaneously pursuing his passion for writing, penning novels, short stories, and scripts for radio and television. His acclaimed works include *Poor Lazarus* (1969), a compelling tale of a Protestant outsider navigating a predominantly Catholic community, which earned him the Guardian Fiction Prize, and his novel *Silver’s City* (1981), set against the backdrop of the Troubles. Following his passing in 2023 at the age of 90, an obituary in *The Irish Times* hailed Leitch as an “acclaimed Northern Irish novelist” and, echoing sentiments expressed by the Belfast writer Robert McLiam Wilson, celebrated him as a “glorious, inconvenient voice” (Doyle 2023).¹⁴ Leitch’s final novel, *Gone to Earth* (2019), intricately weaves a narrative that follows the mystery surrounding the figure of Diego, a former left-wing Republican fighter in the Spanish Civil War. Presumed dead by Franco’s regime, Diego lives in hiding, “in constant fear

¹³ George Orwell vividly captures a similar revolutionary fervour in the opening chapter of *Homage to Catalonia* (1938).

¹⁴ The same comments were included in the obituaries published in other British newspapers, such as *The Telegraph* (2023) and *The Sun* (Farrell 2023).

of discovery” (2019, 26), alongside his wife Adriana in Torremolinos, a quaint fishing village on the southern coast of Spain in the mid-1950s.

Diego’s mysterious narrative arc serves as a backdrop for exploring the internal conflicts of other characters grappling with the ghosts of their pasts and their hidden truths. Adriana, Diego’s wife, bears the burden of being married to a former “rojo” (red), as termed by the Nationalists during the war, constantly living in fear of reprisals from Franco’s authoritarian regime. Another character entangled in the couple’s trials is Johnnie Ray, an American singer struggling with alcohol addiction, who travels to Spain in the hope of revitalizing his fading career while concealing his homosexuality. Yet, at the core of the tale lies Eugene Furlong, an Irish expatriate hailing from Leitrim, residing in Torremolinos. He finds himself stranded abroad after serving with O’Duffy’s Irish Brigade during the Spanish Civil War. Described as “[j]ust another foreigner escaping from a past which was his business and no-one else’s” (2019, 34), Eugene embodies the struggle of individuals haunted by their past choices. While the narrative scathingly critiques Franco’s post-war regime, characterized by pervasive fear and repression, it also incorporates numerous flashbacks, transporting readers back to the tumultuous years of the civil war, offering a nuanced portrayal of its multifaceted nature. Leitch deftly captures the brutality perpetrated by both sides: Eugene grapples with the “terrible things he’s witnessed and been party to” (2019, 127) when fighting alongside the Nationalists, whereas Diego recalls the anarchists’ ruthless destruction of a local church and the murder of Father Gregorio, the priest, as he attempted to intervene, underscoring the savagery unleashed during the conflict (2019, 24–26). Intriguingly, one of the leaders of this assault emerges as a prominent supporter of Franco’s post-war regime. Moreover, the narrative includes references to the international dimension, with German aircraft dropping bombs and British ships dumping Spanish refugees on the coast of Valencia (2019, 139), underscoring the global ramifications of the war. Throughout, the narrative poignantly portrays the enduring suffering of its victims, irrespective of their direct involvement in the conflict, resonating with the plight of the “third Spain”, whose memories continue to haunt them long after the war’s end.

In terms of historical accuracy, *Gone to Earth* meticulously incorporates real names of people, places, and events related to the Spanish Civil War. At the outset, the novel features a revealing epigraph with words attributed to the Nationalist General Gonzalo Queipo de Llano: “Even if they hide beneath the earth, I shall dig them out; and even if they are already dead, I shall kill them again.” Queipo de Llano, a leader of the military uprising in Seville, was renowned for his radio propaganda broadcasts from Radio Sevilla. In fact, the quote is lifted from an actual broadcast over Seville radio on 25 July 1936 (Browne 2014, 106). This epigraph serves to underscore the central plot of Diego’s evasion from old adversaries, as well as one of the main themes of the narrative: the brutality and repression of the war effort. Besides the expected references to real figures such as O’Duffy, Franco and the Spanish bullfighter Manolete, it is notable that one of the characters, the American singer Johnnie Ray, is a fictional depiction of a popular American crooner from the 1950s. Even a song mentioned by one of the hotel waiters, “The Little White Cloud That Cried”, was a real hit by Ray,

released in 1951.¹⁵ Similarly, various authentic places populate the novel, including Cáceres, where Eugene was stationed with his Irish Brigade, Teruel and Madrid, where Diego fought the Nationalists, and Galway, where the bishop presented the members of the Irish Brigade with religious medals before their departure for Spain (2019, 76). The meticulous attention to detail is further evident in the reference to the Plaza de Felix Saenz in Malaga – a real square that remains accessible today – where Eugene visits a tailor. Although the volume does not explicitly mention the author’s research, insights from Leitch’s publisher, Turnpike Books, reveal that the author was drawing upon his many visits to Spain over decades and a “real-life story he once heard” to construct a vivid portrayal of the conflict (Doyle 2019). Stories like Diego’s of Republican supporters who lived in hiding to avoid Franco’s repression have been circulating in Spain for decades. In fact, in 1977, the book *Los topos* was published by Jesús Torbado and Manuel Leguineche, two journalists who collected many testimonies of this kind.¹⁶ There is also a 2011 documentary titled *30 años de oscuridad (30 Years of Darkness)*, directed by Manuel H. Martín, whose protagonist, curiously enough, is a former mayor of a town in Malaga, like Diego. This documentary was shown at the Cervantes Institute in Dublin in 2014.

Alongside the verisimilitude of the mystery plot, Leitch’s meticulous attention to detail when describing characters and evoking Franco’s Spain or its wartime past further adds to the novel’s sense of authenticity, immersing readers in the sights, sounds, and emotions of Spain’s history. In *Gone to Earth*, we are introduced to the little closed community of Torremolinos, with its own social norms, where the memories of the Spanish war are still vivid for most residents. With the introduction of a diverse array of minor yet believable characters such as the bullying police officer, Adriana’s nosy neighbour and the former anarchist turned influential Franco supporter, the narrative establishes an authentic atmosphere that portrays the bleak picture of life in provincial Spain. Similarly, the novel’s intense descriptions of wartime scenes evoke a sense of realism that resonates with readers. For example, Diego’s detailed depiction of the atmosphere in Republican Madrid during the early stages of the conflict paints a vivid picture:

[...] the streets choked with people waving flags, yelling competing slogans of the Left, while the front itself was barely a score of kilometres away with their own side going out to engage with the enemy in the city’s double-decker buses and taxis as though travelling to a picnic, then returning at night to eat and sleep with their families. (2019, 139)¹⁷

Furthermore, through a narrator who often presents characters’ thoughts and feelings using the technique of free indirect style, readers can delve into their minds and closely follow their differing views on their past experiences and how they grappled with the upheaval of war, from various ideological standpoints and moral dilemmas. This adds depth and authenticity to the narrative, portraying the complexity of war. At times, the novel presents how the same

¹⁵ The song can still be found and listened to on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gX82VcjJvew>.

¹⁶ There is an English version of this book titled *The Forgotten Men* (1981).

¹⁷ As a curiosity, the reference to the double-decker buses in 1930s Madrid is accurate; they were known as “londineses” (Londoners) because, like those in London, they were made by the British firm Leyland Motors.

event or experience can be perceived differently by two different characters. This contrast is evident in a conversation between two volunteers of the Irish Brigade, Eugene Furlong and Jack Early: “While Furlong recalled horrors like seeing the roaming dogs on abandoned farms on human corpses, Early joked about shooting them for sniping practice [...]” (2019, 82). Such instances offer an honest re-creation of the war’s multifaceted nature. Collectively, these elements paint a grim picture of a country coming to terms with the violence of civil war and a repressive, fictional Spain, which, as noted by the novel’s publisher, James Doyle, had much “in common with the Antrim mill villages of Leitch’s early novels” (2019). Similarly, according to the academic David Clark, certain aspects of Leitch’s *Gone to Earth* draw “inevitable comparisons with the political situation in Northern Ireland” (2022, 277).

The use of the free indirect style also enables the author to re-create the speech of the characters as if using a first-person narrator. With skilful precision, Leitch captures the idiomatic use of the characters’ language both in dialogues and when conveying their thoughts, particularly the Americanisms of Johnnie and the unique slang of Eugene. For instance, Eugene describes his old Irish Brigade as “Summer soldiers, we used to call them. Fired off a coupla rounds, then back home for a feed and a furlough like it was a bank holiday weekend” (2019, 115). However, challenges arise when Leitch attempts to infuse his narrative with a foreign flavour and introduce words and phrases in Spanish. Handling foreign languages in novels is no easy task, and Leitch endeavours to ensure that his English-speaking readers do not become lost by utilizing common techniques such as repeating the words in English or providing appropriate context. Nevertheless, the text contains some spelling and grammatical errors when incorporating Spanish terms in dialogues and descriptions, including those featuring Spanish characters. For example, in the opening paragraph, the word *alpargatos* is used to describe a type of rope-soled shoe that Adriana is wearing, when the correct word would be in the feminine form, *alpartagas* (2019, 1). Subsequently, we encounter *pueblovina* (2019, 59) instead of *pueblerina*, *surprisa* (1919, 165) instead of *sorpresa*, *mucho famosa* (2019, 169) instead of *muy famosa*, and some other errors. While such inaccuracies and oversights may go unnoticed by an English-speaking reader, for a Spanish reader the presence of typos or incorrect usage of vocabulary and grammar can feel jarring and detract from the narrative’s authenticity. The issue will undoubtedly be resolved when a good Spanish translation is published.

4 Uncovering the Suffering of War Victims in Anamaría Crowe Serrano’s *In the Dark*

Anamaría Crowe Serrano, an Irish writer and translator, was born in Dublin to an Irish father and a Spanish mother.¹⁸ She is widely recognized for her collections of experimental and witty poetry, including *on Words and up Words* (2016) and *Crunch* (2018). After her success in poetry, Crowe Serrano ventured into the world of fiction with the comic novel *The Big E* (2019), which features an extravagant finance journalist going through a mid-life crisis. However, her latest novel, titled *In the Dark*, takes a stark departure from comedy. In this work, Crowe Serrano delves into the shadows of history, using the tumultuous backdrop of the Spanish

¹⁸ Information about the author’s life was retrieved from her official website. See Anamaría Crowe Serrano’s website for more details: <https://anamariacs1.wixsite.com/amcs>.

Civil War. Set during the siege of the Republican-held city of Teruel, in northeast Spain, in the winter of 1937–1938, *In the Dark* follows the lives of two sisters, María and Julita. Despite their personal and political differences, they both strive to survive the dangers and hardships of the war, as well as cope with the loss of loved ones. The novel also incorporates an element of mystery when a member of their family deserts from his military duties, seeks refuge in the house where María and Julita live, and hides in a small space under the stairs. María is the only one who knows about the man hiding there, and endeavours to keep it a secret. This intriguing part of the plot is reminiscent of the suspense created by Leitch in *Gone to the Earth* when Adriana hides her husband Diego from the Francoists in one room of their home.

In the Dark delves into the harrowing experiences of war victims against the backdrop of a long, terrible conflict. With a predominant focus on the plight of women, the narrative exposes the myriad challenges endured by these marginalized characters during wartime. Issues such as food scarcity, exposure to harsh weather conditions, the constant threat of violence, fear of being denounced by neighbours with a different ideology and the anguish of separation from loved ones permeate the lives of these female figures, offering a poignant portrayal of their struggles. Through the contrasting perspectives and constant clashes of the two protagonists, María and Julita, the novel also navigates the complex ideological landscape of the conflict. Julita, a staunch communist, espouses unwavering loyalty to the Republican cause, celebrating the heroism of those who defend democratic ideals and a better life against fascist aggression. In contrast, María, whose husband fights for the Nationalists, harbours deep scepticism towards the Republicans, viewing them as “a disorganised bunch of hooligans who have done nothing but cause mayhem and murder for the past five years. [...] They are puppets of that fellow in Russia” (2019, 73). This ideological dichotomy mirrors the broader societal divisions that characterized Spain during the civil war. However, amid their ideological differences, both María and Julita demonstrate acts of compassion and solidarity by offering refuge to vulnerable individuals displaced by the conflict, embodying a sense of resilience and humanity in the face of adversity. The novel also portrays the horrifying realities of war through a diverse cast of minor characters who suffer its consequences: Julita’s and María’s children; Fina, a woman who used to be a dancer in Paris and cares for her elderly father; señora Rojas, an old lady who prays fervently but is displaced from her home without being aware of the reality around her; and Encarna, a kindly old woman who is captured by militiamen, taken to Valencia and executed without understanding her crime. Additionally, what makes everything even bleaker is that much of the suffering of these victims has Christmas as a backdrop – Christmas Day, New Year’s Eve and the Epiphany, much celebrated in Spain. This narrative intricately weaves together personal struggles with larger socio-political dynamics, shedding light on the enduring impact of war on individuals and communities alike.

The accuracy of historical details in *In the Dark* is paramount to its portrayal of the Spanish Civil War’s backdrop. At its core lies the Battle of Teruel, a pivotal and gruesome engagement that unfolded amid the bitter cold of winter from December 1937 to February 1938.¹⁹ Crowe

¹⁹ Details about The Battle of Teruel are recorded in many history books; see, for instance, Charles Esdaile’s *The Spanish Civil War: A Military History* (2019, 254–61).

Serrano meticulously intertwines factual events and figures into the narrative, grounding the story in historical authenticity. Notably, real names permeate the text, including prominent historical figures such as Miguel Primo de Rivera, whose dictatorship prompts Fina's migration to Paris in pursuit of a dancing career; Manuel Azaña, the incumbent President of Spain at the outbreak of the war; and Indalecio Prieto, the Minister of Defence who extends condolences to Julita for her husband's death on the frontline. Moreover, tangible locations, such as the Plaza del Torico and the Torre de San Martín in Teruel, lend credence to the narrative's setting, imbuing it with a sense of place and time. The incorporation of clippings from authentic newspapers of the era further enhances the novel's historical veracity, providing readers with glimpses of the war's unfolding events. Crowe Serrano's commitment to historical accuracy is evident in her meticulous research process, which involved studying the works of esteemed historians like Anthony Beevor, Paul Preston, and Nigel Townson, alongside perusing Republican periodicals of the time such as *La Vanguardia*.²⁰ In the novel's acknowledgments, the author credits her sources of inspiration, including the above-mentioned documentary *30 años de oscuridad*, which she watched at the Instituto Cervantes in Dublin, as well as her research at the Military Archives in Ávila and the National Historical Archive on the Spanish Civil War in Salamanca. Through these rigorous efforts, Crowe Serrano not only crafts a compelling narrative but also underscores the novel's fidelity to historical accuracy.

Continuing with our exploration of authenticity, the narrative achieves a high degree of realism through its narrative voice, character development and the language used. Firstly, an essential element contributing to the sense of authenticity in *In the Dark* is the narrative technique Crowe Serrano employs. While the novel features an omniscient narrator, there are instances where readers are privy to the characters' inner thoughts, reminiscent of stream-of-consciousness novels like James Joyce's *Ulysses* and those of other twentieth-century modernist writers. Departing from the conventional realist narrative, *In the Dark* endeavours to recreate reality by presenting experiences in an allusive and fragmented manner, rich with motifs, symbols, and allusions. By delving into the inner world and consciousness of the characters, the novel seeks to derive meaning from their subjective perspectives. For instance, the following interior monologue from the deserter vividly illustrates his view of the disillusionment and suffering experienced by some International Brigade volunteers:

fodder these boys who thought they knew something of Spain – fair and freckled –
passion and ideals flaming in rebellious hair—from so many places...

America – England – Ireland – Czechoslovakia – Germany – France – Russia – Poland
– Yugoslavia – Italy

their skin – blistered under the sun only to burn for real inside the tanks

boys betrayed by ideals – by the Republic and its commanders [...] (2019, 35)

Furthermore, the absence of traditional heroes and villains in the narrative contributes significantly to its authenticity. Unlike conventional war narratives, *In the Dark* does not feature heroic characters fighting for their country or ideals. The true heroes emerge as those

²⁰ See the author's comments about how and why she wrote her novel in the article "Reconciling the Darkness: Historical Novel Shines a Torchlight on Spanish Civil War".

who selflessly endeavour to aid others in the face of adversity. Figures such as Dr García and Dr Mercedes Maestres exemplify this altruism, risking their own safety to help their patients or to deliver vital medical supplies to the besieged city of Teruel, “oblivious to the dangers, freezing temperatures, hunger, tiredness” (2019, 144). While some soldiers, like the communist Ernesto and the fascist Hunchback, embody the extremes of the conflict with their rudeness and cruelty, respectively, they represent only a fraction of the populace. Most characters in *In the Dark* epitomize the suffering and resilience of the “third Spain”, enduring the intolerance and brutality of war without succumbing to extremism. Finally, the author’s bilingual and bicultural background allows for the correct introduction of the usual Spanish phrases and terms, as well as many cultural details – such as the twelve grapes eaten on each strike of the clock at midnight on New Year’s Eve or the “roscón de reyes” to celebrate the arrival of the Three Wise Men on Twelfth Day – which lends verisimilitude to the story, even for a Spanish reader.

5 Conclusion

In exploring these three Irish historical novels – *The Family on Paradise Pier* by Dermot Bolger, *Gone to Earth* by Maurice Leitch and *In the Dark* by Anamaría Crowe Serrano – a tapestry of the Spanish Civil War emerges, revealing the multifaceted nature of this conflict and its enduring impact on individuals and communities. Despite their differing narrative approaches and focal points, these novels skilfully capture the essence of the era and the complexity of the conflict. While many details remain untold, readers do not receive a simplified version of the war; rather, they are presented with a nuanced portrayal that transcends a mere clash between two opposing ideologies on politics, religion or class. The authors also introduce an international dimension, referring to the problematic intervention of Soviet Russia, as seen in Bolger’s depiction of Brendan’s experiences, and the complexities of Irish participation in the war through Eugene’s perspective in Leitch’s novel. Within this re-creation of the war’s complexities, these authors refrain from clearly advocating for a particular side. Instead, they focus on the extreme brutality of war and on the suffering endured by those involved. All three novels delve into the human experience of war, portraying the personal struggles, sacrifices, and resilience of individuals caught in the turmoil. Whether actively participating in the war, like Brendan in *The Family on Paradise Pier*, Eugene in *Gone to Earth* or the deserter in *In the Dark*, or as relatives and ordinary people, they all become victims of the excessive violence employed by both sides. By engaging with these literary works, readers are invited to confront the complexities of history, recognizing it as more than a mere confrontation between two ancestral Spains, but rather the struggles of individuals seemingly part of a “third Spain”, offering timeless reflections on the universal themes of love, loss, and resilience.

Another commonality in these novels is their commitment to historical accuracy and narrative authenticity. They all meticulously incorporate real events, figures, chronologies and locations into their narratives. Bolger’s *The Family on Paradise Pier* grounds his story in a real Anglo-Irish family, drawing material from one of its member’s recollections and notebooks. Similarly, Leitch’s *Gone to Earth* intricately weaves factual elements from Spanish and Irish histories into the story, painting a vivid portrait of the Spanish Civil War. Crowe Serrano’s *In the Dark* also demonstrates a rigorous research process, integrating real events and newspaper articles to

evoke the historical backdrop of the conflict. This fidelity to historical detail not only enhances the credibility of the narratives, but also provides readers with a deeper understanding of the period. Furthermore, the novels ensure authenticity through well-developed plots, characters and atmospheres, enriched with background period details. By navigating the complexities of ideology through deeply developed characters, these authors avoid the traditional dichotomies between stereotyped good and bad characters, heroes and villains, which would otherwise reduce reality to a caricature and contribute to a simplistic view of the war. Whether it is Bolger's portrayal of Brendan's journey from idealism to disillusionment, Leitch's exploration of the haunting pasts of his characters, or Crowe Serrano's depiction of the harrowing experiences of women during wartime, the protagonists of each novel offer poignant insights into the complexities of the human condition. Although Leitch's use of the Spanish language is imperfect, all three narratives handle cultural details with precision, contributing to the novels' authenticity and creating a vivid portrayal of the historical period.

While this analysis has focused on novels as primary sources, several other literary works offer intriguing perspectives on the intersection of Irish and Spanish history during the Spanish Civil War. For instance, Colm Tóibín's short story "The Summer of '38" (2013) provides a brief yet poignant glimpse into the experiences of a young woman who falls in love with a soldier fighting alongside Franco's troops. Although short stories have not been included here, Tóibín's work merits further exploration for its themes of loyalty, sacrifice, love and memory. In a different genre, Tim Fanning's *The Salamanca Diaries: Father McCabe and the Spanish Civil War* (2019) presents a unique firsthand account of the war through the diaries of an Irish priest in the Irish College in Salamanca, offering valuable insights into the lived experiences of individuals involved in the conflict. Furthermore, works like Christopher Bland's *Ashes in the Wind* (2014) and James Lawless's *Peeling Oranges* (2007) briefly touch upon the Spanish Civil War in the context of broader narratives, highlighting the enduring connection between Spain and Ireland. Exploring these and other texts could provide a deeper understanding of the multifaceted relationship between the two countries and offer new avenues for research into the representation of historical events in literature.

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“We Never Told the Truth for Ten Minutes in This House”: Competition in *Death of a Salesman*

ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* does not broadly critique the American Dream, but rather targets the competitive ethos, the “law of the jungle”, as a defining American tradition. This reading reinterprets perceived contradictions in the play, positioning competition as its central theme. Charley, often viewed as a kind neighbour, subtly embodies this ethos, locked in a lifelong rivalry with Willy over masculinity, business, and fatherhood. Willy, living in a post-colonial society, does not abandon the colonial spirit represented by his father and brother, but adapts it to a modern and metropolitan environment. Personality, or popularity, is but a disguise of pragmatism in his salesmanship, of which his liaison with the Woman is only a minor expression. Well-informed of social Darwinism, Willy raises Biff and Happy to be fearless competitors. While Biff experiences an epiphany and disentangles himself from the law of the jungle, Happy carries it forward. Through Happy, Miller reveals a gloomy future of America beset with corruption and alienation.

Keywords: *Death of a Salesman*, competition, the law of the jungle, American Dream

»V tej hiši niti deset minut nismo govorili resnice«: tekmovalnost v drami *Smrt trgovskega potnika*

IZVLEČEK

Arthur Miller v drami *Smrt trgovskega potnika* ne kritizira ameriškega sna na splošno, temveč se osredotoča na tekmovalni etos, na »zakon džungle«, kot na značilno ameriško tradicijo. Ta interpretacija ponuja novo razlago navideznega protislovja v drami in tekmovalnost postavlja v središče zgodbe. Charley, ki se ga pogosto obravnava kot prijaznega sosedu, subtilno uteleša ta etos, saj je z Willyjem v življenjskem rivalstvu glede moškosti, posla in očetovstva. Willy, ki živi v postkolonialni družbi, ne opusti kolonialnega duha, ki ga predstavljata njegov oče in brat, ampak ga prilagodi sodobnemu mestnemu okolju. Njegova osebnost oziroma njegova priljubljenost je le prikrivanje pragmatizma v njegovem prodajnem talentu, in njegova zveza z Žensko je le delni izraz njegove osebnosti. Willy, ki je dobro seznanjen s socialnim darvinizmom, vzgaja Biffa in Happyja, da postaneta neustrašna tekmovalca. Medtem ko Biff doživi razsvetljenje in se osvobodi zakona džungle, ga Happy nadaljuje. Prek Happyja Miller razkriva mračno prihodnost Amerike, ki jo pestijo korupcija in odtujenost.

Gljučne besede: *Smrt trgovskega potnika*, tekmovalnost, zakon džungle, ameriški sen

1 Introduction

A recurring theme in Arthur Miller's dramatic oeuvre is the corrosive nature of the American Dream under capitalism. This critique is central to plays like *All My Sons*, which explores the conflict between personal morality and capitalist greed. In *Death of a Salesman* (hereafter *Salesman*), Miller continues his critique but focuses specifically on competition – vicious and governed by the law of the jungle – as the means to pursue the Dream. He illustrates how this national tradition, once modernized for an urban setting, systematically devastates the ordinary man, as represented by Willy Loman and his family.

While many critics address competition in *Salesman*, few examine it comprehensively. Most treat it peripherally – as the backdrop to Willy's failure. Scholars like Brenda Murphy and Michael Spindler contextualize the economic shift toward an impersonal, professionalized market that renders Willy obsolete (1999, 7; 1983, 205), while Eric Sterling and David Savran note Willy's inability to adapt or prosper in this new environment (2008, 7; 1992, 32). Yet these studies seldom explore the Lomans' active participation in the ruthless competition. The family are not passive victims; they internalize and perpetuate competitive brutality, a critical dimension that remains under-examined.

Some critics recognize the competitive tradition in the Loman family, attributing it to Willy's inheritance of his father's pioneering spirit, though they claim he is tragically “in the wrong place and at the wrong time” (Gross 1965, 406). This view, however, romanticizes the frontier; Willy's father put the whole family on the long and hard journey to the West not for freedom or peddling flutes, but to seize opportunities – likely land or gold – through the same ruthless competition that Ben, Willy's brother, is engaged in. Other scholars posit a dichotomy between two paths: Ben, “a robber baron” (Porter 1979, 30), who embodies colonial brute force, and Dave Singleman, Willy's model salesman who relies on “personal attractiveness” (Spindler 1983, 204). They conclude that Willy fails due to a “feminine sensibility” (Gross 1965, 407) and a lack of toughness, leaving Ben as “the road not taken”. This interpretation is fundamentally flawed. Willy does not abandon the competitive tradition but modernizes it for an urban landscape. Furthermore, he never truly had Ben's choice – the era is far gone when one could “walk into the jungle ... and walk out rich” (Miller 2006, 189,192).

Critics widely acknowledge the destructive impact of Willy's adultery on Biff. Many further classify his infidelity, insurance fraud, habitual lying, etc., as “severe moral failings” that signify “his fall from his ideal” (Weales 1967, 357) and cause “his failure as a father and salesman” (Moss 1967, 52). Another faction rationalizes these actions, framing Willy as a man “prone to human temptations” (Schneider 1967, 253). What remains largely absent from these discussions, however, is a recognition that these behaviours constitute Willy's strategic methodology: a calculated, if not always desperate, form of competition to get ahead in business and to cover his trail afterwards.

Meanwhile, *Salesman* has long been met with critical reservations. Some critics see the protagonist as full of “inconsistencies” and “contradictions” (Cardullo 2007, 586–87), while others find the play “riddled with flaws” and has “real or apparent defects” (Carpenter 2008, 1–2). This article argues that by adopting competition as a critical lens and treating it as the

central action of the play, we can not only effectively resolve such “contradictions” and “flaws”, but also uncover previously unplumbed depths of Miller’s artistic ambition in *Salesman*.

2 Charley’s Rivalry with Willy

There has been a “tendency to see [Miller in *Salesman*] as attacking capitalist society” (Biggsby 2005, 136). However, efforts to unveil such “attacks” face an inherent challenge: Charley, Willy’s neighbour and friend, is a capitalist and has been unanimously praised by critics: “a humane capitalist” (Carson 1982, 47), “a good Samaritan”, and “a model of how to succeed in business and in child-rearing” (Moseley 2009, 50). Given Charley’s business success and his son’s achievement, this role is often interpreted as offering Willy’s way of life a “possible alternative” (Sacchetti 2020, 17) or an “analogical contrast” (Benziman 2005, 23).

One exception is Guijarro-González and Espejo’s article (2008, 63–64), which analyses the dialogues between Charley and Willy and reveals the competitiveness therein. However, despite its innovative start, the article abruptly reverts to the mainstream view, portraying Charley as “a good capitalist” and attributing their “complicated relationship” to Willy’s “feeling of inferiority and envy”.

If these observations are valid, Miller must have made a fundamental mistake in the construction of his play and its characters, because the “contrast” suggest that there are two paths to success: the right one represented by Charley and the wrong one by Willy. An obvious corollary is that Willy’s tragedy is entirely personal. This diminishes the social significance of the play and undermines Miller’s intention to create a tragedy of the common man. Indeed, Willy is often seen as “a poor fool” (Mottram 1969, 33) and even “pathetic” (Muller 1957, 317; Martin 1996, 103). Although there is still the wide-held belief that Willy represents “everyman or ... every Americanman” (Gross 1965, 405), so far as Charley “the perfect” is found a contrast to Willy “the fool”, Willy remains to many “theatric reviewers, as well as serious scholars ... an unworthy man incapable of carrying the tragic burden its author places on him” (Roudané 1997, 62), while *Salesman* is fundamentally flawed as a tragedy.

Miller is certainly above this, and Charley is not as good as he appears. Behind the disguise of benevolence, Charley is essentially a dangerous competitor to Willy. Their rivalry manifests in at least three areas: masculinity, business success, and their sons’ achievements.

Charley and Willy are primarily engaged in a rivalry over masculinity, with Linda being the trophy. There are details in *Salesman* implying a relationship between Charley and Linda beyond that of ordinary neighbours. First, Charley has most likely divulged to Linda Willy’s loans from him. The transactions go on in Charley’s office and are Willy’s main secret. Linda, however, knows that Willy “borrows fifty dollars a week and pretends to [her] that it’s his pay” (Miller 2006, 195). There is no one who could inform Linda about this other than Charley, who fully understands the importance of guarding the secret, for it not only concerns Willy’s dignity but his own moral integrity as well. No matter whether Charley reveals this to please Linda or to shame Willy, he obviously places Linda above Willy. Furthermore, there are instances where Charley and Linda exhibit excessive intimacy. For example, when attending Willy’s funeral, Linda does not take the arm of either of her sons but “goes over to Charley and takes his arm” (2006, 254).

Miller himself reveals Charley's secret. In 1983, while directing a Chinese production of *Salesman*, he explained to the actor portraying Charley, who was perplexed by the character's excessive kindness towards Willy, that "Charley has a deep feeling for Linda, whom he greatly admires" (Miller 1984a, 50). This revelation indicates that Charley's kindness is actually directed towards Linda. Despite her middle age, Linda is portrayed as an exemplary woman and wife, repeatedly praised by Willy and their sons. Charley's familiarity with Linda may have bred infatuation. Even if one discounts her attractiveness, Linda effectively becomes a "trophy" for Charley in his unspoken competition with Willy.

Willy is not oblivious to Charley as a competitor. His frequent hostility towards Charley does not reflect his poor manners but his "resistance" to his neighbour as an intruder into his personal and familial domains. When Charley first appears in the play, Willy bluntly asks, "What do you keep comin' here for?" (Miller 2006, 185). During their card game, Willy recalls a moment when Charley arrived late at night wearing knickers, to which Willy remarks, "Now all you need is a golf club and you can go upstairs to sleep" (2006, 191). Willy appears to be mocking Charley's attire, but he is by no means joking, and his line would be devastatingly revealing if we added the phrase "with Linda" to the end. Interpreted through a Freudian lens, its implication is clear: despite Charley's display of masculinity, he lacks the essential male power (the phallus), which would otherwise grant him access to Linda's bedroom. In this exchange, Willy subtly intimates his awareness of Charley's intention and asserts confidence in his own masculinity. However, Willy does not appear to know exactly how intimate Charley is with Linda. Miller seems more interested in delineating the competition between the two men than in portraying Linda as a treacherous woman.

Charley and Willy's card games appear a casual pastime, but they are a serious competition; their seemingly friendly conversations during the games are in fact verbal sparring. For instance, when Willy boasts about his success in sales, Charley, intent on exposing his lie, quips that he will "take some of [his] Portland money" (Miller 2006, 191). When Willy mocks Charley's ignorance of vitamins, Charley retaliates by reminding Willy of his financial difficulties and boasts about his upcoming vacation to California. Willy rudely cuts him off. Charley changes the topic and offers Willy a job. Willy immediately gets insulted. In an attempt to regain the advantage, Willy boasts about his success in putting up a ceiling and humiliates Charley for his lack of manual skills by declaring, "A man who can't handle tools is not a man. You're disgusting" (2006, 186). Knowing each other well, Charley and Willy attack each other's insecurities: the capitalist Charley mocks Willy's career failures, while Willy emasculates Charley by targeting his lack of handyman skills and athleticism, both synonymous with masculinity. This pattern defines their card game conversations.

Charley's most insidious tactic against Willy is his offer of employment, which is commonly perceived as a benevolent gesture but is a calculated and malicious move. To begin with, Charley's sincerity is questionable. If Charley genuinely intended to help, he would have made a more tactful and detailed proposal. Instead, his offer is condescending and vague, mentioning only "fifty dollars a week" (Miller 2006, 224) – the exact sum Willy is borrowing from him for survival. The offer's timing, amount, and manner all seem designed to assert his dominance and reinforce Willy's inferiority, as Charley knows Willy's pride will never allow him to accept it.

Charley's true feelings towards Willy are further revealed when Willy visits his office. Jenny, Charley's secretary, who is annoyed by Willy's visits, tells Bernard, Charley's son, that his father "gets all upset every time he comes" (Miller 2006, 219). This time, Charley makes the job offer again and elucidates his rationale:

Why must everybody like you? Who likes J.P. Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he'd look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was very well liked. Now listen, Willy, I know you don't like me, and nobody can say I'm in love with you, but I'll give you a job because – just for the hell of it, put it that way... (Miller 2006, 224–25)

This rare moment of candour exposes Charley's pragmatism and the nature of their seemingly close friendship. Charley does not harbour any genuine affection for Willy and their friendship is merely performative. To Charley, likability is tied solely to financial power, which Willy obviously lacks. His assertion that "the only thing you got in this world is what you can sell" (Miller 2006, 224) aligns perfectly with the ruthless business philosophy of Howard, Willy's boss, who has just fired him. Charley's final remark about "giving" Willy a job, unmasks his true intentions. He hesitates, most probably because he is worried that his offer will be too shocking. He, therefore, partially and temporarily puts his mask back on by saying that it is "just for the hell of it", which means "for fun". Whatever fun it is, it is not for Willy's benefit, but is derived from his being "insulted".

The central competition between Willy and Charley revolves around the achievements of their sons, Biff and Bernard. As teenagers, while Bernard excels academically, his success in school pales in comparison to Biff's glamor on the football field. This mirrors a broader societal preference for physical dominance over intellectual achievement, a hierarchy central to the ideal of rugged individualism in the American Dream. Bernard, eager to bask in Biff's reflected glory, helps him cheat in his homework and exams. In return, Bernard is granted the "honour" of carrying Biff's shoulder guards, instead of the football, which represents masculinity. Willy seizes every opportunity to boast about Biff's achievements, while dismissing Bernard as a nerd with a limited future. Charley, recognizing his son's disadvantage, attempts to assert moral superiority by urging Willy to discipline his sons for stealing from a construction site. Well aware of Charley's motivation, Willy retaliates by mocking his attire.

The tension between the two fathers escalates as Biff is poised to be the captain in the New York City High School championship at Ebbets Field – Biff's crowning achievement as a footballer and Willy's proudest moment as a father. When Willy shows off to Charley and predicts that Biff will be as successful as Red Grange, Charley, realizing he has been bested, fabricates a story about Ebbets Field being bombed and feigns ignorance of the legendary football star. Willy ignores both his claims, and orders Charley to "put up [his] hands" (Miller 2006, 219), an unmistakable sign of Willy's confidence in victory in this important round.

This victory is replayed in Willy's mind and the timing reveals his real need: having lost his job, he needs to borrow some money from Charley. Obviously, Willy is mustering the confidence he needs in order to face Charley once more. However, Bernard's unexpected presence in Charley's office complicates the situation. Bernard, now a successful lawyer, stands

in stark contrast to Biff, a farmhand. In addition to boasting that Bernard is going to argue before the Supreme Court, Charley collaborates with his son in showing off that he is also going to play tennis on a private villa's tennis court in Washington. Bernard's tennis rackets, highlighted twice in the stage directions, are a phallic symbol similar to the Biff's football. As Bernard leaves, Charley exclaims, "Knock'em out, Bernard!" (Miller 2006, 223). This echoes his earlier encouragement to Biff, "knock a homer" before the Ebbets Field game, and Willy's exultant shouting "Touch down! Touch down . . ." (2006, 219). The only difference lies in the recipient. Given the reversal in the control of the phallus and the vast social chasm separating Biff and Bernard, the competition between the two fathers is effectively over. However, Willy refuses to admit defeat and begins to contemplate a suicidal car crash, hoping that Biff might still win back some points with the insurance payout.

Charley's lengthy speech at Willy's funeral has perplexed, if not misled, many critics. Some find it "incongruous with and atypical of the character" (Carpenter 2008, 9), while others assert that it "denies the character of Charley" (Haynes 1962, 576), or "contributes to the confusion" (Cardullo 2007, 588). These opinions most probably stem from the belief that Charley is a good neighbour and the interpretation of this speech as a "gloss on the psychology of the salesman" (Spindler 1983, 211). Seen from the perspective of competition, it conveys a very different message:

Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman and for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He is a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back – that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream. Boy, it comes with the territory. (Miller 2006, 255–56)

Charley is not defending Willy against Biff's harsh judgment that Willy "had the wrong dream" and "never knew who he was" (Miller 2006, 253), nor is he offering a eulogy for a late friend. Instead, his speech serves as an unchallenged proclamation of his final victory over Willy. Charley asserts that Willy's choice of career as a salesman has doomed him to insecurity and total failure ("no rock bottom"). Willy's lack of practical skills ("don't put a bolt to a nut") and professional knowledge (no "law" or "medicine") leaves him with nothing to rely on but shallow, fleeting relationships. Willy's dependence on superficial charm ("riding on a smile and shoeshine") and fear of losing approval (worrying about people "not smiling back" or "spots on the hat") trap him in a world of illusions. His pursuit of an unreachable "dream" is a doomed quest (no "territory"). Charley's judgment here echoes his earlier derision: "When the hell are you going to grow up?" (2006, 224). Miller himself once noted that this speech "is now said as the obverse of the other [previous speeches to denigrate Willy], but it's complementary. These are two halves of the same thing" (Miller 1984b, 352). Thus, instead of defending Willy or contradicting his own earlier critique of him, Charley here nails Willy firm in his coffin.

Apart from his benevolent disguise, Charley's impeccable reputation among critics has also been shaped by the following comments from Miller:

The most decent man in *Death of a Salesman* is a capitalist whose aims are not different from Willy Loman's. The great difference between them is that Charley is not a fanatic. Equally, however, he has learned how to live without that frenzy, that ecstasy of spirit which Willy chases to his end. (Miller 1957, 37)

These remarks have probably obscured deeper insights into this character. This article contends that Miller's description of Charley as "the most decent man" is relative and probably sarcastic, not a statement of his absolute integrity. What Miller emphasizes here are the similarities between Willy and Charley: both pursue the same American Dream. Their only distinction is that Willy is a "fanatic", while Charley is a moderate.

As such, Charley may not be as virtuous as he appears. His tolerance and benevolence toward Willy could be motivated by strategic interests rather than genuine friendship or altruism. By placing Charley – a pragmatic capitalist well informed of social Darwinism – next door to Willy, Miller may not intend to showcase the virtues of neighbourly friendship or highlight Willy's personal flaws. Instead, he seems to demonstrate the pervasiveness of competition, not only limited to the workplace, but even in one's bedroom.

3 Will's Addiction to the Ethics of the Jungle

It is undeniable that Willy's career decline and the ensuing financial difficulties both exert immense pressure on him. However, they are not the primary causes of his despair and tragic death. Willy's true preoccupation is Biff's success – or rather, the lack thereof. The critical blows to Willy's psyche are all directly related to his son – his abrupt abdication of ambition during high school, his subsequent failures in education and business, and his current resignation to mediocrity. The opening of *Salesman* shows how Biff's return and his business proposal restore Willy's confidence and mental normalcy, but Biff's failure to secure a loan and his decision to remain a farmhand drive Willy to utter despair. Consequently, Willy carries out his suicide plan, believing it will provide Biff with the financial means to succeed. By doing so, he imagines he will "end up worth more dead than alive" (Miller 2006, 225) and will finally "secure his rightful place in the world" (Miller 1949, 146).

Willy attributes Biff's downfall to the "spite" he has developed since discovering his father's adultery, a belief which implicitly acknowledges his own culpability. However, Biff ultimately transcends this trauma after his epiphany while fleeing his former boss Oliver's office. He realizes that Willy's infidelity was merely a symptom of a deeper "law of the jungle" mentality – a philosophy that defines both Willy's salesmanship and the Loman family's generational pursuit of wealth. This revelation fuels his vehement declaration that the Lomans "never told the truth for ten minutes in this house". With this, Biff aims to shock his family into recognizing the harm of their "wrong dreams" and to dispel the cloud of lies and illusions that have long enveloped them.

Despite his genuine affinity for nature and craftsmanship, Willy chooses a predatory approach in his pursuit of wealth, believing he is just upholding a family tradition. His father, who likely relocated the whole family from Boston to the West in search of Native American resources – be it gold or land – embodies this ethos. Similarly, Ben's legendary fortune, built

on the ruthless exploitation of Africans or Native Americans, epitomizes a success achieved through violence and fraud. His entire persona – from his aggressive demeanour to his advice to Biff – is a testament to his practice of social Darwinism. Centola (1993, 35) aptly identifies Ben as “Willy’s alter ego”: a mental projection whose presence reveals not only what Willy values but also why he makes the life choices he does. This article contends that Willy does not have autonomy in making choices – all his choices are shaped, or even dictated, by values he has inherited. By examining these values, we gain insight into broader familial and national traditions. Although the frontier had long been exhausted and the colonial era had ended by Willy’s time, the predatory spirit persisted. Lorraine Hansberry perceptively recognizes the root of Willy’s problems:

His predicament in a New World where there just aren’t any more forests to clear or virgin railroads to lay or native American empires to first steal and build upon left him with nothing but some leftover values which had forgotten how to prize industriousness over cunning, usefulness over mere acquisition, and above all, humanism over “success.” (2021, 95)

Willy, however, does not need to travel far to seek his fortune. He can live in a city and pursue success right there. Among his generation, Willy is convinced that one can succeed right in the city as there is a “diamond mine in his own backyard” (Porter 1979, 26). The urban environment does not deter him from employing the ethics of the jungle. This is why he confidently tells Ben: “It’s Brooklyn, I know, but we hunt too” (190). This shows that, from the very beginning, Willy is aware that “salesmanship implies a certain element of fraud” (Clurman 1961,65) and that one must “play with rather than by the rules” (Quigley 2005, 64) to achieve greater profits than one deserves. In essence, this continuity of the frontier mentality in modern urban life is a marriage between the ethics of the jungle and capitalism, which gives birth to pragmatism, their child prodigy, which dominates American culture despite the changing times and settings.

Willy’s liaison with the Woman exemplifies his practice of the ethics of the jungle. He was motivated neither by love, loneliness, nor the so-called “philandering nature” (Baker 2016, 59), but sheer business advantages. The Woman’s complaint, “you ruined me ... you are self-centered!” (Miller 2006, 238), provides a glimpse into Willy’s calculated efforts and ultimate goal. With his “sense of humor” and “sweetness” (2006, 182), Willy secures the Woman as a lover, who then becomes his conduit to buyers: “From now on, whenever you come to the office, I’ll see that you go right through to the buyers. No waiting at my desk anymore” (2006, 238). This dovetails with Willy’s own boast about his privilege: “I never have to wait in line to see a buyer, ‘Willy Loman is here!’ That’s all they have to know, and I go right through” (2006, 178). Willy enjoys a significant boost in sales due to the Woman, as evidenced by his claim that he “had a big year ... averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commissions” (2006, 213). In a sense, the Woman becomes Willy’s “diamond mine”.¹

Willy’s most audacious application of the law of the jungle is his suicide by car crash. Unwise as it may appear, Willy is actually blinded by the imagined “magnificence with twenty thousand

¹ Grant Williams places Willy’s height of success, Biff’s Ebbets Field game, his trip to Boston, and several other events in 1928.

dollars in [Biff's] pocket" (Miller 2006, 253). In his delusion, Willy seeks reassurance from Ben, who affirms, "the jungle is dark but full of diamonds ... One must go in to fetch a diamond out" (2006, 252). At this stage Ben is the ethics of the jungle incarnate, which completely possesses Willy. Miller, through Willy's life-for-cash choice, highlights the frantic nature of competitiveness, which is strictly in line with tradition handed down by Ben.

Willy's deep-seated belief in the ethics of the jungle is also evident in his educational philosophy for his sons. Drawing from his family tradition and his observations of society, Willy, "a sidestepper ... a little puncher" (Gussow 2002, 41), consistently instils in his sons what he calls "fearlessness". He purchases a punch bag for the boys, ensures that they are "built like Adonises" (Miller 2006, 178), encourages them to steal, condones Biff's cheating in exams, and fosters his excellence at football. Here, sports are not pursued for their own sake or "likability", but rather serve as preparation for a future of ruthless competition. As Max Weber observes, "Where capitalism is at its most unbridled, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, divested of its metaphysical significance, today tends to be associated with purely elemental passions, which at times virtually turn it into a sporting contest" (2002, 121). Football, characterized by intense physical confrontation, is to Willy an ideal means of cultivating "fearlessness". Similarly, in spite of the knowledge that "the jails are full of fearless characters", Willy still encourages his sons to engage in theft and other reckless behaviour as he is more impressed by the fact that the stock exchange is also full of such fearless characters (2006, 190). From a moral or legal standpoint, Willy's philosophy is clearly flawed; however, his value system prioritizes audacity and the ability to bend or break rules in the pursuit of quick wealth. Willy sometimes questions his approach, but ultimately reaffirms his choice, as illustrated in a hallucinatory conversation with Ben:

WILLY: Ben, my boys – can't we talk? They'd go into the jaws of hell for me, see, but I–

BEN: William, you're being first-rate with your boys. Outstanding, manly chaps!

WILLY: Oh, Ben, that's good to hear! Because sometimes I'm afraid that I'm not teaching them the right kind of – Ben, how should I teach them?

BEN: William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich! ...

WILLY: ... was rich! **That's just the spirit I want to imbue them with! To walk into a jungle!** (Emphasis mine) I was right! I was right! (Miller 2006, 191–92)

This conversation occurs during the sons' adolescence, marking the stage when Willy's early doubts gradually give way to a conviction in the law of the jungle as the guiding principle in his sons' education.

Willy's educational philosophy is not unique, but rather reflective of a broader tradition. His approach to raising his sons, particularly Biff, can be summarized in the following formula: excellence in sports + good personality + capitalism = wealth. While "good personality" ostensibly refers to being "well liked", it in fact signifies "fearlessness". Notably absent from this formula are attributes such as integrity, hard work, and self-reliance, which are traditionally valued. Interestingly, Willy's formula parallels the life of the protagonist in the

movie *Forrest Gump* (1994), whose success can be captured by a similar formula: excellence in sports + good personality + capitalism = wealth. Gump achieves various successes in sports, yet none secures him the ultimate material success. The shrimping company that propels him to wealth is a consequence of his friendship with a black fellow soldier. The only significant difference between the two formulas lies in the definition of “good personality”. For Gump, this means absolute honesty and courage on the football field and battlefield; for Willy and Biff, it represents the “fearlessness” to flout rules or even laws. Gump ultimately becomes a successful capitalist, whereas Biff ends up a day labourer. These differences stem from the nature and goals of the two works: *Salesman* is a tragedy that critiques social realities, while *Forrest Gump* is a celebration of the American Dream, crafted for box office success. However, Gump’s legendary life, especially his miraculous business success, suggests that his story is exceptional, while the tragedy in *Salesman* is a common reality.

It is not difficult to observe in *Salesman* that the prevalence of the law of the jungle correlates closely with the pervasiveness of deception. The Lomans commonly tell lies that can be categorized into two distinct types: those fabricated to cover up their misdeeds and those invented to sustain their hopes. It is natural that people do not openly boast about their underhand actions in competition, and instead layer lie upon lie to conceal the truth. As mentioned above, Willy achieves undeserved benefits through the Woman. Since this fact must not be told, Willy fabricates stories about his popularity to pump himself up to the size his sales success. Biff’s accidental discovery of the Woman in his father’s hotel room pierces the balloon. Instantly, Willy’s superhero image deflates, and he is reduced to a “liar ... phony little fake” (Miller 2006, 242). The falsehood of Willy’s claimed popularity is further underscored at his funeral, which he predicts would be “massive”, but is attended by nobody but his family and two neighbours.

When the Lomans are unable to gain undeserved benefits, they resort to illusions. This pattern is particularly evident in their efforts to maintain confidence, dignity, and family cohesion. Willy occasionally wakes up to the reality, but “Linda prevents him from challenging his own self-delusions and thereby helps preclude the possibility of his psychological growth” (Tyson 1994, 67). Upon his return home, Biff is once again engulfed by the family’s atmosphere of lies and illusions. Willy and Happy quickly inflate him with “hot air” (Miller 2006, 250), leading him to fantasize about Oliver’s appreciation and becoming a “boss big shot in two weeks” (2006, 250). Although Biff eventually awakens and extricates himself from the web of lies, Willy and Happy vehemently reject a life grounded in truth. This addiction to illusion aligns *Salesman* with Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh*, a play whose characters are trapped in their protective fantasies.

Unfair competition not only spreads but also evolves, necessitating increasingly extreme measures for the participants to stay ahead. Willy ultimately becomes a victim of the law of the jungle. His suicide is a direct consequence of his realization that he has fallen behind in ruthless competition. This harsh lesson is imparted by Charley, Howard, and, more poignantly, by Happy. At Frank’s Chop House, Willy does not react to Happy’s shamelessness with anger or authority, since he is more shocked than humiliated or heartbroken. While there is a parallel between Willy’s sexual infidelity and Happy’s womanizing in this scene,

Happy's corruption demonstrated here far surpasses that of his father. Willy most probably also recognizes his own culpability. Yet, more profoundly, he must have understood that he has become obsolete in the ever-escalating competition, that he has to be even more fanatical in order to stay current in this new wave of competitiveness, hence the decision to commit suicide as the means of insurance fraud. This dynamic mirrors the fate of Eddie Carbone in *A View from the Bridge* (1955), whose failure to adapt to a new, more intense form of competition leads to his tragedy.

The law of the jungle pervades the entire play, extending far beyond Willy's infidelity, which, as demonstrated above, is merely an example of his broader adherence to the ethics of the jungle. Biff's discovery of Willy's "phoniness" is significant but marks only the beginning of his own journey of discovery. It takes Biff 15 years to fully comprehend the extent and consequences of the law of the jungle that has entangled his entire family. Biff's epiphany during his flight from Oliver's office represents the turning point in his life and, by extension, is the climax of the play. His subsequent decision to remove himself, as well as Willy and Happy, from the law of the jungle, and his reconciliation with his father, are his resolution of the problem, and also the dénouement of the whole play. The central tragic action of the play is thus not Willy's infidelity, but rather Biff's ordeal with the law of the jungle. In this sense, Willy and Biff together form the tragic hero – Willy embodies the tragic flaw, while the purpose (discovery), perception, passion, and resolution all reside with Biff. This explains why the 1984 Broadway production presented *Salesman* as "far more the story of Biff, the son, than it was of Willy Loman, the salesman of the title" (Miller 1987, 381).

4 Happy's Embodiment of Future Competitiveness

Although overshadowed by Biff and often neglected by both Willy and critics, Happy's narrative significance is not a simple byproduct of birth order or a symbolic "good son" trope (Monteiro 2011, 168). Instead, by deliberately crafting Happy as a poor second, Miller imbues him with a unique competitive drive, positioning him as the spokesperson for a new wave of competitiveness. While his childhood efforts to win Willy's attention seem innocent, Happy's sense of competition evolves into an adult personality defined by an "overdeveloped sense of competition" (Miller 2006, 172). More importantly, he amplifies the Loman family's competitive spirit to an unprecedented and ruthless degree. Through Happy, Miller reveals a bleak vision of America's future – one destined to be consumed by social Darwinism.

Happy never stops competing with Biff, and his current strategies turn out to be insidious and shameless. Although Happy appears to welcome Biff's return, he covertly seeks to even the score with the former teenage football star. By boasting about his career, apartment, and "plenty of women", he highlights his own superiority and exploits his brother's vulnerability. Most tellingly, whenever Biff attempts to improve himself or to aid Willy, Happy sabotages him by maliciously dredging up Biff's past misdeeds, such as "go[ing] off and swim[ming] in the middle of the day" (Miller 2006, 198) and "running off" from home (2006, 237).

Happy also employs his business acumen to take financial advantage of Biff. When Biff mentions borrowing money from Oliver to start a business, Happy immediately senses an opportunity, and eagerly proposes that they start a sporting goods company together. Given

Happy's modest income and extravagant lifestyle, it is clear he lacks the funds necessary for investment. However, by naming the prospective company "Loman Brothers" and emphasizing their joint venture, Happy positions himself as a co-founder, effectively claiming 50% of the enterprise without contributing much financially. Later, Happy purchases a suit for Biff and treats him to a meal at a Manhattan restaurant – not out of generosity or fraternal love, but because, as he confides to the waiter, he believes that Biff "pulled off a big deal today" and they are "going into business together" (Miller 2006, 226). Upon learning that Biff's attempt to get a loan has failed, the disillusioned Happy reverts to his habitual practice of exploiting women "to boost his self-image" (Tyson 1994, 74).

Moreover, Happy schemes against Biff in the context of Willy's insurance payout. At Willy's funeral, Biff announces his decision to leave the commercial jungle of New York and pursue a natural life in the West. In contrast, Happy vows to win for his father and continue with the "Loman Brothers" business plan. Given Happy's usual indifference to Willy's well-being and his blatant renunciation of his father at the restaurant, this vow cannot be sincere. It is far more likely that Happy has his eye on the insurance money Willy sought to secure through his death. With Biff withdrawing and the family's debts settled, Happy sees an opportunity to monopolize the entire \$20,000 payout. Therefore, his declaration is less a eulogy and more a calculated claim to his inheritance.

Indeed, Miller portrays Happy as a devil and fully exposes the extent of his corruption in the scene at Frank's Chop House. Although a minor character elsewhere, Happy takes centre stage in this part, where Miller offers a caricatured depiction of him as a master of the law of the jungle. A close examination of a seemingly casual dialogue reveals how meticulously Miller constructs this portrayal:

HAPPY: His name is Biff. You might've heard of him. Great football player.

GIRL: Really? What team?

HAPPY: Are you familiar with football?

GIRL: No, I'm afraid I'm not.

HAPPY: Biff is quarterback with the New York Giants.

GIRL: Well, that is nice, isn't it? *She drinks.*

HAPPY: Good health.

GIRL: I'm happy to meet you.

HAPPY: That's my name. Hap. It's really Harold, but at West Point they called me Happy.

GIRL: *Now really impressed:* Oh, I see. How do you do? (Miller 2006, 228)

Here Happy introduces himself and Biff to Miss Forsythe, a young woman he has never met before. Initially, he is cautious, subtly sounding out her knowledge of football. Upon confirming her ignorance, he lies with confidence, claiming that Biff is a star footballer – not in general terms, but specifying a position on a real team. This begins to intrigue Miss Forsythe, although her lack of familiarity with football tempers her reaction. Sensing that she

is hooked, Happy delivers a second lie, casually letting it slip that he is a West Point graduate. This appears offhand, but is of course intentional, and has the desired effect – Miss Forsythe is immediately “really impressed”.

This exchange highlights a sharp contrast in how Willy and Happy lie and approach women. Willy’s lies about his popularity seem contrived and suspicious to listeners like Linda and Charley, whereas Happy’s are delivered with a spontaneous, credible deftness. Their motives also differ: Willy’s gestures – jokes and gifts – are deliberate efforts to secure economic benefits, while Happy pursues women solely for sex. Guided by what he terms “a radar for strudels” (Miller 2006, 227), he gains intimacy within minutes. This efficiency and shamelessness validate his claim of “knocking [women] over ... like bowling” (2006, 171), also making him a potent symbol of misogyny whose actions evoke repugnance and cement his status as “the least likable male character in the play” (McDaniel 2008, 30).

Happy’s treatment of Willy in this scene further reveals his alienation. Biff, despite his unsuccessful loan application and psychological crisis, remains primarily concerned about Willy’s well-being. In his conversation with Miss Forsythe, he speaks of his father with respect: “A fine, troubled prince ... A good companion. Always for his boys” (Miller 2006, 237). Even Stanley, the waiter, and Letta, another new woman, both instinctively sympathize with the wretched and abandoned father. In contrast, Happy, eager to impress the women, coldly disowns his father: “No, that’s not my father. He’s just a guy” (2006, 238). This confirms Biff’s judgment that Happy does not “give a damn for [Willy]” (2006, 237) and shows his total alienation from humanity.

In depicting Happy’s degradation, Miller also highlights the disastrous impact that vicious competition has had on American society. Happy, as “one of the two assistants to the assistant buyer” (Miller 2006, 170) in a hardware department store, is emblematic of a broader social malaise. While he complains that “everybody around [him] is so false” (2006, 171) and believes he can “outbox, outrun, and outlift” (2006, 170) everyone else, it is likely that his peers have a similar mentality. As he cheats at work and seduces other men’s wives and fiancées out of jealousy, it is probable that his rivals are engaged in similar behaviour. In a society where social Darwinism prevails, trust eventually becomes an impossibility. Indeed, the wrongdoings of Happy and his kind rapidly transform society. Happy uses women as tools of competition, instruments of revenge, and outlets for frustration, yet he laments the lack of “a good woman to marry”. This observation, while it may reveal a certain social reality, also draws attention to its root cause, which is made clear by Happy’s own degeneration. This situation also represents a form of retribution, as Happy “cannot invest himself in one woman because he fears competing men who might rob him of his woman’s supposed only value, the chastity of virginity and sexual fidelity” (Stanton 1989, 74). Of course, like Willy’s infidelity, Happy’s corruption symbolizes his broader villainy. Over time, such unscrupulousness erodes nearly all traditional middle-class values.

Despite his material “achievements”, Happy is profoundly unhappy, complaining of a deep “loneliness”. This spiritual emptiness is not due to limited material success. His boss builds “a terrific estate” on Long Island and immediately sells it to build another, because he lacks the “peace of mind to live in it” (Miller 2006, 170–71). For Happy and his boss, material

success generates no satisfaction, but instead an insatiable desire that only fuels more ruthless competition. Through them, Miller outlines a dire future of America ruined with the law of the jungle. His prediction is artistically fulfilled in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*, where the salesmen, dehumanized by greed and cutthroat competition, become utterly alienated from each other and their own humanity.

5 Conclusion

Willy Loman deserves his status as a tragic hero – a Might-Have-Been who possesses a natural affinity for nature and craftsmanship, but is tragically seduced by “the wrong dream”. His story transcends the personal; while he appears to have choices, his decisions are all shaped by the American tradition of ruthless competition, which distances him from decency and true happiness. A common man in a society tantalized by the myth of the American Dream, Willy's tragedy attains the universal significance that Aristotle found essential for tragedy. This places *Salesman* firmly within the great American literary tradition of critiquing the American Dream. Yet Miller's work is uniquely forceful in this regard, because it deliberately avoids the glamour that often accompanies such tales. Instead of tantalizing the audience with lavish displays of the opulence of the ruthless protagonists, Miller focuses on the bleak, crushing aftermath of the dream on the common man. This refusal to romanticize, this unwavering focus on the human cost rather than the criminal pursuit and the resultant luxury, is what makes Miller's critique so searing and successful.

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The Sense of Our Ending: Mortality, Narrative (In)Efficiency, and Autopathographical Commitment in Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air*

ABSTRACT

The Medical Humanities underscore the pivotal role of autopathographies in understanding the impact of illness on the self, and the correlative senses of agency, autonomy, and identity for critical and practical insights. This study employs a multidisciplinary theoretical framework, aligned with the requirements of the Medical Humanities, incorporating cognitive approaches to life-narratives alongside Frank Kermode's humanistic interpretation of storytelling to address two contestations with regard to the existing theories of narrative selves, particularly concerning narrative unity and totality. Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air* is analysed as the quintessential autopathography that effectively responds to these challenges while adhering to the postmodern exigencies of its era.

Keywords: autopathography, life-narratives, Paul Kalanithi, Medical Humanities, postmodernity

Smisel konca: umrljivost, pripovedna (ne)učinkovitost in avtopatografska zavezanost v *When Breath Becomes Air* Paula Kalanithija

IZVLEČEK

Medicinska humanistika poudarja ključno vlogo avtopatografij pri razumevanju vpliva bolezni na posameznika ter s tem povezanih občutkov tvornosti, avtonomije in identitete. Ta študija uporablja multidisciplinarni teoretični okvir, ki je v skladu s pristopi medicinske humanistike. Ta vključuje kognitivne pristope k življenjskim pripovedim skupaj s humanistično interpretacijo pripovedovanja zgodb Franka Kermoda z namenom kritične obravnave obstoječih teorij pripovednega jaza, zlasti pripovedne celovitosti. Knjiga Paula Kalanithija *When Breath Becomes Air* je analizirana kot tipična avtopatografija, ki se učinkovito odziva na te izzive, hkrati pa upošteva zahteve svoje – postmoderne – dobe.

Ključne besede: avtopatografija, življenjske pripovedi, Paul Kalanithi, medicinska humanistika, postmoderna

1 Introduction

Pain, suffering, and death are of course not exclusive to humans; however, articulating pain, contemplating suffering, and confronting the inevitability of mortality are distinctly human endeavours. While in the past humans turned to religion, the arts, and philosophy to address these foundational concerns, in the contemporary world where the self is framed by embodiment, the most existential milestones of a person's life often occur in medical centres and hospitals (Cole, Carlin, and Carson 2015, 14), making the field of Medical Humanities crucial in recognizing the needs of this new paradigm of existence. The Medical Humanities and corresponding fields such as bioethics and health humanities reveal a growing awareness of a blind spot in traditional medical sciences. Scientific objectivity has reduced sick people to mere patients and bodies to medical records, resulting in not only “less satisfactory” outcomes than expected (Taschereau-Dumouche et al. 2022, 1322), but also in the objectification and marginalization of human beings during times of misery (see Cole, Carlin, and Carson 2015, 18–21; Whitehead and Woods 2016, 1–5; Bates, Bleakley, and Goodman 2014, 3; Frank 1995, 6–7). This blind spot specifically refers to the absence of “subjective” experience, encapsulated in the term “humanities” within the Medical Humanities.

Since ancient times the humanities have sought to “reveal how people have tried to make moral, spiritual, and intellectual sense of a world in which irrationality, despair, loneliness, and death are as conspicuous as birth, friendship, hope, and reason” (Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities 1980, qtd. in Cole, Carlin, and Carson 2015, 17). Thus, at the core of the Medical Humanities lies the subjective interpretation and the expression of *what it feels like* to endure these profound experiences in the context of a serious illness.

It is essential to understand that by reintegrating the subjective into the scientific discourse in the latter decades of the 20th century – parallel to other postmodern activist shifts – the Medical Humanities initiated a “political and moral enterprise” (Cole, Carlin, and Carson 2015, 28). The second half of the 20th century marked the decline of many metanarratives, including the “telos of cure” (Frank 1995, 83), the godlike status of science and the seemingly omniscient and omnipotent man of science. In the postmodern context, local narratives and minor experiences replaced grand narratives (Punday 2003, 1), reclaiming the voices of the marginalized, the silenced, and the powerless, foregrounding subjectivity, contextuality, and multiplicity (Nazockdast and Ramin 2023, 205). Therefore, the Medical Humanities seeks to recognize the patient as “human”, restore diversity to the concept of “human”, and reintegrate the “human” into the analytic field of knowledge.

Autopathographical narratives of illness play a central role in the scholarship of the Medical Humanities due to their strong connection with first-person narratives, personal identity, and a sense of self.¹ In fact, Bates, Bleakley and Goodman identify the emerging interest in

¹ In his genealogical study of confessional writing, Norm Friesen traces the broad category of self-writing back to confessional practices. Drawing upon Foucault's notion of “technologies of the self” – defined as “reflected and voluntary practices” and writing “about the self and for the self” (Foucault 2005, 61, qtd. in Friesen 2017) – Friesen argues that these acts not only made the self but also endowed it with “particular access to the truth” (Friesen 2017, 2). As a result, confessions, grounded in introspective enquiry, can be seen as early forms of autobiographical self-making: “The self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity. That is not a modern trait born of

narratives (the linguistic turn) along with brain studies (cognitive turn) as key contributors to the development of the Medical Humanities (2014, 6). Arthur Frank connects this rising interest in pathographies to the postmodern and specifically postcolonial reclaiming of one's territory – one's body (1995, 10) – and the restoration of one's voice in the story of their illness. Referring to MacIntyre and Carr, he argues that while the discourse of enlightenment and modern medicine held that the "patient" was responsible "only for getting well" (1995, 13), this humanistic turn posits that "the post-colonial ill person takes responsibility for what illness means in his life" (Carr 1986, 96, qtd. in Frank 1995, 60). These narratives not only reinstall the voices of those deprived of their identity and objectified by the system – providing critical insights – but also in recounting *what it feels like* reclaim a sense of self, alleviate pain and suffering, and foster a collective act of human understanding and sympathy (see Cole, Carlin, and Carson 2015, 23–28). Moreover, as Taschereau-Dumouchel et al. (2022, 1323) suggest in "Putting the 'Mental' Back in 'Mental Disorders'", these stories can help practitioners achieve more accurate diagnoses and deliver better treatments.

Due to the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of research in the Medical Humanities (Bates, Bleakley, and Goodman 2014, 4), in our research framework, drawing upon Bates, Bleakley and Goodman, we emphasize "exchange and reciprocity" (2014, 4–5) among different disciplines, with a particular focus on the humanist aspects of autopathography. In this study, we apply the most recent theories of narrative identity to examine the changes that the self undergoes due to the trauma of illness, as evinced in Paul Kalanithi's esteemed autopathography *When Breath Becomes Air*.² To explore the humanist implications of autopathographies, it is necessary to address two current critical concerns at the heart of the theories of narrative identity that complicate their application to studies of the self. The first concern is narrative totality, mandating a flow from a definite beginning (an origin) to a conclusive end. The second concern is narrative unity, enforcing the exclusion of multiplicity and diversity (see Davenport 2012, 150–66; Punday 2003, 4–12). Critics argue that the above features render narrative structures limiting and incompatible with the complexities of our lives. This study engages with these postmodern objections through the framework of prominent narrative analysis approaches to demonstrate that life-stories

the Reformation or of Romanticism; it is one of the most ancient Western traditions" (Foucault 1988, 27–28; qtd in Friesen 2017, 3). Tracing the thread of "technologies of the self" all the way through printing machines to the present day, Friesen sees Facebook – "a social media site with over one billion registered users – as a powerful, interpellating confessional technology of the self" (2017, 10).

Autopathographies, which narrate traumatic, painful, and deeply personal experiences, can likewise be seen as confessional acts. In both genres, wounds, both physical and mental, speak the self (Frank 1995, 98) and the act of narration becomes an act of formation (Frank 1995; Friesen 2017). Most importantly, both genres may function as political acts, giving voice to the silenced other and serving as acts of survival (Frank 1995; Friesen 2017). Although autopathographies are specifically concerned with illness narratives, whereas confessional writing encompasses a broader range of introspective experiences, the two can intersect in their autobiographical engagement with trauma, suffering, and identity.

Thus, even though, as Luckhurst argues, "trauma culture" has become the zeitgeist of the contemporary era (2008, 2), and experiences of illness, pain, and suffering have increasingly acquired both critical attention and new modes of expression, autopathographies and autothanatographies – "death writing" (Smith and Watson 2001, 188) – are as ancient as life writings (Smith and Watson 2001, 188).

² *When Breath Becomes Air* is a New York Times bestseller. It was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and a winner of the Goodreads Choice Award for Memoir and Autobiography.

play a pivotal, if not the most pivotal, role in our cognitive ways of making sense of our world of contingency. Moreover, it is claimed, they adapt and leverage the aforementioned contestations to their advantage in response to the context in which they are produced.

Kalanithi's posthumously published autopathography *When Breath Becomes Air* is not "a happy-ending" story. It does not depict a hero's journey into the kingdom of the sick – to borrow Susan Sontag's metaphor (1978, 3) – and his triumphant return to the "world of the well". Instead, it portrays the undeniable triumph of death over all kinds of life (Kalanithi 2016b, 63). The narrator is a polymath: a neurosurgeon, neuroscientist, literary scholar, and philosopher. Beyond Kalanithi's profound and complex exploration of themes as grand as life, death, and meaning, *When Breath Becomes Air* serves as an exceptionally insightful case study for the concerns of the Medical Humanities, because it combines the perspectives of both the practitioner and the patient in considering and reconsidering the terminology used to articulate illness, suffering, and the trauma of confronting one's mortality.

Kalanithi's short yet prolific life can be summarized as a pursuit of his overarching question "what makes human life meaningful?" – a recurring inquiry that unites his diverse endeavours across different fields. He recognizes that, on the one hand, the medical context raises "the questions intersecting life, death, and meaning, questions that all people face at some point" (2016b, 43), while, on the other hand, he acknowledges the inability of science to "grasp the most central aspects of human life: hope, fear, love, hate, beauty, envy, honor, weakness, striving, suffering, virtue" (2016b, 88). Holding on to the belief that "happiness is not the point of life" (2016b, 23), he asks bitterly: "Shouldn't terminal illness, then, be the perfect gift to that young man who had wanted to understand death? What better way to understand it than to live it?" (2016b, 78). Yet, in answering this question, he also ventures at delineating the meaning of life in our time.

2 Life-Stories: Why Do We Need Them, How Do We Make Them? A Multidisciplinary Answer

The 21st century has seen a rising interest in narrative and its recognition across many disciplines. This growing focus on narrative has led some, like Galen Strawson, to label it "narrative dogmatism" (2004, 428).³ One of the significant contributions of narrative is its role in shaping the cognitive sense of self (Bruner 1987; Dennett 1991; Gotshall 2013; LeDoux 2023; MacIntyre 1984; Schechtman 2014, and others are prominent names related to narrative analyses in different fields consulted in this article). Embedded in the subjective sense of being a person is the notion of persistence: what makes one the same person through time, or auto-noesis. This essential feature requires a diachronic sense of self, commonly called personal identity. Due to its diachronic features – inducing connectedness, evaluative and emotional depth – the diachronic self-perception is claimed to be narrative in structure:

³ In her article "The Limits of Narrative: Provocations for the Medical Humanities" (2011), Angela Woods has examined the limitations of the use of life-narratives within the field of the Medical Humanities drawing upon Strawson's "Against Narrativity". While the current article emphasizes the foundational role of narratives, Woods presents a counterargument and highlights the shortcomings of pathographies advocating for broader methodologies that transcend the use of narratives.

“each person’s individual’s [*sic*] identity is, or depends on, an understanding he has of his life in narrative form, as a development from his past towards his future prospects, ending in his death” (Davenport 2012, 2). In simpler terms, stories are “lived before they are told” (MacIntyre 1984, 212).

It is important to note that we do not have just one life-narrative, but rather “multiple drafts” that are woven into an overarching narrative (Dennett 1991 qtd. in LeDoux 2023, 284), leading to an overall sense of self composed of clusters of diverse identities. Furthermore, seeing oneself as an agent necessitates viewing life as a unified self in a structural whole: “a concept of a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end” (MacIntyre 1984, 205). This unity emerges via characterization rather than the flow of “the same self” through the timeline of a plot⁴ (Schechtman 2014, 100). Our egoistic concern, according to Marya Schechtman, comes from this strong psychological continuity embedded in the coherence and elaboration of our life-narratives. As a result, our attachment to our lives, particularly our futures, is “stronger than it needs to be” because of the strong narrative ties that connect our past to our present and future (Schechtman 2014, 95). Therefore, our sense of *unity* and *continuity* are constructed through our life-narratives, whence we understand ourselves as complete and numerically single subjects.

It may seem that strong psychological continuity explains our fear of mortality. However, the main challenge to theories of narrative identity – and to the concept of life as a unified narrative whole – is epitomized by death. By definition, a narrative structure connects the events of a plot from a specific beginning to an end (MacIntyre 1984, 202; Davenport 2012, 202; Goldie 2012, 164). Unlike fictional stories where the narrative end is designed to harmonize with the other parts, our real lives are inevitably dominated by contingency and disjunction, and are left unfinished by an unexpected, discordant end. Davenport explains this as follows: “the way our lives continue in time and end in death makes it impossible for us to experience any narrative unity of our ‘whole’ life” (2012, 157). In other words, the unpredictability of death and the fact that it disrupts the first-person voice permanently makes its integration into a complete whole impossible. Consequently, our life-narratives can never be experienced as complete as long as we are living them, and the “loose ends” can only be tied by others after our death (2012, 160). Thus, the parallel between lives and life-stories “breaks down completely at the fatal end-point” (2012, 40).

The existential implication of the impossibility of seeing life as a unified whole is perhaps more significant than the structural ones: the indeterminacy of the end makes life necessarily absurd, meaningless, and a source of angst (see Sartre 1956; Davenport 2012, 157–60). It is true that we despise death, yet mortality is a well-known fact of life, and we anticipate it

⁴ Schechtman claims that the constitution of the self through time is indeed due to autobiographical memory’s conveyance of a sense of self through an overall narrative. She explains that narrative self-constitution departs from the memory criterion of the self where the latter faces the issue of self-identification at individual moments and life as the flow of the same self or self-concept in “momentary units”, and argues that the sense of personal identity is based on characterization rather than the timeline of a plot. In this way, the self emerges and develops as a result of and through the narrative’s structural whole instead of being ontologically prior to it (2014, 100), and the identification criterion is dismissed.

in our own negligent way (Kübler-Ross 1969, 23); as such, “dying” is necessarily a part of what we call living. Epicurus argued against the harmfulness of death, stating that “Death is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not” (Luper 2021, s.v. “Death”). Stokes, reminding us of the fact that we know that someday we will die, rightly inverts Epicurus’ claim by saying, “you are, and death also is” (2006, 75; qtd. in Davenport 2012, 161). In Frank Kermode’s words, death is immanent in our understanding of life (2000, 6 25), and it is in this painful realization that we feel the “need to humanize it” (2000, 45). In *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode insightfully rethinks the way narrative beginnings, and especially ends, interact with a world devoid of such forms. Kermode is considered a “synthetist” (Schwarz 1984, 46; Gorak 1987, 1) for bringing together philosophy, science, history, art, and religion to explain how we humanize the world of matter. For our stories to be meaningful, there must be a correlation between our fictions and the reality of our existence. Kermode’s humanistic approach sheds a different light on death as the end and the challenges to the narrativity of life and self.

Kermode argues: “Men, like poets, rush ‘into the midst,’ in medias res, when they are born; they also die in mediis rebus, and to make sense of their span, they need fictive concords with origins and ends” (2000, 7). We “humanly do not want it to be an indeterminate interval between the tick of birth and the tock of death” (2000, 57–58). He believes beginnings and endings are fictions created to establish complete forms and a sense of purposeful direction, avoiding the chaos and contingency surrounding us in the real world. These forms “console” us (2000, 3,132, 144), the “dying generations”, in the “meaningless reality of things” (2000, 129); in fact, the primary reason “dying generations” need consolation is because they die. The fundamental role of *the end* comprises the core of Kermode’s in-depth analysis of narrative form. The sheer unnarratability of the end propels us to create imaginative and narratable ones in our fictions.

Although our real lives will not obtain the contrived, soothing ends of our fictional stories, having no ending is itself a *new* ending (Kermode 2000, 150). In the postmodern world, with the fall of the grand narratives of biblical stories and modernization with their rigid totality and ostentatious endings, the end becomes immanent instead of imminent (2000, 101). This leads to *individual death* being correlated with perpetual crisis and absurdity. Crisis is the penetration of chaos into our well-wrought fictive world of concords, creating tension between form and reality (2000, 133).

Yet, making sense of death by incorporating it into our life-stories is the most artistic accomplishment humans can achieve. Kermode believes the best of our stories are marked with ingenious *peripeteias* (2000, 23). He defines a peripeteia as the “falsification of simple expectations as to the structure of a future” in literary works, where our “simple expectations” are interrupted by reality (2000, 23). Masterpieces are created when a peripeteia is endorsed by a more complicated narrative leading to an inspiring ending. Kermode reminds us that peripeteias are not just turns of events in our fictions; the world we live in is a world of “peripeteias so vast and apparently uncontrolled that nothing in the literature of comedy or tragedy can do more than faintly image them” (2000, 132). Mortality is the greatest of all peripeteias, exposing the naivety of our simple narratives. Our life-stories are thus the most

significant narrative challenges our minds must overcome. However, our minds are equipped for this task.

LeDoux, in his cognitive approach, agrees that our “inner narrations” (2023, 283) help us “make sense of who we are, what we are doing, and why we are doing it” (2023, 282). He particularly emphasizes the significance of narrative interpretations in maintaining “mental cohesion and conscious unity” despite “the multiplicity of brain systems that control our behaviour non-consciously” (2023, 282). Building on Bruner’s work, LeDoux contends that narrating and re-narrating our lives helps reduce “the cognitive dissonance caused by discordant thoughts and feelings that challenge existing narratives” (2023, 285), especially in traumatic and critical conditions. The key point from LeDoux’s observation, in relation to our research, is that “narratives are a defense tactic, a way of defining and protecting our understanding of our self” (2023, 304). And again, what greater dissonance and trauma is there than death, and what greater need than the need to comprehend and “humanize” it (Kermode 2000, 45)?

In conclusion, although death renders a coherent narrative sense of self impossible, if we wish to recover from the absurdity of existence – particularly in our postmodern world, marked by the collapse of simple consoling forms of metanarratives – the only way is to create a *new* kind of narrative that restores meaning while acknowledging its own incompleteness and indeterminacy as against the totality and unity of metanarratives. And Paul Kalanithi’s (2016b) *When Breath Becomes Air* is a magnificent example of such a narrative.

3 **Born *In Medias Res*, Die *In Mediis Rebus***

“This might be how it ends.” In the epilogue of *When Breath Becomes Air*, Lucy Kalanithi (2016a) recounts the final moments and words of her dying husband, Paul Kalanithi (Kalanithi 2016b, 105). In contrast, the last paragraph of Kalanithi’s autobiography trails off with the words, “In this time, right now...” He reflects on the loss of temporality in his final days, describing how time has become static rather than progressive (2016b, 101). Humans are never present to finish their own stories, but perhaps less haunting is the fact that we were not there at the beginning, either. In the modern world, it is mostly doctors who mark both ends of our stories – the “grave digger with the forceps” (2016b, 41). As Paul Kalanithi notes, “Doctors...see people at their most vulnerable, their most scared, their most private. They escort them into the world, and then back out” (2016b, 33). Although our bodies are deeply private and personal, they belong to the world of matter, making us perpetually subject to contingency and death. As such, doctors have become the harbingers of crises and peripeteias: “Humans are organisms, subject to physical laws, including, alas, the one that says entropy always increases” (2016b, 43). For Kalanithi, the doctor’s role is close to that of a pastor, a spiritual guide, and a “seer” (2016b, 51, 65, 93) who stands at the junction of the material and existential realms: “Seeing the body as matter and mechanism is the flip side to easing the most profound human suffering” (2016b, 32–33). Although Kalanithi as a doctor accompanied many births and deaths, he leaves finishing his own story to others.

If Kalanithi’s autobiography does not have a real ending, it also begins in the middle of things. The prologue recounts the interruption of life by the news of a terminal illness. The

first chapter, “In Perfect Health I Begin”, goes back to his childhood and charts a path to adulthood, filled with hard-won concords achieved through his relentless pursuit of the “meaning of life”. The second chapter, which is also the last, details his diagnosis, treatment, and final days – the penultimate period before the end.

Prior to his diagnosis, Kalanithi’s life seemed harmonious, marked by a strong sense of identity:

I had reached the pinnacle of residency. I had mastered the core operations. My research had garnered the highest awards. Job interest was trickling in from all over the country... It felt to me as if the individual strands of biology, morality, life, and death were finally beginning to weave themselves into, if not a perfect moral system, a coherent worldview and a sense of my place in it. (2016b, 62)

However, this perfect image was always shadowed by crisis, suffering, and death – the death of patients from newborns to the elderly, the death of fellow colleagues, the death of all living things – being a witness to death is very different from being its subject (2016b, 48). Before his diagnosis, the voices of the dying were “easy to ignore” (Frank 1995, 25); the ill were reduced to the names of their diseases, medical histories, paperwork, and finally, faceless cadavers. The shift from a third-person perspective to a first-person encounter with mortality means “living with perpetual interruption” (1995, 56), a dissonance that leads to traumatic depersonalization (see Van der Kolk 2014, 124) and a loss of “mental cohesion” (LeDoux 2023, 282). The progression of the life-narrative that comprises personal identity (LeDoux 2023; Schechtman 2014; MacIntyre 1984) is not only paralyzed but shattered by the obliteration of the future. The dying patient suffers both the physical pain of cancer and the mental anguish that trauma cannot be left behind; it is present wherever he turns, right in front of him.

It is no coincidence, then, that Arthur Frank points out that one of the most common metaphors in pathographies is the “loss of map” and “destination” (1995, 53–54). Kalanithi’s initial attempts to articulate his peripeteia are conveyed through similar metaphors: “Instead of being the pastoral figure aiding a life transition, I found myself the sheep, lost and confused. Severe illness wasn’t life-altering; it was life-shattering. It felt... like someone had just firebombed the path forward. Now I would have to work around it” (2016b, 65). The feelings of “dislocation”, “confusion”, and “disorientation” recur throughout his struggle with the disease, showing that “Death may be a one-time event, but living with terminal illness is a process” (2016b, 84).

This confusion has grave consequences. As it was delineated, we understand our lives as a unified and continuous whole, progressing from a fictive beginning to an end. Moreover, although we are never just one self but rather a cluster of “multiple drafts” (LeDoux 2023), when the overall narrative collapses, the coordination between these drafts becomes paralyzed. With the loss of senses of unity and continuity, the self can only locate itself in the middle – static and forcefully pacified, with no sense of agency, autonomy, purpose, or meaning. Kalanithi writes that after hearing the news of his diagnosis, “that identity as a physician – my identity – no longer mattered” (2016b, 65); he describes his existence as “lost in a featureless

wasteland of my own mortality”. When the narrative is “wrecked” (Frank 1995, 54), the self is wrecked as well. Kalanithi reflects, “In fourteenth-century philosophy, the word patient simply meant ‘the object of an action,’ and I felt like one. As a doctor, I was an agent, a cause; as a patient, I was merely something to which things happened” (2016b, 75).

However, striving in the face of “the... utter shapelessness, and the utter inhumanity of what must be humanized” has always been a shared human condition (Kermode 2000, 145). Kermode notes, “It is not that we are connoisseurs of chaos, but that we are surrounded by it, and equipped for coexistence with it only by our fictive powers” (2000, 64). Accordingly, the only way out of this paralysis is to create new stories – ones that can work through the crisis (as was suggested by LeDoux 2023; Bruner 1987; Schechtman 2014; Davenport 2012; Frank 1995; and Kermode 2000). Since the struggle to reconstruct the disrupted narrative is “a responsibility which no one else can finally lift entirely from the shoulders of the one who lives that life” (Carr 1986, 96, qtd. in Frank 1995, 60), it demands and induces agency and active engagement with the trauma of the crisis, making the ordeal necessarily a moral one as well.

4 Heroes, Worlds, Words

Narratives that stray too far from the reality of our world fail to console us (see Kermode 2000, 18, 64); we need to make sense of our experiences by narrating the unpredictable and incomprehensible. Kalanithi must continuously redefine and redesign narrative elements in response to changing events, requiring a *hermeneutic* engagement with his traumatic experiences to restore his life-narrative (see Meretoja 2020, 25). This process gives rise to new characters, identities, and sense of self. In delineating the correlation between life-narratives and morality, MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, builds on this by linking the formation of identity to a character’s sense of agency and autonomy. He posits that we understand ourselves as the heroes of our life stories, with our choices shaped by the roles we assume in our narratives: “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” (MacIntyre 1984, 216). Our personal identity – or character – is therefore closely tied to the genres developed in our life stories, for “man is the novelist of himself” (Ortega 1936, qtd. in Kermode 2000, 140).

Muijnck, in “When Breath Becomes Air: Constructing Stable Narrative Identity during Terminal Illness”, applies McAdams’ study of life-narratives to *When Breath Becomes Air*, analysing how different narratives create a sense of self through the “unification of several narrative identities” (2019, 64). In each plot, a correlative identity emerges with some lingering and some transitioning into one another. In a larger scope, exploring the effects of illness on life-story plots, Frank introduces a generic classification of pathographies including *restitution*, *chaos*, and *quest* narratives, asserting that all three can coexist within a single pathography (1995, 76). Kalanithi’s familiarity with literature allows his autopathography to draw meaningful parallels with literary themes. However, *When Breath Becomes Air* proves to be more complex and heterogeneous than the formal classifications of character types and genres suggest.

Kalanithi is all too acquainted with mortality to be deceived by restitution narratives, which promise a “telos of cure” (Frank 1995, 83) and rely on the metaphor of winning a battle against disease: “As a doctor, I knew not to declare ‘Cancer is a battle I’m going to win!’ or

to ask ‘Why me?’ (Answer: Why not me?)” (2016b, 74). Like Kermode’s romances, these narratives are too artificial and naïve to help us make sense of illness and mortality. Although, chaos is intrinsic to Kalanithi’s understanding of existence, we cannot call *When Breath Becomes Air* a chaos narrative, either. Frank argues that true chaos narratives do not exist, as chaos negates explanation and requires a safe distance to be articulated (2016b, 105).⁵ Retrospection is necessary; chaos is always narrated after the fact, once the speaker can “accept the contingency”, integrate the chaos and crisis into their life-story, and recontextualize it within a “quest” narrative that involves “accepting illness and seeking to use it” (2016b, 115). The central theme of *When Breath Becomes Air* is how chaos can be understood and imbued with subjective meaningfulness.

Modelled on Campbell’s hero’s journey (Campbell 2008), quest pathographies depict the narrator undergoing trials and ordeals, including a preliminary death, followed by rebirth in a stronger form. While Kalanithi recognizes the need for a new narrative – “I struggled... to rebuild my old life, or perhaps find another one” (2016b, 74) – these changes do not follow a linear, progressive path; remnants of old drafts often conflict with emerging ones (see Muijnck 2019). Frank cautions that quest narratives, like the phoenix metaphor, can portray the transformation process as too clean and complete, potentially marginalizing those who fail to rise from the ashes (1995, 135). This warning highlights the risk of narrative totality and the exclusion of diversity, one of the central contentions in narrative theories of identity. Kalanithi is not a phoenix-like hero; rather, he is a connoisseur of pain and suffering: studying, witnessing, elevating, surrendering to, and trying to articulate it. In his pursuit of life’s meaning, his final and most challenging quest is to *humanize death*: “I was searching for a vocabulary with which to make sense of death”⁶ (2016b, 78). His true quest lies in articulating what he has seen and learned⁷ (2016b, 109): “Looking out over the expanse ahead I saw... a blank page on which I would go on” (2016b, 100). He must write a *new* ending to his story, and in doing so, new patterns will emerge: a voice and a narrator that is realized in the act of articulation.

5 No Ending, but a *Good* Ending: Revisiting the Two Contestations

In the face of mortality, human choices seem irrelevant. No matter what kind of a hero a person thinks they are in their life-narrative, the ending is the same. Furthermore, absent the metanarratives that extend beyond individual lives to a shared, promised, and meaningful end, personal death now becomes the absolute end (Kermode 2000, 101). Near the end Kalanithi reflects on his oncologist, who, instead of being the *oracle*, appears as helpless as he is before the end: “‘you have five good years left’, she said, but without the authoritative

⁵ This stage in the experience of illness is tantamount to PTSD and its more obvious symptoms such as alexithymia (see Van der Kolk 2014, 122).

⁶ In sharing the last moments of her husband, Lucy Kalanithi (2016a) says “At the end of his life, Paul told me, ‘It’s not all about the fight. It’s also about the love’”, showing how for Kalanithi his efforts were not focused on “fighting” cancer but maintaining meaningfulness.

⁷ In the “Epilogue” of *When Breath Becomes Air*, Lucy Kalanithi states her husband’s book evinces Emerson’s saying “Always the seer is a sayer” (2016b, 109).

tone of an oracle, ‘without the confidence of a true believer’. She spoke like a plea, not a declaration, like she was not so much speaking to me as pleading, a mere human, with whatever forces and fates truly control these things” (2016b, 99). In Greek tragedies oracles reveal visions of the future, but reality offers no such revelation; the future is silent. The most we can do is to write our own ending while still alive, before the real one. By forging new concords and attempting to write a “good ending” (Frank 1995, 50; Davenport 2012, 145), the ill person takes responsibility for what illness means in their life (Frank 1995, 13).

Kermode argues that literature provides solace when confronting the apparent meaninglessness of reality (2000, 129). Prior to reclaiming his voice and discovering his new narrative concords, in moments of profound pain and hopelessness, Kalanithi finds that literature brings him back to life: “The monolithic uncertainty of my future was deadening; everywhere I turned, the shadow of death obscured the meaning of any action...” (2016b, 78). Reciting Samuel Beckett’s words from *Waiting for Godot*, “I can’t go on. I’ll go on”, he finds a new vocabulary for continuing his life: “If I’m dying, until I actually die, I am still living” (2016b, 78–79). Even though the future seems uncertain and the present feels overwhelming, Kalanithi’s struggle for meaning results in discovering a “good ending”; “dissonance (if you’re interested) leads to discovery” (W.C. Williams qtd. in Kermode 2000, 126). In exploring *When Breath Becomes Air*’s response to the two critical challenges to life-narratives, the ambiguity surrounding the concept of a “good ending” will be clarified and Kalanithi’s commitment to the moral dimensions of his autopathography in our postmodern world established.

5.1 The First Contestation: Real Lives Lack Totality and Ending

We often discuss the acceptance stage of facing mortality without fully grasping the profound courage and commitment it takes to integrate the unnarratable into the life-story. In *When Breath Becomes Air*, precisely at the moment when the idea of a future appears most alluring, and hope begins to draw Kalanithi back to his familiar sense of safety, he courageously chooses not to deceive himself. Having emerged from the peak of his illness, his cancer has stabilized, job offers are once again being extended, and he has successfully resumed his surgical practice. Caught in the midst of this enticing prospect, he reflects that “it’s like a fantasy”, only to have a stark realization: “in that moment, it hit me: it was a fantasy” (Kalanithi 2016b, 85). Unlike the previous time when he was compelled to confront the fragility of his carefully constructed walls of order and control, this time he carries with him the bitter knowledge – the anagnorisis. When the disease returns, this time irreversibly, he describes his state: “I was neither angry nor scared. It simply was. It was a fact about the world” (2016b, 90). Upon seeing the scans of his new tumour, signifying an end to his days as a surgeon, he inhales deeply and embraces his humanity, remarking, “smelling the eucalyptus and... was that pine? Hadn’t noticed that before” (2016b, 90). In facing the void of lack of ending, striving “to achieve harmony while time remains, while recognizing that we will not completely succeed” (Davenport 2012, 165) is both the only and most admirable choice that humans can make.

On Kalanithi’s last day at work, as he grapples with the realization: “My last time scrubbing?” (2016b, 91), a nurse, unaware of his situation, jokes, “I guess this is a happy ending” (2016b, 92). Kalanithi replies, “Yeah, yeah, I like happy endings” (2016b, 92). Our existence in this

world does not culminate happily. This can render our lives – and the responsibilities we bear – either absurd (meaningless) or tragic (meaningful) (Kermode 2000, 143). Peter Goldie suggests that while we may not achieve *narrative closure* in our lives, we can find *emotional closure* (2012, 70); through good endings that are emotionally consoling and morally responsible, we can bravely confront suffering, assign meaning to our fragmented life-narratives, and escape absurdity by crafting alternate endings before we are silenced for good.

The first contestation addressed to understanding selves in terms of narrative identity is that narrative structure mandates the completeness and totality lacking in life-stories. Kalanithi's autopathography discovers an alternative ending that transcends chronological constraints. In his final days, devoid of an envisaged future, the continuity of time becomes tenuous and devoid of meaning:

These days, time feels less like a ticking clock and more like a state of being” (2016b, 101). Consequently, the narrative sense of self and personal identity begins to unravel: “Verb conjugation has become muddled as well. Which is correct: “I am a neurosurgeon,” “I was a neurosurgeon,” or “I had been a neurosurgeon before and will be again”? ...Have I surpassed the present tense and entered the past perfect? The future tense seems vacant and, on others' lips, jarring. (2016b, 101)

Yet, even in the closing lines of his book, Kalanithi asserts: “I plod, I ponder... I simply persist” (2016b, 101). The last pages of *When Breath Becomes Air* are imbued with a profound sense of meaningfulness, leaving the reader with the feeling that the previous pages – including the past, the present, and what lies ahead for the speaker – converge into a non-temporal state of being: Chronos is replaced by Kairos in Kalanithi's autopathography. Kairos represents the “significant season, ... poised between beginning and end ...what they call ‘temporal integration’” (Kermode 2000, 46). In Kairos, temporality loses its conventional meaning under the overwhelming weight of the present; the flow of time diminishes in light of the moment's significance (Kermode 2000, 47). Here, the conclusion of the *book* transcends mere chronology, signifying a meaningful completion and a sense of peace (Davenport 2012, 158), echoing the same attributes in the fading narrator. However, the Kairos and profound emotional closure experienced by the narrator cannot be fully understood without locating Kalanithi's autopathography within a larger collective framework, which also requires addressing the second contestation.

5.2 The Second Contestation: Real Lives Lack Unity

While people die, their narratives endure; voices may be silenced forever, but words continue to resonate. In his final paragraph, Kalanithi addresses his daughter, expressing that in her, he has found completion, peace, and satisfaction – a joy that is not reliant on future-oriented expectations and fulfilments. The book reveals the perspective of a father who, constrained by time, could not fully be known by his daughter: “you filled a dying man's days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more but rests, satisfied” (2016b, 102). This persistence regardless of the limits of time transcends Cady Kalanithi and reaches out to all the readers of her father's work, highlighting the ethical imperative of sharing our stories, particularly in capitalist systems that advertise an abundance

of happiness and trust in its institutions while attempting to silence deviating voices. Arthur Frank, in emphasizing the ethical importance of not only telling illness stories but also hearing them, writes: “one who suffers has something to teach... and thus has something to give” (1995, 150). Quoting György Lukács, he adds: “The ethical man is no longer the beginning and the end of all things, his moods are no longer the measure of the significance of everything that happens in the world. Ethics forces a sense of community upon all men” (1995, 153). For Frank, it is in the act of sharing illness narratives that “communicative bodies” emerge: “Narrative ethics takes place in the telling and listening to stories. There is no such thing as a self-story that is entirely isolated...” (1995, 163). Illness narratives, therefore, foreground a relational and ethical dimension in which storytelling becomes an act of communal engagement and mutual recognition. Not only does the narrator of an autopathography find a voice and become realized through the process of narration, but also “a listener becomes in the course of listening to the story” (1995, 159).

The process of becoming should not be mistaken for identification with the narrator. If it were merely a matter of internalizing the other’s point of view, it would undermine the ethical demand of resisting the totalization of the narrative. While inviting empathy has always been an essential part of storytelling (Meretoja 2018, 117), the ethical impact of a narrative lies in what Leak describes as “difficult empathy” – a form of empathy that is “unsettling”: “Difficult empathy pushes us to not only see others differently but to also perhaps see ourselves differently and more expansively through problematic others and their social conditions” (quoted in Meretoja 2018, 234).

Autopathographies and other narratives of trauma are necessarily unsettling for the reader, yet it is in this very “awareness of the other’s alterity” (Meretoja 2018, 208, 233) and not a simple “taking on the other’s emotions or taking the side of the other” (2018, 233) that we as readers are, as Assmann maintains, able to “find ways to expand our ‘circle of concern’ to include the suffering of others different from ourselves” (qtd. in Meretoja 2018, 129). In this way *When Breath Becomes Air* joins the cultural memory of narratives of pain and suffering inviting the readers to transmit the stories of those who were marginalized in the kingdom of the sick.

As Kalanithi addresses his daughter at the end of the book he is not only assigning her the role of the *empathetic reader*⁸ in receiving the stories of the father of the family, but also reminding her that there is no end to the story of a family, but instead ongoing stories that communicate with one another. In the constant process of sharing life-stories Frank’s observation is realized that “[n]arrative ethics takes place in telling and listening. There is no such thing as a self-story if that term is taken literally; only self-other-stories” (Frank 1995, 163). Kalanithi’s endurance, articulated through the voice of the suffering narrator, serves as a declaration, echoing Whitman’s exhortation to “cease not till the end” to all his readers. Although life-narratives do not need to be expressed, the act of sharing them extends beyond individual efforts toward sense-making; it solidifies and deepens human understanding and emotional responses, assisting readers in finding agency and internal significance, particularly

⁸ Assmann defines the term “empathetic reader” as one who “accepts the invitation to leave his or her own position and to enter another time, another world, another perspective” (2011, 222–23). In doing so “the call of the other” is recognized and the “difference” is not dissolved but acknowledged.

in places where it is not to be found (Goldie 2012, 162). It is evident that by sharing his story, Kalanithi demonstrates an adamant commitment to his lifelong pursuit of the meaning of life, embodying his quote from Montaigne – he aims for others to learn how to live by understanding how to die (2016b, 65). Lucy Kalanithi, in sharing her side of the story of her family's struggles with her husband's diagnosis, declares: "My husband's death taught me how to live". For her it is in sharing his love that Paul "completes his life story" (2016a)⁹.

As Whitman beautifully states, "And of these one and all I weave the song of myself", Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air* resonates with this sentiment, singing its own song through the exploration of mortality and situating it within a larger design that extends beyond the crisis of personal death. Having dedicated his life to the pursuit of meaning and "capital-T Truth", Kalanithi articulates his realization:

...but recognize that the task is impossible – or that if a correct answer is possible, verification certainly is impossible. In the end, it cannot be doubted that each of us can see only a part of the picture. The doctor sees one, the patient another, the engineer a third, the economist a fourth, the pearl diver a fifth, the alcoholic a sixth, the cable guy a seventh, the sheep farmer an eighth, the Indian beggar a ninth, the pastor a tenth. Human knowledge is never contained in one person. It grows from the relationships we create with each other and the world, yet it is never complete. And Truth exists somewhere above all of them. (2016b, 89)

The second challenge posed by postmodern criticism to narrative theories of identity is that the rigid structure of narrative annihilates the inherent diversity of selves and voices. Kalanithi's portrait of life is inconclusive, collective, and inherently fragmented. As Kermode observes, the postmodern ending reflects the complexities of the postmodern world (2000, 127). He quotes Iris Murdoch, who states, "Since reality is incomplete, art must not be too afraid of incompleteness" (Murdoch 1961, qtd in Kermode 2000, 130). In this postmodern landscape, diverse minor narratives converge to form patterns that can never achieve completion or totality. Auto/pathographies – narratives of pain, trauma, and suffering – carry the weight of an indifferent world of matter. These narratives can only be practically and critically functional if they articulate the reality of experience, which encompasses both narratable and non-narratable elements. Existence defies a singular definition; it embodies both being and non-being, as well as diverse beginnings and ends. Amid the bits and fragments, silence coexists with articulation. The truth is not the beginning – the origin – nor is it determined at the end; truth lies in the middle, within what might be regarded as the insignificant fragment of a "life". Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air* does not conform to a conventional quest narrative. In its philosophical acknowledgment of contingency and chaos, it achieves what Frank believes postcolonial and postmodern narratives should: representing a "mutual contingency" between life and the world it inhabits (1995, 70). Furthermore, by simultaneously attempting to articulate and share his story, while recognizing that it is only one piece of a larger collective picture – one filled with gaps that summon additional pieces – Kalanithi invites readers to continue discovering other truths and meanings.

⁹ Except for Lucy Kalanithi, other family members have not publicly talked about Paul Kalanithi's death.

6 Conclusion

The Medical Humanities has emerged as a response to the medical institutions' neglect of the subjective experience of illness. With the rising interest in narratives following the postmodern linguistic turn, autopathographies have become central to understanding the subjective experience within the field, addressing both practical and critical concerns. The prevailing assumption is that personal narratives reveal how the experience of illness shapes self-understanding, agency, autonomy, and identity, as the sense of self is forged through life-narratives. However, two significant contestations arise when discussing the relationship between selves and life-narratives. Firstly, unlike narratives that are inherently structured to connect events from a defined beginning to a concrete end, selves remain unfinished due to the contingency of mortality, rendering it impossible to assign a narrative structure to life. Secondly, the reliance of narratives on unity and totality risks excluding the inherent diversity of selves, lived experiences, and voices. Translating these contestations into the realm of the Medical Humanities leads to the conclusion that selves cannot be equated with life stories and narratives of trauma and illness are flawed evidences of the reality of the experience. Furthermore, these narratives often overlook the inexpressible and the suppressed, thereby presenting a misleadingly monolithic picture of illness. This is exemplified by metaphors such as "winning the battle with cancer", which exclude those experiences that do not conform to this singular, unified thematic representation.

In addressing these contestations and reaffirming the essential role of personal narratives in the Medical Humanities, this research adopts a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates prominent theories of narrative analysis alongside Frank Kermode's comprehensive humanistic perspective. Kermode posits that we create stories because we are aware of our mortality. He suggests that our lives represent insignificant middles, with beginnings and ends functioning as fictions that allow us to escape the inherent uncertainty of death. Amidst chaos, we consistently recreate narratives that help us make sense of the peripeteias that interrupt our forms. Through these stories, we construct identities as agents, creating cohesive worlds out of the incomprehensible reality of matter, and, in this way, we ascribe meaning to our lives, even in the face of their inherent incompleteness, ultimately escaping the absurdity that surrounds us. Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air* serves as an outstanding illustration of how autopathographies function as cognitive tools, helping to restore a sense of self when the trauma of illness has shattered auto-noesis, agency, autonomy, and identity.

Nearly half a century after Sontag's criticism of the public shunning of cancer sufferers, and as autopathographies are expanding to include digital platforms,¹⁰ this illness is no longer treated as unspeakable, leading to its "destigmatization" and fostering empathy and public discourse (Couser 1997, 8). As a perfect example of this phenomenon, *When Breath Becomes Air* shows that a terminal diagnosis can become an inspiration, even an opportunity, to answer the foundational existential question of the meaning of life and death. Without resorting to

¹⁰ Some examples of such platforms are personal blogs (e.g. Blog for a Cure, CaringBridge), social media posts, online support communities (e.g. Cancer Survivors Network, Reddit's r/cancer), real-life portrayals of cancer journeys (e.g. The C Word), art and visual projects (e.g. The Scar Project), and podcasts and audio platforms. Also see Arduser (2017).

euphemism Kalanithi aestheticizes his experience and makes autopathography a genre that challenges the limiting cultural assumptions propagated by institutions and media about cancer, and instead unveils the complexity of the experience.

Though his life-story remains unfinished and fragmented, Kalanithi achieves meaningfulness not through a narrative closure, but through emotional closure. His tireless pursuit of understanding mortality leads him to incorporate the peripeteia of death into his own narrative, forming an identity not as a hero in search of a conclusive truth, but as a narrator who acknowledges the incompleteness and artificiality of all final resolutions.

Kalanithi's quest represents this relentless pursuit of meaning amid the wasteland of mortality (Kalanithi 2016b, 75) and turning it into a blank page (Kalanithi 2016b, 100) for creation. By accepting the incompleteness of truth, life, and his own story, Kalanithi manages to transcend Chronos with Kairos, triumphing over the constraints of time. Aligned with postmodern realizations of diversity, fragmentation, and the value of minor narratives, *When Breath Becomes Air* contributes to a collective act of sharing life-stories, embedding itself within the evolving discourse on "the meaning of life". Kalanithi's recognition of chaos, contingency, and incompleteness – while ceaselessly striving to create meaning in an absurd world where meaning is elusive – embodies the postmodern active stance, reaching toward the future.

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Writing the Unwritten: The Childless New Woman Identity in Sara Jeannette Duncan's *A Daughter of Today*

ABSTRACT

Sara Jeannette Duncan creates a groundbreaking New Woman heroine in the protagonist of her novel *A Daughter of Today* (1894). The text portrays the struggles of Elfrida Bell in pursuing her life endeavour of creating her individual version of female identity by becoming a woman artist who leaves motherhood aside. By distancing female identity from all traditional conceptualizations in the character of Elfrida, Duncan writes the unwritten since a childless and artistic female subjectivity is portrayed as valid and valuable. A study from the intersectional critical space between New Woman and motherhood studies sheds new light on the protagonist of the novel, as well as on controversial elements of the text, such as its ending.

Keywords: Sara Jeannette Duncan, *A Daughter of Today*, Canadian literature, new woman studies, motherhood studies

Pisanje nenapisanega: identiteta »nove ženske« brez otrok v romanu *A Daughter of Today* Sare Jeannette Duncan

IZVLEČEK

V romanu *A Daughter of Today* (1894) Sara Jeannette Duncan ustvari izviren lik t.i. nove ženske. Glavna junakinja Elfrida Bell si prizadeva ustvariti lastno različico ženske identitete: postane umetnica, ki se odreče materinstvu. Z oddaljevanjem ženske identitete od tradicionalnih konceptualizacij, Sara Jeannette Duncan piše nenapisano, saj je v njenem romanu ženska subjektivnost umetnice brez otrok prikazana kot legitimna in dragocena. Intersekcionalne kritične študije o novi ženski in materinstvu odpirajo nove vidike za obravnavo glavne protagonistko romana, kot tudi kontroverznih elementov besedila, na primer njegovega konca.

Gljučne besede: Sara Jeannette Duncan, *A Daughter of Today*, kanadska književnost, študije nove ženske, študije materinstva

1 Introduction

As Misao Dean explains in her introduction to *A Daughter of Today* (1894) by the Canadian author Sara Jeannette Duncan, the novel received ambivalent reviews at the time of its publication. From reviewers who saw it as “a serious piece of work in a serious mood” with a strong female protagonist, to others who objected to the character’s egotism or to the novel’s ending (Dean 1988, vii–viii). Together with the twentieth-century edition of this text, Dean’s introduction was a crucial step in the revitalization of this work more than a century after its publication; it marked a point of departure for subsequent critical analyses that have offered differing readings, interpretations and conclusions about the novel. In line with these previous approaches, this study offers a new insight from the intersectional space between New Woman and motherhood studies in order to shed more light on the text and its heroine.

Dean’s post-colonial and feminist insight into Duncan’s life and work in *A Different Point of View* is precisely the critical work that situates *A Daughter of Today* in the tradition of New Woman fiction with the creation of “another kind of heroine in the female artist” (Dean 1991, 74). The decision to include a New Woman artist as the protagonist is what makes the novel “boldly modern” (Gadpaille 2007, 60) and positions the text beyond “others in its exploration of new subjectivities for the heroine” (Tonkin et al. 2014, 201). As a New Woman writer herself, Sara Jeannette Duncan certainly created a different class of heroine in Elfrida Bell, the protagonist of her novel.

We meet Elfrida as a teenage high-school student in Sparta, Tennessee, USA, and witness her determination to become an independent artist, first as a painter in Paris and later as a journalist and fiction writer in London, where she commits suicide after not achieving success. Throughout this process of becoming, “Elfrida sets out to create herself” (Dean 1991, xiv), to create her own individual version of female identity, and consciously rejects marriage and motherhood as obstacles for a woman “to whom life may mean something else” (Duncan 1988, 157). She turns down not one, but two marriage proposals and openly rejects wifedom and motherhood as hindrances to her artistic ambitions. It therefore seems clear that art and identity, or art *as* identity, together with a conscious rejection of the traditional female roles of wife and mother, are the driving forces that move Elfrida Bell.

According to this summary, it may seem that *A Daughter of Today* is a *Bildungsroman*. However, it does not, or at least does not only, belong to this genre. Although the first two chapters may count as *Bildungsroman*, the rest of the novel is a *Künstlerroman* since, even though the reader gets to know Elfrida as a school student in Sparta in the first chapter, and back at home from art school in Philadelphia where her artistic career has begun in the second chapter, her struggles to become an emancipated and renowned woman artist are the main focus of the text. In this regard, the novel is an example of the fact that, according to Heilmann, “the female *Künstlerroman* frequently starts off as a *Bildungsroman* [...] charting the formation of the heroine’s character against the backdrop of a fragmented education, and is frequently the novel of a frustrated artist” (Heilmann 2000, 161). In fact, close analyses of the work confirm that the novel is not only a female *Künstlerroman*, but a unique example in so far as “it does not chart the artist’s accommodation to society, but rather ends with the artist’s death” (Treagus 2014, 111). Elfrida’s suicide epitomizes Virginia Woolf’s idea that a woman with an

artistic urge “would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage” (1989, 49). Although mainly referring to women in the sixteenth century through Shakespeare’s fictional sister, Judith, Woolf acknowledges the great difficulties women writers endured even at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which may have led to death, as in the case of Elfrida. It seems clear that the protagonist of *A Daughter of Today* is indeed “an unconventional and, to some, offensive heroine” that needs to be read from different perspectives so that all her complexity can be unravelled (Treagus 2014, 113).

2 Elfrida Bell as a Paradigm of the New Woman

Unconventional and offensive or, in other words, dangerous, were among the biased ascriptions attached to New Women, either as writers or protagonists. The emancipated, free-thinking and emotionally independent woman at the end of the nineteenth century “was called ‘Novissima’: the New Woman, the Odd Woman, the Wild Woman, and the Superfluous Woman” for pursuing a career and/or remaining unmarried and/or childless, that is, for seeking new identity configurations outside the traditional domestic and maternal boundaries against a patriarchal backdrop that felt threatened by their claims (Ardis 1990, 1). They were regarded as “self-directed and self-absorbed” women, that is, as egotists for not abiding by the rules of established femininity and contributing as mothers to the continuity of humanity as they were expected to do (Pykett 1992, 101). Questioned, criticized, suppressed, vilified, mocked, used and abused, these persistent rebels were, above all, defined from the outside or “represented”, to use Pykett’s term. This external definition is what New Woman writers challenge by including different and differing heroines that move away from the traditional conceptualization of a woman as the “angel in the house”. In line with Gilbert and Gubar, the representation of women as domestic angels positioned them as virtuous appendixes to men that contributed to the greatness of their male counterparts, but whose own merits were not even contemplated. With a long tradition in literature, this conceptualization of femininity is rooted in the figure of the Middle Ages’ divine Virgin, and evolved through the writings of, for instance, Dante and Milton into the secular image of women as domestic angels of Victorian times and is, according to Woolf, “the most pernicious image male authors have imposed upon literary women” (Gilbert and Gubar 1984, 20). Contesting this tradition of representation, female protagonists in New Woman novels, as in the case of Duncan’s Elfrida, “argued for changes in the conventions of representation, changes in the unwritten rules about what subjects were appropriate for literary treatment” (Ardis 1990, 38). They were thus redefining, rewriting possible female identities, and this is what Elfrida Bell embodies.

“I’ll admit her to be abnormal, if you like” says the character of Lawrence Cardiff about Elfrida to his daughter and Elfrida’s best friend, Janet Cardiff (Duncan 1988, 129). Abnormality or, in other words, unconventionality, is not a side effect of her life, but an artistic and life goal. Now in London, in a conversation about literature with her friend Janet, and openly defending naturalism in the novel, Elfrida states that “art has no ideal but truth, and to conventionalize it is to damn it!” (1988, 115). This idea of a truthful art that moves away from conventionality (as well as an accordingly truthful artistic life) fuels her stance as a woman artist whose writings are persistently rejected at first. In her determination to pursue art and unconventionality, she does not hesitate to enrol in a burlesque company of female

dancers, which makes the novel extraordinary since “it may well be the only one in which a ‘New Woman’ heroine achieves self-recognition and an affirmation of the terms of ordinary femininity in her performance with a troupe of dancers in a seaside music hall ‘leg show’” (Devereux 2014, 35).

As a woman for whom life means art, creativity, artistic delivery and recognition as an artistic agent are at the centre of her world. In fact, art is the only possible bond in any heterosexual or marital relationship for Elfrida. As the narrator confirms, for her “the only dignity attaching to love as between a man and a woman was [is] that of an artistic idea” (Duncan 1988, 154). Otherwise, heterosexual love is just interesting for her as a game in which success is an attractive possibility. “It’s splendid” she affirms (1988, 159), just as splendid as gaining recognition as an artist who is able “to do things – *good* things, you understand – and to have them appreciated and paid for in the admiration of people who feel and see and know” which is what she desires “more than anything else in the whole world” (1988, 125). These words illustrate the extent to which success is important to Elfrida, and thus it is no coincidence that, when faced with the fact that her fiction does not achieve her desired acknowledgment after countless struggles, she commits suicide. Similarly, when exclaiming “fancy being the author of babies, when one could be the author of books!” (1988, 157), Elfrida makes her ideas regarding motherhood clear. For her, authorship is above motherhood, therefore the female power to deliver rooted in artistic creation is preferable to that of the biological process of giving birth. Moreover, this quote suggests that, in Elfrida’s view, female authority emerges from authorship in order to forge a pioneering female matrilineality through writing that moves away from traditional matrilineage by means of maternity.

Elfrida’s focus on art could be read as a substitute for childbearing, as a way of conceiving and contributing to society from the standpoint of a woman who has chosen to write and not to mother biologically. In this regard, Elfrida’s narrative can be said to participate in what Ann Heilmann describes as the mothering-as-creating theme present in New Woman fiction (Heilmann 2000, 155), while proposing a reversal of terms as in creating-as-mothering, since Elfrida somehow contributes through art to a patriarchal society that resists an unmarried, childless woman. In fact, her story seems to be in line with Heilmann’s idea that this theme is usually “developed through two central metaphors, those of birth and death” (2000, 155). Birth encoded in “the desire to write, to give birth to the vision within” represented through the artist’s retreat to a personal space where free self-expression is possible (2000, 155). Elfrida’s conquest of a place of her own, both in her bohemian apartment in Paris and a rented room in London where she is able to shape her own idea of art and identity, is a clear epitome of such encoding. This private space is evidently a forerunner of Virginia Woolf’s idea that a room of one’s own is necessary for the rise and development of female authority and authorship. Likewise, regarding death as a metaphor, Elfrida’s unsuccessful artistic career and suicide speak for “the metaphorical miscarriage or abortion of the artist’s projects and ambitions” (2000, 156). Woolf’s idea that the lack of success of female artists frequently leads to their death, due to a patriarchal artistic framework that conspires against them, is represented in the text through the figures of the male master Lucien in Paris, the male artist and apparent friend John Kendal, and the numerous male figures of London’s publishing world, and not because of a lack of talent as proven by the posthumous success of

Elfrida's novel. Thus, *A Daughter of Today* can be included as an example of what Heilmann calls "suspended narratives", meaning that what is ultimately at stake is its heroine's search for her own unique individuality which, in Elfrida's case, embraces art and moves away from motherhood.

However, Elfrida's stance goes beyond this as she feels aversion when Janet affirms that she wants to die as a grandmother, and even repulsion when wondering what kind of woman her beloved friend Kendal would marry, perhaps "some red-and-white cow of an Englishwoman" who would serve him as a "reproductive agent" unlike her, who would not conventionalize their imagined marriage, as art would be at its very core (Duncan 1988, 254). In this regard, Elfrida's approach to maternity is a predecessor of Adrienne Rich's idea regarding a woman without children, for whom motherhood may be perceived as "the bondage of a patriarchal system" and who would "congratulate herself on having stayed 'free,' not having been 'brainwashed into motherhood'" (Rich 1986, 251). Bondage is precisely what marriage means for Elfrida. As she states, it is especially "degrading" and "horrible" for women since men "are not affected by it" (Duncan 1988, 157). However, she is not alone in her endeavour since, as she affirms, there are other spirits like hers who fight for and achieve that beloved freedom; she is not alone, she is not insane, for her strong opinions held throughout the novel are backed by others who feel like her (Duncan 1988, 158).

In consonance with Ardis' ideas regarding the consideration of New Women as offensive egotists, it is totally unsurprising that Elfrida is also considered dangerous and selfish. "Dangerous" is the adjective employed by the narrator when explaining why the editor-in-chief of the London newspaper the *Illustrated Age* refuses to expand her role as a writer: "editor-in-chief said no, Miss Bell was dangerous" (Duncan 1988, 163). As one of the most revelatory moments of the novel seems to suggest, she is regarded as dangerous because of her self-determination. The revelation of John Kendal's portrait of Elfrida shows what he – and through him, patriarchal society – truly thinks of her. Kendal's choice of "a disguise" and a kind of veil on Elfrida's face, instead of hiding, reveals what in his and society's eyes is "the real Elfrida" (1988, 250): a self-centred and unredeemable woman who does not intend to change. And indeed, she has no intention whatsoever of changing. "I am what I am", says a dignified Elfrida (1988, 250), despite the shock and the outrage of her friend's portrait, to which she adds when leaving the room: "I will never be different! [...] I will never be different!" (1988, 253). Although it might seem she defends herself as a consequence of the situation, such a proclamation of identity is not new in her. Previously in the novel, Elfrida acknowledges her egotism and claims it is the spark igniting all she does, to such an extent that "it will be that little fierce flame" which will remain after her death (1988, 127), and indeed it will. Unlike the rest of society, she is not at odds with egotism – quite the contrary, for it holds her real true self, her soul. As she claims: "I have my whole life in the flame and it becomes my soul" (1988, 127). In doing so, Elfrida goes against as well as beyond her time. On the one hand, her words question the contemporary identification of fictional heroines' freedom with ego, and by extension that of their creators. Contemporary comments on New Women's egos demonstrate that writers and heroines alike were feared and thus needed to be suppressed (Ardis 1990, 382), or were mocked and questioned, as shown by the portrait in the case of Elfrida. She embodies the "improper feminine", in Lyn Pykett's words, since by

being so self-centred she drifts apart from the proper version of womanliness. It is not her who behaves egotistically, but society which considers her as doing so. Hence, the use of the term *egotist* when referring to Elfrida needs to be included in the discourses of the nineteenth century, because she cannot be labelled as such today. On the other hand, she also transcends the concept of female egotism of her time by turning it into something positive, into a force fuelling her identity and a power that will transcend death.

The complexity of Elfrida's identity seems to have been a hindrance in Kendal's process of painting her, which is something she finds perfectly understandable, for she sees herself as holding diversity inside. As she states, "I, whom you see as an individual, am so many people" (Duncan 1988, 247). Elfrida's character is directly interwoven with Ann Heilmann's idea of "the variety of New Woman identities", of "the polymorphous nature of the categories and meanings that could be ascribed to her", as well as of "the textual and semiotic hybridity of the New Woman" (Heilmann and Beetham 2004, 1). Again, our heroine goes beyond this as she is an example of the variety, polymorphism and hybridity of the New Woman, as well as a vessel holding all three inside her, encapsulating many of their possible identities. For Elfrida, identity *is* diversity, although this is not the case for members of established society, like Kendal. Up to this moment, rather than showing Elfrida's attempts to construct her unique identity, the novel depicts her efforts at *being* unique.

Ironically, Kendal feels his mastery of painting has finally become apparent in his portrait of Elfrida, for, according to the narrative voice, "in it he saw himself a master" (Duncan 1988, 260), which is "the most intoxicating sensation his work had ever brought him" (1988, 247). It seems that his act of using and abusing a friend as an artistic object is not regarded as egotistical but as a product of mastery, because, as a nineteenth-century man, he holds the possibility of artistic genius inside, whereas Elfrida's life stance and pursuit of artistic expression and recognition reveal selfishness since, as a woman, she is assumed not to hold that option of mastery. The character of Elfrida deviates from domesticity, wifedom and motherhood and is a *woman artist*, a problematic term at the time since "the problem for the female artist is that the qualities of the egoist, while they might be found to be acceptable in a 'genius', so contravene the discourse of femininity as to make the category of 'female genius' a contradiction in terms" (Treagus 2014, 122). The portrait thus serves as an epitome of the fact that for Kendal, the representative of a patriarchal society, Elfrida does not, and as a woman *cannot*, possess the features of a genius but only those of a selfish woman. Paradoxically, the painting also functions as "a portrait of an artist as a young woman" and in doing so mirrors "the lack of fit between women's desire, the socially prescribed norms of the woman's lot, and the actuality of women's lives" (Pykett 1992, 127).

This revelatory moment is fatal for our heroine. The revelation of the portrait implies a loss of identity for her, as Kendal has taken control over her lifelong process of creating her own unique subjectivity, and has inserted an alien critical voice that ultimately speaks for rejection. Elfrida is now confronted with the image the others have of her; she has become the *other*, she has been forced to become an object and has stopped being her own subject. She is not innocent and demonstrates that she perfectly understands what is at stake by asking Kendal "Don't you feel, [...] as if you had stolen something from me?" (Duncan 1988, 251),

something he confirms. And this is perhaps why she destroys the portrait in an attempt to annihilate the possibility of that *other* identity being true and so close the gap that the portrait has opened up. By the ragged canvas, she leaves a letter to Kendal that reads: “I have come here this morning [...] determined either to kill myself or it” (276). There is no other possible way out for “after her unmasking; she must give her life to achieve closure and save some sense of identity” (Gadpaille 2007, 62). But the last word has not been pronounced yet, for which it is necessary to wait until the end of the novel.

3 Elfrida Bell as a Childless Female Artist

Through the character of Elfrida, Duncan’s text performs a re-evaluation of *the feminine*, which in later texts is carried out by writers such as Virginia Woolf or Adrienne Rich, because they all ultimately “reclaim it as a cultural positive” (Pykett 1992, 144). *A Daughter of Today* is connected to motherhood studies by its very title. As this indicates, the novel tells the story of a woman who is considered a daughter of her times, a product of the sociocultural and historical background in which she is living. The title can also be linked to Maureen T. Reddy’s concept of “daughter-centricity”, since the pre-eminence of the daughter’s voice is favoured over that of the mother. *A Daughter of Today* is thus an example of how usually “the perspective of the daughter, as subject, is privileged over that of the mother, as object” (Podnieks 2023, 18). Although Elfrida’s choice not to become a biological mother seems to speak for this daughter-centric perspective, Duncan’s novel can be considered matricentric since the protagonist moves from daughterhood into the possibility of motherhood when she is indeed objectified, in her case, as a selfish woman who rejects maternity. Due to such refusal of motherhood, the text can be inscribed within matricentric dialectics because it deals with motherhood as a crucial factor in women’s lives, as shown by the character of Janet Cardiff, whereas Elfrida’s rejection of maternity ultimately speaks for motherhood as decentred. The novel must therefore be included as both an early step and a step further within the body of works participating in the process of “unmasking motherhood” raised by Podnieks, although from the perspective of the conscious refusal of motherhood. It is not a deviant, or defiant, or differing motherhood that is at stake, but a total rejection of it since what Elfrida Bell pursues is “independence and creative, professional, and intellectual fulfilment outside of wifehood, parenting, and domesticity” (Podnieks 2023, 3).

As a symbol of the bipolarity of Elfrida’s times, she is mothered by two maternal figures in the novel. On the one hand, she is the daughter of her biological mother, Mrs Bell, an apparently conventional married woman, trapped in a male-centred universe where her artistic ambitions have been discouraged. As her daughter, Elfrida is assumed to keep the matrilineality alive by giving birth so that patriarchy can be perpetuated. On the other hand, Rich’s suggestion that the second mother tends to be an inspiring female figure that makes her a kind of “counter-mother” can lead to Miss Kimpsey being identified as such (Rich 1986, 247). Present in Elfrida’s life from the very beginning of the novel, Miss Kimpsey is the first character to be introduced, and, in fact, the first two words of the novel are “Miss Kimpsey” (Duncan 1988, 1). She is an emancipated, unmarried and childless teacher with “a distinct suggestion of character under her unimportant little features” (1988, 2), who is the first representative of an apparent New Woman that Elfrida meets. Through her, Elfrida discovers a different

matrilineality that offers her other life paths. Coincidentally, the first passages of the novel portray a revealing conversation between these two women about Elfrida, demonstrating that first impressions may be much more complex than they seem. We meet Miss Kimpsey waiting for Mrs Bell in her undoubtedly symbolic drawing-room. Filled up with books, “the room was full of Magdalens, and on an easel in the corner stood a Mater Dolorosa lifting up her streaming eyes” (1988, 3). The pictures represent a dichotomy of two female figures; one, Mary Magdalene, popularly known as a paradigm of the fallen but redeemed woman, and Mary, who is interestingly invoked in the text in her grieving version as a mother “obscured by connotations of the ‘undeflorated’ or intact hymen, or of the Roman Catholic Virgin Mother, defined entirely by her relation to God the Son”, and not in relation to the original sense of the term “virgin”, that is, “(she-who-is-unto-herself)” (Rich 1986, 249). Similarly dichotomous is the contrast between Miss Kimpsey’s concern for Elfrida’s knowledge of the “atheistical” and “improper” Rousseau and her biological mother’s praise for her daughter’s taste in citing a genius (Duncan 1988, 6). Furthermore, while Miss Kimpsey focuses on Elfrida’s beauty as an advantage for getting married, Mrs Bell believes she is “predestined for art” (1988, 8), so Elfrida’s ambition for an artistic life seems to be mothered to a certain extent. This biological maternal bond is also evident in Mrs Bell’s idea that marriage is not appropriate for her daughter, nor for any woman, which is an idea that Elfrida will defend and honour throughout her life. Two maternal figures, two life stances, two individualities, much in line with Rousseau’s ideas. As a child of two mothers, Elfrida fits within Rich’s vision that every woman has been “caught” and “split” between them (Rich 1986, 247), and it is at this intersection where Elfrida struggles to develop her own unique identity, apparently failing at last, although her haunting presence after death seems to suggest otherwise.

After the female trinity of Miss Kimpsey, Mrs Bell and Elfrida is presented, Mr Leslie Bell makes an entrance into the narrative. He is described as an intelligent, rational and stubbornly independent man with a strong “adherence to prescribed principles” (Duncan 1988, 10). An adherence that, of course, leads him to envision a life of marriage and motherhood for his daughter in their hometown, although perhaps with two little licenses: teaching and keeping painting as a hobby. An angel in the house with timid hints of freedom or, in other words, another Miss Kimpsey. Another duality is represented through the contrast between Mr and Mrs Bell regarding their daughter. In this case, concerning what a patriarchal society wants for and from women, and what they might want for themselves. This is further proof of the polarized world in which Elfrida lives. Mr Bell is the first voice of institutionalized patriarchy in the novel, although not the only one. Together with Kendal and the two marriage proposals to save Elfrida from what, in the eyes of society, would be a free fall into disgrace, other patriarchal voices in the novel very significantly resonate with the world of art. While living a bohemian life in Paris as a painting apprentice, Lucien, the master, takes the paintings of the women downstairs to the men’s room for their approval and tells “the little American” that her “drawing is still lady-like”, and so she needs to continue improving (1988, 22–23). Despite the joy of her life in Paris, this is the moment when Elfrida starts contemplating the possibility of writing, a decision also influenced by the financial difficulties she faces. Likewise, the London publishing world is not a welcoming arena for outsiders, much less for women. Having her journalistic pieces constantly rejected, she finally gains access by showing up at the newspaper offices in person. Although upon arrival at the *Consul* office,

she is informed that the editor “only sees people by appointment – especially ladies” (1988, 72), and is forced to leave with “a heavy sense of failure” (1988, 73), her determination is rewarded by meeting one of the sub-editors of the *Illustrated Age* by chance at the door of this newspaper office. “There was a light in her eyes which seemed to be the reflection of success” explains the narrator (1988, 76), and indeed it is Mr Rattray who accepts her first contribution. As her dear friend Mr Ticke comments, “it’s a thrice beastly world, Miss Bell” (1988, 66). However, Elfrida has a plan in case she is not as successful as hoped: she carries poison with her so she can commit suicide when she is exhausted, since for her “it’s weak to wait until you can’t help it” (1988, 66).

Elfrida’s decision to focus on art comes from her sojourn outside domestic safety at an art school in Philadelphia. There, she experienced her true, “mysterious, and interesting” self, and is already conscious of her uniqueness and the inner divided self it brings (Duncan 1988, 14); besides, she has an idea of what an artistic life would be, and is determined to devote herself to it. Moreover, she has been awarded for her drawing of Psyche which, according to Michelle Gadpaille, establishes an analogy between both figures in so far as Psyche’s “sin of seeking knowledge, of wanting to see the face of love, is close to Elfrida’s own ‘sin’ in aspiring as a woman to be an artist also” (Gadpaille 2007, 62). The drawing is described by the narrator as follows:

The lines were delicate, expressive, and false; the relief was imperfect, yet the feeling was undeniably caught. As a drawing it was incorrect enough, but its charm lay in a subtle spiritual something that had worked into it from the girl’s own fingers and made the beautiful empty classic face modernity interesting. (Duncan 1988,18)

Ambivalent comments like this from the narrator are present throughout the whole novel, and are one of the elements that provoke most controversy, thus achieving what was originally intended: ambiguity. Some critics seem to fall for this ambivalence when considering Elfrida “egotistical, erratic, and melodramatic, [although] she is also frank, occasionally generous, and sometimes brilliant” (Fiamengo 2009, 7). Mandy Treagus’ reading of the novel perhaps best describes the use of this fictional technique, as it explains that Duncan is keeping up with her ironic narrative style, although in this case “it is toned down” (Treagus 2014, 116), and that ambiguous comments like this are addressed to Elfrida as well as to the rest of the characters. It is a useful technique for it opens a distance between the narrator and the characters, and introduces a liminal space where uncomfortable topics can be approached; it “creates a double text because of the possibility of both a literal and an ironic reading, which enables a text to undermine subtly the values it might otherwise appear to espouse” (Treagus 2014, 160). It could be said that this voice functions as an amplifier of the muttering taking place during Elfrida’s times; it works as backdrop for the characters’ actions, expressing the contradictions of a sociocultural moment in between tradition and modernity, open to new possibilities yet attached to old mores, hesitant regarding women’s old and new paths, in sum, ambivalent. Furthermore, it is a technical achievement that connects Duncan’s narrative to other New Woman “proto-modernist” texts in which the employment of such “polyvocality and multi-perspective” gives rise to the problematization of characters’ decisions and acts (Pykett 1992, 139).

Elfrida's choices, as well as those of her friend Janet Cardiff, are indeed problematized by the duality they represent through their differing ideas of art and motherhood. While Elfrida focuses on artistic creation and leaves all womanly tasks as a wife and mother aside, Janet centres on creativity at first although she finally settles for domesticity, marriage and motherhood. Despite having experienced the publication of her first novel and how well it was received among readers, she stops writing. Janet's novel results in two meaningful resolutions: it bonds her and Kendal, while it irrevocably damages her friendship with Elfrida. By binding the lovers, the book symbolizes Elfrida's idea that true love can only come through art. On the other hand, for Elfrida, Janet's work is proof of the unfairness of the patriarchal art world raised by the novel; while she devotes all her strength, energy and time to write a good yet unconventional piece of fiction and gets no favourable response, her friend succeeds despite not being committed to art in the same way.

This is when Elfrida reveals that Janet's father has proposed to her, and Janet acknowledges that she is in love with Kendal. The fact that Lawrence Cardiff proposes to Elfrida is significant, since it moves Elfrida closer to motherhood. It would have meant a kind of mothering close to an aberration, however, since Elfrida would have become her best friend's stepmother'. Moreover, in the eyes of society, her behaviour is more improper than the possibility of such an incongruous marriage and maternity. On the other hand, art also stands in the way of the two women's sisterhood, for Elfrida realizes that their different artistic concepts are irreconcilable. In a letter to Janet, Elfrida writes: "what you said betrayed a totally different conception of art, as it expresses itself in the nudity of things, from the one I supposed you to hold, and, if you will pardon me for saying so, a much lower one. [...] our aims and creeds are different" (Duncan 1988, 242). Kendal dictates his wife's response, and thus Janet, the former writer who had some success with her novel, "wrote as he dictated" (1988, 274), an illuminating resolution for her character. Again, two women, two approaches to art, two resolutions, two identities.

From within the female kaleidoscope portrayed by the characters of Elfrida, Janet, Mrs Bell and Miss Kimpsey, *A Daughter of Today* seems to reclaim and assert women's right to individuality and identity. In this regard, by claiming that "the living, politicized woman claims to be a person whether she is attached to a family or not, whether she is attached to a man or not, whether she is a mother or not" (Rich 1986, xvi), an intrinsic connection between any debate about motherhood and any about personhood can be established so as to inextricably link maternity and/or its absence to the construction of female identity. By consciously rejecting motherhood, Elfrida seems to speak for Rich's idea that detachment from family, men and/or maternity is a challenge to motherhood as a patriarchal institution, here differentiated from motherhood as the relationship of women with their reproductive powers. In fact, before the nineteenth century, voluntary childlessness had not even been contemplated as an option. Having the possibility of leaving childbearing and child-rearing aside opened up a whole new path of life options and, thus, identifications for women. Such unique life stances implied (and still imply) broader demands, since the choice of "voluntary childlessness may serve as one way to actively challenge the centrality of motherhood to feminine identity" (Kelly 2009, 171). By rejecting motherhood, a repossession of the female body is also at stake that simultaneously implies "a form of gynecological revolt against the

system” (Rich 1986, xviii). Women like Elfrida were challenging the institutions of not only motherhood but also heterosexuality, both as agents of an institutionalized patriarchy, meaning that the whole patriarchal system is ultimately being questioned, and these women are claiming new identity constructions on the basis of their own choices involving their own bodies, and thus regarding maternity and sexuality.

Within the nineteenth-century patriarchal system that prioritized women’s reproductive function, and as a woman who chose not to mother, Elfrida is seen as an outcast. Embodying difference, Elfrida is “a target of threat, harassment, violence, social control, genocide” (Rich 1986, xxxii) or, in other words, an object of rejection, mockery, and even death, as portrayed by the novel. Furthermore, if only women with children have a future (Rich 1986, xiv), then childless women have none. Without a future as a childless woman by choice, Elfrida inhabits a liminal space of difficult fictional resolution. In fact, hers is an unnamed liminal space. The fact that there was not (and there is still not) a term that refers to the situation of women who decide not to have children is certainly revealing. Rich is clear in this respect, since “we have no familiar, ready-made name for a woman who defines herself, by choice, neither in relation to children nor to men, who is self-identified, who has chosen herself” (Rich 1986, 249). Terms such as “non-mothers”, “unchilded”, “childless”, or “child-free” all fail to define life stances such as that of Elfrida, of a woman “who is self-identified, who has chosen herself” (Rich 1986, 249). While some of these terms may define Elfrida based on an absence of maternity or children, none of them focuses on the epicentre of her choice: herself. *No name, no existence* seems to be the mantra for Elfrida’s decision on motherhood, as her final suicide also suggests. However, the liminality of the space she inhabits also gives rise to the introduction of sexlessness as a female option. The only passages in which she seems to be in sexual situations to some extent are those already mentioned, when she is sitting as a model for Kendal’s portrait and her enrolment in a burlesque show company; the former as an artist’s muse and the latter with the clear artistic goal of gathering information for her first novel, that is to say, both sexual situations are connected to artistic production. Such an encounter between art and sexlessness is not coincidental, but derived from Elfrida’s idea of “the sexlessness of artistic sympathy” (Duncan 1988, 131). Her conviction that art must be sexless goes beyond this, as she asks her parents for an epitaph that transcends gender boundaries and reads: “*Pas femme-artiste*” (1988, 281). She wants to be remembered “not as a woman, but as an artist and a Bohemian” as the narrator comments earlier in the text (1988, 46). Despite the gendered nature of the term *artiste*, it could be interpreted as a “unified ideal” within which a woman and artist are the same so that it “open[s] a space in language for her to engage in the kind of representation she wants; to constitute herself as a subject; to find, as it were, her self” (Devereux 2014, 40). On the other hand, the avoidance of sexuality offers the narrative the chance to approach other topics regarding nineteenth-century women and counter-balances the pre-eminence of sexuality in New Woman’s fiction, suggesting it might not be so central (Treagus 1024, 117). It seems clear that, by remaining childless and sexless, Elfrida carries out the repossession of the female body raised by Rich and ultimately claims her own individuality; she embodies a new identity, that of a personhood devoted to self-expression, creativity and art regardless of gender.

4 Conclusion

Having tried everything in her power to become a successful artist, having endured countless outrages even from dear friends, and after the rejection of her candid fictional work “An Adventure in Stageland” by publishers, Elfrida commits suicide. It is Janet who finds the body when she enters Elfrida’s bedroom and witnesses “that the room was pregnant with the presence of death” (Duncan 1988, 280). The fact that the word *pregnant* is introduced here in connection with death is revelatory. By being pregnant, the room represents maternity, for it can be considered “a metaphorical womb into which the protagonist withdrew to emerge a new-born artist” (Heilmann 2000, 156). But Elfrida’s room is an infertile womb, a uterus that has finally been beaten by death. As a New Woman writer creating a ground-breaking heroine, Duncan’s choice of suicide may symbolize “the difficulty of finding appropriate closure for the New Woman story” (Gadpaille 2007, 67). Likewise, the ending seems to voice the subliminal message “don’t go too far” hidden behind the explicit message passed on to women reading “you can be anything you want to be” (Rich 1986, 248), because if you act like Elfrida, if you dare to go against an overpowering patriarchal system by rejecting domesticity, marriage and motherhood, if you risk pursuing your ambition of becoming an individual *and* an artist, you must be ready for the consequences. Elfrida’s final gesture also seems to answer Podnieks’ question about the possibility of being “both a mother and an autonomous individual” (Podnieks 2023, 5), and the answer seems to be *no*. According to the text, at that time it was possible to be either one or the other, but not both.

The critical reception of such fictional closure was ambivalent, too: from critics who considered it a failure, to others who hesitated about its meaning as “a warning or a protest” (Fiamengo 2009, 6), to contemporary approaches that offer more poised interpretations. The critical perspective offered by the intersection between New Woman and motherhood studies proves it is indeed the only possible closure for a childless artist at the end of the nineteenth century. As a New Woman who has chosen herself over everything else, who has devoted her life to art and has not been successful, as well as a non-mother who has rejected her mandatory participation in a patriarchal society, Elfrida’s contribution to society is thus sterile and the only possible ending in fiction is a departure, in this case through death. By distancing female identity from all traditional conceptualizations in the character of Elfrida, Sara Jeannette Duncan was writing the unwritten. Through her, a childless artistic female individuality is portrayed as valid and valuable, although destroyed as a daughter of her time.

However, Elfrida’s last word has not been said yet, as her dream comes true after death: her novel comes to light and is “met with a very considerable success” (Duncan 1988, 280). Perhaps by reasserting Mrs Bell’s conviction that “genius cannot die” (1988, 7), as well as making the previously contradictory terms of *female* and *artist* finally coherent, her work remains. Back in her hometown, Miss Kimpsey has a daughterly relationship with Mr and Mrs Bell and the three of them are devoted to Elfrida’s legacy together. Furthermore, although Janet and Kendal have a peaceful and idyllic life, “a silence sometimes falls between them” (1988, 281), symbolizing Elfrida’s haunting presence that reminds them of what they did and did not do. “The only person whose equanimity is entirely undisturbed is Buddha”, says the narrator in the last lines (1988, 281). Placed among the Magdalens, the statue of Buddha

that has accompanied Elfrida through Paris and London, that has been her most intimate and non-judgmental companion, that has witnessed her determination and society's prejudices against her as an artist and woman, "still smiles", representing the little fierce flame of Elfrida's ego, or better said, of a finally accomplished free, different and daring female identity that will endure.

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Empathic Response of Slovene Readers to Poetry in Slovene and English

ABSTRACT

Drawing on literary theory, translation studies, and social identity theory, the research investigates whether reading Louise Glück's poem "Adult Grief" in English versus Slovenian elicits different affective reactions. Using a repeated-measures design and a specially developed empathy scale, the study differentiates between compassionate and distressed responses of narrative empathy and examines how they relate to the four dimensions of trait empathy as assessed by the *interpersonal reactivity index*. The findings indicate that *empathic concern* and *fantasy* are key predictors of empathic engagement, with *fantasy* enhancing *perspective taking* and *personal distress*. Notably, language significantly influences empathic responses, especially when interacting with *personal distress*, suggesting that reading in one's native language reduces the self-other differentiation and intensifies emotional experience. However, language exposure also moderates responses, indicating that habitual engagement in a language can enhance emotional resonance regardless of native status. These results underline the complex interplay between language, empathy, and literary affect.

Keywords: empathy, poetry, translation studies, mother tongue, foreign language, self-other differentiation

Slovenski bralci in njihovo empatično odzivanje na poezijo v slovenščini in angleščini

IZVLEČEK

Na podlagi literarne teorije, prevodoslovja in teorije socialne identitete preučujemo, ali branje pesmi Louise Glück »Adult Grief« v izvirniku v primerjavi s slovenskim prevodom sproža drugačne afektivne odzive. Z uporabo ponovljenega merjenja in lestvice za merjenje empatije razlikujemo med sočutnimi in s stisko zaznamovanimi oblikami narativne empatije ter preučujemo njihovo povezanost s štirimi dimenzijami osebnostne empatije, kot jih definira IRI (ang. *interpersonal reactivity index*). Rezultati kažejo, da sta empatična skrb in domišljjsko vživljanje ključna napovednika empatične vključenosti; pri tem domišljjsko vživljanje krepi zmožnost prevzemanja perspektive in osebne prizadetosti. Jezik statistično značilno vpliva na empatične odzive, zlasti v interakciji z osebno prizadetostjo, kar nakazuje, da branje v maternem jeziku pri bralcu zmanjšuje razlikovanje med lastnim odzivom in odzivom lirskega subjekta ter intenzivira čustveno izkušnjo. Na odzive vpliva tudi izpostavljenost jeziku, kar pomeni, da lahko ukvarjanje z jezikom okrepi čustveno resonanco. Izsledki poudarjajo zapleteno prepletenost jezika, empatije in literarnega afekta.

Ključne besede: empatija, poezija, prevodoslovje, materni jezik, tuji jezik, razlikovanje jaz-drugi

1 Introduction: Empathic Experience During Literary Reading

In the present study,¹ we investigated the effects of reading in the native language compared to a foreign language on the empathic experience. Suzanne Keen (2006, 208) defines empathy as a feeling that is triggered when we are personally confronted with the emotional state of another person, or when we listen to or read about such a state. Keen distinguishes between sympathy (compassion for another person's state) and empathy (internalization and adoption of another person's emotions), as well as between narrative emotions (emotions felt towards the characters, the narrated situation or the narrator) and aesthetic emotions (emotions directed exclusively towards the formal aspects of the text). *Narrative empathy* is understood to be based on the experience of narrative emotions. A key element of *narrative empathy* is that the reader identifies with a character while reading, even if the similarity between them is minimal. However, it remains unclear whether identification with the character precedes the experience of empathy or whether empathy arises first and leads to identification (Keen 2006, 214). For this reason, we believe it is important to examine how readers' dispositions, in conjunction with other variables, influence their empathic responses.

Mark Davis (1980) proposed a model of *trait empathy* (empathy as a personality dimension) comprising four interrelated constructs. To operationalize this model, he developed the interpersonal reactivity index (IRI), one of the most commonly used instruments for measuring empathy today. The four subscales of the IRI are *empathic concern* ("a tendency to feel warmth, compassion and concern for others"), *personal distress* ("a tendency to feel self-centred distress in response to the negative experiences of others"), *fantasy* ("a tendency to identify strongly with fictional characters and to put oneself in fictional situations") and *perspective taking* ("a tendency to spontaneously adopt the psychological point of view of others"). *Perspective taking* and *fantasy* are generally considered the cognitive dimensions of empathy, while *empathic concern* and *personal distress* are considered the affective dimensions of empathy.

A concept closely related to the *fantasy* dimension is narrative transportation, which refers to the reader's immersive experience of being *transported* into the world of the narrative in an imaginative way (Green and Brock 2000). This process involves a temporary detachment from the real world and a heightened sense of identification with the persona and the situation in which they find themselves. People with high *fantasy* scores were more likely to feel immersed in the story and consequently showed stronger emotional responses to the literary text.

The connection between empathy and literary reading was first outlined theoretically by Keen (2006), while empirical research, in particular the distinction between various aspects of empathy (affective and cognitive), was initiated by Koopman (2015). She found that readers react more empathically when engaging with texts that exhibit a high degree of literariness than with texts that lack such stylistic features. Her findings can be attributed to the influence of *narrative transportation* on empathic responses.

Future research on empathic responses to literature should definitely continue to distinguish between cognitive and affective components of empathy. Although, as Keen (2006) postulates,

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these are highly overlapping experiential phenomena that flow in the reader's consciousness in such a way that they are not necessarily able to meaningfully distinguish them in their subjective experience.

Another important distinction in the psychological literature is that *empathic concern* is a measure of other-oriented feelings of empathy, whereas *personal distress* measures self-oriented feelings of empathy (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987). It is now widely recognized that the self-other differentiation is a critical component of empathy that distinguishes maladaptive from adaptive responses (Decety and Jackson 2004).

With this in mind, we propose that the most important distinction between empathic responses to literature, particularly when other variables such as the language of the text are taken into account, may not be between cognitive and affective empathic responses. Rather, it lies in the way cognitive processes and affective regulation interact to facilitate differentiation between self and other and allow readers to experience empathy differently while reading. This interplay of affect, cognition and regulation, also known as "*empathy regulation*" (Tully et al. 2016), is considered central to the distinction between distress and concern in response to the suffering of others.

Recent interdisciplinary studies from the fields of empathy theory, social neuroscience and multilingualism suggest that the experience of *personal distress* may be particularly sensitive to contextual variables, such as language. Decety and Lamm (2006) show that affective empathy is enhanced when the distinction between the self and the other is weakened. While they do not explicitly address language, their neurocognitive framework supports the idea that social closeness, which can be reinforced by shared identifiers such as language and other contextual factors, can enhance emotional resonance. Consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986), a shared linguistic identity may trigger a preference for one's group and, more importantly, a stronger emotional resonance.

Pavlenko (2006) argues that emotional responses are more deeply encoded in a person's native language due to early socialization and embodied language use. This could explain why reading in the native language elicits a stronger emotional response. Foroni (2015) and Iacozza et al. (2021), by observing the physical responses of readers using electromyography and pupillometry, demonstrated that the use of a foreign language is associated with limited emotional processing and partial embodiment of the language. They attributed this to the greater emotional attachment to the native language. Further evidence comes from developmental studies. Heffelfinger Peacocke (2018), for example, observed that children showed more prosocial and empathic responses when interacting in their native language, suggesting that emotional resonance is more accessible through early acquired language systems.

In the field of literary reading, Chesnokova et al. (2017) found that the aesthetic and emotional impact of poetry decreased when the texts were read in translation, indicating that language choice significantly influences readers' emotional engagement, even in controlled literary contexts.

Batson et al. (1997) also provide additional support for the more general notion that empathy towards members of one's own group – such as those associated with a common language – tends to be stronger, especially in emotionally engaging conditions.

Although most of these studies are not concerned with literature per se, their common denominator – higher affective reactivity when reading in one's native language – is the central focus of our study. Specifically, we want to investigate whether reading a poem in one's native language triggers a deeper engagement of the *personal distress* component of empathy. We hypothesize that the reader's native language acts as a shared social identifier that reinforces a sense of belonging and reduces the psychological distance between the reader and persona.

2 Research Aim and Hypotheses

The aim of our study is to investigate how the language in which a poem is read impacts the reader's empathic response to the poem. Specifically, we examine this effect by comparing responses to poems read in Slovene (the participants' mother tongue) and in English.

To address this question, we need an instrument for measuring narrative empathy states. Since to the best of our knowledge no such measure exists, we will design our own. It will draw primarily on Keen's (2006) work on narrative empathy and be informed by relevant psychological conceptualizations of the facets of empathy originally proposed by Davis (1980) and further elaborated by Batson (2009). We anticipate identifying a two-factor structure of empathic responses, mostly distinguished by the level of self-other differentiation.

First, we will investigate whether a difference in empathic responses between the language conditions exists, and whether any observed difference is attributable to Slovene being participants' first language. We will also explore whether this difference is not better explained by linguistic preference, self-assessed proficiency, or greater exposure to a particular language in terms of reading, viewing and listening to content.

Based on previous studies (Koopman, 2015; Pavlenko 2006, 227–46; Foroni 2015, 10), we hypothesize that the intensity of empathic responses will increase when the poem is read in the mother tongue. Although preference, knowledge and exposure to the language are expected to influence the intensity of empathic responses, we anticipate that these factors will not fully account for the effect of the language in which the poem is read.

Secondly, we will examine how trait-level empathy, measured by Davis's (1980) IRI, interacts with language variables in predicting empathic responses to the text. We hypothesize that *empathic concern* and *fantasy* will be the primary predictors of empathic responses. *Fantasy* will also meaningfully interact with *personal distress* and *perspective taking*, intensifying their effects because of the central role of imaginative transposition in the context of reading narrative.

Personal distress will differentiate between the two factors of empathic responses, positively predicting one and negatively the other, showing the difference in self-other differentiation between the two types of responses (Decety and Jackson 2004; Decety and Lamm 2006).

Building on findings by Koopman (2015), we anticipate a ceiling effect in the interaction between the language conditions and *empathic concern*, and thus that the language effect at high levels of trait *empathic concern* may diminish significantly.

We also expect an important interaction between language conditions and *personal distress*, indicating that language can act as a signifier of in-group belonging, thus lowering the level of self-other differentiation (Tajfel and Turner 1986).

Before proceeding with the empirical part of the study, we analyse the Slovene translation of the poem, compare it with the English original, and provide a close literary interpretation. It is essential to determine how the poem has been translated, which strategies were employed in the process, and what differences exist between the two texts that might potentially evoke distinct emotional responses. On the other hand, an analysis of the poem's formal and stylistic features ensures the semantic equivalence of the translation and the adherence to key principles of translation theory, which is a necessary condition for assuming the possibility of comparable reading effects across languages. As we elaborate further in the following sections, poetic effect is closely tied not only to lexical semantics but also to the phonetic and rhythmic structure of the text, as well as to its embeddedness within a specific linguistic and cultural context.

3 Poem Selection and Methodology

The selection of the poem was based on an analysis of its potential to evoke empathic experiences in the reader. This potential is primarily related to the theme or central motif of the text. We wanted to select a poem that expresses a negative emotion, as reference studies (e.g. Koopman) have shown that negative emotions are more productive for studies on the reception of literature. A second important criterion was the literary quality of the text, which should avoid banality, stereotypes, redundancy, simplification and other features characteristic of trivial literature. The third criterion was linguistic clarity, whereby the stylistic devices used should not hinder the understanding of the content. The fourth criterion was the expectation that readers would be relatively unfamiliar with the specific text. This was determined by ensuring that the poem is not part of the standard school or university curriculum in Slovenia. Based on these criteria, we selected the poem "Adult Grief" by the American poet and Nobel Prize winner Louise Glück. Grief over the loss of a loved one is a universal theme and, through the literary motifs in the poem, is closely linked to negative emotions – particularly sadness, but also anger and fear – so we assumed that the poem would evoke strong emotions in the participants.

In addition, the selected poem has an internal structure that follows a clear narrative arc of events in linear time, characterizing the speaker's emotional state and thought process at the moment of lyrical utterance. This provides the reader with the opportunity to clearly recognize the central motif, events and emotions that can either be identified with or linked to similar personal experiences.

In addition to the necessary theoretical framework regarding the empathic potential of poetry and the importance of the language in which the poetry is read, an essential component of the study is the analysis of the poem itself. The choice of the language in which the original poem used in the study was written proved to be methodologically significant. We chose

English because of its hypercentrality (Casanova 2004): it is the language from which most literary texts are translated, and the language in which the majority of readers engage with foreign-language literature – an observation confirmed by this study. This touches on the broader question of literary translation and the global circulation of literature. On the other hand, for the purposes of our study, language competence – apart from the mother tongue – could reasonably be expected only in relation to English as a foreign language.

To achieve the aim of our study, we used a randomized repeated measures design in which all participants were exposed to two reading conditions (Slovenian and English) at two consecutive time points. To control for the order effect, the participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Half of the participants read the poem first in their native language (Slovenian) and then in a foreign language (English), while the other half did so in the reverse order.

We selected a single poem and its translation for the study in order to maintain the same content of the text in both language conditions and to minimize the risk of content bias. The names of the author and translator were also omitted.

We conducted an online survey via the 1KA platform. Before reading the poem, the participants completed a measure of trait empathy (Davis 1980). After each reading of the poem (once in Slovenian and once in English), the participants immediately completed a study-specific questionnaire designed to measure empathic responses. The questionnaire comprised a total of 26 items, which were intentionally constructed to include a substantial number of distractors (17 items²) to reduce response bias. The remaining nine³ items were developed to capture empathic responses to the poem and were selected in part based on a consensus reached by the research team after reading the poems to identify the emotions the poem was trying to convey to its readers. Two of the nine items were constructed to specifically reflect narrative transportation and identification (Green and Brock 2000). For each emotion, participants had to respond on a five-point scale (1 = very little or not at all; 5 = completely). There were no breaks between the first and second readings as we wanted to encourage completion of the entire questionnaire.

This was followed by yes/no questions to verify that the participant had read the poem and understood its content: (1. “*Did the protagonist lose her parents?*” 2. “*Does a child die in the poem?*”). Finally, we asked the participants to indicate how many words in each text (Slovenian and English) they did not understand. Those who did not answer “yes” to the first content question and “no” to the second content question, or indicated that they did not understand four or more words, were excluded from further analysis.

In addition to demographic data (gender and age), we also asked the participants to self-assess their level of English, their language preference (Slovenian vs English) and their exposure to content in both languages.

² The distractors were: fear, happiness, enthusiasm, courage, nervousness, cheerfulness, joy, tenderness, kindness, boredom, exhaustion, discomfort, ridicule, disgust, love, anger, warmth, shame, pleasure.

³ The nine selected emotions were compassion, being moved, mercy, sadness, helplessness, dejection, guilt. The nine selected emotion items are identified in the model diagrams with their Slovenian translations: sočutje, ganjenost, usmiljenje, žalost, nemoč, potrtoost, krivda.

The data was collected from a total of 329 participants between 7 May 2025 and 11 June 2025. Only 205 (62.3%) answered the entire questionnaire, while 59 (28.8%) were excluded due to the exclusion criteria described above. Three of the remaining 146 participants were excluded from subsequent analyses due to a disproportionately high Mahalanobis distance computed on the nine items. The participants' demographic data are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Participants' characteristics and demographic information.⁴

	Condition sequence group		Full sample
	English to Slovene	Slovene to English	
Total final sample	69	74	143
Gender			
Female	57	54	111
Male	10	15	25
Other	2	5	7
Age group			
18–25	56	49	105
26–35	10	15	25
36–45	0	2	2
46–55	2	5	7
56+	1	3	4
English proficiency			
B1	3	5	8
B2	12	14	26
C1	36	32	68
C2	18	23	41
Language preference			
Slovene	19	26	45
English	17	20	37
Depends	33	28	61
Exposure to content			
Slovene	3.28 (1.07)	3.32 (0.98)	3.30 (1.02)
English	4.29 (0.73)	4.31 (0.74)	4.30 (0.73)
Interpersonal Reactivity Index			
Fantasy	3.73 (0.67)	3.65 (0.63)	3.69 (0.65)
Perspective Taking	3.60 (0.60)	3.45 (0.56)	3.52 (0.58)
Empathic Concern	3.88 (0.53)	3.81 (0.55)	3.85 (0.54)
Personal Distress	3.04 (0.63)	2.95 (0.64)	2.99 (0.63)

⁴ For exposure to content and IRI, both the means and standard deviations are reported.

The statistical analysis was performed with the programme R, version 4.5.0 (R Core Team, 2025). To account for repeated measures with the same items across two time points, we fitted a correlated-traits correlated-uniqueness confirmatory factor analysis (CTCU-CFA) model with two pairs of correlated latent factors to assess our conceptual factor structure of empathic responses. The CFA was conducted with the lavaan package (Rosseel 2012) utilizing a robust maximum likelihood estimator (MLM) to account for non-normality of item distributions.

For model refinement, we used two exploratory factor analysis (EFA) models with the psych package (Revelle 2025) – one for each time point. The models were estimated using maximum likelihood (ML) and an oblique rotation was performed (Promax). Communalities testing was used to assess which items should be discarded. All items that had communalities below .40 in at least one of the EFAs were discarded. The new refined model (Figure 1) with fewer items was readjusted and compared with the conceptual model using the chi-square test (χ^2), comparative fit index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR).

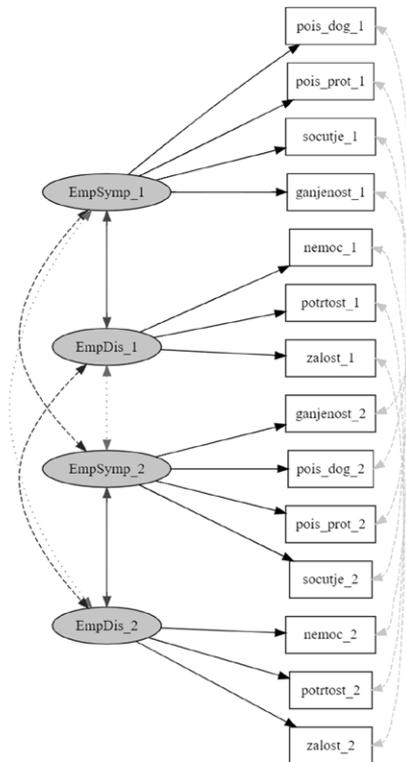


FIGURE 1. The Correlated-Traits Correlated-Uniqueness (CTCU-CFA) refined measurement model.

Measurement invariance was tested using the *semTools* package (Jorgensen et al. 2025) and following the guidelines suggested by Chen (2007) by dividing participants into two groups according to the language in which they had first read the poem. The longitudinal stability of the model was assessed by examining the correlations between conceptually identical factors across time points. The internal consistency of the factors was assessed by calculating the McDonalds Omega coefficient with the *semTools* package (Jorgensen et al. 2025). Participants' factor scores were extracted with the regression method for use in subsequent analyses. To assess convergent and divergent validity, the correlations between the factor scores and the values of IRI (Davis 1980) were analysed.

Two within-subjects analyses of variance were conducted with the *ez* package (Lawrence 2016) to examine the effects of language conditions on both types of empathic responses. To assess the role of other language variables, we ran two mixed multiple linear regression models with random intercepts for participants using the *lmerTest* package (Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, and Christensen, 2017). In the analysis of the first pair of mixed models with multiple linear regression, only significant predictors and the first measured language variable (control variable) were retained. To assess the interactions between empathy traits and language variables, we conducted two further mixed models with multiple linear regression and random intercepts and calculated bootstrapped confidence intervals for fixed effects using the *lme4* package (Bates et al. 2015).

4 Adult Grief Analysis

The analysis of the poem focuses on the elements that underpin its emotional dimension and its impact on the reader's empathic experience, i.e. on its phonological structure and thematic organization, rather than on the broader context of the poet's work, in which the leitmotif is often existential loneliness (Markova 2021, 470). What is decisive for us is, on the one hand, the thematic justification of the anticipated effect of the text and, on the other, the particular translation decisions that help to shape the specific effect of the poem at the level of empathic reception. In particular, we emphasize the changes in the intensity and valence of the poetically encoded emotions that are crucial for empathic engagement, rather than the success or failure of the translation per se or even the translator's overarching translation strategy. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the poet and translator Veronika Dintinjana did not translate this poem in isolation, but as part of a selection of Louise Glück's works for the Slovenian collection *Onkraj noči* (*Beyond Night*, 2011), published by Mladinska knjiga.

The translator is familiar with Glück's poetic style, the meanings of her images and the use of poetic devices. The original title "Adult Grief" is rendered in Slovenian as "Žalost odraslih" ("The Sadness of Adults"). By using the word *žalost* (sadness) instead of *žalovanje* (grief), the meaning of the poem is slightly altered, as the original does not refer to sadness in general, but specifically to the sadness associated with loss, i.e. grief. In this case, the translator has opted for a broader interpretation of grief as a form of sadness, which leads to certain shifts in meaning and affective nuances in the translated text. This decision may have a modest effect on the intensity of the articulated emotions as well as on the intensity of the impact of the reading on the reader's empathic experience, insofar as the grief is more concretely linked to the textual

content (themes and motifs). Concepts that are more directly linked to specific experiences of the persona exert a stronger influence on empathic reception, as it is easier for readers to identify with a specific situation or event than with a general state or abstract emotion.

In cases where the poet uses the neutral pronouns “you” or “your” in English, Slovenian grammar requires the use of gender-specific forms. Interestingly, the translator consistently chose the feminine grammatical gender rather than the grammatically masculine form, which is usually used as the standard unmarked form in Slovenian. This choice was probably influenced by the female gender of the persona, which is evident in other translated poems, as well as by the gender of the author herself. In the selected poem, however, the gender of the speaker has no effect on the emotional structure of the text, as gender is not an emphasized theme or motif. We therefore assume that this decision has no significant influence on the reader’s empathic reaction.

Attention is also drawn to a line from the third stanza, “for you, home is a cemetery”, which has a clear poetic resonance due to its unusual word order. In Slovenian, the line is rendered as “zate je dom pokopališče”, a literal translation that retains the original word order but lacks the poetic inversion that could enhance the lyrical quality of the line in Slovenian. A more poetic conversion in Slovenian would be “pokopališče je zate dom” (“the cemetery is your home”). By choosing the first variant, the translator has favoured fidelity to the poet’s unadorned, non-decorative style over a heightened poetic effect. In this way, the translator preserves the affective imagery of the text, which in Slovenian would otherwise border on lyricism or even pathos.

This decision coincides with a statement from Glück’s essay “Education of the Poet”, also translated by Dintinjana and included in the collection, in which the author explicitly expresses her aversion to aestheticization: “[r]omance is what I most struggle to be free of” (Glück 2011, 156). With this in mind, we conclude that the translation successfully reflects the author’s stylistic ethos. Through such carefully considered changes and adaptations, the translation offers the reader an experience that remains true to the original message – especially on an emotional level.

4.1 Analysis of Phonic Devices

The poem consists of three stanzas. The last two stanzas correspond to the original poem in terms of the number of lines, while the first stanza differs slightly, as the translator has split the line. The enjambment in Slovenian seems entirely justified, as it balances the brevity and conciseness of the original while emphasizing the central line, which stands out strongly in the poem.

The poem is written in free verse. Since the rhythm in free verse is based on the lively pulse of the word sequence and syntactic parallelism, as well as on discrete acoustic devices such as alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme and other recurring sound patterns (Novak 2011b, 165), the use of free verse in “Adult Grief” contributes to a sense of immediacy and spontaneity while enhancing the emotional rawness of the poem. The language is simple, direct and free of excessive stylistic embellishment or symbolism. The poem is free of embellishments and digressions that

might otherwise distract from the central line of thought: grief. The tone, which is characterized by the persona's judgements, is harsh, accusatory, sharp and severe. At the same time, the poem conveys deep sadness and despair, but also a deep love between child and parents.

The poem's language is neither softened nor sentimentalized in order to evoke compassion. It captures the truth in a simple, honest, direct and therefore cruel way that strikes the reader with its severity and finality, as if hearing the following accusation for the first time: "There has never been a parent kept alive by a child's love" (Glück 1985, 51).

The poem uses few auditory and rhythmic devices, and those that do appear are subtle. The alliteration of initial consonants is not particularly pronounced, as in the line "press your face against the granite markers", where the /g/ sound reinforces the weight and physicality of the image. Assonance is not predominant either, but soft vowels in certain lines create a melancholy tone, as in "Now you have nothing: / for you, home is a cemetery", where the repeated "o" and "u" sounds are striking. The vowels "you did not prepare yourself sufficiently", the vowels "i" and "e" recur. Other tonal devices are largely absent.

The poem begins with a metaphor:

Because you were foolish enough to love one place,
now you are homeless. (Glück 1985, 51)

The persona accuses a person – or rather humanity – of loving a single place, which stands for the emotional attachment to home and parental love. This attachment is depicted as naivety, the consequence of which is homelessness, not in a physical sense, but in a spiritual or identity-related sense: one becomes a person without an inner centre. Later metaphors such as the "orphan" in a "shelter" again emphasize the loss of home, security, connection and personal identity.

The central image of the poem is that of the cemetery. The speaker's parents are dead, and so the idea of home ends with death. Home becomes just a memory, no longer a place to live. The line "I've seen you press your face against the granite markers" evokes longing, sadness and a slipping away from life, as the speaker seeks a connection to the dead due to her intense emotional attachment to what she has lost. The image of the cemetery evokes sadness in the reader, memories of the deceased, memories of joyful and sorrowful moments spent with them and, above all, a sense of the emptiness they leave behind.

In the final stanza, we encounter the metaphor of the lichen, representing a person trying to grow in a barren, dead place. The lichen, an extremely resilient organism, symbolizes the condition of a desperate person who draws his strength for survival from an inhospitable surface: a gravestone. The situation of such a person becomes almost parasitic, completely incapable of independence. This behaviour is described as futile attachment and the metaphor describes a person's emotional loyalty to the past, which at the same time prevents the speaker's personal growth. The metaphors in the poem thus revolve around the loss of home and identity, grief and the inability to rebuild one's own life emotionally or physically.

Due to its phonological structure, English allows for a dense use of alliteration and assonance – repetitions of sounds that reinforce meaning. An example of this is the line "you are the

lichen, trying to grow there”, in which the vowels “o”, “u”, “e” and “i” create a soft, melancholic echo. In the Slovenian translation: “lišaj si, ki poskuša rasti tam,” this phonetic softness is not equally foregrounded, as only the vowels “a” and “i” recur. While the semantic content of the line remains similar, its phonetic texture is less fluid and undulating.

Consider also the line “you were obstinate / pathetically blind to change”, in which the word “pathetically” hits the reader almost mockingly. In the translation: “bila si trmasta, bedno slepa za spremembe”, the meaning is retained, but the acoustic sharpness is weakened as the word “bedno” lacks the same tonal intensity as its English counterpart. Due to its longer, more syllabic word forms, Slovenian often softens the directness and sharpness of English diction.

In addition, the rhythmic simplicity of English lends certain lines a strong, percussive effect, that is partially weakened in the translation. The original is characterized by short, rhythmically dynamic lines that resemble a direct accusation or an inner monologue, conveying a sense of raw honesty. As already mentioned, the line “There has never been a parent kept alive by a child’s love” (Glück 1985, 51) is extremely short and pointed, while in Slovenian it reads: “Ni še bilo starša, / ki bi ga pri življenju ohranjala otrokova ljubezen”, the verse is more extended and diffuse. This inserted enjambment is remarkable because it foregrounds the theme in such a way that it emphasizes the break in the parent-child relationship visually and, above all, rhythmically. In this sense, it could even be seen as a form of “explication for the sake of expressiveness” (Mozetič 2014, 108).

The repetition of the negation is particularly effective in the original:

you will not grow,
you will not let yourself
obliterate anything. (Glück 1985, 51)

Here, the repetition creates a sense of entrapment and psychological constriction. The translation “Toda rasti ne moreš, / ne dopustiš si izničiti ničesar” retains the semantic pattern, but its rhythm and tone are softer, less strict.

We may conclude that the English original is acoustically more tense, with sharp intonations and an unforgiving rhythm that deepens the emotional register of guilt, regret and loss. The Slovenian translation remains true to the meaning of the poem, but due to the phonetic characteristics of the language it comes across as muted and contemplative, rather than confrontational. This difference may also affect the reader’s emotional response: Instead of the acute, raw pain evoked by the original, the translation elicits a more subdued, quiet sadness. However, this is also the result of deliberate translation choices that take into account the nature of the Slovenian language, where rhyme, assonance and other tonal devices are easier to achieve but sound more sentimental than sublime. A rhythm based on these characteristics would therefore not achieve the same poetic effect in both languages.

4.2 Thematic Analysis

The poem is interspersed with a series of motif fragments that together form a depiction of grief, loss and the human inability to accept transience. One of the central thematic elements

is the motif of home, which is usually associated with warmth, parental love, attachment and security. In the poem, however, home is transformed into a space of death, memory and stagnation as it dies along with the parents. Those who are too attached to their home – who never really leave it or develop an emotional distance from it and the people connected to it – are labelled “foolish” by the speaker in the first line.

Ageing and the death of parents are alluded to in the lines:

Before your eyes, two people were becoming old;
I could have told you two deaths were coming. (Glück 1985, 51)

With these lines, the speaker emphasizes the inevitability of ageing and death and explicitly links the house, the parents, ageing and death with her own experience, thereby establishing grief as the basic motif of the poem.

With the death of one’s parents, a person becomes homeless and an orphan: two key thematic images that emphasize the loss of stability and identity. Without parents, one no longer has any roots. Although the poet emphasizes a certain type of person – someone who is unprepared for the death of their parents, someone who has not come to terms with the impermanence and changeability of life – what is depicted here is in fact a profoundly existential human condition, the moment that anyone can experience after the death of a loved one. Even the most independent person who has come to terms with death intellectually can feel at such a moment that their world is momentarily collapsing and they are losing their balance.⁵

The speaker makes a bitter indictment of humanity and refuses to forgive its tendency to cling to home and loved ones. Her sharp tone expresses the motives of reproach and (self-)criticism:

you were trapped in the romance of fidelity [...]

you will not let yourself

obliterate anything. (Glück 1985, 51)

These lines reveal the inner conflict, guilt and sadness that arise from human helplessness and attachment. The idea of blaming human stupidity, which runs throughout the poem, becomes a leitmotif along with the motifs of home and parents in relation to the persona. The speaker portrays human love and loyalty as misguided values that lead to despair, i.e. to grief. Death is inevitable, part of life and must be accepted by every human being. The death of our parents is expected, it is foreseen:

Before your eyes, two people were becoming old;
I could have told you two deaths were coming. (Glück 1985, 51)

The poem evokes feelings of helplessness, failure and guilt, mainly due to the accusatory tone of the speaker, who turns the accusations against herself. The poem constructs a fascinating

⁵ The mother-daughter relationship is indeed a recurring theme in Louise Glück’s poetry; among other things, she articulates this relationship through the figure of Persephone, as discussed by Markova (2021, 474).

form of inner dialogue as the speaker addresses her younger self. She mourns not only the death of her parents, but also the foolish decisions she once made. Addressing the reader directly, for example, “because you were foolish enough,” “now you are homeless, an orphan,” “you did not prepare yourself,” “you were obstinate, pathetically / blind to change”, “you are lichen”, creates the impression of an intimate dialogue and a shared emotional space. The reader assumes the guilt of the person whom the speaker accuses of excessive attachment to home and an inability to accept transience and change. These accusations, which are directed against a specific character and thus also against the reader, accumulate over the course of the poem and intensify the emotional atmosphere of sadness and devastation:

now that time's past: you were obstinate, pathetically
blind to change. Now you have nothing. (Glück 1985, 51)

The persona confronts the sentimental belief that love can withstand the inevitability of death, a belief that she considers false. The child or now adult being addressed, who is obviously grieving, has missed the opportunity to prepare for such an outcome. Yet the poem recognizes that no one can ever truly prepare for the death of a loved one, even if it is expected. The persona is addressing her younger self, which explains the harsh tone. People are often more ruthless with themselves than with others.

Nevertheless, the grief caused by the death of a loved one is inescapable. The poem goes beyond mere sadness, however, as the recurring motifs relating to time and the personas relationship to her own past show. What is expressed here is grief: a complex and enduring emotional state.

The poet depicts the situation of a person who has never accepted the fundamental characteristic of life: its transience. This motif is symbolized by gravestones. Consequently, such a person is unable to adapt to change, which is the only constant in life. In this respect, they have failed. They lose themselves in grief; their clinging to gravestones and their search for solace in the dead is in vain.

5 Data Analysis and Results

5.1 Specifying a Measurement Model

The conceptual model (Figure 1) shows quasi-acceptable fit indices ($\chi^2 = 205.4$; $df = 120$; $p < .001$; CFI = 0.945; TLI = 0.930; RMSEA = 0.073; SRMR = 0.071) with standardized loadings between .45 and .93. A review of the modification indices does not indicate reasonable model adjustments to improve model fit. The EFA shows that two items (one for each factor) at both time points have commonalities under the minimal accepted boundary of .40 for item retention (items: *krivda* and *usmiljenje*). In addition, the item measuring identification with the lyrical theme showed significantly lower commonality at the second time point, just below the threshold for item retention ($h^2 = .39$), raising concerns about its stability over time. The refined model (Figure 2) shows a good fit ($\chi^2 = 57.6$; $df = 42$; $p = .055$; CFI = 0.986; TLI = 0.977; RMSEA = 0.051; SRMR = 0.046), with standardized loadings between .66 and .93, and was adopted for all subsequent analyses since it best represents the data.

5.2 Measurement Invariance

The results of invariance testing between first reading language groups show that invariance holds strongly until at least the scalar level. Residual invariance is marginally retained. However, this finding should be interpreted with caution due to the relatively small group sizes ($n = 69$ and $n = 74$), likely limiting the statistical power of the test. We can thus meaningfully compare results across language conditions as the structure of the instrument does not significantly change when applied to reading in different languages.

5.3 Longitudinal Stability

Correlations between conceptual factors across time points are reasonably high and show good longitudinal stability of the measure ($r_{\text{EmpSymp}_{1-2}} = .76$ and $r_{\text{EmpDis}_{1-2}} = .88$).

5.4 Extraction of Factor Scores and Internal Consistency

Factor scores for participants were extracted from the refined CTCU-CFA model with the regression method. Extracted factors show good internal consistency of both pairs of factors ($\omega_{\text{EmpSymp}_{1-2}} = .816$; $\omega_{\text{EmpDis}_{1-2}} = .863$; $\omega_{\text{EmpSymp}_{1-2}} = .808$; $\omega_{\text{EmpDis}_{1-2}} = .868$), and thus can be reliably interpreted.

5.5 Changes in Factor Content After Refinement

Model refinement did not significantly change the possible interpretation of factors from the conceptual model.

The first factor, *empathic distress response*, is represented by sadness (*žalost*), helplessness (*nemoč*) and dejection (*potrlost*) – a constellation of negative emotions in line with the poems’ message and themes. Guilt (*krivda*) was the least conceptually related item, since it reflects a complex negative emotion; however, it was initially included because of the perceived accusatory tone present in the poem.

The second factor, *empathy/sympathy response*, reflects a more sympathetic and less distressed type of response. The core of this factor constitutes a feeling of compassion (*sočutje*) and being moved (*ganjenost*) while feeling transported by the story (“Koliko ste se vživeli v dogajanje pesmi?”).⁶ Mercy (*usmiljenje*) is generally used to indicate an action rather than a feeling, while the identification item (“Koliko ste se poistovetili v protagonistko?”)⁷ seems to be unstable through time.

We propose that the stability issues of the identification item may reflect real effects. It could be that identification is felt most strongly when we first connect with the persona, and therefore weakens when we have already connected with the character. As our interest is in testing differences between language conditions, we felt it was more useful to minimize any other systematic effects on the individual factor scores, which is why we excluded the item from the model.

⁶ “To what extent did you immerse yourself in the events of the poem?”

⁷ “To what extent did you identify with the protagonist?”

5.6 Convergent and Divergent Validity

To assess the convergent and divergent validity of the measure, correlations between the factor scores and the raw scores of the IRI were calculated and ranged between .07 to .35. As expected, all factors are most strongly associated with the *empathic concern* and *fantasy* subscales, while only the response factors for *empathic distress* are more strongly associated with *personal distress* than their counterparts.

Perspective taking was more closely related to the two measurements at the second points in time. This would be consistent with proposals in the literature suggesting that *perspective taking* is a conscious act that first requires a level of immersion or a point of contact before it occurs (Kaufman and Libby 2012).

The correlation between the pairs of conceptual factors was high ($r_{ES_1-ED_1} = .72$; $r_{ES_2-ED_2} = .65$), indicating that the two response types are related constructs, although they are conceptually different. The *empathy/sympathy response* is an almost exclusively other-orientated feeling, whereas the *empathic distress response* is more self-orientated and tends to express a lack of self-other differentiation.

The pattern and strength of correlations confirms that the developed instrument can be utilized in the context of our research question as a valid measure of state empathy that is able to differentiate between self-oriented and other-oriented empathic responses.

5.7 Quantifying Language Differences

The results of the two within-subjects analysis of variance showed significant effects of the language condition for both *empathic distress* and *empathy/sympathy responses* ($F_{EmpDis}(1, 142) = 7.80$; $p = .006$; $F_{EmpSymp}(1, 142) = 7.35$; $p = .008$). Effect sizes were very small ($\eta^2_{g-EmpDis} = 0.003$; $\eta^2_{g-EmpSymp} = 0.006$).

5.8 Language Related Covariates

Table 2 shows results of the analysis of variance computed with Satterthwaite's method (Hrongs-Tai Fai and Cornelius 1996) for the effects of language and other language variables on empathic responses. Apart from the language reading condition, only exposure to content shows a statistically significant effect on the empathic responses.

TABLE 2. Results of analysis of variance II computed with Satterthwaite's method for effects of language and language related variables.

	SS	MS	df _n	df _d	F	p	
Empathic Distress responses							
Language	139.21	139.21	1	144.8	141.89	<.001	***
First measured language	0.00	0.00	1	143.0	0.04	.837	
Exposure to content	0.62	0.62	1	149.2	62.84	.013	*
Language x First measured language	0.00	0.00	1	143.0	0.02	.902	

Empathy/Sympathy responses							
Language	215.15	215.15	1	146.9	116.51	<.001	***
First measured language	0.00	0.00	1	143.0	0.00	.962	
Exposure to content	0.76	0.76	1	156.7	41.04	.044	*
Language x First measured language	0.00	0.00	1	143.0	0.01	.909	
* <i>p</i> <.05; ** <i>p</i> <0,1; *** <i>p</i> <.001							

5.9 The Interactions of Language and Trait Empathy

The bootstrapped confidence intervals (computed on 5,000 samples) for the coefficients of fixed effects of IRI trait empathy measures and language variables are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Fixed effects and interactions with bootstrapped confidence intervals for trait and language.

	Estimate	SE	Bootstrapped CIs (95%)		
			LL	UL	
Empathic Distress responses					
Intercept	-0.36	0.12	-0.51	-0.19	*
Language (Slovene)	0.17	0.04	0.11	0.23	*
Empathic Concern	0.28	0.09	0.23	0.33	*
Personal Distress	0.09	0.08	0.05	0.13	*
Perspective Taking	0.05	0.08	0.00	0.09	
Fantasy	0.17	0.08	0.13	0.20	*
Exposure	0.06	0.02	0.02	0.09	*
Language (Slovene) x Empathic Concern	-0.11	0.04	-0.17	-0.05	*
Language (Slovene) x Personal Distress	0.07	0.04	0.02	0.12	*
Language (Slovene) x Perspective Taking	0.01	0.04	-0.05	0.07	
Language (Slovene) x Fantasy	0.03	0.04	-0.03	0.08	
Personal Distress x Fantasy	0.21	0.06	0.19	0.23	*
Perspective Taking x Fantasy	0.16	0.07	0.13	0.19	*
Personal Distress x Perspective Taking	-0.07	0.07	-0.09	-0.04	*
Empathy/Sympathy responses					
Intercept	-0.37	0.16	-0.56	-0.15	*
Language (Slovene)	0.21	0.06	0.11	0.29	*
Empathic Concern	0.32	0.09	0.26	0.39	*
Personal Distress	-0.12	0.08	-0.18	-0.06	*
Perspective Taking	0.06	0.08	0.00	0.11	
Fantasy	0.15	0.07	0.10	0.21	*
Exposure	0.07	0.03	0.02	0.11	*
Language (Slovene) x Empathic Concern	-0.14	0.06	-0.23	-0.06	*
Language (Slovene) x Personal Distress	0.09	0.05	0.01	0.18	*

Language (Slovene) x Perspective Taking	0.01	0.06	-0.07	0.10	
Language (Slovene) x Fantasy	0.04	0.05	-0.03	0.12	
Personal Distress x Fantasy	0.06	0.06	0.03	0.09	*
Perspective Taking x Fantasy	0.09	0.07	0.05	0.13	*
Personal Distress x Perspective Taking	-0.06	0.06	-0.09	-0.02	*
* $p < .05$					

The results show *empathic concern* as the best predictor of both *empathic distress* and *empathy/sympathy responses*. *Fantasy* and the interactions between *fantasy* and other trait empathy measures were also significant for both responses. *Personal distress* positively predicts *empathic distress responses* and *empathy/sympathy responses* negatively. *Personal distress* and *perspective taking* have a mutually attenuating effect.

The language condition and exposure to the content remain significant predictors after including trait empathy measures. The interaction between language condition and *empathic concern* shows the presence of a ceiling effect. The interaction between language condition and *personal distress* is significant, while there is no significant interaction with cognitive measures of trait empathy.

6 Conclusions

The results confirmed our assumptions that *empathic concern* and *fantasy* are the primary predictors of both *empathy/sympathy* and *empathic distress responses*. The distinct prediction pattern of the *personal distress* subscale (positive prediction of *empathic distress responses* and negative prediction of *empathy/sympathy responses*) suggests an expected split between a less regulated empathic resonance and a more regulated, compassionate, other oriented engagement. The *empathy/sympathy response* thus appears to involve an engagement with the other, whereas *empathic distress* reflects more of an embodiment of the negative emotions expressed in the poem that one transfers to oneself.

Perspective taking in combination with *fantasy* showed an amplification of both types of empathic responses, confirming Keen's (2006) hypothesis that empathy in the context of narratives can be better conceptualized as a cognitive-affective process involving both imaginative immersion and *perspective-taking*, acting synergistically. Similarly, the coupling of *fantasy* and *personal distress* led to comparable synergistic effects, suggesting that imaginative immersion acts as a gateway to deeper empathic responses to the poem. Further support for such an interpretation comes from the mutual dampening effect between *perspective taking* and *personal distress*. This could mean that individuals who tend to experience high levels of stress in interpersonal contexts have difficulty engaging in proactive *perspective taking*, which reduces *empathy/sympathy responses*. Conversely, for those who adopt *perspective taking* despite this tendency, the result may be emotional regulation of distress, reducing the intensity of *empathic distress responses*.

In the Slovenian language condition, *personal distress* increases both types of reactions. This finding builds on the work of Decety and Lamm (2006) by showing that language can act as a salient social identifier and disrupt the process of self-other differentiation. The

interaction being significant for both response types may suggest that the process of self-other differentiation in a literary context can be modulated by language or other social identifiers to enhance not only distressed feelings of emotional resonance but also compassionate engagement. As Keen (2006) points out in her work, the reader always maintains a higher degree of psychological distance from fictional characters than from actual people in a social situation. However, this distance can be reduced through an imaginative and emotional engagement with the text. As the reader is aware that this is a fictional context, they are not overwhelmed by their feelings to the exclusion of other empathetic and compassionate responses. Instead, they coexist and allow the reader to have a complex experience of narrative empathy – feeling with and for the character in the story while processing negative and distressing emotions within a controlled imaginative framework.

We also found that there was a ceiling effect in the interaction between the language reading condition and *empathic concern*. This ceiling effect, previously found in the work of Koopman (2015), suggests that individuals high in the trait *empathic concern* consistently show intense emotional responses across narrative conditions, making experimental manipulations such as the language condition less effective. Highly empathic individuals may thus respond empathically even to characters from out-groups, which is consistent with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) and the empirical work of Cuddy et al. (2007).

The language reading conditions and the cognitive measures of trait empathy did not interact, supporting the view that any language-related differences were not due to cognitive processing or processing style. Furthermore, there were no main effects of language proficiency to suggest that reading skill modulates empathic responses. However, the generalizability of these null findings is severely limited due to the small and inconsistent sample sizes of the groups, which are due to random sampling and limited resources.

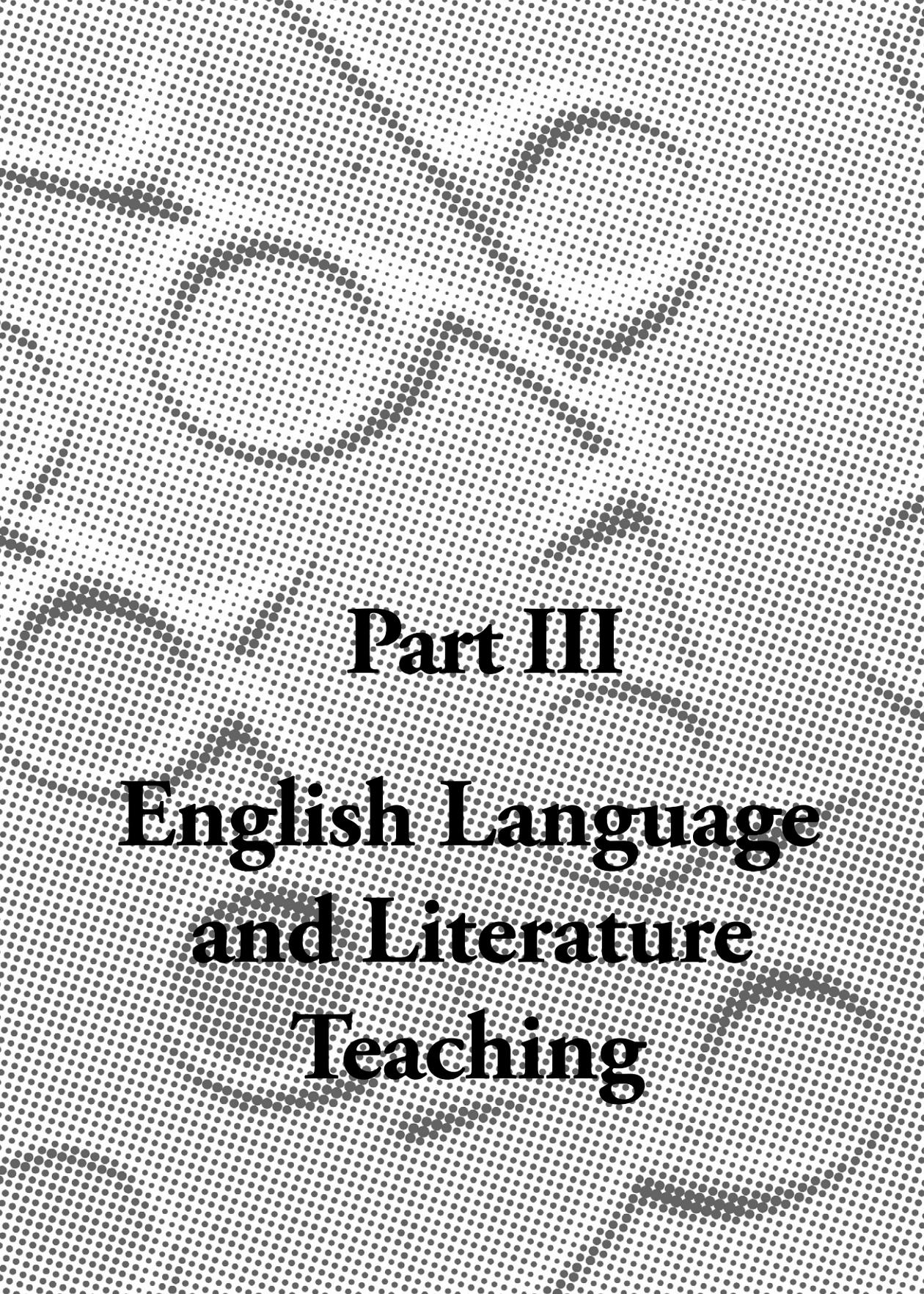
There is also no evidence to support our hypothesis that a cognitive bias towards one language or another could lead to a more intense empathic response. However, we did observe a limited main effect of exposure: participants who reported being more exposed to content in a particular language showed slightly stronger empathic responses when reading in that language, regardless of their native status. This could mean that empathic responses to literary texts also reflect an aspect of learnt familiarity with stories that depends on a particular language. Therefore, even a native Slovenian speaker who frequently engages with English-language content may experience stronger empathic reactions to literary texts in English due to habitual exposure and linguistic familiarity than due to emotional anchoring in the native language alone.

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Part III

**English Language
and Literature
Teaching**

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Learner-Centred Corrective Written Feedback in Primary EFL: Colour-Coding and Collaborative Peer Feedback

ABSTRACT

Colour-coding and collaborative peer feedback are learner-centred techniques that support the development of writing skills in English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly in primary education. These techniques encourage creativity, foster collaboration, and increase learner engagement; however, their practical use among young learners remains underexplored. This article presents a systematic review of eight scholarly studies and theses published between 2010 and 2024, focusing on students aged 10 to 15, corresponding to the second and third cycles of the Slovenian primary school system. While the pedagogical value of these techniques is widely acknowledged, clear, age-appropriate guidelines for their classroom implementation are still lacking. To address this gap, the article synthesizes existing research and proposes a step-by-step instructional model adapted to EFL learners in this age group.

Keywords: corrective written feedback, colour-coding feedback technique, collaborative peer feedback, English as a foreign language, second and third cycles of primary school

Na učenca osredinjeno podajanje pisne korektivne povratne informacije pri angleščini kot tujem jeziku v osnovni šoli: barvno kodiranje in sodelovalna vrstniška povratna informacija

IZVLEČEK

Tehniki barvnega kodiranja in sodelovalne vrstniške povratne informacije sodita med na učenca osredinjene pristope, ki dokazano prispevajo k razvoju pisnih zmožnosti pri učenju angleščine kot tujega jezika (TJ), zlasti v osnovnošolskem kontekstu. Čeprav tehniki spodbujata ustvarjalnost, sodelovanje ter večjo vključenost učencev, njuna sistematična uporaba pri mlajših učencih ostaja razmeroma slabo raziskana. Prispevek zato predstavlja sistematični pregled osmih znanstvenih prispevkov in zaključnih del, objavljenih med letoma 2010 in 2024, s poudarkom na učencih, starih od 10 do 15 let, ki ustrezajo drugemu in tretjemu vzgojno-izobraževalnemu obdobju slovenskega osnovnošolskega sistema. Kljub prepoznanim pedagoškim koristim tehnik še vedno primanjkuje jasnih, starosti prilagojenih smernic za njihovo učinkovito vključevanje v učni proces. Da bi zapolnili to vrzel, članek združuje obstoječe raziskave in predlaga model postopnega poučevanja, prilagojen učencem angleščine kot TJ v tej starostni skupini.

Ključne besede: pisna korektivna povratna informacija, tehnika barvnega kodiranja, sodelovalna vrstniška povratna informacija, angleščina kot tuji jezik, učenci drugega in tretjega vzgojno-izobraževalnega obdobja OŠ

1 Introduction

Providing feedback in English as a foreign language (hereinafter: EFL), particularly in writing, is challenging and crucial for learner development, as mastering EFL writing requires extensive practice and experience (Cook and Bassetti 2005; McKay 2006; RIC 2024). To effectively develop foreign language (hereinafter: FL) writing skills in students, the process-oriented approach to feedback is recommended (Turbill, Butler, and Cambourne 1999; de Oliveira and Silva 2016; Trüb 2022; Yacon and Cruz 2022), as it emphasizes teaching writing holistically, from spelling to evaluating full compositions, rather than highlighting primarily errors and mistakes (Tan and Pham 2021). However, this perspective is not without its critics; notably, Truscott (1996) argues that error correction is fundamentally ineffective and should be abandoned altogether. Despite such counterarguments, many researchers advocate for adopting innovative corrective feedback strategies adapted to learners' needs, learning styles, and prior knowledge, especially in primary education (Kuhar and Brumen 2024).

In learner-centred pedagogy, feedback is a powerful tool that significantly impacts learners' achievement, guides progress, and enhances learning (Mory 2003; Brookhart 2017; Cindrić and Pavić 2017; Kerr 2020). Grounded in socio-constructivist theory, particularly Vygotsky's concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development*, feedback and scaffolding play a crucial role in supporting learners as they progress from dependent to more autonomous performance. Recent studies reveal that primary students' cognitive abilities are key to improving learning (Richards and Rodgers 2014), with colour-coded feedback emerging as an effective indirect method to enhance written outcomes (McKay 2006; Gentile and McCormac-Condon 2009; Clarke 2014). Among the various feedback approaches (direct, indirect, summative, formative, etc.), teachers are encouraged to help students understand mistakes or errors through constructive criticism and discussion (Clarke 2014; Britton 2021). The technique is even more effective when students provide feedback in smaller groups of three or four, a practice referred to as a collaborative approach to feedback or collaborative peer feedback (Zemach and Rumisek 2005; Nelson and Carson 2006; Panadero, Jonsson, and Strijbos 2016; Smith 2017; Giri 2018; Tan and Pham 2021). This emphasis on cooperation and peer interaction aligns with contemporary European educational priorities, which promote active, dialogic, and collaborative learning as essential for 21st-century skills development (Dumont, Instance, and Benavides 2013). Moreover, the value of collaborative learning extends beyond language education; for example, in the field of social work, Čačinovič Vogrinčič (2008) emphasizes learning as co-creation and dialogue, reinforcing the interdisciplinary relevance of such approaches.

In Slovenia, the development of EFL skills is essential for students' success in national examinations, such as the National Assessment of Knowledge for primary school students (ages 10–12 and 14–15) and the Matura exam for secondary students (ages 18–19) (RIC 2024). Despite some progress, approximately half of the students struggle with EFL writing (Brumen et al. 2018; RIC 2022; Nagode, Pižorn, and Juriševič 2014; Nagode, Pižorn, and Korošec 2023). Several factors contribute to these difficulties, including ineffective learning strategies, low motivation, distractions from social media, large class sizes, inconsistent language exposure, problems with task comprehension, and inconsistent teacher feedback

(Premrl and Pižorn 2010; Dagarin Fojkar and Rozmanič 2021; Nagode, Pižorn, and Korošec 2023). Moreover, the implementation of innovative approaches is often hindered by insufficient teacher training and the limited suitability of certain methods and techniques for specific educational contexts or age groups (Kuhar and Brumen 2024). These issues highlight a persistent gap between theoretical frameworks and classroom practices, particularly at the primary or lower-secondary levels (Laveault and Allal 2016; Brumen and Garrote Salazar 2022; Samaie and Valizadeh 2023). Nevertheless, Slovenian scholars emphasize the critical role of written corrective feedback, whether direct or indirect, focused or unfocused (Ellis 2009; Pižorn 2014; Puhner and Dagarin Fojkar 2018; Bratož et al. 2023), in supporting EFL development. The impact of feedback is influenced by various factors, including sociocultural contexts, learners' foreign language exposure (Nagode, Pižorn, and Jurišević 2014; Nagode, Pižorn, and Korošec 2023), teachers' awareness of the role of feedback (Pižorn 2014, who also proposed a new 12-factor model for effective feedback provision), and national education policies that emphasize writing competence for assessment purposes (Brumen et al. 2018). However, there remains a lack of practical, research-based techniques that teachers can easily and directly implement in everyday classroom settings, particularly those tailored to the developmental needs of young learners.

While the overall effectiveness of corrective feedback in EFL writing is well supported by research, considerably less attention has been given to how specific techniques, such as colour-coding and collaborative peer feedback, can be adapted and systematically applied in primary school contexts. Few studies provide concrete methodological frameworks or age-appropriate guidance tailored to learners in this developmental stage. To address this gap, the present article investigates how these two feedback techniques can be used to enhance writing instruction in EFL classrooms for learners aged 10–15. Colour-coded feedback, originally developed for writing instruction in English as a first language (hereinafter: L1) (Gentile and McCormac-Condon 2009; Clarke 2014; Britton 2021), has since been adapted for use in EFL contexts to support learners in identifying and revising specific areas of their writing. Collaborative peer feedback, on the other hand, fosters improved learner engagement and writing quality through structured small-group discussions and peer evaluations of written compositions (Filius et al. 2018).

While recent studies have explored these techniques in tertiary education (Elwood and Bode 2014; Yaacob et al. 2021; Chen, Liu, and Lin 2023, and others) and in general EFL courses (Hamid, Nasri, and Ghazali 2018; Alshuraidah and Storch 2019), most research has concentrated on comparing corrective feedback strategies, particularly the effectiveness of indirect feedback (Ahmadi, Maftoon, and Mehrdaad 2012; Westmacott 2017; Zhang and Cheng 2021). However, applying these techniques in primary education poses unique challenges compared to teaching adults, given their different cognitive and metacognitive skills (Schneider 2008; Khezrlou 2012; Brumen and Garrote Salazar 2022).

Accordingly, this article reviews the effectiveness of both techniques and proposes a novel, practical, step-by-step instructional model for their integration in EFL primary school settings. It aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice by offering actionable strategies for FL teachers. This research is guided by the following two questions:

1. In what ways is the colour-coded feedback technique applied when providing corrective written feedback to EFL primary school students aged 10–15?
2. How is collaborative peer feedback implemented to support corrective written feedback for EFL primary school students aged 10–15?

2 Theoretical Framework

The umbrella term for colour-coding feedback and collaborative peer feedback, known as formative evaluation or assessment *for* learning (Black et al. 2003; Clarke 2014; Britton 2021; Smith, Berg, and Lipnevich 2022), was initially proposed by Scriven (1967) and further developed by Bloom (1984). It aims to improve students' learning by providing feedback, addressing errors, reducing achievement gaps, and informing instructional adjustments (McKay 2006; Cindrić and Pavić 2017; Lipnevich and Panadero 2021). Feedback “as information from an output that was looped back into the system” (Lipnevich and Panadero 2021) evolved through cognitivist and social constructivist paradigms (Thurlings et al. 2013). While cognitivism, following Piaget, emphasizes correcting misconceptions and developing individual learning strategies (Clark 2018), social constructivism, especially through Vygotsky's concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*, underscores the importance of scaffolded learning through social interaction (Thurlings et al. 2013). Within the ZPD, feedback serves as a pedagogical tool that enables learners to progress beyond their current level of competence with the support of peers or teachers (Palincsar 1998; Smith 2017). In this context, both colour-coding and collaborative peer feedback act as scaffolding mechanisms, guiding learners toward greater autonomy. To maximize the impact of such practices, teachers must ensure that students clearly understand the learning objectives and success criteria, and are actively involved in the feedback process (Black and Wiliam 1998; Clarke 2014; Brookhart 2017).

Various written feedback techniques such as smiley faces (for very young learners), two stars and a wish, sharing a good and a wrong model, perfect purple and red to remember, next steps, and colour-coding (Britton 2021) are recommended for EFL learners above 9–10 years old who are more metacognitively mature (McKay 2006; Brookhart 2017; Britton 2021). Colour-coding, as an under-researched technique for evaluating FL writing, provides feedback at the word, sentence, or text level based on success criteria, with visual cues highlighting areas for improvement (Britton 2021). This technique not only encourages students to revise and improve their written output, but also gives teachers valuable insights into learners' knowledge gaps and misunderstandings (ibid.). Furthermore, research indicates that this visually predominant approach enhances learners' metalinguistic awareness and improves their writing performance (Hamid, Nasri, and Ghazali 2018). The pedagogical effectiveness of colour-coded feedback is further supported by studies on the role of colour in learning, which demonstrate that the use of specific colours in instructional materials can significantly influence learners' attention, memory, mood, and overall academic engagement (Chang, Xu, and Watt 2018; Baper, Husein, and Salim 2021). Bright colours, such as green, blue, yellow, and purple, have been found to be more effective in promoting cognitive and emotional engagement than darker tones like black or grey (ibid.). In contrast, the colour red is frequently discouraged in educational contexts due to its consistent association with

negative emotional responses and increased anxiety (Elliot and Maier 2012). Moreover, “using the CC [colour-coding] technique to encourage learners to modify their output could serve the learning function of assessment” (Britton 2021, 96, following Rea-Dickins 2001) and help facilitate learning through assessment. Table 1 illustrates a modified version of the colour-coding technique, developed by the authors for implementation in upper primary FL classrooms. Building upon the frameworks proposed by Rizky (2018) and Britton (2021), this version allows for further differentiation in accordance with learners’ proficiency levels.

TABLE 1. Steps for implementing the colour-coding technique, adapted to the development of writing skills in upper primary FL learners.

Step	Teachers	Students	Step Objectives
1	Teachers and students agree on the topic and <i>success criteria</i> for the writing task. They agree on the meaning behind the colours used for later written composition grading.		To establish mutual agreement between teachers and students regarding the topic, success criteria for the writing task, and the significance of the colours used for grading.
2		Students write the <i>written composition</i> following the criteria.	For students to apply the agreed-upon criteria as they write their compositions.
3	Using <i>two/three colours</i> (e.g. green, yellow, and purple), teachers <u>circle</u> , <i>highlight</i> , or <i>underline students’ work</i> that was <i>well written</i> (remember to praise, not just criticize) or <i>requires improvement</i> without explaining what needs to be changed. For example, green would be used to mark areas that have been done very well and with no mistakes, yellow if there are minor changes to be made (e.g. word order, spelling, etc.), and purple if the sentence/phrase/word is completely incorrect (e.g. wrong tense, incomprehensive sentence structure, etc.). Here please note the number of marked sentences – ideally up to three per colour – as we do not want to be demotivating.		To use colour-coded highlighting to indicate areas of strength and areas needing improvement in students’ work, fostering a balance of praise and constructive criticism without detailed explanations. Optionally, to offer additional (written) feedback at the bottom of the page, including praise and brief thinking tasks to support skill development in identified areas of weakness.
4	Teachers (may) also provide some <i>additional (written) feedback</i> at the bottom of the page consisting of <i>praise</i> and a short <i>thinking task</i> to support the learner in developing their skills where lacking (e.g. Please, circle the correct past form of the verb “to have” – “had” or “has”).		

5	Teachers return the written compositions to students who later focus on the three colours equally – we do not want them to focus only on the mistakes – and <i>rewrite the work</i> responding to the teacher’s prompts to develop their skills further and move them closer to meeting the learning objective.	Check the teacher’s/ peer’s marks and possible additional comments and <i>rewrite the composition</i> accordingly.	Students review their written compositions until refined (may be repeated as necessary), giving equal attention to areas marked in the three colours, with a focus on responding to prompts provided by the teacher/peers to enhance their skills and progress towards meeting the learning objective.
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Promoting the visually dominant colour-coding feedback technique can involve various forms of interaction, including teacher–student collaboration, peer engagement, and guided self-correction. Such approaches support the joint resolution of learning challenges and encourage knowledge scaffolding within and beyond peer groups. As Bitchener and Ferris (2012) emphasize, effective written corrective feedback in FL acquisition involves a dynamic interplay between different sources and types of feedback. In light of this, the following section will focus on collaborative peer feedback as one key component of this broader pedagogical framework.

The collaborative peer feedback model addresses common issues in EFL written feedback, such as students’ inability to provide helpful comments, lack of confidence, frustration with negative feedback, doubts about feedback from less knowledgeable peers, and students’ focusing more on grammar than on content or ideas (Smith 2017; Herlinawati and Rachmajanti 2018; Tianotak 2021). This technique encourages students to discuss written compositions and offer constructive comments, proving superior to traditional methods (Alshuraidah and Storch 2019). It fosters joint efforts among students and teachers, enhancing language accuracy and engagement in socio-cognitive activities while focusing on the product of writing rather than the process (Barnawi 2010; Er, Dimitriadis, and Gašević 2020). Before implementation, teachers must train students and clarify goals and success criteria, as “making students aware of institutional standards, and even constraints, helps to mitigate negative feelings stemming from confusion about expectations” (Taggart and Laughlin 2017, 6; Bharuthram and van Heerden 2023). This will increase students’ ability to understand peer feedback without negative feelings. Additionally, teachers should effectively assign groups, ideally with three students each, and monitor group dynamics to ensure functionality, with options to maintain or rotate members for varied perspectives (Storch 2002; Storch 2005; Barnawi 2010). Table 2 outlines ground rules for collaborative peer feedback (adapted from Brookhart 2017; Er, Dimitriadis, and Gašević 2020).

TABLE 2. Steps for implementing collaborative peer feedback for primary school writing skills.

Step	Teachers	Students	Step Objectives
1	<i>Planning</i> and <i>coordination</i> of the feedback activity (including the topic and success criteria).		This step ensures students understand the activity's purpose, plan the work effectively together with teachers, establish clear feedback objectives, define the feedback focus, and set criteria for evaluation.
2	Monitoring and guiding the work	Students in groups (3 or 4 students max) <i>read</i> the peer's work carefully.	To engage students in a collaborative peer review process where they carefully examine a peer's work, assess its alignment with previously established success criteria, and compare it with a rubric to provide structured feedback.
3		Students determine if the written composition follows the <i>success criteria</i> agreed upon.	
4		Students <i>compare</i> the work with the <i>rubric</i> .	
5		Students <i>discuss</i> and talk about the work. There is no judgment; instead, students describe what they think is <i>good</i> about the work and what is missing or could be <i>done better</i> .	
6		Students <i>make specific suggestions</i> .	
7		Students <i>exchange</i> their opinions politely and constructively.	
8		Students ask the author for their <i>opinion</i> .	
9		Students <i>rewrite</i> their own written composition following the <i>comments made</i> in the process.	To revise and improve written compositions based on the feedback received during the process.

Combining collaborative peer feedback and colour-coding in EFL writing skills enhances scaffolding, fostering collective knowledge construction and achievement of writing goals (Malmberg, Järvelä, and Järvenoja 2017). The main objectives of integrating these techniques for primary school EFL students are: (1) to tackle the challenge of teaching writing through a process approach – from spelling to composing and evaluating texts, (2) to help teachers save time and energy, as there are approximately 20 students (or more) in each EFL class, limiting opportunities for detailed written feedback, (3) to encourage students to be active co-creators of their knowledge, and (4) to teach students empathy, cooperation, and constructive problem-solving while exploring other alternative solutions through collaborative discussion. Accordingly, Sections 3 and 4 present, analyse, and evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of these techniques as evidenced in scholarly articles and academic theses.

3 Method

This study's systematic review of the literature included diverse scholarly contributions published in educational journals and academic theses accessible through the University of

Maribor Library’s research databases, focusing on providing corrective written feedback in EFL through the colour-coding feedback technique and collaborative peer feedback. The review applied specific search criteria targeting qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method studies published in English between 2010 and 2024, explicitly addressing colour-coded feedback and collaborative peer feedback in primary school EFL settings (including elementary and lower secondary due to differences in educational systems worldwide), aligned with the Slovenian school model for students of the second and third cycles aged 10–15 years.

Collaborative peer feedback has been researched using different keywords, such as group (corrective) feedback, a collaborative approach to feedback, collaborative assessment, and group assessment, which posed challenges for the researcher. Additionally, the term *collaborative peer feedback in EFL writing* wrongly finds many articles on *collaborative writing in EFL*, a different teaching method where students jointly produce a single text (see Storch 2005), whereas *collaborative peer feedback* focuses explicitly on the feedback aspect, not on the joint production of a text.

The review followed a systematic approach involving six key steps: (1) defining the research questions and eligibility criteria (outlined in Section 1), (2) searching for studies, (3) selecting studies, (4) data extraction, (5) data synthesis, and (6) interpretation of results (Impellizzeri and Bizzini 2012). These steps were tailored to the review’s needs and summarized in Table 3.

TABLE 3. The procedures adapted for constructing the systematic literature review.

<i>Database</i>	Ebsco, WoS, Sage, Scopus, JSTOR	
<i>Searching for studies</i>	“color/colour coding in EFL writing” AND “elementary school” OR “primary school” OR “lower secondary school” AND “English as a foreign language”	
	“collaborative peer feedback in EFL” OR “collaborative learning in providing EFL feedback” OR “group peer feedback in EFL” OR “collaborative peer assessment in EFL” OR “collaborative peer evaluation in EFL” OR “cooperative peer feedback in EFL” AND “elementary school” OR “primary school” OR “lower secondary school” AND “English as a foreign language”	
Selecting studies, data extraction and data synthesis: <i>Criteria for finding the relevant articles of analysis</i>	<i>No. of articles found in the 5 databases</i>	
<i>Initial article selection</i>	Articles written in English, published between 2010–2024 in peer-reviewed journals or academic theses	Colour-coding in EFL writing: 92 (Ebsco) + 1 (WoS) + 59 (Sage) + 1 (Scopus) + 22 (JSTOR) = 175 Collaborative peer feedback in EFL writing: 6 (Ebsco) + 48 (WoS) + 191 (Sage) + 275 (Scopus) + 25 (JSTOR) = 545 <i>Total: 720 articles</i>

<i>Refining the search with specific keywords</i>	Students aged 10–15, feedback techniques	Colour-coding in EFL writing: 6 Collaborative peer feedback in EFL writing: 11 <i>Total: 17 articles</i>
<i>Complete and inspectional content analysis</i>		<i>5 relevant articles found</i>
Extending and limiting the research to Google Scholar		<i>3 relevant theses found</i>
		In total: 8 relevant articles and theses found

The initial keyword search across Ebsco, WoS, SSCI, Sage, and Scopus databases revealed 720 articles: 175 on Colour-coding in EFL writing and 545 on Collaborative peer feedback in EFL writing. After refining the search with specific keywords, the number of relevant articles decreased to 17 (six on Colour-coding in EFL writing for primary/elementary/lower secondary school students and 11 on Collaborative peer feedback in EFL writing for the same age group). After a thorough reading, only five articles were found relevant (one on colour-coding feedback and four on collaborative peer feedback). Most articles discussed feedback (coding) without specifically addressing colour-coding or differentiating collaborative writing from collaborative peer feedback. Due to insufficient articles, the research was extended to Google Scholar and included three academic theses. Ultimately, eight relevant articles and theses were identified for analysis.

4 Results and Discussion

This section presents and interprets key findings from the selected studies, focusing on two pedagogical techniques: colour-coding feedback and collaborative peer feedback. Rather than separating results from interpretation, we integrate both dimensions to better reflect the applied and practice-oriented nature of the studies reviewed. Each subsection synthesizes the empirical findings and discusses their pedagogical significance for EFL writing instruction among learners aged 10–15.

4.1 Research Findings on Colour-Coding in EFL Writing

Ismawati (2021) studied the impact of using the colour-coding technique on improving writing skills among 20 first-grade students (ages 14–15) at SMKN 3 Makassar, a public vocational school in Indonesia. Using a quasi-experimental method with pre-and post-tests, the study found significant improvement in the five writing components: content, vocabulary, language use, organization, and mechanics after applying the colour-coding technique to teaching writing. Ismawati concludes that colour-coding helps students generate ideas, enhances text quality and organization, and boosts motivation and focus, recommending its use for different EFL text types.

Rizky (2018) conducted a thesis study to assess the effects of using the colour-coding feedback strategy on writing achievement among eighth-grade students (ages 11–12) at YP AL MASDAR

Batang Kuis, Indonesia. The study included 32 students in both the experimental and control groups, using observations, interviews, and tests for data collection. The results indicated that students using the colour-coding strategy outperformed those receiving conventional feedback and the teacher's direct explanation of procedural texts' definition, function, and structure. Rizky recommends applying the technique for teaching procedural texts and suggests further research across different learner levels and writing genres to validate its effectiveness.

Arriyadhi (2018) researched the effects of using colour-coding techniques on students' mastery of EFL adjectival sequences in written compositions through quasi-experimental research with first-middle-grade students (ages 12–14) at SMPN 10 Pontianak, Indonesia. Pre- and post-test data showed that while weaker students initially struggled with identifying adjectives and parts of speech, they progressed after a few lessons incorporating the colour-coding technique. The study found the technique effective in teaching word order and adjectives, sparking student interest and creativity. Arriyadhi recommends using this technique not only for EFL writing but also for teaching reading and vocabulary (for more (practical steps), see CWU Learning Commons, n.d.; Asyid, Nurdiansyah, and Parmawati 2019).

Otto's (2013) case study found that the colour-embedded writing strategy significantly enhanced the writing skills of junior and sophomore high school students (ages 12–16) in the United States, across various genders, races/ethnicities, and mild to moderate disabilities. The experimental group, which used the colour-coding technique, outperformed the control group (both groups included EFL and native students). Using mixed methods, including student surveys, pre-and post-tests, quasi-experiments, and observations, the study revealed that the experimental group showed a higher increase in isolated writing skills, self-confidence, and engagement. Otto recommends using the colour-coding technique in inclusive classrooms, as it benefits all students, regardless of language background or diversity.

4.2 Research Findings on Collaborative Peer Feedback in EFL Writing

Dang et al. (2022) investigated the effects of collaborative group feedback on EFL writing development and engagement among 31 Vietnamese secondary school students (ages 12–15). Conducted over eight weeks, the study analysed audio recordings and rewritten texts. The findings revealed that group peer feedback significantly enhanced students' learning compared to paired or teacher feedback. Students progressed from knowledge sharing to performance improvement, benefiting from the scaffolded group feedback approach, which fostered cognitive and social learning through active participation in feedback and revision. The authors recommend this technique for primary school students to enhance collaboration and social learning in L2 environments.

Al-Hroub, Shami and Evans (2019) examined the effects of the “writers' workshop” approach on the EFL writing skills of 31 upper-primary students (ages 10–11) in Lebanon. The workshop, developed in 1983 and adapted with contemporary collaborative peer feedback methods, aimed to improve writing through bi-weekly sessions. Using a pre-and post-test design, students wrote short opinion essays and were categorized as below average, average, or above average based on their scores. The results showed improved writing fluency for all students, with peer interaction enhancing detail and revision. Above-average students showed

the most significant gains, particularly in content, while average and below-average students needed more teacher assistance.

Berggren (2015) studied how Swedish lower secondary students (ages 14–15) improved their EFL writing skills using a collaborative peer feedback strategy. The research involved 26 students tasked with writing an informative letter reply. Data included a criteria list, feedback forms, and initial and revised letter drafts. The analysis identified student revisions and cross-referenced them with peer feedback comments. The findings showed that peer feedback increased students' awareness of audience and genre, and the changes influenced by peer feedback led to overall improvements in their writing.

Siregar and Siregar (2015) analysed the impact of feedback from small group work on the writing achievement of 90 Indonesian 9th-grade EFL students (ages 12–14), focusing on procedural texts. The students were divided into an experimental group that used collaborative peer feedback and a control group that worked individually without peer collaboration. Data analysis of the students' written procedure texts showed that those in the experimental group achieved significantly higher grades than their peers in the control group.

4.3 Cross-Study Analysis and Pedagogical Implications

A synthesis of the eight reviewed studies reveals that both colour-coding and collaborative peer feedback techniques enhance EFL learners' writing skills through distinct but complementary pathways. Colour-coding supports structural awareness and revision, while collaborative peer feedback fosters social learning and critical engagement. These findings highlight the importance of combining visual and dialogic methods to scaffold writing development. However, the integration of such techniques requires careful attention to contextual factors such as age, autonomy, teacher preparedness, and available classroom time.

The synthesis drew on eight academic theses and scholarly articles, analysed with regard to publication dates, participant demographics, measured variables, assessment tools, and key findings. Notably, few studies have targeted learners aged 10–15 within primary EFL contexts, especially concerning the combined use of colour-coded and collaborative peer feedback. While recent research has explored these techniques in secondary and tertiary settings (e.g. Alshuraidah & Storch, 2019; Chen, Liu, and Lin 2023), their systematic application at the primary level remains underexplored, as also emphasized by Kuhar and Brumen (2024). This underscores the need for further research to inform evidence-based instructional design for primary school students.

The studies reviewed were conducted predominantly in Asian contexts, with a smaller number originating from Europe and the United States. While this geographic distribution reflects a growing global interest in improving EFL writing instruction at the primary level, it also presents a limitation, as the regional imbalance may affect the generalizability of the findings across diverse educational settings.

The studies employed various research methods, including qualitative (Dang, Scull, and Chowdhury 2022) and quantitative approaches (Berggren 2015; Siregar and Siregar 2015;

Arriyadhi 2018; Al-Hroub, Shami, and Evans 2019; Ismawati 2021), where researchers tested experimental and control groups and evaluated student progress using pre- and post-tests after applying innovative teaching techniques. Additionally, some studies (Otto 2013; Rizky 2018) utilized a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative experimental research with pre- and post-tests and qualitative analysis through questionnaires or surveys.

The study participants include students from various school systems, including junior high schools, lower secondary schools, and junior and sophomore high schools. Despite institutional differences, all participants fall within the age range corresponding to the second and third cycles of the Slovenian primary school system (ages 10–15). The sample sizes across the studies ranged from 20 (Ismawati 2021) to 90 students (Siregar and Siregar 2015).

The authors of the papers under review generally agree on the benefits of the colour-coding feedback technique and collaborative peer feedback in developing EFL writing skills, particularly among learners aged 10–15. Both techniques help generate ideas, enrich written compositions, and improve students' motivation, collaboration, and general attitude toward writing. Researchers focusing on colour-coding (Ismawati 2021; Rizky 2018; Arriyadhi 2018; Otto 2013) recommend its use for teaching writing skills, as it effectively enhances EFL writing across various writing genres and aids in teaching reading and vocabulary (Arriyadhi 2018). Additionally, Otto (2013) highlighted its value in inclusive classrooms, supporting students of diverse backgrounds, regardless of their native language, ethnicity, or disabilities.

In contrast, authors examining collaborative group feedback (Berggren 2015; Siregar and Siregar 2015; Al-Hroub, Shami, and Evans 2019; Dang, Scull, and Chowdhury 2022) emphasize its benefits, noting that peer interaction and collaboration promote deeper engagement and improve the quality of writing. This technique increases students' awareness of audience and genre (Berggren 2015), fosters social learning and engagement (Dang, Scull, and Chowdhury 2022), and creates a supportive environment for language development.

Nonetheless, the biggest challenges in incorporating new techniques in EFL classrooms are inadequate teacher training and the unsuitability of certain techniques for specific environments or age groups (Kuhar and Brumen 2024). This has been further elaborated in the presented studies (Berggren 2015; Dang, Scull, and Chowdhury 2022 and others), stressing that effectively using techniques like colour-coding and collaborative peer feedback in the EFL classroom requires well-trained and cognitively prepared students and teachers; otherwise, integration may be hindered. Therefore, before implementing this approach, teachers should consider key factors such as student age, independence, prior knowledge, time management, group assignments, and the classroom's overall collaborative atmosphere.

Finally, further research is needed on the colour-coding feedback technique and collaborative peer feedback for EFL primary school students. However, the available studies and theoretical background support a learner-centred teaching framework and emphasize the importance of collaboration between language students and teachers in sharing completed written assignments.

5 Recommendations for EFL Classroom Implementation

Based on the discussed findings and supported by theoretical frameworks (Storch 2005; Clarke 2014; Brookhart 2017; Malmberg, Järvelä, and Järvenoja 2017; Kerr 2020; Er, Dimitriadis, and Gašević 2020; Britton 2021), this section presents practical recommendations for EFL teachers. Table 4 introduces a flexible, step-by-step model for implementing colour-coded and collaborative peer feedback in primary classrooms. The model emphasizes student-teacher collaboration, active learner engagement, and increased writing motivation. As a novel contribution, particularly within the Slovenian educational context, this approach offers concrete classroom guidance that has not yet been systematically applied or documented.

Table 4 also provides a detailed classroom routine, highlighting how both techniques can be applied iteratively. Steps 5–11 are intended to be revisited as needed to refine student writing, promoting gradual improvement through repeated cycles of feedback and revision. During initial implementation, it is essential to introduce and practice each step deliberately, allowing students to build familiarity and confidence. Over time, learners are expected to assume more responsibility, enabling greater autonomy. The model's structure is designed to be flexible, accommodating the diverse needs and teaching styles found in real classroom settings.

TABLE 4. Step-by-step teaching model for integrating the colour-coding technique and collaborative peer feedback in teaching EFL writing skills for primary school learners aged 10–15, along with the step objectives.

<i>Step</i>	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Step Objectives</i>
1	Teachers and students agree on the <i>topic</i> and <i>success criteria</i> for the writing task. They both agree on the meaning behind the used colours for later written composition grading.		Establishing a mutual understanding between teachers and students regarding the topic, success criteria, and colour-coding system for grading the writing task based on a model essay.
2	The teacher presents a random, model <i>essay example</i> , which may either be sourced from old records or anonymously taken from current students. This presentation occurs either via PowerPoint or by transcribing the content onto the board.		
3	Teacher and students <i>comment on the presented essay collaboratively</i> , highlighting the good points and points for improvement using the agreed two/three colours (e.g. green, yellow, and purple). Together they <u>circle</u> , <u>highlight</u> , or <u>underline</u> students' work that was <i>well written</i> (remember to praise, not just criticize) or requires <i>improvement without explaining</i> what needs to be changed. For example, green would be used to mark areas that have been done <i>very well</i> and with no mistakes, yellow if there are <i>minor changes</i> to be made (e.g. word order, spelling, etc.), and purple if the sentence/phrase/word is <i>incorrect</i> (e.g. wrong tense,		Engaging teachers and students in collaboratively analysing a presented essay, using colour-coded feedback to identify strengths and areas for improvement without providing explicit corrections.

	incomprehensive sentence structure, etc.). Please note the number of marked sentences – ideally up to three per colour – as we do not want to be demotivating. <i>Corrections</i> and <i>improvements</i> are made with the whole class.		
4		Using code names, students <i>write their own composition</i> following the <i>success criteria</i> , <i>paying attention to the corrections</i> made collaboratively in the model essay example.	Students apply the success criteria and insights gained from the collaborative analysis of the model essay to their own anonymous writing, aiming to improve their compositions based on the discussed corrections and improvements.
5	The teacher <i>monitors</i> the students' work, only supervises their progress and then distributes the works among the groups, and if necessary directs the students to further research the solution (e.g. look up in the dictionary for the correct spelling of the word, we covered this material last week, look in the notebook/textbook, what we wrote (not directly where, let them find it themselves), etc.), this does not provide a direct solution in any way, but is considered support.	Students in groups (3 to 4 students) read the peer's paper carefully and determine if the composition follows the <i>success criteria</i> . (Based on the students' level of EFL knowledge, communication in their native language should not be prohibited.)	Teachers supervise and support students' progress without providing direct solutions, encouraging independent problem-solving and resourcefulness, while students collaboratively evaluate a peer's composition against success criteria using a colour-coding system, allowing native language communication if needed for effective feedback, discussing strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement, seeking the author's opinion, and providing oral/written feedback to foster intellectual growth, collaboration, communication skills, and constructive critique.
6		Students evaluate <i>the peer's essay</i> within the group using the three colours, focus on what was written well, averagely, or still needs some adaptation, discuss <i>specific suggestions</i> and verbally exchange opinions, applying <i>the feedback sandwich method</i> (positive feedback, constructive feedback, positive feedback).	
7		Students ask the author for their <i>opinion</i> or <i>clarification</i> if necessary (optional) and <i>use oral comments</i> (e.g. "I like your essay because...", "I feel you did well...", "You could have used...", "I used the green/yellow/ colour because this part was written well/needs improvement...").	

8		Student authors <i>rewrite</i> their own composition following the comments made in the process and provide it for teacher evaluation.	Student authors revise their compositions based on peer feedback and submit them for teacher evaluation, allowing teachers to assess the essays according to success criteria, gain insight into the group's overall writing abilities, identify common strengths and weaknesses, and provide additional feedback, including praise and targeted thinking tasks, to further support individual skill development.
9	<i>Teachers evaluate the essay</i> according to the success criteria. By doing so, they gain insight into the group's general writing knowledge.		
10	Teachers (may) also provide <i>additional feedback</i> at the <i>bottom of the page</i> consisting of praise and a short thinking task to support the learner in developing their skills where lacking (e.g. Please, circle the correct past form of the verb "to have" – had or has.).		
11		Teachers <i>return</i> the written compositions to students who focus on <i>the three colours equally</i> and (if necessary) <i>rewrite</i> the work responding to the <i>teacher's prompts</i> to develop their skills further and move them closer to meeting the <i>learning objective</i> (if there are any more detailed suggestions at all).	Students review their compositions, equally considering all feedback (positive and corrective) indicated by the three colours, rewriting their work if necessary, based on the teacher's prompts to further develop their skills and meet learning objectives. Teachers grade the revised essays, providing a final assessment of the students' work.
12	Teachers <i>grade</i> the essay.		

Combining the two techniques is a bold yet reasonable strategy to develop independent, problem-solving students skilled in constructive criticism and collaboration. While integrating colour-coding and collaborative peer feedback offers long-term benefits, several initial challenges may arise. These include students' limited metacognitive awareness and unfamiliarity with feedback strategies, especially in the early stages of primary education

(McKay 2006; Britton 2021). Teachers may also face resistance from students unaccustomed to peer assessment, as well as difficulties in establishing group dynamics that support productive interaction (Storch 2005) and ensuring consistent application of colour-coding conventions. Additionally, teachers require adequate training to implement both techniques effectively, particularly in heterogeneous or large classrooms where individualized feedback is often challenging to sustain (Kuhar and Brumen 2024). Nevertheless, as Brookhart (2017, 92) observes,

feedback from each successive assignment should inform studying and work on the next assignment. Students will be at the top of their learning curve when the unit test or other assignment counts for a grade. They should be able to see how the work along the way helped bring them to that point. (2017, 92).

In Slovenia, where primary school teachers manage an average of 19.2 students per class (STAT.SI 2024), providing detailed written feedback can be difficult and often goes unnoticed, particularly in the third cycle, where students' written compositions tend to be longer and more demanding. By employing the colour-coding and collaborative peer feedback techniques, teachers can more effectively support students' writing development while fostering learner autonomy. These strategies encourage students to identify and discuss their own writing issues, helping to ensure that feedback remains both meaningful and manageable.

6 Conclusion

Providing feedback in EFL writing compositions is crucial for learner development but presents significant challenges. Effective nurturing of FL writing skills requires a process-oriented approach to feedback, which involves teaching students everything from basic spelling to evaluating entire compositions rather than merely focusing on mistakes and errors. Feedback should be viewed as an opportunity for students to acquire and apply new knowledge in future contexts (Clarke 2014; Britton 2021).

Recent studies suggest innovative feedback techniques, such as colour-coding and collaborative peer feedback, which can significantly enhance EFL writing skills. These methods address broader issues such as asocial behaviour and problem-solving deficiencies, fostering empathy, cooperation, proactiveness, understanding, and constructive problem-solving among students (see Markowska-Manista 2018; Dang, Scull, and Chowdhury 2022), highlighting their intellectual growth, communication skills, and constructive critique. However, a gap remains between theoretical frameworks and practical implementation, particularly in primary school settings, as evidenced by the limited number of studies conducted at this educational level.

Consequently, this article presents a learner-centred approach to written feedback by systematically reviewing the colour-coding and collaborative peer feedback techniques for EFL primary students aged 10–15 within the Slovenian school system. By analysing the existing research, we holistically evaluated the effectiveness of these techniques, addressed the fundamental needs of students and teachers, and provided practical step-by-step recommendations for their successful implementation into primary EFL classrooms.

In the context of Slovenian primary education, the proposed model provides both pedagogical relevance and practical feasibility, especially when implemented alongside adequate FL teacher training. By systematically combining colour-coded and collaborative peer feedback into a coherent, developmentally appropriate framework, it introduces a novel approach that supports instructional innovation and opens new avenues for empirical research in primary-level EFL writing.

While the literature reviewed here provides valuable insights into the potential of the colour-coding and collaborative peer feedback techniques, further empirical research is needed to validate and refine their application in primary EFL education. To deepen our understanding of their effects on writing development, it is crucial to conduct larger-scale studies, classroom observations, cross-cultural research, and multiple quasi-experimental studies.

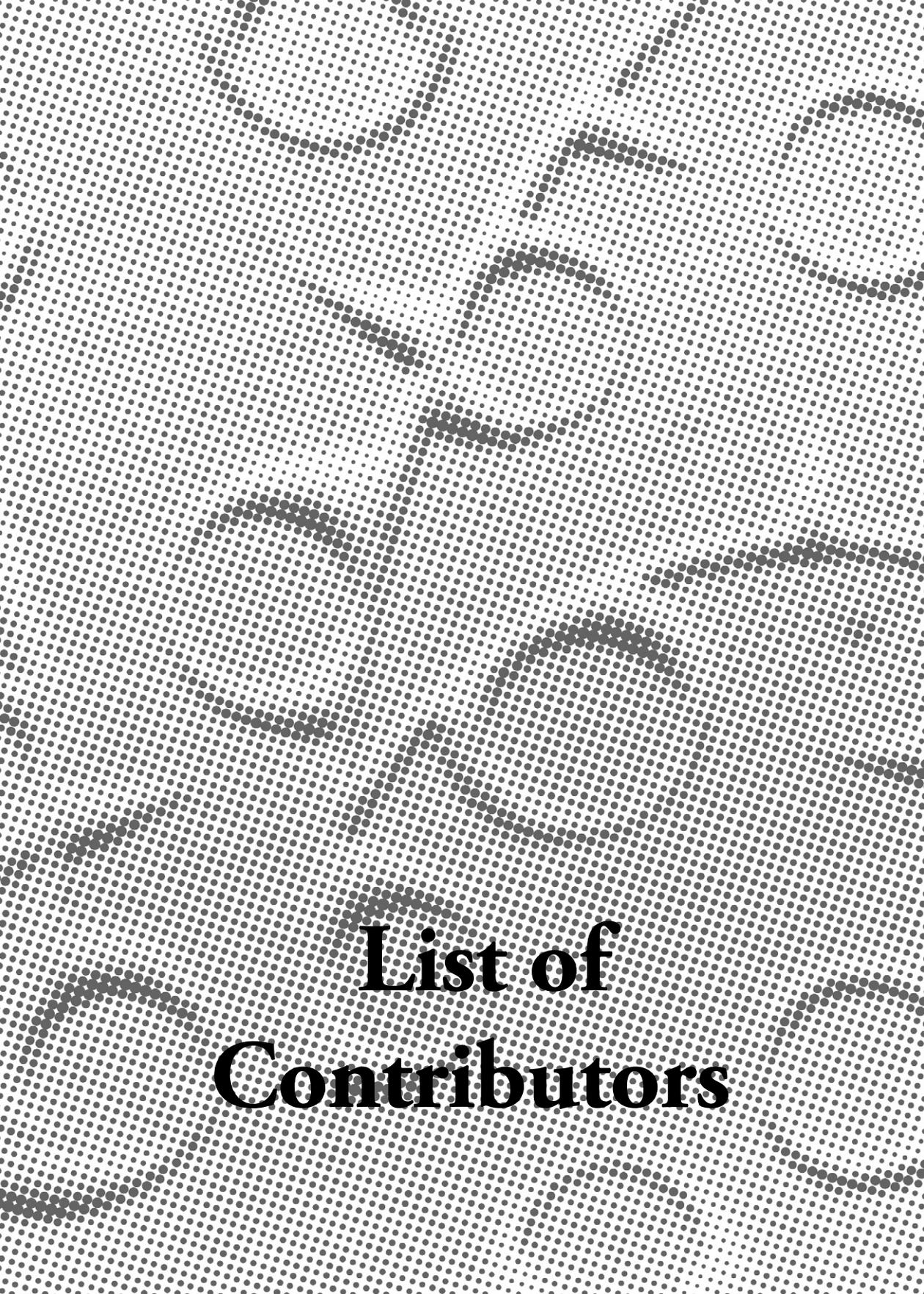
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