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## DYSPHEMISMS IN BRITISH PRINT MEDIA – INEVITABLE NEGATIVE ALTERNATIVE OR TREND?

**Abstract:** Dysphemisms, expressions motivated by hatred, contempt, fear, or envy, appear when a neutrally or positively keyed expression is deliberately replaced with another with negative associations. The use of dysphemisms in mass media largely creates an image of society and social life. This language, being short, sharp and clear, adapted to and suitable for readership with diverse social status and sensibility, should not include dysphemisms for their negative character, although we infrequently come across them. We have presumed dysphemisms to be used in every kind of newspaper, at a different level and frequency. The research is based on identification, classification and analysis of dysphemisms used in British newspapers (The broadsheet papers - *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and *The Times*, and the tabloids - *The Sun*, *The Mirror* and *The Daily Mail*). In order to show their frequency in everyday discourse, the examples found in the media have been cross-checked against the native language corpora – British National Corpus (BNC) and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The results show that all processed newspapers and magazines contain dysphemisms, depending on the type and format. Low quality tabloids and sensationalist press use them more frequently (with a higher level of offence) than the informative press with better quality content.

**Key words:** BNC, British press, COCA, discourse analysis, dysphemism, mass media, newspapers.

### 1. Introduction

Language is constantly censored by its users, while political correctness is described as an aspect of tabooing behaviour. Trudgill (2000, p. 18) claims that the social values of a language community greatly influence taboo words and the language itself. Speakers behave as if there is a very real connection between the actual physical shape of the words and their taboo sense, consequently describing them as dirty. The censorship of language is one of the main reasons and motives for language change, which manifests through the creation of new expressions or the change of vocabulary. According to Allan and Burridge (1991, p. 31) taboo is an

emotive trigger for word addition, word loss, phonological distortion and semantic shift which plays perpetual havoc with the methods of historical-comparative linguistics, even undermining one of the very cornerstones of the discipline – arbitrary nature of the word. Taboos arise out of social constraints on the individual's behaviour where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury (Allan and Burridge 2006, p. 1). People avoid tabooed topics or behaviour unless they intend to violate a taboo. Understanding language in different social contexts is important because of its impact on meaning, but it is also important to understand the differences and influence of style in the varieties of English which is one of the basic concepts in linguistics.

Many authors have studied dysphemisms in recent years (Conroy, 1927; Rawson, 1989, 2003; Allan & Burridge, 1991, 1992, 2006; Newman, 1995; Trudgill, 2000; Holder, 2002 among others). Euphemisms are non-offensive expressions that replace those that could be offensive (Newman, 1995, p. 51) and dysphemisms are the opposite of euphemisms. Rawson explains them as the speaker's attempt to offend or antagonise the listener by targeting their humanity (1989, p.12). Mott (2011, p.180) describes them as a deliberate reaction against euphemism and involves intentional use of strong words, very often with the aim of shocking the audience. They include swearing, giving derogatory names or any insulting comments at the expense of others. The connotations of such expressions are offensive and vulnerable in nature. They appear through the process of pejoration, where terms, originally neutral or even euphemistic, get the tone of bad, unpleasant and, eventually, unacceptable words that tend to be replaced by new euphemisms. This process is very short and highly dynamic.

Carnoy (1927, xxii, p. 351), who claimed that he was the first to use this term, explained that dysphemism is ruthless, brutal, mocking; it is also a reaction to arrogance, rigidity and pretentiousness, but it is also against sublimity and dignity in language. The creation of dysphemisms can be motivated by fear, defiance, or hatred, and people use them when they talk about other people or facts that irritate them, with which they disagree, or which they want to degrade or humiliate (Allan and Burridge, 2006, p. 32). Although negatively marked, dysphemisms are sometimes needed in discourse as there are situations when kindness is not necessary, and that is when the listener needs to be reminded of how much we disagree about an issue. In such cases, the insults are intentional, and language is a means by which we show our strong emotions.

The print media, an extraordinary medium and mainstay of leisure behaviour, have long been one of the most widespread and influential forms of informing. Moreover, in addition to engaging in informing, it also significantly contributes to culture and education, as well as to language development. Accordingly, society is more than ever influenced by the language that appears in newspapers. The press language must be clear, understandable and tailored to those we are addressing – a wide audience. Trudgill (2000, p. 33) points out that the key process of language change is the diffusion or spread of language innovations, or 'alternatives'. He believes that diffusion is established through linguistic adaptation, whereby speakers can change their speech in response to those with whom they speak or whom they

address. Therefore, diffusion is the transmission of linguistic features as a result of socio-psychological processes that take place during the interaction between the speaker or writer on one side, and the listener or reader on the other. Trudgill (ibid) also argues that the press can act as a source of new vocabulary, which, among other things, includes dysphemisms.

Broadsheet newspapers, usually referred to as broadsheets, are commonly perceived to be more intellectual in content than their tabloid counterparts. They tend to publish stories exploring topics in-depth, while avoiding sensationalist and celebrity-oriented material. The broadsheet, which are more formal with more complex language and descriptions of people, tend to relate to personality or position in society, while the language used in tabloids (or ‘the popular press’) is crude and often violent. It is also much more involved, emotive and biased than those of the broadsheets.

## 2. Research methodology

The aim of the study is to assess the impact of the language of British newspapers on English when it comes to dysphemisms. The hypothesis of the paper is that dysphemisms are used in British newspapers on a daily basis and that their frequency and level of formality directly depend on the type of newspaper, whether they are broadsheets or tabloids. In order to confirm this hypothesis, the research involved the following objectives: (1) to select the most representative newspapers, i.e., to create the primary corpus; (2) to identify dysphemisms in the primary corpus; (3) to compare and analyse the selected dysphemisms from the broadsheet papers and tabloids in order to determine their level of formality; and (4) to assess which ‘strong’ and ‘mild’ vulgarisms<sup>1</sup> from the primary corpus are the most frequent in the natural discourse – British National Corpus (BNC) and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

The following British newspapers (online editions) with the highest circulation have been analysed: *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and *The Guardian* as broadsheets, and *The Sun*, *The Mirror* and *The Daily Mail* as tabloids.

Corpus analysis has been applied in the research. It deals with two different corpora – *the print media* as the primary corpus and *native language corpora*, BNC and COCA, as the reference corpora. The most offensive dysphemisms (vulgarisms) from the primary corpus have been cross-checked against the BNC and COCA to show their frequency in native corpora and to provide an adequate comparison. Corpus analysis has been chosen since corpus linguistics has become one of the dominant methods used to analyse ‘real language’. Corpus-based studies encompass naturally-occurring language samples, come close to representing authentic ‘real English’ and give appropriate examples to illustrate the meaning. The British

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<sup>1</sup> In the paper, vulgarisms (“...coarse, crude or obscene expressions”, Collins Dictionary) and dysphemisms are studied as synonymic expressions.

National Corpus contains more than 100 million words, and it covers British English (BE) of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century from a wide variety of genres, with the intention of being a representative sample of spoken and written BE of that time. COCA contains more than one billion words of text from a wide range of genres (spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers and academic).

More than 300 dysphemistic words and expressions have been identified and nearly one hundred selected for further analysis. Due to space constraints, a large number of interesting examples have not been included in the article. Nevertheless, the presented examples are indicative, intriguing and entertaining. The qualitative analysis has been used for the study and interpretation of the results, and the quantitative analysis for the native reference corpus in order to determine the distribution of dysphemisms. Definitions and descriptions of dysphemism and other terms related to the subject based on current linguistic literature have also been provided for some examples. To the best of our knowledge, the terms ‘strong’ and ‘mild’ dysphemism were given by linguists K. Allan and K. Burridge (Allan & Burridge, 2000, Allan 2012, 2016).

This paper is a continuation of our previous research in which we presented data on dysphemisms used in animated films (Gorčević, 2021). In the previous study, the results confirmed that the language of animated films contains dysphemisms and that their number and nature vary from film to film. Similarly, in the current paper, it is expected that the results will confirm the use of dysphemisms in the British print media and that the level of dysphemistic language depends on the nature of the newspaper.

### 3. Case studies

#### 3.1. Dysphemisms in the broadsheet newspapers The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph and The Times and the tabloids The Sun, The Daily Mirror and The Daily Mail

This paper’s subsection begins with the examples of the permanent use of dysphemisms in just one article. The following excerpt is the article *Surgeon wounded hundreds amid ‘cultural denial’* in *The Daily Telegraph* (4 February 2020).

“There was a culture of avoidance and denial, an alarming loss of corporate memory and an offloading of responsibility at every level. (...) patients were again let down by ‘wholly inadequate recall procedures’ (...) An independent inquiry into how *rogue breast surgeon Ian Paterson* was (...) uncovered a healthcare system ‘*dysfunctional at almost every level*’ (...) ‘even when it was clear *his malpractice was criminal*’ (...) It was allowed to refer individuals considered to have committed a ‘*disciplinary or criminal offence*’ to the relevant authorities.”

Another excerpt from the article *Piers Morgan’s GMB meltdown shows he is trapped in his own psychodrama* in *The Guardian* (10 March 2021), which shows how an author constantly uses dysphemisms throughout the text criticizing one topic.

*“Far from Oprah’s masterclass of empathy with Harry and Meghan, the ITV presenter’s chastising response is the latest chapter in a long, self-destructive cycle.” (...)* *“On Monday’s edition, the presenter accused Meghan of lying about her experiences of racism and severe mental health issues.” (...)* *“Then he’ll go, and he will probably go down in flames because that’s what he always does.” (...)* *currently the subject of a quasi-independent BBC investigation into journalistic ethics.” (...)* *“He effectively accused Diana of being unbalanced and unreliable.” (...)* *“In contrast, his contributions on Meghan felt as if he was playing out some bizarre personal psychodrama”.*

Dysphemisms and dysphemistic euphemisms as well, like the previous ones, are characteristic of serious journalists and newspapers that write about important subjects such as politics, economics and other news of national interest. They are designed to match the preferences of their readers and are adapted to the level of formality of the newspaper. Both texts were written in a negative tone, one criticizing the (British) National Health Service and the other criticizing Prince Harry and Megan Markle, the members of the British royal family. From the beginning, the reader encounters a considerable number of negative comments and creates a negative picture about the subjects, which is the main intention and goal of the authors.

In order to illustrate the difference in the level of formality of dysphemisms in the selected broadsheets and the tabloids, we made a selection containing different types of dysphemisms, which are grouped as *sexist*, *racist*, *political* and *various dysphemisms*. The first set of examples are *sexist dysphemisms*. According to Oxford’s Dictionary, sexism refers to the unfair treatment of people, especially women, because of their sex. It is prejudice or discrimination that leads to a wide range of harmful behaviours, from acts of violence to subtle comments that reinforce stereotypes. Throughout the daily press, we are exposed to sexist comments and the broadsheets are not an exception.

*“Mio Sugita won the award for Japan’s most sexist comment after accusing women of lying about sexual violence” (...)* *“‘women can lie as much as they like’ about sexual violence.”* (The Guardian, 10 March 2021)

*“(…) who was forced to resign last month after complaining that ‘that woman talked too much during meetings’.”* (ibid)

*“(…) members of the LGBT community were ‘unproductive’ because they cannot have children (...)* In other words, *they lack productivity* and, therefore, *do not contribute to the prosperity of the nation.”* (ibid)

*“‘Womaniser’ police officer strangled lover to death.”* (The Times, 13 October 2020)

*“I was literally killing trans people with my hate, to be called cunt and bitch (...)* (The Daily Mail, 12 July 2020)

#### *Sexist dysphemisms in the tabloids:*

*“She is too queer to marry a man in my life.”* (The Daily Mail, 11 May 2020)

*“The ‘gentle’ sex. The ‘taken advantage of’ sex. The you can’t do that, ‘you’re a woman’ sex. The weaker sex. The bitch. The whore. The ‘she deserved it’ sex. (...)* *‘wife in the kitchen, whore in the bedroom’. The ‘you deserved that beating’ sex.”* (The Mirror, 13 October 2020)

*“I am not his bit on the side (...)”* (The Sun, 10 March 2020)

“Nurse suffered ‘unsurvivable’ brain damage after ‘*man whore*’ PC lover strangled her.” (The Mirror, 25 June 2020)

“(…) the abuse included “*all kinds of stuff from ‘paedophile’ to ‘Hiroshima’ to ‘rapist’*.” (ibid)

“Police officer called woman ‘*dirty little whore*’.” (The Mirror, 5 February 2020)

“*I was literally killing trans people with my hate* (…)” (The Daily Mail, 12 July 2020)

From the previous examples, it can clearly be concluded that the ones from the broadsheet papers are more serious and balanced with carefully chosen words and phrases that are more appealing to the reader (e.g. ‘*accusing women of lying about sexual violence*’, ‘*that woman talked too much...*’ or ‘*LGBT community were unproductive*’) but still quite offensive, while the dysphemisms from the tabloids are pompous, flashy and sensational with lots of ‘strong’ dysphemisms and vulgarisms (*sex, queer, whore, man whore, bitch, fuck and shit*, although censored, *f\*\*\* and s\*\*\** among others).

*Racist dysphemisms* occur when a speaker refers to or implicates the hearer or some third person’s race, ethnicity, or nationality in such terms as to cause a face affront (Allan, 2007, 1047). The negative connotation of these dysphemisms is intimately involved with notions of appropriateness in language use. The following examples illustrate some of the *racist dysphemisms found in the broadsheets and the tabloids*.

“David Starkey forced to resign over ‘*damn blacks*’ slavery comments.” (The Daily Telegraph, 3 July 2020)

“Xi Jinping’s China may one day lead the world – but *it will never be loved*.” (The Times, 18 November 2020)

“(…) with the industrialised world *learning to distrust and even hate the Beijing government*.” (….) “*China is actively distrusted, disliked or hated by more people than ever before*.” (The Times, 18 November 2020)

More than 2,000 migrants *were bussed* (….) (The Times, 18 Nov. 2020)

#### *Racist dysphemisms in the tabloids:*

“‘*Negro*’ was the first pejorative uttered. ‘*The low-calorie version of the N-Word*’: “(Nigger) (The Mirror, 2 December 2019)

“(…) calling him a ‘*negro and cotton-picker*’.” (The Mirror, 2 December 2019) “His descriptions of black people as ‘*tribal warriors with watermelon smiles*’ and ‘*flag-waving pickaninnies*’.” (ibid)

“Trump supporter in Starbucks asked to put on face mask screams ‘*f\*\*\* Black Lives Matter*’.” (The Mirror, 20 October 2020)

“*Black women scare me*. I put this down to being chased through Amsterdam by a *crazy black whore*...” (The Mirror, 24 April 2019)

“(…) who played *the Chocolate Coloured C\*\*n* in the 1930s.” (The Daily Mail, 12 June 2020)

“(…) who called her a ‘*stupid northerner*’ and a ‘*silly white bi\*\*\*\*h*’.” (The Daily Mail, 19 July 2020)

“Rook was also convicted racially aggravated (….) by calling her a ‘*f\*\*king negro*’.” (The Sun, 25 June 2020)

When it comes to *racist dysphemisms* in the selected broadsheets, they appear more tolerable and ‘pleasant’ than the tabloid dysphemisms. In the tabloids, *the blacks* become ‘(fucking) negroes’, ‘cotton-pickers’, ‘chocolate coloured cunts’ or ‘tribal warriors with watermelon smiles’. As it is not enough to call a black person *negro/nigger*, authors add attributes such as ‘fucking’ or ‘crazy’ to intensify the insult. On the other hand, *the whites* become ‘stupid northerners’ and ‘silly white bitches’ alluding to the white skin of the white people who live in parts of northern Europe (Scandinavia). The sentence “China is *actively distrusted, disliked or hated by more people than ever before.*” describes an attitude of the ‘western civilisation’, especially the US, towards this country and nation. Not only do they distrust and dislike China, but that they hate it ‘more than *ever before*’ which conveys to the reader a message that this has not been a current issue, but rather a continuous and long-lasting enmity.

The press has a special capacity to establish particular values and reference models for public opinion as well as to reproduce dominant ideologies and social conceptions; hence its value in the political field as a weapon of ideological persuasion and manipulation (Sanchez Ruiz, 2017, p. 7). Political discourse refers not only to politicians and their own agendas and manipulations in politics, but also to mastering language. The speaker represents the situation or characteristics of the interlocutor in a negative light, and an emotionally charged expressive value (Aytan et al. 2021, p. 743). The political language is manipulative, and consequently, many *dysphemisms with political background* may be found in the press regardless of their level of formality. The following examples illustrate the wide range of political dysphemisms, from quite formal to surprisingly informal.

“The Conservative cult of self-reliance usually provides *intellectual anaesthesia* against the discomfort of living in a very unequal society”. (The Guardian, 10 March 2020)

“Boris Johnson has refused to comment on *the debacle* (...) saying Harry was ‘*blowing up his family*’ (...)” (ibid)

“(...) calling it ‘*nonsense*’ and a ‘*hoax*’.” (The Times, 18 November 2020)

“Donald Trump *fires* top election cybersecurity official who refuted voter *fraud claims*.” (The Daily Telegraph, 1 February 2020)

“Trump *was dumped, on-air and in print* (as Boris Johnson also was).” (ibid)

“Putin has previously dismissed the web as a ‘*CIA creation*’.” (ibid)

“The deputy foreign secretary calls the prime minister of Japan a *wanker*.” (ibid)

“Navalny *was jailed* in January when he flew back to Moscow.” (The Guardian, 10 March 2021)

“Guy Verhofstadt holds up a *bollocks* to Brexit.” (The Daily Telegraph, 6 September 2019)

“*Bloody, bloody* Andrew Jackson (...)” (The Daily Telegraph, 8 July 2020)

“Three Hong Kong politicians arrested for ‘*rotten*’ protests in parliament.” (The Times, 18 November 2020)

#### *Political dysphemisms in tabloids:*

“Donald Trump branded ‘*moron*’ for suggesting disinfectant could treat coronavirus.” (The Mirror, 24 March 2020)

“Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, a ‘*joke of a man*’ for advocating a second Brexit

referendum.” (The Mirror, 16 January 2020)

“*Can Labour sink any lower?*” (The Sun, 10 March 2020)

“How about *the disastrous* EU vaccine programme Labours want to join?” (ibid)

“*She did a lot of public damage with her dishonesty and her manipulation, domination and control.*” (The Sun, 15 March 2021)

“This appears to be a blatant attempt *to create an authoritarian police state.*” (ibid)

“Their MPs are *mostly student-union sloganeers – fatally out of touch* with working people (...)” (ibid)

“Miss Hitler pageant entrant convicted of *neo-Nazi terrorist group* membership.” (The Daily Mail, 31 October 2019)

As mentioned, broadsheets often deal with serious topics in different spheres of everyday life, most of which relate to politics or economics. In terms of the level of formality, dysphemisms with political background from the broadsheet papers seem to be more balanced and adequate than those from the selected tabloids. Many authors publish newspaper articles in which they criticise political and economic subjects such as presidents, prime ministers, ministers, directors, and CEOs, among others. The language they use is mostly balanced, but still offensive, and negatively keyed as in ‘*deep-seated patriarchal relationships and in chauvinistic male mindsets...*’, ‘*...intellectual anaesthesia...*’, ‘*...nonsense and a hoax*’. Another example is the expression ‘*...was jailed...*’ that became dysphemistic because other milder expressions, such as ‘*was imprisoned*’ or ‘*arrested*’, could have been used in the first place.

Dysphemism is sometimes used as a hyperbole in a pejorative sense, the exaggeration of characteristics to make them sound even worse. They arise through the process of pejoration, where terms that are otherwise neutral or even euphemistic in nature get the characteristics of bad, ugly and, in the end, unacceptable words that tend to be replaced by new euphemisms (e.g. “*She did a lot of public damage with her dishonesty and her manipulation, domination and control.*” or “This appears to be a blatant attempt to create *an authoritarian police state.*”). When there is a possibility of variation, i.e., the existence of a more acceptable expression, “neutral” term or expression becomes “stronger” and “raw”, and that can be characterized as dysphemisation of the expression in modern discourse analysis. This process is short and quite dynamic.

However, occasionally quite inappropriate expressions emerge (e.g. ‘...calls the prime minister of Japan a *wanker*’, ‘...holds up a *bollocks* to Brexit’, or ‘*Bloody, bloody...*’). Political dysphemisms in the tabloids (e.g. ‘*moron*’, ‘*a joke of a man*’, ‘*...fatally out of touch with...*’, ‘*...neo-Nazi terrorist group...*’) are harsher, which is to be expected, having in mind the newspaper’s editing policy.

Sometimes, journalists use both censored and uncensored forms of the same expression in the same article. In the following pair of examples, the expressions *son of a bitch* and *asshole* have been censored when used in the headlines. The word *bitch* contains asterisks instead of the regular letters – *b\*\*\*\**, but further in the text the author used the uncensored form. The second example is similar – *ass* in *asshole* has been censored (*a\*\**). The authors of both articles probably wanted to intrigue the



reader by using these infamous expressions, but considered them too harsh for the headline, although suitable for the body of the article.

Headline: “You’ve got a good one now, even though they’re trying to impeach the *son of a b\*\*\*h!*” (The Daily Mail, 18 January 2020)

In the article: “President Trump said the Democrats are ‘trying to impeach *the son of a bitch*’.” (ibid)

Headline: “Ewan McGregor’s daughter Clara attacks ‘*a\*\*hole*’ dad with bikini snap of mum Eve.” (The Mirror, 16 January 2020)

In the article: “Clara hit back: ‘Nah, I keep her away from *asshole men* who leave my goddess of a mother!’“ (ibid)

The following examples add up to the variety of dysphemisms in the press. They make a broad spectrum of dysphemisms with different levels of insult.

“Coronavirus: *Moron* who licked toilet bowl now in hospital with the bug.” (The Daily Mail, 25 March 2020)

“The man the Maduro regime labels a “*terrorist*”.” (The Times, 17 November 2020)

“Harvey Weinstein, *the disgraced movie mogul*, is suspected of having (...)” (The Times, 18 February 2020)

“Agency was ‘*terminated*’ for ‘*highly inaccurate*’ statements.” (The Times, 18 November 2020)

“And in perhaps *the academy’s most unimaginative and elitist pattern* (...)” (The Guardian, 12 March 2020)

“I fear *work lover will ditch me for sex* with a younger girl who wants *to bed him*” (ibid)

“I love my partner but *his teeth are terrible, stained and with plaque all over* (...) but his teeth *turn my stomach*.” (The Sun, 13 March 2020)

“She *went to hell and back* with her *jailbird ex* (...)” (The Sun, 10 March 2020)

“Does anyone care it’s where *the trolls go to hide... get a life!*” (ibid)

“Ted and his *awful daughter* were just moving in for a lockdown.” (The Sun, 13 March 2020)

“The owner has blasted customers as ‘*stupid*’ and ‘*plonkers*’.” (The Mirror, 1 April 2020)

Newspapers are supposed to present information to readers in an interesting but objective way. Although journalistic ethics teaches journalists to always report objectively and tell the truth, no matter how negative it is, which means that euphemisms should be avoided, they can hardly be left out because the topics and problems in which modern societies find themselves require a careful choice of words. However, the word choice in newspapers today has changed and, as a consequence, dysphemisms are much more common.

Our findings seem to show that all selected broadsheet papers, being similar in content and authors’ and editors’ policies, contain dysphemisms with a similar level of formality. It implies that these dysphemisms are more balanced and refined and are still suitable for ‘serious’ newspapers. They are not too offensive but are indicative enough to pass the critical message from the reporter.

## 3.2. “Serious” dysphemisms in BNC and COCA

The selected primary corpus contains a considerable number of offensive words with a various but quite high degree of negative expressiveness. The first set of examples show the use of ‘mild’ vulgarisms. These harsh dysphemisms are widespread in the selected newspapers, even though they are much more common in the tabloids. They are also called ‘soft vulgarisms’ and, as such, they are intriguing and inviting to the reader, but they rarely offend their sensibilities and dignity. ‘Strong’ vulgarisms, the extreme lexical units, violate social norms in public discourse. The most vulgar expressions, such as *fuck* (and its compounds *fuck-up*, *fucking*, *motherfucking*, *motherfucker*), *shit*, *bitch*, *cunt*, *whore*, *penis* among others, are often printed censored.

*‘Mild’ vulgarisms* in sentences:

“*Rot in hell, bitch.*” (The Daily Mail, 12 March 2020)

“Prince Harry claiming that he and Meghan moved abroad to avoid the ‘powerful media’ is *rubbish.*” (The Sun, 21 January 2020)

“This is no *damn* hobby!” (The Guardian, 28 April 2020)

“Oh, you *murderous bastard!!!*” (The Sun, 5 March 2020)

“Chris Eubank Jr has branded Billy J. Saunders a ‘*moron*’ and an ‘*idiot*’.”

“Yes, no, *Bugger!*” (The Guardian, 22 January 2020)

“McKenna brands cheating ex Pete Wicks a ‘*f\*\*\*ing w\*\*\*er.*’” (...) (The Sun, 11 February 2020)

“My Mum’s a *twat* at Royal Court Jerwood Upstairs.” (The Times, 11 January 2020)

*‘Strong’ vulgarisms* in sentences:

“(...) to try to force a ban on Huawei, with one calling it ‘a *totally f\*\*\*ing shit* decision.’” (The Sun, 29 January 2020)

“He was quizzed about whether his size 13 feet meant he had a ‘*big dick.*’” (The Sun, 16 February 2020)

“*What the fuck* you watching?” (The Daily Mail, 27 March 2020)

“I was *literally killing trans people with my hate*, to be called *cunt and bitch* (...) (The Daily Mail, 12 July 2020)

“If nothing else Typhoid Dido is fluent in *management bollocks.*” (The Guardian, 7 April 2020)

“(...) and called her a ‘*dirty little whore.*’” (The Mirror, 6 September 2019)

“One Twitter called him a ‘*pussy*’ while another said the stunt was ‘*lame.*’” (The Sun, 4 March 2020)

As we stated earlier, we have dealt with two different corpora – *the print media* as the primary corpus and *native language corpora* – BNC and COCA as the secondary. In this section, we have cross-checked the most prominent ‘mild’ and ‘strong’ vulgarisms from the primary corpus against the BNC and COCA to show their frequency and distribution in native language corpora and to provide an adequate comparison. The following tables (Table 1 and Table 2) contain two columns: (1) the selected ‘mild’ and ‘strong’ dysphemisms, and (2) their frequency

(number of hits) in BNC and COCA. Charts (1, 2, 3 and 4) display the data from the mentioned tables, showing the distribution of the dysphemisms in numerical order, starting with the most frequent ones.

'Mild' vulgarisms	British National Corpus (BNC)
<i>Bloody</i>	6,748
<i>Hell</i>	5,005
<i>Rubbish</i>	2,180
<i>Damn</i>	1,876
<i>Bastard</i>	1,251
<i>Idiot</i>	591
<i>Bugger</i>	564
<i>Wanker</i>	92
<i>Twat</i>	63
<i>Moron</i>	46

Table 1 – 'Mild' vulgarisms in BNC

'Mild' vulgarisms	Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)
<i>Hell</i>	132,064
<i>Damn</i>	67,181
<i>Bloody</i>	19,817
<i>Idiot</i>	19,629
<i>Bastard</i>	11,829
<i>Rubbish</i>	4,841
<i>Moron</i>	4,715
<i>Bugger</i>	1,007
<i>Twat</i>	385
<i>Wanker</i>	371

Table 2 – 'Mild' vulgarisms in COCA

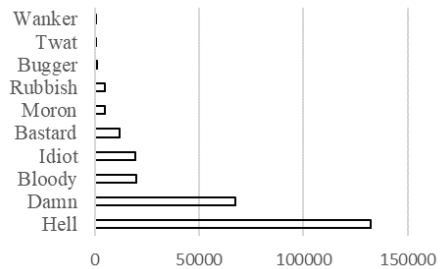
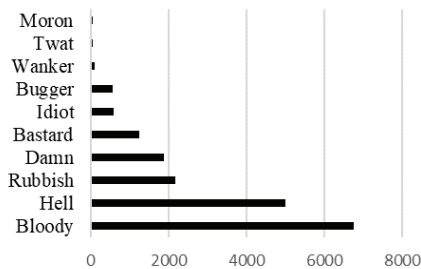


Chart 1 – 'Mild' dysphemisms in BNC    Chart 2 – 'Mild' dysphemisms in COCA

'Strong' vulgarisms	British National Corpus (BNC)
<i>Shit</i>	1,733
<i>Dick</i>	1,437
<i>Fuck</i>	1,398
<i>Bitch</i>	870
<i>Negro/Nigger</i>	348
<i>Bollocks</i>	271
<i>Whore</i>	248
<i>Cunt</i>	206
<i>Pussy</i>	173
<i>Asshole</i>	44

Table 3 – 'Strong' vulgarisms in BNC

'Strong' vulgarisms	Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)
<i>Shit</i>	105,277
<i>Fuck</i>	101,588
<i>Dick</i>	32,470
<i>Bitch</i>	32,130
<i>Asshole</i>	12,914
<i>Negro/Nigger</i>	10,718
<i>Whore</i>	5,902
<i>Pussy</i>	5,674
<i>Cunt</i>	1,833
<i>Bollocks</i>	590

Table 4 – 'Strong' vulgarisms in COCA

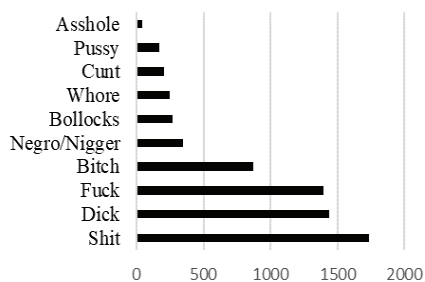


Chart 3 – 'Strong' vulgarisms in BNC



Chart 4 – 'Strong' vulgarisms in COCA

Tables 1 and 2 show the obtained results regarding 'mild' vulgarisms.

The most frequent ‘mild’ vulgarisms in BNC are *bloody* (6,748 hits), *hell* (5,005), *rubbish* (2,180), *damn* (1,876) and *bastard* (1,251), while the least frequent ones are *moron* (46), *twat* (63), *wanker* (92), *bugger* (564) and *idiot* (591). Charts 1 and 2 illustrate the distribution graphically.

The most frequent ‘mild’ vulgarisms in COCA are *hell* (132,064), *damn* (67,181), *bloody* (19,817), *idiot* (19,629) and *rubbish* (4,841), while the least frequent ones are *wanker* (371), *twat* (385), *bugger* (1,007), *moron* (4,715) and *rubbish* (4,841).

Tables 3 and 4 (along with Charts 3 and 4) show the obtained results regarding ‘strong’ vulgarisms.

The most frequent ‘strong’ dysphemisms in BNC are *shit* (1,733), *dick* (1,437), *fuck* (1,398), *bitch* (870) and *negro/nigger* (348), while the least frequent are *asshole* (44), *pussy* (173), *cunt* (206), *whore* (248) and *bollocks* (271).

The most frequent ‘strong’ dysphemisms in COCA are *shit* (105,277), *fuck* (101,588), *dick* (32,470), *bitch* (32,130) and *asshole* (12,914), while the least frequent ones are *bollocks* (590), *cunt* (1,833), *pussy* (5,674), *whore* (5,902) and *negro/nigger* (10,718).

If we compare the distribution of the selected ‘mild’ vulgarisms in BNC and COCA, we can conclude that the same expressions prevail as the most frequent in both corpora – *hell*, *bloody* and *damn*. As for the selected ‘strong’ vulgarisms, the expressions *shit*, *dick*, *fuck* and *bitch* are amongst the most frequent in both corpora.

It is worth noting that some of the selected vulgarisms, both ‘mild’ and ‘strong’, are much more in use than the others from the list. For example, the ‘mild’ vulgarism *hell* is the most frequent one in COCA and twice as common as *damn*, which is the second on the list. The rest of the vulgarisms are far behind, with a significantly less share. With regard to the selected ‘strong’ vulgarisms, similarly, *shit* and *fuck* are far more in use than the other vulgarisms on the list.

#### 4. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which the language of British newspapers contains dysphemisms. Returning to the hypothesis, it is now possible to state that dysphemisms are used in both broadsheet newspapers and tabloids, i.e., they exist in the language of the British print media. Their number depends on the newspaper’s and editors’ policies – the more the newspaper is ‘serious’, containing more serious topics, texts, interviewees and language, the fewer dysphemisms, or less ‘dangerous’ ones, are used. Even though broadsheet newspapers, or ‘the serious press’, typically cover serious topics such as politics, economics and other national news, they are not without dysphemisms. Far from it. However, they are more balanced and sophisticated than the ones used in tabloids, and they are more acceptable for the readership.

Tabloids have always been brash and loud, using sensationalism as a means to engage readers and giving priority to anything that attracts public attention.

Consequently, their dysphemisms are pompous and showy, especially when it comes to sex, scandals, celebrity, nightlife or glamour. However, despite the fact that tabloids include more informal language, it is wrong to assume that they do not carry other ‘serious’ news. Nonetheless, the tone used is highly personalized and the reporters are opinionated.

Sometimes it’s not just a word or expression that can be used dysphemistically, but also an entire article. It can be written without using strong and harsh expressions, but the reader perceives the author’s negative intention and message, consequently creating a negative idea about the subject(s) of the article.

Given that our findings are based on a limited number of newspapers (there are twelve daily newspapers and eleven Sunday-only weekly newspapers distributed nationally in the U.K. as well as ten tabloids), even though they have the largest circulation in Great Britain, the results from such an analysis should consequently be treated with slight caution. In order to get more accurate results more newspapers should be included in future research.

As we have suggested here and in previous research (Gorčević, 2014, 2021), the language of public discourse, especially the language of the media, is exposed to changes that take place following general social progress, and, as a consequence, new dysphemistic expressions emerge. The study of dysphemisms, in this regard, may shed light on these contemporary changes since dysphemisms, especially cursing, have been and will be an attention-grabbing phenomenon that is becoming more and more popular with the media *as growing trend rather than necessity*.

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## ДИСФЕМИЗМИ У БРИТАНСКИМ ШТАМПНИМ МЕДИЈИМА – НЕИЗБЕЖНА НЕГАТИВНА АЛТРНАТИВА ИЛИ ТРЕНД

### Резиме

Дисфемизми, изрази мотивисани мржњом, презиром, страхом или завишћу, настају када се један неутрални израз са намером замени другим изразом који носи негативне асоцијације. Употреба дисфемизама у масовним медијима у великој мери приказује слику једног друштва и живота у њему. Овакав језик, сажет, оштар и чист, прилагођен да одговара читалачкој публици различитог друштвеног статуса и сензибилитета, не би требало да садржи дисфемизме због њиховог негативног карактера, иако их повремено примећујемо. Наша претпоставка је да се дисфемизми могу наћи у свакој врсти штампе, различитог нивоа формалности и у различитом броју. Ово истраживање је засновано на препознавању, класификацији и анализи дисфемизама у британској штампи, односно у информативним дневним новинама Дневни телеграф (The Daily Telegraph), Гардијан (The Guardian) и Тајмс (The Times), као и у таблоидима Сан (The Sun), Мирор (The Mirror) и Дејли мејл (The Daily Mail). У намери да прикажемо њихову учесталост у дневном дискурсу, примере које смо одабрали за анализу смо претражили у електронским језичким корпусима BNC – Британском националном корпусу и COCA – Корпусу савременог америчког енглеског језика. Резултати су показали да сви обрађени листови и часописи садрже дисфемизме, што зависи од типа и формата новина. Чешће наилазимо на њих у нискоквалитетним таблоидима и сензационалистичкој штампи, и њихов степен негативног значења је већи, него у информативним новинама квалитетнијег садржаја.

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