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Taboo Language and Signalling Nouns on Incest: When Newspapers Substitute, Rename, or Define Taboo Topics

Introduction

Taboos have been part of societies at all times (Freud, 1913). They prescribe behaviours regarding death, food, and especially sexuality (Brandes, 2018). One of the strongest sexual taboos is incest (Justice & Justice, 1980). The incest taboo was first defined in anthropology as marital prohibition (Lévi-Strauss, 1949). In this sense, the incest taboo proscribes marriage and/or sexual relationship between members of the same family. However, later scholars questioned this definition by shedding light on incest occurring within families (Armstrong, 1978; Dussy, 2021; Gilgun, 1995; Russell, 1983, 1999). In this case, incest is defined as intrafamilial sexual abuse involving an adult sexually assaulting an underage child. Another definition acknowledges incest as a consensual relationship between adults. However, this perception is more widespread in fiction than in reality (Brey, 2022; Dussy, 2021). In this paper, incest refers to intrafamilial sexual abuse, as it is the main type of incest reported in the corpus under study. The corpus consists of newspaper articles from the British press between 2017 and 2022.

Drawing from the social taboo, the interest lies in understanding how it intertwines with linguistic taboos. The linguistic taboo is the linguistic manifestation of a social prohibition (Diffloth, 2014; Widłak, 1965). The fear provoked by the taboo triggers linguistic inhibitions (Allan & Burridge, 2006). In this paper, taboo language is defined as a linguistic avoidance strategy Interestingly, linguistic inhibitions enable linguistic creations (Crespo-Fernández, 2015; Goudaillier, 2018). It means that instead of directly naming the taboo topic, strategies are developed to avoid specific terms and substitute them with linguistic alternatives. In this case, euphemism is a creative manifestation of the avoided term (Allan & Burridge, 1991, 2006; Casas Gómez, 2012; López Díaz et al., 2020). As such, the paradox lies in the omnipresence of what is absent (Popescu, 2018; Rosewarne, 2013). Therefore, linguistic taboos may increase vagueness in the way that language becomes purposefully

imprecise (Cutting, 2007). It should be noted that taboo language does not refer in this paper to swearing words as is the case in other linguistic research (Allan, 2019; Bednarek, 2019; Jay, 2000; Jay et al., 2008). Taboo language refers here to linguistic patterns that reinforce vagueness on incest. Therefore, this paper aims to consider whether taboo language may also include signalling nouns in their plasticity of meaning and inherent vagueness.

Signalling nouns are lexical words unspecific in their meaning but made specific by the context (Flowerdew, 2002; Flowerdew & Forest, 2015). In other words, signalling nouns are abstract nouns, such as *fact*, *idea*, *problem*, or *possibility*. Those lexical words are inherently vague and become more specific depending on the context in which they are used. However, the concern is to investigate whether signalling nouns do acquire meaning when the context is already vague. Within the discourse of a taboo topic, the hypothesis is that signalling nouns may enhance the vagueness of the taboo. Therefore, the research question is: How do signalling nouns shape the discourse on incest in the British press (2017–2022)? To address this question, different functions of signalling nouns (SNs) are analysed. It will be demonstrated that SNs have either a substituting, renaming, defining, or timing function. The degree of abstractness to consider terms as SNs and the writer's intent when using SNs will be addressed.

Methodology

SNs are abstract nouns that are "devoid of specific meaning when taken out of context, but are made specific in meaning by their context" (Flowerdew, 2002, p. 147). Words such as *fact*, *idea*, *problem*, *possibility* or *argument* are examples of SNs (Flowerdew, 2002; Flowerdew & Forest, 2015; Schmid, 2012). They are vague enough to encompass different meanings depending on their following or preceding clause(s). SNs are called *cataphoric* when they refer to the following clause, and *anaphoric* when they refer to the preceding clause. Therefore, SNs enable lexical cohesion by encapsulating the content of the corresponding clause (Flowerdew, 2002; Jiang & Hyland, 2015; Schmid, 2012). Interestingly, SNs determine what is said while being determined by what is said. In other words, the meaning of SNs relies on "lexical realisation" or "lexical specification"; otherwise, they remain vague (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015, p. 2). SNs and their lexical realisation are complementary because they complete the meaning of each other. This reference function works within the text, *endopherically*, but also outside the text, *exophorically* (Flowerdew, 2002). In the case of exophoric reference, SNs are understood through the "reader's or listener's background knowledge" (Ibid., p. 150). These characteristics are further discussed in the analysis regarding the incest taboo.

In this paper, the term *signalling noun*, coined by Flowerdew (2002), is used because it emphasises the discursive function. SNs serve as signposts "making explicit how particular clauses are meant to be interpreted" (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015, p. 34). In other words, SNs signal the "organisation of the discourse" (Ibid., p. 40)

by labelling content with a general yet chosen notion. As this paper focuses on the discursive influence of SNs, the terminology of Flowerdew was selected. However, it should be mentioned that such a notion has also been coined *shell noun* (Schmid, 2012), *general noun* (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), *carrier noun* (Ivanič, 1991), *anaphoric noun*, abbreviated *A-noun,* (Francis, 2002), or *stance noun* (Jiang & Hyland, 2015). Nevertheless, those different terms emphasise different characteristics of SNs. While Ivanič (1991) and Schmid (2012) highlight the lexical function of SNs, Halliday and Hasan (1976), and Francis (2002) emphasise their grammatical features. Interestingly, Jiang and Hyland (2015) focus on the rhetorical function of SNs when writers employ them in academic writing to indicate their stance on a subject. The term *stance* enhances the metalinguistic function of SNs used to express writer's perceptions and judgments, especially in academic style (Charles, 2003). This paper aims to investigate this rhetorical function in media discourse for the first time.

In addition to the varied terminology, SNs have been broken down into different semantic and grammatical categories according to scholars. For instance, Schmid (2012) categorises SNs –or in his case, *shell nouns*– according to their semantic features. SNs can be factual (facts), mental (ideas), linguistic (utterances), modal (possibilities/permission), or eventive (activities). Furthermore, he distinguishes *core shell nouns* from *peripheral shell nouns*, namely SNs that are clearly perceived as abstract nouns from those that have more debatable meanings. SNs such as *fact*, *feeling*, *idea*, *intention*, *hope*, and *view* are abstract and unspecific whereas *area*, *region*, and *site* are abstract locations that may have physical existence (Schmid, 2012). Therefore, the degree of abstractness varies and must be evaluated when considering whether a term is a SN. Similarly, Flowerdew and Forest (2015) distinguish *constant* vs. *variable* SNs, i.e., SNs that are context-independent with those that are context-dependent. The question of "whether groups of words are included or excluded from membership in the class of SNs" (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015, p. 40) is central to the discourse analysis of this paper. This distinction will be further commented on in the following sections.

Besides these semantic considerations, the grammatical features are critical for analysing SNs. SNs have typical grammatical features such as a noun followed by that-, wh-, to-clauses, or clauses with a preposition. These grammatical patterns can be marked as *N-that*, *N-wh*, *N-to*, and *N-prep* (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015) or as *N-cl* and *N-be-cl* (Schmid, 2012). There are recognisable grammatical patterns when a signalling noun is introduced. It is what Hunston and Francis define as *phraseology* when a pattern is "associated with (a sense of) a word, particularly in terms of the prepositions, groups, and clauses that follow the word" (2000, p. 3). As a consequence, SNs can be recognised automatically because they follow identical patterns. For this purpose, computational tools developed in corpus linguistics are extremely helpful for conducting such analysis. Corpus linguistics relies on software to collect data and reduce researcher's bias in investigating language (Baker, 2023). It enables the collection of large amount of data and the comparison of frequencies (Hunston, 2006). Frequencies help to determine common grammatical patterns whereas infrequent phenomena can be considered as linguistic exceptions.

An additional advantage is that observations rely on authentic examples, rather than invented or intuitive ones (Hunston & Francis, 2000; Schmid, 2012). Furthermore, the method of collecting data is automatic and replicable (Brezina, 2018).

In corpus linguistics, it is said that two types of research can be conducted. Either researchers have a specific question to investigate and analyse the corpus to find answers, or researchers have no expectations and look at what the corpus yields. The first approach is called *corpus-based* while the second one is termed *corpus-driven* (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001). However, such distinction is called into question as both approaches are two extremes of the same continuum (Baker, 2010). In this paper, the grammatical feature *N-that* was intentionally investigated, but the results extracted from the corpus also drove the analysis. Furthermore, it should be noted that automatic search implies "unwanted matches", i.e., findings "that do not match the search queries" (Schmid, 2012, p. 51). These findings are manually discarded by the researcher. Conversely, there are "misses", i.e., findings that could match the research question but do not appear through the automatic query (Ibid.). For instance, the conjunction *that* may be omitted in sentences such as "The fact (that) is…". Thus, it is a limitation of corpus linguistics, or as Schmid puts it, it is "the price one has to pay when one is using automatic corpus retrieval methods" (2012, p. 53). Therefore, it should be borne in mind that the findings presented in this paper are partially representative of all the occurrences of SNs in the corpus. To a larger extent, the findings are a focused sample because only the grammatical features *N-that* and *This+N* have been investigated for limit constraints and relevance. The process is further discussed in the following part introducing the data and the query search.

Data

The corpus under study has been built on the concept of taboo language. It is reminded that taboo language is defined here as linguistic avoidance strategies. The aim of building the corpus stems from the hypothesis that newspaper articles may cover incest while avoiding the term *incest*. The assumption is that *incest* is a taboo word in the sense it is avoided for sensitive reasons. For this purpose, an iterative approach has been developed to investigate whether a corpus could be built by excluding the searched keyword. Therefore, the term *abuse* was selected as it encompasses a broad meaning, along with the term *father*. Even though the choice of *father* may be stereotypical as incest is also committed by female abusers (Elliott, 1993), the search yielded more efficient results with the word *father* compared to the words *brother* or *mother* for instance.

Thus, a corpus was collected with the search terms *abuse AND father* on Lexis Nexis[1]. The selected time frame starts on 15 October 2017, marking the beginning of #MeToo movement, up to 14 October 2022, the date of the data collection. #MeToo movement was chosen as a recognised moment of increasing awareness

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[1] A database accessible at https://www.lexisnexis.co.uk/

towards sexual violence (De Benedictis et al., 2019). Data was retrieved from four broadsheets – *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian, The Independent*, *The Times*, and four tabloids – *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *The Express*, *The Sun*. These eight newspapers were selected according to their circulation figures as they are the main national newspapers in the United Kingdom (Media Reform Coalition, 2021; Office of Communications, 2019).

The process of building the corpus consisted in including and excluding several terms through Lexis Nexis Boolean search. The process required three steps which involved close reading of the articles (forthcoming). At the end of this filtering process, the search query was:

> child W/5 abuse AND father AND NOT alcohol abuse AND NOT clerical abuse AND NOT church abuse AND NOT disability abuse AND NOT drug abuse AND NOT economic abuse AND NOT elder abuse AND NOT financial abuse AND NOT online abuse AND NOT police abuse AND NOT racist abuse AND NOT racial abuse AND NOT substance abuse AND NOT verbal abuse

Therefore, the corpus is composed of articles covering incest stories, but without explicitly using the term *incest*. The corpus consists of 258 newspaper articles, amounting to 275, 025 words. Each article was thoroughly read to observe implicit mentions of incest. As a result, every article has at least one mention of incestuous abuse. This corpus is an interesting field of investigation to understand whether SNs contribute to vagueness in a corpus built through linguistic avoidances. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the relevant size of the corpus depends on the research question (McEnery & Brookes, 2022).

As mentioned above, SNs can be searched through automatic queries that target specific grammatical structures. In this corpus, two grammatical patterns were selected. The SNs should be either followed by a clause introduced with the conjunction *that* or the SNs should be introduced by the deictic *this*. These two grammatical patterns are widely investigated (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015; Hunston & Francis, 2000) and the formal constraint of this paper limited the numbers of patterns that could be explored.

Therefore, the corpus was uploaded to the software Sketch Engine, as it is a computational tool allowing the user to investigate linguistic patterns (Kilgarriff et al., 2008). As such, the grammatical patterns analysed in the corpus were written as follow:

[tag= N*] + [word= that]
[word= this] + [tag= N*]

In the first search query, the software Sketch Engine enables finding all the words tagged automatically as nouns (*N**) followed directly and only by the conjunction *that*. In the second search query, all the nouns preceded by the deictic *this* were retrieved. Henceforth, the pattern [tag= N*] + [word= that] is designated as *N-that* and [word= this] + [tag= N*] as *This+N*. Thus, the pattern *N-that* appeared 1,035

times and the pattern *This+N* appeared 73 times. Therefore, there were 1,035 lines of concordances where the node terms in the middle of the screen are a noun followed by *that*, and 73 lines of concordances where the node terms are the deictic *this* followed by a noun.

However, as noted previously, the automatic search of grammatical patterns implies "unwanted matches" (Schmid, 2012). For instance, verbs were sometimes wrongly tagged, such as *claim*, that can be followed by *that* both as a verb and a noun, like in the following example:

(1) Instead, the 52-year-old **claims that** because of her belief […].

In this case, the software had tagged *52-year-old* as an adjective instead of a substantive, leading the incorrect tagging of *claim* as a noun instead of a verb. Thus, the occurrence was discarded and not considered for the analysis. Therefore, automatic search implies close reading, involving researcher's analysis and interpretation. As such, each concordance line was read through to determine whether the SN was relevant to the research question. For this purpose, two criteria were established to select a signalling noun for analysis:

(a) The signalling noun has to refer to incest;

(b) The signalling noun has to be an abstract notion.

Nevertheless, those two criteria were challenging to implement. Criterion (a) means that only SNs referring to incest in the corresponding clause were selected. Consequently, the only way to determine the relevance was close reading. It was sometimes easy to determine the relevance, such as for the following sentence:

(2) Eric Gill's sculptures are compromised by **our knowledge that** he habitually **raped his daughters**.

The SN *knowledge* has a cataphoric function in referring to incest mentioned in the following clause. Furthermore, the explicit mention of rape leaves no doubt regarding the description of incest in this sentence, which corresponds to child sexual abuse. However, mentions of incest were sometimes more circumvented, as in:

(3) A terrible, unjust mess that could have been avoided had all those whose profession centres around protecting innocents such as Poppi done their job properly.

This example refers to a case reported several times in the press where Poppi, a five-year-old child, died after being raped by her father, who was later convicted. The SN *mess* refers to this tragic event. However, determining the reference of *mess* requires background knowledge. The description of events is scattered in the newspaper article, or sometimes barely mentioned in articles, referring to events already known and covered. It is what Flowerdew refers to as an exophoric reference (2002). However, in the analysis, only endophoric references of SNs are analysed because the focus is on how the closely linked clauses are encapsulated. Thus, whenever the reference can be clearly established in the corresponding clause, they are included in the analysis.

Criterion (b) addresses distinctions discussed by Schmid (2012) and Flowerdew & Forest (2015), i.e., the degree of abstractness concerning SNs. Terms such as *belief, case, claim, idea*, *fact*, and *thing*, are considered as clear examples of abstract nouns in the way they conceptualise vague notions (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015; Jiang & Hyland, 2015; Schmid, 2012). However, a term such as *secret* seems more questionable. A secret seems more specific than a *fact* because it carries more implications (e.g., silence, confidence, hiding), yet it still requires content to be fully defined.

(4) Connolly has previously described **the sexual abuse** he suffered as **a dark secret that** he had shouldered throughout adulthood.

That is the reason why such SNs were considered uncertain and were categorised as "unsure". Similarly, Schmid classifies *boy* as a general noun, and more specifically as "human noun", along with *people*, *person*, *man*, *woman* and *girl* (2012, p. 274). However, this classification is questionable in the following example:

(5) This continued for a period of time and the defendant threatened **the boy that** if he told anyone he would **sexually assault his sister**.

The *boy* refers here to a brother. Although the noun *boy* may be considered abstract, the context in which it is used makes it very specific. In this example, the noun *boy* serves as a substitute for the noun *brother,* but *boy* is specific rather than vague or abstract. It is not any boy that is discussed, but a boy perceived through the kinship with *his sister*. Hence, the inclusion or exclusion of those SNs tends to precede the analysis of what constitutes a SN and what it refers to. Following these considerations, out of 1,035 occurrences of *N-that*, 173 were considered relevant to the criteria established to answer the research question, with 40 cases falling into the unsure category. Regarding the 73 occurrences of *This+N*, 11 were considered relevant, 2 of which fell into the unsure category.

Therefore, the analysis consisted in evaluating the meaning of the clause encapsulated in SN. Four main characteristics were considered for both grammatical patterns, *N-that* and *This+N*. SNs can serve a substituting function, as was the case in 61 sentences; they have a renaming function, observed in 56 cases; a timing function; identified in 19 cases; and, more rarely, a defining function; seen in 6 cases. The following section contributes to developing and explaining these categories.

Results

In total, 184 SNs following the patterns *N-that* and *This+N* correspond to the criteria mentioned above: they refer to incest and are abstract nouns. Out of these 184 SNs, 61 were classified in the substituting category, 56 in the renaming category, 19 in the timing category, 6 in the defining category, and 42 were left in the unsure category. The function of substitution is analysed first, and the other functions are explained further on.

Substituting

In the corpus, 61 SNs contribute to increasing the vagueness of the coverage of incest. It was previously noted that SNs and their referring clause are complementary for enabling lexical realisation. In other words, SNs should complete the meaning of the clause and be completed by the referring clause. However, in the observed clauses, both the meaning of the clause and its corresponding SN are vague:

(6) But **the fact that** there's **historical abuse**, **that** Susan was **abused by her father** – **that** does something to a person.

(7) We don't think about what's driving people towards drugs; we might think about regulating access, when actually it's the consequences of **something that happened to someone as a child**." **Abused children** often become hyper-vigilant, Bellis explains […]

(8) The statement said that she was still uncovering the ways **the abuse** has affected her life and said she had been hurt „**in a way that** no human should".

(9) This kind of abuse warps something inside of you. Because it doesn't happen by a stranger that snatches you off the street; **it happens by someone you love and trust**.

In examples (6)-(8), the abstract nouns *fact*, *something* and *way* are SNs as they are inherently vague (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015; Schmid, 2012). In this context, they reinforce the vagueness of the clause as they do not provide any additional meaning. In the four examples, especially in example (9), the term *abuse* can be considered as a SN. It was purposefully chosen as the search term in the query because it is not restrictive in meaning. However, unrestrictive does not mean unspecific. Thus, it was unexpected to find many occurrences of the term *abuse* without any specific meaning. Is it *domestic*, *physical*, *emotional*, or *sexual* abuse? Therefore, when *abuse* is not specific, the context is too vague to determine the incestuous characteristic of the descriptions within the sentence. Additionally, example (9) shows how *abuse* is further unspecified through the vague classification *This kind of*. Thus, SN does not correspond to the definition of being unspecific when isolated and becoming specific when in context (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015; Schmid, 2012). On the contrary, SNs remain unspecific in a context of taboo and serve as substitutes for more specific words.

Renaming

Conversely, there are specific mentions of incestuous abuse in the clause, but SNs keep at distance what is reported in the newspapers. In this case, SNs rename the referring clause. For instance, the term *allegation* throws doubts to what is reported:

(10) Most of our younger siblings had long since gone into care, following **allegations that my father had raped my sister** Louise, 13.

(11) He also believed **the mother's allegation that** several years earlier she had seen **the father with an erection, leaning over and touching his five-year-old stepdaughter** while her pyjama pants were down, […].

Examples (10) and (11) give explicit descriptions of incestuous abuse. In both cases, it involves the father sexually assaulting an underage (step)daughter. However, these descriptions are distanced through the SN *allegation*. This term often occurs in media discourse to cover cases of sexual abuse because journalists report information while protecting themselves against defamation (Tranchese, 2023). Nevertheless, the term is tends to protect the abusers over the victims, even in situations where there is no risk of defamation (Ibid.). It is not a mere description; it is an alleged version made by the victims. For this reason, the victims' testimonies are undermined. Therefore, this type of SN was considered to rename the clause. Instead of specifying it, it tends to undermine it by encapsulating the description in a loaded term.

Furthermore, SNs can influence the discourse in the way they determine the meaning of the clause. For instance, the following examples show that for the same SN, the inferred meaning differs according to the highlighted and chosen perspective:

(12) The Pamplona court accepted **his claim that** the teenager had **sat astride him** while he was asleep on the sofa and had **engaged in penetrative sex**.

(13) Asked about **her father's claim that** she had been coached, she replied: „What I don't understand is how is this crazy story of me being brainwashed and coached more believable than what I'm saying about **being sexually assaulted by my father**?"

In those examples, *claim* is the SN that either confirms or invalidates the victim's testimony. In example (12), the *claim* is the stepfather's, asserting that he was asleep during the sexual act. The possessive *his* shows that his version is chosen over the one of the *teenager*. However, in example (13), *claim* takes the perspective of the victim. Firstly, it is mentioned through the possessive pronoun *her father,* emphasising the chosen perspective. Secondly, the claim is contested through the direct quotation where she reiterates her claim that she has been *sexually abused by [her] father*. Therefore, the father's claim is further weakened through the daughter's testimony within the sentence. Thus, SNs realise the lexical cohesion and organise how the discourse should be interpreted.

In the previous examples, the renaming function is cataphoric because SNs refer to the following clause. However, the renaming function can be anaphoric, such as in the following examples:

(14) Paul's adoptive mother sexually assaulted him from the age of three, **a trauma that** has left him unable as an adult to have intimate relationships with women.

(15) […] what he once called in an interview the „big rucksack full of bricks" that constituted his memories of **his father's sexual abuse of him as a child**. Connolly talks to me a little about this, of his unnecessary guilt, of how he felt too much love for his father to feel angry, but really does not want

to talk about **it**. **This abuse** does not feature, either, in his new book, *Made in Scotland*, a memoir of his early life in Glasgow.

Interestingly, in example (14), the SN *trauma* encapsulates the preceding clause, renaming the incestuous abuse. In this case specifically, the SN adds information by enhancing the lasting consequence of incest. Conversely, in example (15), *abuse* refers to an incestuous abuse committed by the father. However, it is renamed vaguely, whereas it was made explicit in the previous sentence.

A last example of this category illustrates how even two SNs in the same sentence contribute to strengthening vagueness instead of realising lexically the following clause:

(16) But many of them do **the other things that** Dylan says Allen did, and **in the circumstances that** she says he did it: they use the child's trust in them and their power within the child's life **to acclimate the victim to more and more explicit sexual contact**.

Example (16) shows how the SNs *things* and *circumstances* do not provide any additional information. On the contrary, the vagueness remains, even though the following clause is specific with the terms *child*, *victim* and *sexual contact*. In this case, it refers to the accusations of incestuous abuse against Woody Allen by his adoptive dauther Dylan Farrows. Furthermore, the construction *[she] says [he] did* tends to weaken her accusations.

Therefore, the function of renaming contributes to lexical realisation, as seen with the SNs *trauma* and *claim*. However, it also contributes to vagueness by undermining the meaning of the clause, as seen with the SNs *allegations* and *abuse*. Thus, SNs shape "the organisation of discourse" (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015, p. 40) by influencing how discourse should be interpreted.

Timing

Schmid defines the SNs of time as circumstantial (2012). Flowerdew and Forest agree with this definition, and consider time, along with place, as *circumstantial facts*, because they "present information in terms of where, when, how, and why" (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015, p. 32). Unexpectedly, there were many SNs referring to time in the corpus. It may be explained by the particularity of incest as child sexual abuse; children are often helpless to report the assault when it occurs, and it is too late when they finally reveal the facts once they are adults (CIIVISE, 2023). Furthermore, prescription applies in cases of incest when the victim finally speaks out years after the abuse. Therefore, time is a key element in the narration of incest.

(17) Everyone loves him, everyone appreciates him, and in fact no one imagines **for a single moment that** he is **his stepdaughter's lover**.

(18) During the interrogation, Lucio insisted **more than 100 times that** she **hadn't abused her daughter**, according to the clemency application.

(19) Dylan Farrow, Allen's **adoptive daughter**, has **alleged for years** that he **molested her when she was a child**.

(20) This week, in her first TV interview about her shocking allegations, Dylan **recalled how**, while her mother was out, Allen took her to an attic space.

In examples (17)-(20), the SNs *moment*, *times*, *years*, and *week*, mark vague temporality. In example (19), the SN *years* emphasises the dragging duration of the victim's accusations. In example (20), the interplay between time (*week*) and testimony (*recall*) shows that temporality is central to the discourse on incest. Drawing a parallel with Schmid's analysis of the SN *journey* (2012) –it is challenging to know when a *journey* starts (from home or once in the train?) and where it ends–, a week may refer to different time periods and convey different meanings, depending on whether it is a *working week* or a *holiday week*. In this case, *this week* is a critical temporal marker in the narration. However, examples (17) and (18) signal vague and unfathomable temporality. The references to time highlight the negation of incest through disbelief or rejection: *no one imagines for a single moment*, *more than 100 times that she hadn't abused her daughter*. Therefore, time either marks evolving temporality in the discourse of incest, or enhances the impossibility of its occurrence.

Defining

In rare occasions, 6 out of 184 relevant occurrences, SNs enable explicit lexical realisation. In other words, SNs contribute to defining more specifically the referring clause.

(21) The particular kind of abuse that Dylan alleges against Allen, **incest**, also has recognizable patterns.

(22) Her babysitter told her she'd seen **something that** disturbed her**: Dylan on the sofa, with Allen's head in her lap**.

Example (21) shows a rare occurrence of the word *incest* in the corpus. Interestingly, the classification *The particular kind of abuse*, which is unspecific, is made specific through the incision of *incest* in the following clause. Similarly, example (22) shows another cataphoric reference of the SN *something*. In this case, the lexical specification through the referring clause introduced by the colon. The scene that *disturbed [the babysitter]* is explicitly stated; there is no vagueness in the description, even though the scene is not *stricto sensu* depicting incestuous assault.

Furthermore, SNs have a defining function in the way they are used metalinguistically. SNs serve to comment the terms chosen to report incest:

(23) „Incest" is **a term that** often implies consent, or at least some sort of mutuality**,** but in reality, **incest is what happens when** the power imbalances inherent in the family structure are harnessed as **a tool of sexual assault**.

(24) You, out of all the experts who have looked at this case, and there's been a number, you are the only one who says **in the clearest terms that** Poppi was **the victim of being sexually assaulted**.

Through the metalinguistic SNs, journalists tend to be specific and questions the vagueness of the terms. However, ironically if we may say, this attempt at specification

is undermined by the following clauses. In example (23), the clause *incest is what happens* adds vague information on incest. Likewise, in example (24), the superlative *clearest* contradicts the terms *victim of being sexually assaulted* because the term *rape* could be a clearer term than *sexual assault*. Therefore, the defining function of SNs is fragile when it comes to specifying the meaning of the clause. SNs may be explicit but can remain vague when used metalinguistically.

The unsure category

As mentioned above, the abstractness of some SNs has blurred boundaries. One term caught attention because it can be considered as a circumstantial SN but can also be rejected altogether from the classification of SN. This undecided term is *court*. The term court can be considered circumstantial insofar as it refers to a place. However, a court is also specific in that it refers to a specific legal entity, oriented towards justice and administrated by legal professionals. The fact that the term *court* appeared several times in the search query was another unexpected finding of this research. The reasons may be that the cases of incestuous abuse covered in the press are those that gained public attention. Furthermore, the court is the recipient of victims' and abusers' testimonies. It should be noted that the words said and heard in court are filtered through the preparatory work of legal professionals, such as lawyers and psychiatrists (Dussy, 2021). The two following examples may help to determine the boundaries of abstractness regarding the term *court*.

(25) I'll never forget sitting across from Lucy, an 18-year-old who, aged eight, had the courage to tell her school counsellor **she was being sexually molested by her father**. When her mother, Tina, applied to stop contact, a family report writer dismissed Lucy's **allegations**, described Tina as „psychotic" and wrote in his report **to the court that** if the **allegations** should be raised again, Lucy should be ordered to live full-time with her father.

(26) Mr Justice Patrick McCarthy told **the court that** it „beggars belief" **that a father would rape his daughter** and said „it is hard to find words to describe each new **outrage inflicted on these children**".

(27) The man's legal team said he had stated in a letter **to the court that** he would never apologise for **the sexual assaults** because it would mean admitting the allegations.

(28) Coombes told **Manchester Crown Court that her father had treated her as his sex slave from the age of five**, even allowing other men to take pictures of her naked, as well as being violent and controlling towards her.

In examples (25)-(27), *court* is a recipient to the victim's accusation or abuser's defence. The term remains general and abstract. However, in example (28), the term *court* is specific because it is preceded by the place and jurisdiction: *Manchester Crown Court*. In this example, the court is equally a recipient to the victim's accusation, but the term may be less readily considered abstract as the entity seems less general and abstract than in the previous examples. Therefore, it raises the question

of where the boundaries of abstractness lie. Semantic features are critical in considering the abstractness of SNs, but the context of SNs may be even more determinant. Without further ado, the following section continues this discussion.

Discussion

This paper demonstrates that SNs have several discursive functions regarding the taboo topic of incest: substituting, renaming, timing, and defining. In the corpus built on the concept of taboo language as linguistic avoidance strategies and amounting to 275,025 words, 1,213 SNs were retrieved through the automatic search queries *N-that* (1,035) and *This-N* (73). However, only 184 SNs were considered relevant to address the research question, namely how SNs shape the discourse of incest in the British press from 2017 to 2022. The decision to consider a SN relevant to the research question was more challenging than expected.

Firstly, the reference to incest in the clause could either be explicit or implicit, but in both cases, SNs contribute to increasing the vagueness around the descriptions of incest abuse. Therefore, SNs tend to obscure the lexical realisation by maintaining vagueness. Lexical realisation refers to the mutual specification of the SN and the clause (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015; Schmid, 2012). The meaning of the clause is encapsulated in the SN, giving a meaning to the abstract SN. However, this definition is valid in academic writing where SNs have been extensively analysed (Charles, 2003; Flowerdew & Forest, 2015; Jiang & Hyland, 2015; Schmid, 2012), but less relevant in media discourse, especially when a taboo topic is reported. Incest is "the most common problem of all forms of sexual abuse" but it is such a taboo that "it does not make as many headlines" (Justice & Justice, 1980, p. 33). Therefore, SNs may be used precisely because of their inherent abstractness. In other words, SNs are the perfect tools for euphemising a taboo topic; the meaning remains vague.

To some extent, it raises the question whether it is the writer's aim to realise lexical vagueness through SNs. In the corpus, journalists may contribute to strengthening the incest taboo by being unspecific, and thus, avoid embarrassment. The sensitivity around the taboo topic may stem from the reconsideration of the family. Instead of depicting the family as a constructive entity, incest reveals the dysfunctions and possibilities of destruction within families (Brey & Drouar, 2022; Dussy, 2021; Justice & Justice, 1980). Therefore, being aware that SNs are not only a lexical and grammatical category but "also a semantic discourse phenomenon" (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015, p. 7), the rhetorical function of SNs is critical. SNs structure discourse (Jiang & Hyland, 2015) because "their use affects the reader's perception of the proposition(s) put forward and so enables the reader to perceive the organisation and meaning that the writer intends" (Charles, 2003, p. 318). SNs are abstract nouns, and chosen ones.

Secondly, the analysis raises the question of determining SNs based on their degree of abstractness (Schmid, 2012). The degree of abstractness is critical for interpretation and was examined through close reading. Some SNs, such as *case*, *fact*, *thing*, are easy to determine, while others are more challenging. The term *court*, for instance,

is considered a key element in the media discourse of incest and seems general enough to be a circumstantial fact. However, the decision is interpretative, given that the context is as determinant as the lexical meaning. Therefore, in addition to automatic queries retrieving grammatical patterns of SNs, researchers must analyse and interpret which terms are abstract enough to be SNs.

Therefore, SNs are abstract terms, reinforcing vagueness in contexts that favour vagueness, as observed in the media coverage of the incest taboo. Inherently, SN "function as containers", thus, "it is necessary that they have a gap, a hole, or some other kind of opening or dent which can receive the content" (Schmid, 2012, p. 76). It is perhaps where lies the paradox for this analysis: SNs are the perfect terms to euphemise taboo topics.

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Słowa kluczowe

sygnał, język tabu, lingwistyka korpusowa, dyskurs medialny, kazirodztwo

Abstract

This paper investigates Signalling Nouns (SNs) on the incest taboo. It analyses how SNs shape the media discourse of incest in the British press between 2017 and 2022. SNs are abstract nouns that encapsulate the content of the preceding or following clauses. They have been extensively studied in academic writing, but their signalling role in media discourse remains underexplored. In a corpus built on taboo language, this paper investigates how signalling nouns substitute, rename, or define a topic that is highly taboo: incest. Furthermore, the paper raises the question of the inherent abstractness of SNs and the writer's intent when SNs are used in the context of a taboo topic.

Keywords

signalling noun, taboo language, corpus linguistics, media discourse, incest