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TABOO, TABLOIDS AND TRUMP: THE RISE AND TWILIGHT OF A US PRESIDENT IN DIGITAL MAINSTREAM NEWS MEDIA

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Abstract

This paper examines linguistic and rhetorical formulations of taboo and taboo-related ideas about Donald Trump from a cross-cultural standpoint, analysing how British mainstream news media have represented his political figure along a time span of three years, and more precisely at the start and end of his Presidency. The analysis focuses on how what Trump did or said tended to be conceptualized in terms of taboo in headlines collected from the online version of two British tabloids, *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror* (100 headlines from 2018 and 100 headlines from 2021 each). Despite the scant interest of tabloids in politics, these headlines provide a basis for exploring the selection criteria for informative material to become news, as well as the ways of reporting and linguistically construing news information. By taboo we refer here to behaviour to be avoided in that it generates social "anxiety, embarrassment, or shame" (Gao 2013: 2310). Although the term itself usually points to ideas related to sex, excretion, ugliness, violence, death, religion, etc., with institutional figures the range of taboo can be extended to include any conduct failing to match the expectations associated with such a role and that would disqualify such behaviour. In terms of language, taboo applies to words or meanings dealt with through strategies such as euphemism, dysphemism or orthophemism, in order to neutralize, exorcize or emphasize their inappropriate meanings. The codification of taboo may significantly be influenced by cross-cultural factors, such as the perception of political and cultural identity (and stereotypes) from opposite sides of the Atlantic, and the different editorial policy of rival publications such as *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror*, which nevertheless collaborate in the construction of traits of identity and otherness between communities and cultures. While tackling the array of taboos associated with Trump in the popular press, the paper explores the "altered state of political participation" (Conboy 2006: 10) to be found in today's trivialization of media contents and modes, as well as the construction of a carefully planned audience to whom a popular vision of both Britain and the US is constantly offered, and which the digitalization of the news industry is even amplifying.

1. Introduction

Donald Trump spent his first day at the White House on 21 January 2017. That day, 600 #WomensMarch protest demonstrations took place worldwide (BBC 2017). As he joined one such event in London, British actor and civil activist Sir Ian McKellen pro-

** Although this paper has been planned jointly, Stefania Consonni is responsible for Sections 1 and 3, while Michele Sala is responsible for Sections 2 and 4.*

duced a tweet in which Trump's name is transliterated into schoolyard English: "President Breaking Wind has impacted us all: and personally" (Tweet, 22 Jan 2017). A longer post followed, elucidating the exact opposite reactions typically elicited by Trump, both in the US and abroad: on the one hand, people may "identify with him, believe him because they've seen him" on TV and "think the billionaire and his billionaire team are truly their friends". Many others "see through the charade" and are outraged at how "he has turned democracy into a tv/twitter spectacular". Aimed at debunking and ridiculing Trump's public image and institutional aura by mocking his very name in a childlike, candid manner, McKellen's vernacular name-calling pivots on the socio-political hijacking of a classic conceptual taboo linked to bodily effluvia.

Taking the cue from this histrionic tweet, in this paper we analyse a wider range of linguistic and rhetorical formulations linking Trump – what he said and did from 2018 to 2021 – to taboo, i.e., what is not only scurrilous, but commonly held to be "revolting, untouchable, filthy, unmentionable, dangerous, disturbing, thrilling – but above all powerful" (Burridge 2004: 199). More specifically, we consider how different types of taboos relating to Trump's persona have been formulated in British tabloids, such as *The Daily Mirror* and *The Sun*, along a time span of three years – more precisely, at the 'honeymoon stage' and the end ('bitter divorce'?) of his presidency (2021). We also aim to highlight some cross-cultural trends in the codification of different cultural identities and stereotypes from opposite sides of the Atlantic, by questioning the ways in which, by building a taboo-laden framework for both Trump and US politics, the popular press may have propagated a specific political ideology among its readers. We will as a consequence also explore the relationship between ideologies (i.e. discursive "maps of [a] problematic social reality" and matrices "for the creation of collective conscience"; Geertz 1964/1973: 218-219, cf. also Gerring 1997) and the construction of taboos (i.e. behaviours taken to be harmful to members of a specific cultural setting because, by drawing on unpleasant or offensive contents such as sex, excretion, ugliness, violence, death, religion, they produce "anxiety, embarrassment, or shame"; Gao 2013: 2310).

Taboo is the pointing to certain "behaviour or objects believed to be harmful either for moral, religious, or social reasons" (Crespo-Fernández 2006: 32). It is therefore a way of dealing with what is ideologically impactful or disturbing, in order to perform a variety of social actions, including minimizing *vs*. emphasizing problematic aspects of reality, sounding polite or offensive, etc. Taboo naming is a basic skill in people's socio-discursive competence, allowing them to interact not only with others, but also with reality, that is, with the particular state of affairs in a specific situation. This function of taboo becomes particularly remarkable when public communication – e.g. political discourse, journalism, news media – is involved, for it produces hard-hitting, even iconic configurations of the world which impinge on social interactions as well as on the world itself (Fernández-Smith and Casa Gómez 2018: 26).

This study stems from the interrelated standpoints of linguistic constructivism and discursive-pragmatic analysis. We consider taboos concerning Trump in a corpus of texts from British tabloids from within a cross-cultural perspective, i.e., investigating how British mainstream news media may propagate a popularized and trivialized image of US and global politics. We therefore look at taboos in social discourse from a cognitive as much as pragmatic perspective.

1.1. *A cognitive perspective on taboo*

1.1.1. Word taboo: Negative expressions codifying no (real) referents

Taboo can be conveyed through *taboo words*, i.e. expressions (swearwords, profanities, four-letter words) used to lexicalize what is commonly considered to be obscene or unmentionable (e.g. sex, excretion, the sacred). Often "an outlet for frustration and pent-up emotion and a means of releasing nervous energy" or disappointment, anger or anxiety, without material violence (Crystal 1997: 61), these manifestations may be meant to either mark off identity and solidarity between members of the same social group, or to shock the hearer and provoke embarrassment or aversive reactions. Suffice it to think, on the one hand, of those cases in which a taboo word is used as a marker of a restricted sociolect or even cryptolect (i.e. as a particular 'password' granting access to a particular group), thus signalling common ground and establishing a certain level of informality ("Don't you *fucking* love this!?"). On the other hand, the aggression embodied by the taboo word may target an object of stigma that is perceived as such by both interlocutors ("Mr. X is a *dickhead*!").

In either case, taboo words are not so much employed for their reference, but by reason of the impact they produce on the hearer. In this sense, they are extreme examples of indirect speech acts (Searle 1975): empty at the level of locution, they function at the locutionary (i.e. communicative intention) and perlocutionary (i.e. communicative effect) level.

1.1.2. Concept taboo: positive, neutral or negative expressions codifying negative referents

Taboo can also be conceptualized. *Concept taboos* – i.e. forbidden contents (Varela 1997), forbidden reality (Casas Gómez 2012), forbidden meaning (Pizarro Pedraza 2013) – are ideas that, within specific cultural frameworks, are considered to be disturbing, dangerous, disrespectful, distasteful or obscene. Such topics are very much context-based, and range from traditionally proscribed referents (sex, bodily effluvia, death and diseases, blasphemy, etc.), which seem to be shared cross-culturally, to more specific ones, stemming from particular settings. Examples from Western cultures may be the otherization of social minorities, the stigmatization of differences or eccentricities, or other strategies aimed at discriminating individuals or groups on the basis of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or age.

In these cases, the referent is *in itself* considered to be taboo, or at least delicate or challenging. As a consequence, its linguistic representation – the very mention of that idea – is liable to be perceived as repugnant, uncomfortable or harmful, not because of the words the concept is spoken in, but because of the very concept being spoken of (Allan and Burridge 1991: 4). Taboo thus goes beyond the basic idea of substitution at a lexical level, as in the case of euphemism or derogation, for it addresses a conceptual interdiction from a cognitive perspective. In these cases, language can play an important mitigating function, smoothing the representation of problematic meanings through the use of 'neutral' language. This is the realm of Political Correctness and related language (Hughes 2011), in which lexical substitution makes it possible to express certain meanings in a way that is more socially acceptable through paraphrases, circumlocution or synonyms (e.g. *sex worker* for *prostitute*, *pre-owned* for *used*). However, taboo

concepts can also be formulated through taboo words, when the purpose is not just to represent the referent but to unsettle the audience or to stigmatize the targeted object.

1.1.3. Representation taboo: negative expressions codifying neutral (or positive) referents

Taboo-laden representation covers strategies meant to cast conceptual interdiction on referents which are not *per se* disturbing, thus instantiating the most radically performative dimension of taboo. This form of stigmatization can be realized both at word level (e.g. by referring to a female person as a *bitch*), or at a higher or discursive level through association of meanings, parallelism, or metaphors meant to codify a given stretch of reality in terms of taboo.

On the blog *American Thinker*, we can for instance find an entry like this: "Using the expression *hard worker* to describe a white person is now an offense against slaves and working mothers who don't have health care coverage" (Lifson 2015). The phrase *hard worker*, which in itself has a positive (or, at least, neutral) connotation, is considered to be disparaging towards specific social groups, hence disrespectful and therefore taboo-laden.

As shown by these examples, taboo language is not merely unwelcomed. It can be used to perform a wide array of key social goals, e.g. to control (either reinforce or dissipate) stereotypes, to neutralize dangerous interpretations of problematic concepts or, on the contrary, to disqualify *per se* neutral meanings. We may thus observe that taboos are conceived and shared in specific cultural groups on the basis of commonly accepted or rejected values, in order to reinforce a pre-determined ingroup's worldview, rather than to critically address reality. As such, taboos are powerfully evaluative resources (Martin and White 2005; Thompson and Hunston 1999). The three categories above are synthesized by Allan and Burridge (2006: 2) when they claim that "human beings react to the world around them by imposing taboos on behaviours", manipulating and censoring "their language in order to talk about and around those taboos", so that language becomes both "a shield against malign fate and the disapprobation of human fellow beings", a weapon "against enemies" and "a release valve when we are angry, frustrated or hurt".

1.2. *Taboo and language: a working typology*

From a pragmatic perspective, taboo discourse is characterized by three main functional strategies by which the standard informativeness of language is combined with emotive and expressive meanings, namely:

a) euphemism (or 'sweet talking'), codifying negative referents through positive expressions: through euphemization "the taboo concept is stripped of its most explicit or offensive overtones" (Crespo-Fernández 2018: 9), allowing delicate or dangerous topics to be dealt with in ways that are perceived as more acceptable (e.g. *end of life* for *death*);

b) orthophemism (or 'straight talking'), codifying negative referents through negative expressions: in these cases, the taboo topic is referenced literally, i.e. on the basis of its dictionary meaning, by establishing bare axiological references between meanings and words (e.g. *death* for actual death);

c) dysphemism (or 'offensive talking'), codifying a neutral referent through markedly negative expressions: through derogation, the most problematic aspects of a given meaning (regardless of their being inherently taboo or not) are focused upon, with a stigmatizing aim (e.g. *girly manners* for *good manners*). Dysphemism operates through intensification of certain aspects of reality, which are not *per se* necessarily problematic.

As we can see, with respect to the three taboo categories listed in Section 1.1. above, these x-phemistic categories are mainly used to codify taboo concepts or to cast conceptual interdiction to representations (whereas taboo words, almost by definition, do not participate in x-phemistic meaning negotiation). From a cross-cultural standpoint, they can for this reason help us understand "how taboo topics are conceived in cultural groups and what beliefs are accepted or rejected" (Crespo-Fernández 2018: 10). Among them, the case of dysphemistic language is particularly interesting as far as taboo in tabloids is concerned, since what is unexpected, undesirable or dangerous represents a key value in the spectacularization of newsworthiness that is a typical strategy of mainstream news media's representative policy – or, in other words, of the 'tabloidization' of reality (Conboy 2006).

1.3. *Taboo, politics and tabloids*

A political figure, and even more so a president, is expected to comply with a series of qualities, or certain standards of behaviour, or to share beliefs and views that would single him/her out as a representative of what is valued and prized in a specific cultural framework. According to Political Theory studies (Eulau *et al.* 1959; Reingold 2008; Swers 2005), such qualifications include independence and fair-mindedness, wisdom in decision-making and critical trust building (Dovi 2007), as well as representativeness and inclusion (as expressions of 'symbolic representation', which "ensures that all groups feel included" (Murray 2015: 771); cf. also Pitkin 1967). Empirical Political analysts (Galasso and Nannicini 2011; Besley and Reynal-Querol 2011; Baltrunaite *et al.* 2014) would also list values such as intelligence, education, experience, competence and commitment. From another angle, Murray (2015) points to other sets of criteria through which politicians are evaluated: party criteria, including features like personal charisma, eloquence, and good media presence (Murray 2010), and voter criteria, including empathy, honesty, determination, considerateness and availability (Campbell and Cowley 2014; Vivyan and Wagner 2015).

Any infringement of this etiquette is likely to disqualify a politician's public image. It would hence represent a taboo with respect to his/her reputation, both when such violations are merely reported through language (i.e. they are part of an actual 'taboo order of things') and when they are specifically managed through language (i.e. they are manipulated through *ad hoc* taboo-laden representation). In the former case, taboo lies within the factual dimension of reality, while in the latter it is construed by the performativity of language.

This implies that any violation of such configuration constitutes fuel for taboo – as much as for tabloids. An event indeed becomes 'news' when it is codified as such by newspapers. According to the literature (e.g. Bednarek and Caple 2012; Brighton and Foy 2007; Harcup and O'Neill 2001), both quality and mainstream newspapers select

events to be reported on the basis of their news value, that is to say, the 'quality' that a specific stretch of reality must possess for it to be interesting to an ideal audience. Several studies have provided classifications for such values, with negativity proving the dominant parameter – followed and complemented by relevance, timeliness, proximity, prominence, consonance, impact, novelty, unexpectedness, superlativeness, personalization and eliteness (Bell 1991; Brighton and Foy 2007; van Dijk 1988; Schultz 1982; Harcup and O'Neill 2001).

A "basic news value" (Bell 1991: 156), negativity covers a wide range of phenomena, from wars, disasters and violence to conflict between nations and political parties, disagreements between people or groups, "deviance" (*ibid.*), "scandals" (van Dijk 1988: 123) and all "disruptions in the normal current of events" (Golding and Elliott 1979: 120). Negativity therefore crucially imbues the discursive reporting of destabilizing events in news media, and even more so in tabloids, considering the mix of sensationalism and simplification the latter offer to their readers. Pivoting on the straining of borders between private and public, personalization and authentication, trivialization and hegemonization (see Harrington 2008; Sparks and Tulloch 2000; Lefkowitz 2021), tabloids systematically apply the concept of negativity as 'sensational, non-standard (and therefore newsworthy) behaviour' to a number of prominent public characters (Lefkowitz 2018), including politicians such as Donald Trump.

Admittedly, British tabloids have traditionally shown scant interest in politics, focusing instead on the spectacularization of media contents and modes, and devoting more attention to sport, scandal, and entertainment and conspicuous details from people's lives, both famous and ordinary. On the other hand, though, when tackling politics tabloids always choose taboo as their preferred material and codification strategy. As Conboy (2006: 10) claims, tabloids show an "altered state of political participation": they include political information when it "concerns major issues which can be covered in sensational fashion", so that "politically, they might describe the contours of a journalistic lowest common denominator", providing a populist, opinion-based, binary stance on events and depicting a "melodramatic, not a rational public sphere" (*ibid.*), which they may also feed upon as a source of cross-cultural taboo (or taboo-laden) generalizations or ideological stereotyping.

On the basis of the above, this study investigates x-phemistic strategies conveying Trump-related taboos in British tabloid headlines. We chose to investigate headlines because of the key pragmatic functions they perform within the "economy grammar" of news media discourse (Halliday 1967; Dudley-Evans 2000). If tabloid language tends in general to be lexically low-standard and emotionally loaded, for instance through the frequent use of signal words (e.g. *fat*, *desperate*, *poor*, *bald*) and eye-catching qualifiers, headlines are even more specifically characterized by grammatical omissions, compounding, juxtaposition, alliterations, focalization and topicalization (Reah 2002; Marcoci 2014). Obviously due to the limited physical space allotted to the wording of titles, the use of such conspicuous interactional and textual devices produces on the one hand effects of emphasis, conciseness and emotional or persuasive impact, while on the other it performs an instantaneous (and yet extremely effective) perspectivization of news materials, and as a consequence of 'reality' itself (Lewison and Hartley 2005; Virbel 2002; Hartley 2005).

Tabloid headlines indeed shape a worldview for their readers, for they work as selective filters with respect to their news content, configuring the 'reality' of news events by emphasizing (and often caricaturing) specific portions of it, and steering its public interpretation. On the one hand, they do perform a framing function, in that, like frames, they are used to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicative text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman 1993: 52). On the other hand, they also anticipate the type of content to be found in the associated full article, hence helping the reader decide whether or not s/he is interested in reading it. For this reason, they doubly impact interpretation: by attributing grammatical roles and functions (agent, patient/affected, action, attribute, etc.) to specific portions of reality, they shape the way such reality is going to be perceived, thus functioning as "instruments for newsmakers to filter their vision of the world to their readers" (Belmonte and Porto 2020: 55, cf. also Caple and Bednarek 2013; Richardson 2007).

Enormously amplified by the digitalization of the news market and the publishing industry over the last few decades (Franklin and Eldridge 2017; Conboy and Eldridge 2021; Lefkowitz 2021), such a configurational and hermeneutical function of tabloid headlines produces ever increasing levels of popular persuasiveness – especially when headlines are used to codify cultural and political taboos. For resorting to taboo or taboo associations in representing news makes it even easier for mainstream media to effectively forge public opinion "in favour of or against specific political, economic, and societal trends" (Belmonte and Porto 2020: 56, cf. also Ecker *et al.* 2014). In other words, in developing their own specific 'sense of an audience', tabloids may benefit from the use of x-phemistic strategies as a systematic tool for readership-design purposes: reproducing the "vocabulary and style of their average reader" so as to fashion a kind of "vernacular ventriloquism" (Conboy 2002: 162), they may reach an ever more propagative power. This seems to somewhat resonate with their preference for taboo as a subject matter since, as van Dijk claims (1988: 121-122), "it is easier to understand and certainly easier to accept" what is already in line with the cultural attitudes and expectations of readers, "that is, with the ideological consensus in a given society or culture" – a consensus which is shaped by the circulation on a daily basis of given ideas, especially when formulated through impactful and value-laden terms (Digirolamo and Hintzman 1997; Ecker *et al.* 2017), which are likely to then be entrenched in the readers' worldview.

2. Materials and method

The tabloids chosen for our analysis are the digital versions of *The Sun* and *The Mirror* [1]. The two British tabloids are similar, in that they belong to the family of so-called 'newsstand tabloids', i.e. publications sold at newsagents, alongside broadsheets and serious press. In spite of the emphasis they give to trivial contents like sport, entertainment and gossip, they do show some news values typical of the quality press,

[1] Respectively available at www.thesun.co.uk and www.mirror.co.uk.

for they actively engage in political campaigns, for instance in elections. They differ in terms of their policies for representing nudity and scandal, and their political orientation (Smith 2017), as *The Mirror* tends to be generally perceived as more left-wing (in fact, it is perceived as slightly left-of-centre), while *The Sun* is associated with values such as populism and nationalism, using a vernacular language aimed at 'the man in the street' (Rooney 2000).

By entering the search term 'Trump' in the "Archive search" function on the tabloids' homepages, we have downloaded 200 headlines per source, of which 100 (i.e. the top 100 hits) from 2018 and 100 (i.e. the top 100 hits) from 2021, collecting a total of 400 headlines containing a variety of direct or remote references to the 45th US president. The chronological span covered by the subcorpora goes – more or less in parallel – from 1 February to 13 March 13 2018, and from 1 February to 4 March 2021. The reason for choosing the first few months after Trump's election for our analysis is a specific one. In the light of the many controversies reported and popularized by all media, including British tabloids, during his years in office, our intention is to see in what terms Trump's presidency – its politico-discursive style and legacy – was used as a benchmark against which to measure other agendas, plans and decisions, including those enacted by the British government and by Joe Biden, the current US president. We have therefore divided the 400 headlines into two different groups:

A) those where the word 'Trump' functions as the subject and is followed by a verb phrase, as can be seen below:

(1) Donald *Trump admits* he has no invite to Prince Harry and Meghan's wedding (S57)
(2) Donald *Trump fears* facing criminal charges despite second impeachment acquittal (M120);

B) those where the word 'Trump' is the object of a verb (i.e., 'Trump' is the 'undergoer'), or introduced by a preposition in adverbial clauses, as in the following cases:

(3) Did Melania 'refuse' to stand as audience gave ovation to Donald *Trump's 'faith* and family' remarks? (M95)
(4) *Trump impeachment* lawyer says Capitol riot was 'nothing' to do with President and thinks trial will 'tear nation apart' (S122)

Our analysis focuses on the former group of formulations, in which Trump is grammatically represented as the doer/utterer of specific actions/propositions. We consider this type of formulation as particularly relevant with respect to taboo-naming strategies, for they identify him as the individual responsible for certain sayings and doings, their consequences and impact (on the people directly affected and on the reading public at large). In 2018, at the onset of the presidency, *The Sun* has 34 such headlines, *The Mirror* 36. In 2021, numbers are lower and proportions less balanced between the two tabloids: *The Sun* has nine such headlines, *The Mirror* 21 (see Table 1).

Within each subcorpus, we have further distinguished headlines according to their content, with specific regard to the standards of behaviour discussed with reference to Political Theory and Empirical Political studies (cf. Section 1.3. above):

	The Sun	*The Mirror*	Tot. considered headlines
2018	S1-S100 *34*	M1-M100 *36*	*70*
2021	S101-S200 *9*	M101-M200 *21*	*30*

Table 1. Distribution of considered headlines

a) headlines with major socio-political content, i.e. pivoting on news values such as the impact, significance or relevance of given actions performed by (and institutionally expected from) Trump with respect to his role as US president (e.g. political decisions, diplomatic relationships, etc.);

b) headlines with problematic socio-political content, i.e. centred on news values such as problems or conflicts associated with (unexpected or anti-institutional) actions or behaviour performed by Trump as US president (e.g. his public conduct, comments on social media platforms, etc.);

c) headlines with little or no socio-political content, i.e., gossip, news emphasizing trivial or private aspects of Trump's character, his idiosyncrasies, etc.

For all three groups we have analysed x-phemistic strategies, distinguishing between orthophemisms and dysphemisms [2]. More specifically, we have noticed that dysphemism can be realized in three different ways:

i) by mentioning or quoting Trump's words without rhetorically introducing, contextualizing, hedging or explaining them: this strategy exploits the maxim of informative quality (Grice 1975), for although it is a seemingly objective, unfiltered mention of Trump's words, it may produce a destabilizing cognitive effect, by giving the reader few cues as to how to disambiguate the meaning;

ii) by using strong, ideologically saturated or taboo-inducing expressions (e.g. *brag* vs. *point out* or *remark*; *dump* (v.) vs. *fire* (v.); *lie vs. insist*, *proclaim* or *assert*), thus exploiting the maxim of informative manner (Grice 1975), and casting conceptual interdiction on meanings and actions so as to emphasize the violation of some specific requirement of the etiquette for the 'good' politician (cf. Section 1.3. above);

iii) by using banalizing comments, useless details, irrelevant pieces of information or minimizing preciseness and detail so as to undermine the (possible) relevance of the main meaning – that is, dissipating it by scattering relevant pieces of information among non-relevant ones, thus flouting the maxims of relevance and quantity at the same time (*ibid.*).

[2] At this first stage of investigation, we have not considered euphemisms as the latter are to be frequently found in headlines where 'Trump' grammatically appears as object, affected or adverbial, whereas they do not seem to be used in headlines where 'Trump' is subject.

3. Results

The results of our searches are set out in Table 1 (above) and in Tables 2 and 3 (below), where frequencies are expressed in absolute terms, the size of our corpus being manageable and the indication of absolute quantities fairly transparent. Table 1 shows that the frequency of headlines with 'Trump' as subject significantly drops if we compare 2018 with 2021. At the start of his mandate, the president himself was the subject of 70 headlines equally distributed between *The Sun* (34) and *The Mirror* (36), while three years later there seems to be a clear preference for using 'Trump' as object or in prepositional/adverbial clauses (only 30 headlines having Trump as grammatical subject). The decline is particularly visible in the case of *The Sun*, with only nine such titles in 2021, while the rest build upon other subjects – mainly (and predictably) Joe Biden, as shown by the following example:

> (5) Biden signs executive orders to 'ease naturalization of 11 million migrants' as he rips up Trump immigration policies (S120)

Table 2 details the frequency and distribution of x-phemistic strategies and relative contents in 2018 and 2021 in both *The Sun* and *The Mirror*, and Tables 3 synthesizes the distribution of such occurrences in the corpus as a whole, evidencing some further trends that are discussed in the next three Sections.

3.1. *Relevant contents*

This group of headlines codifies contents of "considerable significance for large numbers of people" (Golding and Elliott 1979: 117). These are events that are not only important, but politically predictable, in that they are in line with a president's agenda and in accordance with his institutional function (e.g. political decisions, meetings, comments on facts of public impact). In other words, these titles concern the conduct that the US president – or any president, for that matter – is expected to have. The presentation of such contents in the corpus may be carried out through orthophemistic formulations such as the following [3]:

> (6) Donald Trump declassifies secret memo alleging FBI and Justice Department conspired against him in Russia probe (M89)
> (7) Donald Trump returns to social media with post on Gab account after online exile (S178)

In these cases, meanings are transferred by emphasizing informativeness over evaluation (on the part of the writer), i.e. without making room for taboo-laden interpretations. As regards these formulations, however, we should point out that in some cases (nine in 2018, five in 2021), *The Sun* resorts to a very specific strategy, which consists in placing a 'kicker' above the headline with the purpose of steering the interpretation of what, in the headline itself, is presented in orthophemistc ways. Consider the following examples:

[3] In this case, as well as in the following, we discuss examples from both tabloids and from both 2018 and 2021.

RELEVANT (e.g. political agenda, decision-making roles and actions)		PROBLEMATIC (e.g. unexpected, contrary to role, non-politically correct)		NON-RELEVANT (e.g. personal, gossip, mode of reaction)		TOTAL
ORTHOPH.	DYSPH.	ORTHOPH.	DYSPH.	ORTHOPH.	DYSPH.	
The Mirror						
9	7	4	3	4	8	2018 Orthoph. 17 Dysph. 18
1	2	0	3	0	3	2021 Orthoph. 1 Dysph. 8
The Sun						
16	6	2	2	3	7	2018 Orthoph. 21 Dysph. 15
1	2	0	3	0	3	2021 Orthoph. 1 Dysph. 8

Table 2. Frequency and distribution of x-phemistic strategies and relative contents in the two subcorpora

RELEVANT (e.g. political agenda, decision-making roles and actions)		PROBLEMATIC (e.g. unexpected, contrary to role, non-politically correct)		NON-RELEVANT (e.g. personal, gossip, mode of reaction)		TOTAL
ORTHOPH.	DYSPH.	ORTHOPH.	DYSPH.	ORTHOPH.	DYSPH.	
The Mirror + The Sun						
25	13	6	5	7	15	2018 Orthoph. 38 Dysph. 43
2	4	0	6	0	6	2021 Orthoph. 2 Dysph. 16

Table 3. Frequency and distribution of x-phemistic strategies and relative contents in the whole corpus

(8) ROYALLY TRUMPED. Donald Trump admits he has no invite to Prince Harry and Meghan's wedding (S57)
(9) DON'S DOWN TIME. Trump is 'relaxed' out of White House & 'happy' off Twitter but could soon start social media platform, aide claims (S198)

As shown by examples (8) and (9), the all-caps introductory expressions are meant to (respectively) poke fun at Trump through a semantically articulated and disparaging pun (*trumped*), and to present a reformulation of his current situation, as reported in the headline (*is relaxed*), in a trivial, mocking way (*down time*).

As shown in Table 3, the frequency of orthophemisms in both *The Sun* and *The Mirror* drops from 38 (namely, 25 ortho. + 13 dys.) in 2018 to only two dys. in 2021 – these two to be found in relevant content titles, while no examples can be found in problematic and non-relevant content titles. This indicates that there has been a preference over time for the construction of such contents through dysphemistic formulations. While representing 43 entries in the 2018 subcorpus, these still amount to 16 occurrences in 2021 (a lower number which is to be contextualized in the general decrease of 'Trump'-subject headlines). The following examples show how dysphemistic strategies work:

(10) When Trump met Kim: the fire and fury of a summit between the world's most powerful manbabies (M12)
(11) Chaotic Donald Trump wanted to 'take out' Syrian President and took US to brink of war (M125)

These examples typify the possible realizations of dysphemistic discourse: the first by employing words (*manbabies*) which discredit the authoritativeness and role of the two leaders, and the second by representing Trump's intentions through the use of an informal phrasal verb (*take out*), which banalizes the president's agenda with respect to the Syrian crisis and portrays it as a possible cause for international crisis.

3.2. *Problematic content*

These headlines deal with duties, tasks, actions, comments ascribable to the role of a political leader, i.e. allowing for the possibility of preferred behaviour. 'Expected' responses, which are typical in the category of relevant contents seen above, are violated here by behaviour which is presented as being uncalled for or incongruous. By creating embarrassment or even conflict, this conduct is inherently taboo. As evidenced in Table 3, in 2018 orthophemisms are used in six (out of 11) problematic content headlines, as shown by the instances below:

(12) Donald Trump suggests he could be president for life after congratulating China's Xi Jinping on consolidating power (M24)
(13) Trump blames FBI for Florida massacre saying they 'wasted time on Russia' (S24)

In example (12), while a president can indeed consider re-running or hope for re-election (a legitimate aspiration common to all US Presidents running for a second term), presidency for life is rather distinctive of dictatorships around the world – against which the US has often taken a stand. Similarly, in (13) it is the president's duty to reprimand faulty behaviour carried out on behalf of the government, but not by blaming officers for focusing too much on matters concerning himself rather than public security (the reference here is to the investigation concerning the possible Russian intervention in Trump's 2016 election, i.e. the affair now known as 'Russiagate').

In 2021, orthophemisms drop to zero, while dysphemisms are used in all six headlines introducing problematic contents, as the following examples show:

(14) Donald Trump brags about his 'legacy' and 'military equipment he can't even talk about' in newly released footage (S179)

(15) Donald Trump so angry at being booted off Twitter he now 'writes other people insults' (M103)

In example (14), the direct quotation introduced by the evaluative verb *brag* is meant to emphasize the awkward comment made by Trump in a delicate situation, thus pointing out, along with his error in judgement, his ill-timed attitude in communication. In (15), the colloquial words *angry* and *booted off* emphasize his lack of self-control and indicate his arrogant and irresponsible reaction to the permanent cancellation of his Twitter account (which occurred on 8 January 2021, as a measure against the incitement to violence after the storming of the US Capitol).

3.3. *Non-relevant content*

This category includes all headlines where socio-political news value is very limited. This is the case of news concerning Trump as a private citizen, e.g. a (bad) father and husband, a golf player, a blunderer, etc. This is the realm of gossip, expressing criticism about given targets "as though they were members of our own social group", so that social conversation about celebrities becomes "indistinguishable from our gossip about family, friends and neighbours" (Fox 2004: 42). Associating irrelevant topics, eccentricities, trivial comments or inconsistencies to a political figure is a taboo-inducing way of damaging his/her reputation, especially in the age of digital information and social networks (increasingly the undisputed domain of personal opinion).

The codification of non-relevant content can to some extent be controlled through orthophemism, the vacuity or triviality of meanings needing no rhetorical emphasis to be perceived as such, as can be observed in these titles from 2018:

(16) "I try like hell to hide it": Donald Trump admits having bald spot as he gets distracted by own hair during conference speech (M44)
(17) Trump is 'terrified of sharks' says porn star 'ex' Stormy Daniels (S80)

And yet, orthophemistic strategies (seven in 2018) drop to zero in 2021. This seems to indicate that the same inconsistencies come to be fully highlighted through dysphemistic resources in non-relevant content headlines. Citations, negative evaluation or banalizers appear as the most frequently used resources in this regard, as shown by the following examples:

(18) Picky Donald Trump needed Diet Coke opened in front of him say staff who served him (M127)
(19) Trump resigns from Screen Actors Guild and says "who cares!" after threats to expel him from TV union (S156)
(20) Donald Trump tries to hold wife Melania's THUMB amid Playboy model scandal (S34)
(21) Donald Trump repeatedly tries to hold wife Melania's hand in awkward video (M200)

In example (18) Trump is represented as a *picky* boy bullying the White House staff with silly requests about soft drinks. In (19), Trump's exclamatory disregard for threats of expulsion from the TV Union (after the Capitol riots) more subtly reveals his previous experience not only as a Hollywood film extra but also as a reality-TV star, which may imply a reiterated conflict of competence in his career. In examples (20) and (21),

the emphasis on a caricatured detail like a clumsy attempt at holding his wife's thumb (or hand) becomes particularly noticeable when such an attempt is made more than once, or while the subject himself is caught up in a major sex scandal.

4. Discussion

In February-March 2018, which is the time span of the first part of the corpus under scrutiny here, Donald Trump was in office as the 45th US president, and allegedly – as the expression goes – the 'leader of the free world'. The very concepts of 'president', 'leader' and 'free world' bring about structured sets of expectations and culture-based ranges of beliefs related to specific ideas of power, control, leadership, trust, representativeness, progress, protection, which are valid not only in the US but in the Western world, of which Britain is part. In fact, not only has the US massively influenced Western culture, especially after World War II (in terms of media products, communication practices, language tendencies – i.e. Political Correctness, popularization, inclusive non-discriminatory policies), but its impact can also be observed from an extended geopolitical perspective, in that the US is a member of several international organizations (e.g. NATO, the UN, observer state for the Council of Europe) where it often holds a pivotal position.

In such a scenario, there are rules of action and behaviour which the US president needs to respect (cf. Section 1.3. above), as a public figure (in terms of knowledge, experience and competence), a leader (in terms of fair-mindedness and communicativeness), and a private citizen (for matters concerning his personal and family life, past and present). With respect to these parameters, before his election Donald Trump did not even seem to have the potential for being a credible candidate. At the time, what people knew of him – including US voters and British tabloid readers – was his being a 'political outsider': a tycoon, a billionaire who built towers, married fashion models, bought football teams, a mediocre actor and TV host and an outspoken interviewee. Moreover, his candidacy was for the more conservative faction within the GOP, the one often associated with nationalism, supremacism, racism and misogyny.

These are clearly all taboo-related elements when associated with a political candidate. As a consequence, after Trump's election in 2016, these elements required some form of re-negotiation and re-definition of the idea of 'president' and 'leader of the free world'. Two tendencies may be identified in this respect – in the US, in Europe and the UK – which can be generally synthesized as:

a) alignment, represented by those (arguably a minority) who welcomed the election of an 'outsider' and were prepared to adjust the idea of 'president' and 'leader' so as to include Trump's idiosyncrasies, that is, by considering his discarding of expectations as a sign of rejuvenation and political revitalization, no matter the possible consequences;

b) resistance, the dominant position, which opposes renegotiation and points out the importance of established political and personal standards as the only guarantee for the effective exerting of the presidency, for democracy, and for maintaining manageable relationships within and outside the US.

In both cases, taboo may represent a major discursive device for efficiently controlling representations. More specifically, from a resistance perspective, by associating Trump with taboo (i.e. violence, materialism, discrimination, lack of competence), any act – both discursive and factual – meant to resist or attack him as a taboo perpetrator is a way of marking off the newsmaker's identity as being as distant as possible from such negative notions. On the basis of this perspective, in this section we address the issue of how British tabloids use these strategies to possibly mark their distance from the US, its policies and its president.

In February-March 2021 (the time span covered by the second half of our corpus), Trump is a former president whose public figure has permanently been damaged by the muddled handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and the rise of social unrest, notably epitomized by the Black Lives Matter movement, by the incitement of the US Capitol riots, by his refusal to recognize the Georgia recount and by his removal from social networks for hate speech. In other words, in 2021, not only is Trump no longer president (and for this reason no longer considered as 'newsworthy material'), but after all these controversies there does not seem to be any need to discursively associate him with taboo, since his words and actions have become part of everybody's shared socio-political knowledge.

In the light of these considerations, turning now to the occurrences set out in Tables 2 and 3, some observations can be made. The first and very general comment concerns how differently the two tabloids, which have markedly different political orientations, represent meanings (and taboos). In 2018, both tabloids use approximately the same number of taboo-related headlines – the only possible exception regards orthophemistic references for relevant contents in *The Sun* (16 occurrences), which are almost twice as many as those in *The Mirror* (nine occurrences). Both tabloids, then, seem to be consistent in their relatively homogeneous resistance perspective, with *The Sun* possibly trying to read as more objective and relatively less evaluative (i.e. fewer dysphemisms).

Moreover, while in 2021 both *The Sun* and *The Mirror* devote equal (if limited) attention to relevant, problematic and non-relevant socio-political contents (each of them counting six headlines), in 2018, at the 'honeymoon stage' of the presidency, priority is conferred to headlines that in the first place concern relevant contents (38 occurrences, respectively 25 ortho. + 13 dys.) and, secondly, non-relevant contents (22 occurrences, respectively seven ortho. + 15 dys.). Attention is being devoted, we may thus hypothesize, to taboo-laden aspects of the recently inaugurated presidency which may be said to confirm important traits of divergence between the tabloid readers' perceived identity of Britain as distinguished from the US.

The higher frequency of orthophemistic strategies (25 ortho. *vs.* 13 dys.) used in 2018 for dealing with socio-politically relevant taboos seems to indicate that, while codifying fallacies of Trump's that are linked to key rituals of democratic life through the reliable (or assumed as such) linearity and transparency of 'straight talking', tabloid headlines may indeed be aimed at reinforcing – on the British side of the Atlantic – the importance of the very principles being flouted by Trump's conduct. Orthophemistic titles may, in other words, produce the persuasive effect of boosting (*ex negativo*) the binary awareness of a different (i.e. smoother, more polite) institutional life in Britain. This hypothesis seems confirmed by the (frequently evoked) comparison with the British PM of the time, as evidenced in the following example:

(22) Trump doesn't let Theresa May speak for more than ten seconds (S77)

When presenting politically irrelevant contents, on the contrary, the higher frequency of dysphemistic strategies used in 2018 for codifying non-relevant taboos (15 dys. *vs*. 7 ortho.) seems to mark off an expressed distance between British tabloid readers and the target of stigmatization and ridicule – i.e. Trump and possibly also those boastful aspects of US cultural life that his presidency may be said to epitomize, such as materialism, consumer culture, anti-welfare policies, industrialism. The persuasive effect is in this case produced by outspoken criticism – carried out through exaggeration and caricature – of a social and cultural element of stereotyping (or target of humour) as a way to express a common identity as clearly distinguished from the one of which Trump is a key representative.

Both of these attitudes may be read as the result of the tabloids' editorial policy and the specific type of political perception they promote, which is nurtured by simplification, spectacularization, populism and stereotyping (Buckledee 2020; Smith and Higgins 2013). This hypothesis seems substantiated by the fact that, in both *The Sun* and *The Mirror*, headlines published in 2018 show a very limited occurrence of problematic contents, that is, truly and univocally conceptual taboo (11 occurrences in total, respectively 6 ortho. and 5 dys.). Those awkward aspects of Trump's presidency indeed appear in our corpus to be minimized, perhaps even neutralized [4].

Comparing the frequencies of x-phemistic strategies in 2018, it appears that *The Mirror*'s use of such strategies is more even: their distribution ranges between a minimum of three (problematic/dys.) and a maximum of nine (relevant/ortho.), which makes the presentation of the various contents more uniform and harmonized. In *The Sun*, the differentiation is more strongly emphasized: frequencies go from two (problematic/dys.) to 16 (relevant/ortho.). In both cases, different contents tend to be presented in rhetorically different ways, pivoting on different cognitive mechanisms. When introducing relevant topics, orthophemism is the preferred strategy – more noticeable in the case of *The Sun* (16 ortho. *vs*. six dys.) than in *The Mirror* (nine ortho. *vs*. seven dys.); when presenting problematic contents, no particular emphasis is made on dysphemistic representation (perhaps because the content itself is already perceived as negative); when presenting irrelevant contents, dysphemistic language (i.e. representation of taboo) is noticeably used, possibly with the aim of turning the lack of news value of such contents into a taboo itself. Dysphemistic language predominates only when trivial topics are covered.

However, the polarization between *The Sun* and *The Mirror* in terms of x-phemistic resources seems to fade in 2021, for frequencies become very similar (and low) for both tabloids, ranging from 0 (in all orthophemistic strategies, except for relevant contents) to a maximum of six (problematic/dysphemistic and non-relevant/dysphemistic topics). In comparison with three years earlier, headlines in 2021 seem less inclined to confine problematic (concept-taboo) contents as a distant, not particularly threatening background to nationalist 'straight talking' and 'offensive' gossip 'talking'. Moreover,

[4] In 2021, the distribution of relevant, problematic and non-relevant contents in both tabloids appears to be more balanced, with each category being devoted six headlines. We may perhaps speculate that, as mentioned above, after such episodes as the US Capitol riots in January 2021 there is less need for British tabloids (and their readers) to reaffirm boundary lines that the whole world seems to have meanwhile acknowledged. One thing is for sure: the stigmatization of the Trump presidency seems in 2021 to allow for no counter argument.

if orthophemistic resources were in 2018 significantly less frequent than dysphemistic resources (38 ortho. *vs.* 43 dys.), in 2021 the gap increases (two ortho. *vs.* 16 dys.). Again, it seems fairly unsurprising that conceptual taboos about Trump would become more manifest within the British mainstream press context, given the rapidly spreading crisis of credibility that Trump's persona and administration have met, especially (as mentioned above) after his refusal to accept the election results, his altercation with media and social networks, etc.

In consideration of the above, by presenting a typology of socio-political taboo contents relating to Donald Trump through a range of x-phemistic representations over a period of three years, both *The Sun* and *The Mirror* seem to be mostly concerned with a twofold mission. They seem, in other words, to have developed linguistic, pragmatic and cognitive strategies in order to balance, on the one hand, the value of informativeness (expected from any kind of news discourse, including quality press sources) and, on the other, evaluation, even over-emphasized evaluation (which is typical of 'tabloidized' news discourse). In other words, as shown by the emphasis given to relevant topics both in 2018 and 2021, the two tabloids present themselves as – primarily – sources of relevant socio-political information. Even though dysphemism happens to be used for relevant contents (which is what differentiates tabloids from quality newspapers), in 2018 this is balanced off, or even superseded, by the use of orthophemism. Although proportions are reversed in 2021, probably by reason of the perceived loss of hegemony of Trump's role in US and global politics, this attitude appears to be coherent with *The Sun* and *The Mirror*'s status as newsstand tabloids.

On the other hand, both tabloids tend to boost the newsworthiness of reported events, especially when they emphasize values of negativity, novelty and relevance, and when, often by contrast, these happen to signal and consolidate the self-perception of a distinctive and coherent national (as with the case of socio-politically relevant contents) or cultural unity (as in the case of non-relevant contents) of *Britain as different from the US*. This is not only coherent with the politics of tabloid representation, with their trivialization of media contents and modes, but above all with their linguistic construction of a carefully planned audience, to which a popular and populist vision of both Britain and the US is constantly being offered.

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