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The Country Wife.

Between Pragmatic Analysis and Translation

Edited by Alba Graziano

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info@skeneproject.it

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FABIO CIAMBELLA*

Insulting (in) *The Country Wife* a Pragmatic Analysis of Insults and Swearwords

Abstract

This article focuses on taboo language (esp. insults and curses) adopted by characters in William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), aimed at explicitly/implicitly, directly/indirectly offending other characters. To this purpose, I will first combine Alan and Burridge's socio-cultural model on taboo language (2006) with pragmatic frameworks of impoliteness (Culpeper 1996 and following revisions/integrations) and with Jucker and Taavitsainen's diachronic model of space pragmatics of insults (2000), and then examine pragmatic interfaces with semantics and morpho-syntax in the comedy. In fact, *The Country Wife* presents a rich and varied panorama well suited to a pragmatist analysis of taboo language, i.e. insults, offences, swearwords, etc. The offensive discourse, albeit primarily concerning pragmatics, has numerous interfaces with various levels of linguistic analysis, from phonetics/phonology to syntax and lexical semantics, with the main purpose, I will argue, of threatening and undermining the honour of the characters in the play, understood as virtue and reputation, and ultimately, in pragmatic terms, as facework. I believe that power relations among characters are explained in terms of (im)polite conversational exchanges that also highlight social and gender boundaries at a time in the late seventeenth century when such issues were pivotal. Therefore, adopting Wycherley's best-known comedy as case study for a pragmatist analysis of insults I want to offer an in-depth, yet limited, exploration of the conscious exploitation of linguistic strategies by Restoration playwrights.

KEYWORDS: *The Country Wife*; honour; facework; (im)politeness strategies; pragmatic interfaces

1. Introduction

“Restoration drama sparkles by comparison with the virtual nullity which followed it . . . The plays which followed, though informed by higher moral intentions, were dull, un-lifelike, fundamentally insincere” (Collins 1957, 156, 171). As excessive and severe as it might seem, Collins' comment about eighteenth-century drama highlights at least one fundamental aspect of Restoration comedies, i.e., their frankness and straight talking. However, when commenting on Collins' statement, Jucker affirms: “[i]t seems that

* Sapienza University of Rome - fabio.ciambella@uniroma1.it

excessively polite drama does not make for good entertainment” (2016, 111).¹ Therefore, Collins highlights that Restoration drama is not dull, un-lifelike, and insincere; similarly, Jucker implicitly states that it is enjoyable, lifelike, and sincere, despite not being unavoidably polite (as other scholars have noticed before him; see, among others, Thompson 1984, 71-91; Knapp 2000).

Moving from these premises, one of the main assumptions of this article is that, at least in the case study analysed here, i.e. William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* (1675), being sincere does not necessarily imply politeness, understood as a pragmatic strategy, just as being locutionarily polite can hide illocutionary insincere speech acts (which hence become indirect speech acts where locution and illocution do not correspond), whose perlocutionary force changes according to the characters involved in or excluded from the conversational context. An immediate example is, according to Knapp, the equivocal use of the adjective “kind”, which is “used between men in the story claiming to be beneficent to one another, when the audience knows they are actually plotting elaborate competitions” (2000, 458).

Taking this into account, this paper focuses on taboo language (esp. insults and curses) adopted by characters in the play, aimed at explicitly/implicitly, directly/indirectly offending other characters. To this purpose, I will first combine Alan and Burridge’s socio-cultural model on taboo language (2006) with pragmatic frameworks of impoliteness (Culpeper 1996 and following revisions/integrations) and with Jucker and Taavitsainen’s diachronic model of pragmatic space of insults (2000), and then examine pragmatic interfaces with semantics and morpho-syntax in the comedy.

Before dealing with methodological issues, however, one must first understand why taboo language is important in *The Country Wife*, at the same time contextualising this comedy of “generic instability, equivocation about moral norms, and linguistic slippage” (Knapp 2000, 452) within its historical and cultural background. In his recent study of manners and politeness in Restoration and eighteenth-century drama, Jucker considers a series of corpora about late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary and non-literary texts, then zooms in on Restoration drama, creating a sample corpus of all the plays by Behn, Wycherley, and *The Man of Mode* by Etherege. By simply extracting four politeness terms, i.e. “manners”, “civil”, “polite”, and “courteous”, Jucker notices that in the Restoration period “the civil set stands out as far more frequent than the others” (Jucker 2020, 107; emphasis in the original), as reported in a histogram (Fig. 1):

¹ Jucker writes this as a comment to his analysis of post-Restoration comedies.

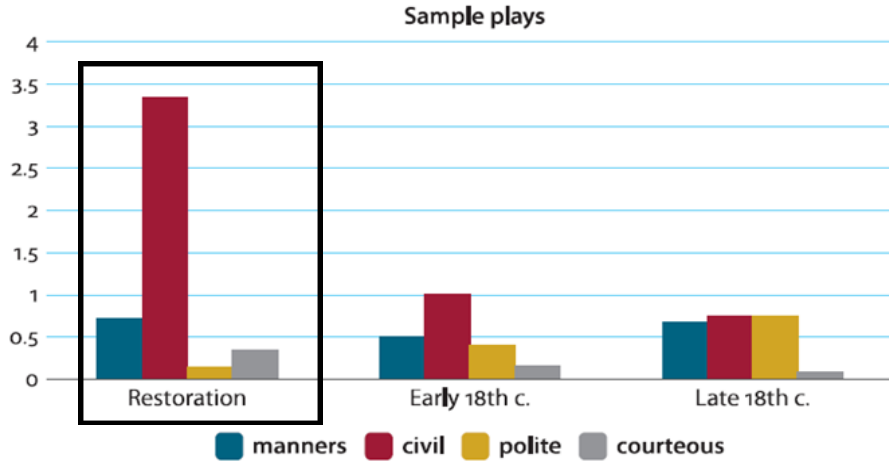


Fig. 1: Relative frequency (normalised per 10k tokens) of four politeness terms in the three different time periods considered by Jucker (2020, 107)

The list of keywords considered is improved by analysing Aphra Behn’s *The Town Fop* (1676) where “the discourse of proper behaviour is mainly concerned with such features of character, and, in fact . . . the terms *honour* and *reputation* . . . stand out with frequent occurrences” (Jucker 2020, 110; emphasis in the original).

Taking the four politeness key terms listed above and the two extra key terms Jucker found in Behn’s *The Town Fop*, a comedy which shares common traits with *The Country Wife* that was published only one year earlier (see Heilman 1982; Williams 1999), I have created a similar bar chart for Wycherley’s comedy (see Fig. 2 below):

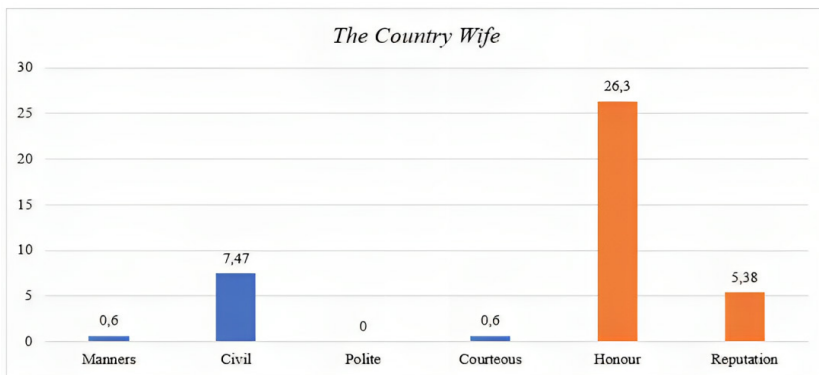


Fig. 2: Relative frequency (normalised per 10k tokens) of politeness key terms in *The Country Wife*

Table 1 below provides additional details about the absolute frequency of the lexical families sought and the forms found for each family:

Key term	Lexical form(s)	Absolute frequency
Manners	Unmannerly	2
Civil	Civil (19)	25
	Civilest (1)	
	Civility (3)	
	Civilly (2)	
Polite	-	0
Courteous	Courteous (1)	2
	Uncourteous (1)	
Honour	Honour (87)	88
	Dishonour (1)	
Reputation	Reputation	18

Table 1: Absolute frequency of key terms and lexical forms belonging to their families in *The Country Wife* (total number of tokens: 33,465)

Figure 2 and Table 1 confirm the trend highlighted by Jucker for *The Town Fop*, with *honour* being the most important key term in *The Country Wife*. My replication of Jucker's preliminary quantitative analysis² seems to confirm, at least from an exclusively quantitative standpoint by now, Morris' assertion that "The Country Wife is a play about honor" (1972, 3).³

I would argue that taboo language in the comedy is strictly connected to the late-seventeenth-century notion of honour, understood essentially as virtue and reputation (Morris 1972, 4; Knapp 2000, 461-4). According to Keller (1982), the idea of honour, typical of Restoration comedies such as *The Country Wife*, has ancient roots in history and anthropology (e.g. the Roman and the Medieval codes of honour). She calls "shame sanction culture[s]" those societies "governed by shame rather than guilt" (64), and includes

² Another noteworthy quantitative analysis about Restoration comedies has been attempted by Evans (2023), focusing on interjections.

³ Discussing honour in *The Country Wife* and Restoration drama in general is a rather farfetched and slippery endeavour for this article. Nevertheless, some issues concerning the idea of honour, connected with taboo language in the comedy, will be tackled. For further details about honour in *The Country Wife* and Restoration drama in general, see, besides Morris 1972, also Brown Watson 1960, esp. 1-162; Thompson 1984, 75-80; Markley 1988, 138-94; Knapp 2000, 461-4.

Restoration comedy within this group, as she considers it to be a culture-specific manifestation of the English shame sanction society at the end of the seventeenth century. Knapp talks about shame and guilt connected to honour in terms of a bifurcation:

The bifurcation of the word *honor* in Renaissance usage is a sign of the vacillation in seventeenth-century thought and feeling between a shame culture in which one's moral identity rests on public esteem or disgrace and a guilt culture which stresses inward awareness. (2000, 461; emphasis in the original)

Such characters as Pinchwife, for instance, embody the Puritan ethics of the Restoration era, more concerned about public shame and reputation than actual guilt for committing sins. The so-called 'virtuous gang' (Matalene 1982, 404, 407-9; Thompson 1984, *passim*), i.e. Lady Fidget, her sister-in-law Lady Dainty Fidget, and their friend Mrs Squeamish, is another group of characters deeply rooted in Puritan values and matters concerning honour. Similarly to Pinchwife,

[t]he ironies produced by when the 'virtuous gang' speak of *honor* in its public, social sense, as 'reputation', but expect to be understood as meaning a more personal and intimate ethical probity are deliberately exposed by Horner in his role of satirist. (Knapp 2000, 461; emphasis in the original)

Focusing on this connotation of honour, *The Country Wife*, affirms Keller, is dominated by instances of "social controls" (1982, 64) and face⁴ preservation that regulate the relationships between characters. On a linguistic level, this social control, aimed at damaging or preserving one's honour and facework, results in a complex system of "corrupted language" (Morris 1972, 6), where explicit/implicit insults and offences serve essentially two main pragmatic functions: 1) attacking a character who is not considered honourable or who is thought to behave dishonourably, and 2) preserving one's positive face (see Section 2) when somebody feels his/her honour is threatened.

⁴ The most famous and scholarly accepted notion of face was given by Erving Goffman (1955, 213; 1967). It is "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes". This connotation of face and its preservation are in close connection with the notion of honour, understood as rank and reputation, in Restoration comedies.

2. Methodology

Given that “both taboo language and impolite language . . . [are] sensitive to local contexts” (Culpeper 2018, 28), as far as methodological issues are concerned, in the analysis carried out in the next section, I first draw on Culpeper’s face-based impoliteness theory (1996 and later revisions), then integrate it with Allan and Burrige’s socio-cultural framework of *X-phemisms* (2006), and lastly with Jucker and Taavitsainen’s diachronic taxonomy of the pragmatic space of insults (2000). This latter theory offers a more detailed framework of insults based on their micro-linguistic characteristics, and effects on interlocutors (considering the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary force of tabooed speech acts).

Resorting to Brown and Levinson’s face-based view of politeness, it was Culpeper who first listed taboo words within a model of impoliteness (1996 and ff.), in particular as one of the ten output strategies of positive impoliteness,⁵ defined as “the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee’s positive face wants” (1996, 356), that is, a series of speech acts by the speaker (hereafter S) aimed at hindering the hearer’s (hereafter H) “perennial desire that his wants (or the actions/acquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable” (Brown and Levinson 1987, 101). This belonging of taboo language to the macro-category of positive impoliteness is reinforced by Culpeper in 2018, when he states that tabooed expressions are “a subgroup within impoliteness”, hence “impoliteness covers much more than taboo language” (29). Paraphrasing Brown and Levinson’s definition of positive face wants, in *The Country Wife* the characters’ positive face can be interpreted as their desire for their honour, understood as the main value deriving and resulting from their actions, to be preserved and admired.

Although not overtly resorting either to Brown and Levinson’s or Culpeper’s (im)politeness theories, Allan and Burrige’s analysis of taboo expressions begins by “examin[ing] politeness and impoliteness as they interact with orthophemism (straight talking), euphemism (sweet talking) and dysphemism (speaking offensively)” (2006, 1). When defining orthophemism, euphemism, and dysphemism, the scholars identify taboo words mainly with dysphemism, defined as “a word or phrase with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance” (31). For this reason, there appears to be a close correspondence between Culpeper’s definition of positive impoliteness output strategies and Allan and Burrige’s dysphemism.

This almost one-to-one association between taboo words (hence positive impoliteness output strategies) and dysphemism can also be easily applied

⁵ “[S]wear[ing], or use of abusive profane language” (1996, 358).

to orthophemism, which “is typically more formal and more direct (or literal) than the corresponding euphemism” (Allan and Burrige 2006, 33), or to euphemism, “more colloquial and figurative (or indirect) than the corresponding orthophemism” (ibid.), as reported in Figure 3 below. As defined by Allan and Burrige, euphemisms and orthophemisms

avoid possible loss of face by the speaker, and also the hearer [and] arise from the conscious or unconscious self-censoring; they are used to avoid the speaker being embarrassed and/or ill thought of and, at the same time, to avoid embarrassing and/or offending the hearer or some third party. This coincides with the speaker being polite. (2006, 32-3)

Therefore, Allan and Burrige insert both orthophemism and euphemism within politeness theory⁶ (albeit not mentioning Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory explicitly).

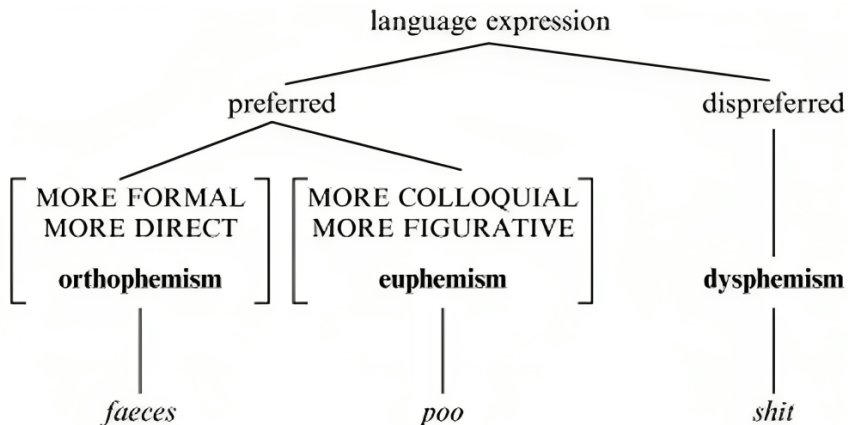


Fig. 3: X-phemism model by Allan and Burrige (2006, 34)

The definition of orthophemism and euphemism and their adherence to face-based models of (im)politeness is not central to this article, although some insults in *The Country Wife* can be understood as euphemistic, as seen briefly in the analytic sections below. What is important to explore in this theoretical framework of taboo language applied to Wycherley’s comedy is the complex use of dysphemism by the characters.

The character’s preference for dispreferred taboo expressions continuously endangers their mutual relationships in the play. But why?

⁶ This somehow contradicts Culpeper’s assertion that “euphemisms are virtually absent from politeness theory” (2018, 39), if one considers Allan and Burrige’s a politeness theory of taboo language. See also Crespo-Fernández 2005 for another face-based attempt to contextualise euphemisms within a politeness framework.

Why should characters bother threatening others' honour and positive face wants? I believe the answer lies in their complex power relations: the more powerful a character is (or thinks s/he is), the more frequent s/he insults others. As noticed by Culpeper (1996, 355), Brown and Levinson's politeness framework states that each time S wants to damage H's face work through a face threatening act (hereafter FTA), "but wishes to maintain the face of those involved, one will undertake politeness work appropriate to the face threat of the act". In other words, in Brown and Levinson's theory, politeness strategies are adopted to avoid insulting or offending H directly, with a pretence to "enhancing or supporting face" (356). On the contrary, in Culpeper's impoliteness framework, "impoliteness strategies are a means to attack face" (ibid.). To measure the extent of an FTA, Brown and Levinson hypothesise that "the seriousness or weightiness of a particular FTA x is compounded of both risk to S's face and risk to H's face" (1987, 76). Choosing politeness or impoliteness strategies is a matter of calculation: S decides whether to be polite or impolite according to three dimensions: "relative power (P) of H over S, the social distance (D) between S and H, and the ranking of the imposition (R) involved in doing the face-threatening act" (Brown and Levinson 1987, 12). These three factors combined result in the weight (W) of any given FTA x :

$$W_x = P(S, H) + D(S, H) + R_x \quad (76)$$

This equation perfectly explains why the characters who are insulted more than others in Wycherley's comedy are the fop Sparkish and such women as Margery and Alithea, as seen in the next section. In fact, both the relative power exerted over them and the social distance (not only understood in terms of social status, but also homosocial relations) which separate them from the other characters contribute to increasing the weight of the insults against them.

The analysis carried out below will benefit also from Jucker and Taavitsainen pragmatic framework of insults (2000), which enriches Culpeper's and Alan and Burridge's investigations of taboo language with a consideration of micro-linguistic aspects and interactional issues. The scholars' list of five parameters, each characterised by sub-characteristics disposed on continua, is given below (Fig. 4).

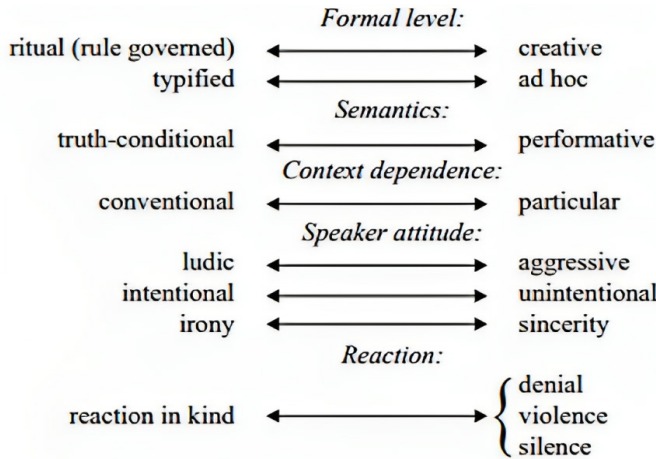


Fig. 4: Jucker and Taavitsainen’s pragmatic space of insults (2000, 74)

This scheme is explained by the two scholars as follows:

The first two dimensions concern the formal level of the insults. In the literature on insults there is usually a distinction between ritual and personal insults. However, the ritual should not be seen in direct opposition to the personal. There are two dimensions involved: the ritual as rule-governed versus the creative as not following conventionalised patterns, and the ludic versus aggressive . . . On the same formal level we distinguish between typified and *ad hoc* insults . . . On the semantic level, we distinguish between truth-conditional and performative insults. This distinction is useful in order to distinguish between slanders and slurs, on the one hand, and name-calling and expletives, on the other. This distinction is important for various forms of verbal dueling. The insults that the contestants hurl at each other must be perceived to be blatantly untrue. Abuse which has some basis in truth is likely to turn the verbal dueling from playful to serious . . . Oaths and swearing are not in themselves insults since they do not encode a predication about a target, but they may be perceived as insults if the addressee perceives them as disrespectful. This may be an intrusion into the addressee’s personal territory to the extent that swearing in the presence of the addressee suggests that the speaker deems this to be appropriate in the presence of the addressee. The dimensions on the next level are concerned with the attitude of the speaker . . . Insults may also be unintentional. As we have outlined above, insults are primarily perlocutionary. An utterance may have the effect of wounding the addressee even if the speaker did not mean to offend him/her . . . Furthermore, we distinguish between conventionalised insults and particularised insults . . . Conventionalised insults are those which in normal circumstances are understood as insults by all members of a speech community, e.g. slanderous remarks, contemptuous remarks, name calling, and demeaning expletives. In

this area the analyst is on fairly safe ground since the illocutionary force of the utterance encodes the intention to have a particular perlocutionary effect . . . Particularized insults, on the other hand, are those which do not have this conventional force. They are more difficult to identify for the analyst because they depend on the reaction of the target to an utterance that does not have this conventional force. And it is in this category that unintentional insults may occur. The target (who was not targeted by the speaker) perceives a predication about himself/herself as face-threatening and as having been made with the intention to demean, wound or outrage him/her. The last dimension concerns the reaction of the target. A personal insult requires a denial or an excuse, while a ritual insult requires a response in kind . . . Flytings may either end in actual violence or in silence, with which one of the contenders admits his inferiority. (74-6)

In the case of *The Country Wife*, Jucker and Taavitsainen's framework will be of particular interest when dealing with interfaces between pragmatics and other levels of linguistic analysis. In fact, as will be shown later, such interfaces contribute, for instance, to the great level of creativity and 'ad hocness' of some syntactically complex insults (on a formal plan), which also result in some ludic, intentional and ironic use of taboo expressions (by S's side).

3. Analysis and Discussion

Bearing in mind the methodological framework outlined above, as well as the main reason why taboo language is so important in *The Country Wife*, i.e. attacking or defending one's honour, a close reading of the play helped me gauge the analysis of taboo language and divide it into three sections, from the macro- to the micro-textual level. First, I will analyse two emblematic scenes, i.e. 1.1 and 2.1, which show similarities and differences between insults towards 'weak', unwitty men and women; then, I will focus on interfaces between pragmatics, phonetics/phonology, rhetoric, and syntax, examining the effects of the many insults built around syntactical structures such as long pre-modification and *tri/tetracola*. Lastly, I will focus on the lexical and semantic level, exploring the most recurrent insults represented by single lexical units and the most common semantic fields they belong to.

3.1 Insulting the Fop and the Women

Insulting fops and women either explicitly or implicitly is one of the main characteristics shared by most comedies of manners of the Restoration period, probably because such characters "spend their time" together, and "have interests in common" (Staves 1982, 414) such as fashion. In particular,

in the case of female characters, matters of power (im)balance between men and women are highlighted by the use of taboo language and impoliteness, which will be explored in this paragraph.

Such fops as Sparkish are described as effeminate men concerned with physical appearance and fashion, and who enjoy being with women, not for any sexual motive (they are actually almost considered asexual) but simply because they enjoy their company. In *The Country Wife*, they are victims of the insults of rakes, libertines, and bullies such as Horner, Harcourt, Dorilant, and Pinchwife, for a variety of reasons.

Sparkish is introduced in the middle of 1.1 by a servant of Horner's. The landlord and his friends Dorilant and Harcourt share a witty repartee describing Sparkish with sharp similes and comparisons before he comes on stage. The reader and audience are thus introduced to Sparkish by concocted insults that amuse them and create a horizon of expectation that they are more inclined to confirm when he appears onstage than if he were introduced with blunter insults. As observed by Knapp, "[t]he gallants in *The Country Wife* place a high priority on witty conversation and object to the witless Sparkish's interference to it" (2000, 454). In particular, Horner is often praised by the critics for his "stylistically significant" use of language, which distinguishes him from his fellows. As noted by Markley,

Horner's language marks him as a creature of his age, although a more complex and ambiguous one than audiences had encountered before 1674. His speech is epigrammatic, almost gnomic; in contrast, Dorilant's and Harcourt's language is less tightly structured and more dependent on conventional images of town life. (1988, 161)

Horner and his friends' witty repartee begins with the intentionally ironic expression "my dear friend" (1.1.209),⁷ and then abruptly shifts into a series of dysphemisms astutely built on similes and comparisons, which "damage the addressee's positive face wants" (Culpeper 1996, 356); i.e. they attack Sparkish's honour, understood as his reputation and his good opinion of himself, as Dorilant notices. Sparkish is compared to "the worst fiddlers [who] run themselves into all companies" (1.1.216-17), or to "a false jewel amongst true ones" (1.1.220-1). Moreover, his company is "as troublesome to us as a cuckold's when you have a mind to his wife's" (1.1.221-2), or "like rooks to the gamesters, who . . . are so far from contributing to the play that only serve to spoil the fancy of those that do" (1.1.229-32). Lastly, "[h]e signifies no more to't than Sir Martin Mar-all's gaping and awakening thrumming upon

⁷ All quotations from *The Country Wife* are from the New Mermaids edition (Wycherley 2014). Act, scene, and line number(s) from this edition are given in parentheses. See *infra* for bibliographical reference.

the lute does his man's voice and music" (1.1.224-6). Sparkish's obsession with honour and his thinking highly of himself are undermined even before his entrance by others describing him as an annoying, false, and useless nobleman with a great self-esteem, but who, like fake jewels, has a "cracked title" (1.1.323) and is broke, as affirmed by Horner later in the scene.

It must be noted that at this stage in the comedy, offenses towards Sparkish are not directly addressed to him, not because Horner, Harcourt, and Dorilant are afraid of him, but simply because he would not understand their repartee, which is a privilege, an advantage only readers and audience enjoy. About the insults towards Sparkish, Martínez García has observed that "he is a classic foolish fop, so obsessed with being perceived as witty that although a cascade of insults is thrown at him, he only takes offense when his intelligence is put into question" (2017, 6). As a matter of fact, in 2.1, after a long series of insults by the libertine Harcourt, reported to Sparkish by Alithea, the fop gets angry only when he understands that the libertine "disparage[d] [his] parts" and so his "honour's concerned" (2.1.289-90). This scene is certainly one of the most interesting to analyse using the pragmatic framework of taboo language outlined in the previous section, since offences towards women succeed one another at great speed, thus establishing a clear power (im)balance between men and women in the play.

In 2.1, Pinchwife, the foolish jealous husband of Margery, the country wife of the title, enters the stage and begins insulting his wife and his sister Alithea. Unlike Horner and his friends' witty repartee, Pinchwife's offences draw on taboo words and are much more direct and aggressive. In fact, as Thompson affirmed, Pinchwife's language is always characterised by "brutality and violence" (1984, 71), unlike "Horner's complex and clever language" (89). His insults are not intended to amuse the readers/audience or to create any kind of sympathetic relationship between character and spectators, but to show him as the prototypical jealous fool who, in the end, inevitably becomes a cuckold. His first line, "You're a fool!" (2.1.36), used against his wife, definitely belongs to positive impoliteness output strategies, i.e. "use taboo words" (Culpeper 1996, 358). When Alithea tries to defend her sister-in-law, her brother insults her as well: "You would have her as impudent as yourself, as arrant a jill-flirt, a gadder, a magpie, and – to say all – a mere notorious town-woman?" (2.1.39-41). By insulting his sister, Pinchwife highlights one of the main themes of this comedy, but also of Restoration comedies of manners in general: the well-known contrast between such concepts as Town and Country. Pinchwife insults his sister because he thinks she is trying to corrupt the genuine but also naïve Country values of his wife with the dangerous standards of fashion, manners, etc., associated with the Town. He wants his wife to remain docile and submissive, ignorant of the emancipation of such "impudent . . . town-wom[e]n" (2.1.39-41) as Alithea. Far from voicing presentist feminist views,

Alithea defends Margery, who goes off crying, not because she deserves that as a woman, but again in terms of honour, since otherwise “the honour of [Pinchwife’s] family shall sooner suffer” (2.1.42-3), says Alithea. Margery, at Alithea’s side, does not reply to her husband’s insults (silence being one of the addressee’s reactions, according to Jucker and Taavitsainen’s framework), but addresses him with markers of endearment such as “bud”, “dear”, and “love”, clearly exhibiting a strong conversational power imbalance in favour of Pinchwife, who will continue to offend her virtue and reputation later on, when he locks her up in her room, ordering her with “In, baggage, in!” (2.1.133). The man reinforces his powerful position not only with taboo words but also through directive speech acts such as the just-mentioned order, or such commands as “[h]ark you, mistress”, “do not talk so”, “[h]old, hold!”, “I bid you keep her in ignorance” (2.1.58), etc. Moreover, he is also inclined to “call the other names – use derogatory nominations” (Culpeper 1996, 358), e.g. “Mistress Minx” (2.1.97) or, later in the play, “Mistress Flippant” (3.1.22), another positive impoliteness output strategy identified by Culpeper. Yet, as often happens in the “highly encoded gendered practices” (Martínez García 2017, 4) of Restoration drama, foolish jealous husbands become cuckholds: Margery sleeps with Horner and the power balance changes. For instance, in the last scene, Margery no longer obeys orders, thus passing from silence to denial and violence: “HORNER Peace, dear idiot! / MRS PINCHWIFE Nay, I will not peace” (5.4.345-6); “PINCHWIFE . . . a country wife, with a country murrain to me. / MRS PINCHWIFE . . . my musty husband” (5.4.409-12). A vocal reaction by the target of his insults makes Pinchwife stop offending her, because it is now useless; too late does he realise that “[h]is honour is least safe” (5.4.428).

3.2 Pre-modification and Tri/Tetracola: Pragmatic Interfaces with Phonetics, Rhetoric, Rhythm, and Syntax

Another interesting aspect of taboo language in *The Country Wife*, which foregrounds the great creativity of Wycherley’s offensive discourse, is connected to the interface between pragmatics and other branches of linguistics. In this section I will deal with phonetics, rhetoric, rhythm, and syntax together, because the examples scrutinised share a focus on noun phrases (hereafter NPs) following the structure ‘(determiner)+(adjective[s])+noun’. In particular, I will examine syntactically complex insults formed by 1) NPs comprising 3+ pre-modifiers and a noun, and 2) tricola and tetracola. To facilitate this analysis, a comprehensive list of this kind of insults is provided in Table 2 below:

NPs (3+ pre-modifiers)	Tricola and Tetracola
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HARCOURT True, damned, tell-tale woman. (2.1.275) • HARCOURT Damned, senseless, impudent, virtuous jade! (2.1.281) • HORNER Raw, peevish, out-of-humoured, affected, dull, tea-drinking, arithmetical fop (2.1.439-40) • LADY FIDGET Stinking, mortified, rotten French wether (2.1.488) • DORILANT Old, beetle-headed, lickerish drones (3.2.14-5) • SQUEAMISH This ugly, greasy, dirty sloven? (4.3.140-1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PINCHWIFE A jill-flirt, a gadder, a magpie, and . . . a notorious town-woman? (2.1.40-1) • HARCOURT A bubble, a coward, a senseless idiot, a wretch (2.1.259-60) • ALITHEA A wretch . . . A common bubble . . . A coward . . . A senseless, drivelling idiot (2.1.279-88) • PINCHWIFE You infamous wretch, eternal shame of your family . . . thou legion of bawds (3.2.546-59) • SQUEAMISH This woman-hater, this toad, this ugly, greasy, dirty sloven (4.3.140-1) • OLD LADY SQUEAMISH This harlotry, this impudent baggage, this rambling tomrig? (4.3.159-60) • SPARKISH I'll . . . call her as many crocodiles, sirens, harpies, and other heathenish names as a poet would do a mistress who had refused to hear his suit (5.3.18-20)

Table 2: List of insults comprising NPs preceded by 3+ pre-modifiers, and tri/tetracola

As Mandon-Hunter noticed when dealing with Congreve's comedies, "the offensive discourse found in the comedies [is] characterised by . . . great inventiveness" (2013, 95), thus mirroring Jucker and Taavitsainen's creativity and 'ad hocness' parameters of formality of insults (see Section 2 above). The examples in Table 2 confirm that also Wycherley shows great inventiveness with regards to taboo language, at least in *The Country Wife*, as such interfaces between pragmatics and other levels of linguistic analysis demonstrate. From a phonetic standpoint, for example, it can be observed that the majority of consonant sounds in the examples above – both columns – are plosives, which phonetically reproduce the strength of the insults uttered by the characters in the play.

Another feature that connects NPs with long pre-modification and the *tri/tetracola* analysed here is rhythm and the rhythmic effects they can produce on the audience. On the one hand, the long strings of adjectives in the left-hand column above create a horizon of expectation in the reader/audience who wait for the phrase to end and discover which is its head, i.e. the noun which functions as the head of the noun phrase that in English is normally on the right, so it is the last element of the phrase to be read/heard. Waiting to read/hear the head of the NP may accelerate the speed of reading and utterance in long phrases, as stated by phonologists (see, among others, Fónagy and Magdics 1960, who affirm that the shorter the phrase, the slower its speed of utterance), especially in such stress-timed languages as English, where the sentence stress is usually on the last content/lexical word of a string, which in the cases reported above correspond to the right-positioned head of the NP. Moreover, if uttered at a certain speed and in a single breath, the NPs analysed can create comic effects, giving the impression that characters are literally ‘vomiting’ insults at each other. Similarly, the *tri/tetracola* listed in the right-hand column of Table 2 accelerate the utterance speed of the entire sentence. In fact, *tri/tetracola* are anaphora-like asyndetic patterns which, by their nature, speed both reading and utterance (see Quinn 2010, 7-10; Kolln and Gray 2017, 199).

At a rhetorical level, on the other hand, the insistence on and repetition of terms belonging to the same grammatical class – i.e. adjectives, on the one hand, and on the other, similar syntactic structures such as *tri/tetracola* – amplify the importance and derogatory effect of the insults uttered by the characters in the play and channel the reader’s/audience’s attention.

Therefore, reading/uttering both NPs with 3+ pre-modifiers and *tri/tetracola* magnifies the impolite dysphemistic effect of the insults and offences they represent, also through the alliteration of hard consonant sounds such as plosives, and accelerates the speed of utterance, as if the characters were goading one another along with insults.

3.3 Tabooed Lexical Units and Semantic Fields

In dealing with interfaces between pragmatics and lexical semantics, this last analytical section focuses on the most recurring lexical items used as or within taboo expressions, and then on frequent semantic fields to which insults in *The Country Wife* belong. The following examples show lesser levels of inventiveness and creativity, the insults and curses being more typified and, on a contextual level, more conventional.

Among the most frequent dysphemisms in the play, the lexeme *fool* occupies a prominent position. It occurs 47 times in four different forms, i.e.

“fool” (29), “fools”(8), “fooling” (5), and “foolish” (5), and it is used almost by anyone. A glance at the contexts where the lexeme appears is provided in Table 3, which shows the co-textual neighbourhood of the string ‘fool*’, with a span of 5 words to the left and 5 to the right, obtained by uploading the text of *The Country Wife* on the Voyant Tools, a user-friendly online freeware for basic corpus-informed searches.

the report. No—this formal	fool	and women! Enter Sir Jasper
in town shows himself a	fool	every night to us, that
Tis my maxim, he's a	fool	that marries; but he's a
that does not marry a	fool	. What is wit in a
from his knowledge. Pinch. A	fool	cannot contrive to make her
box in their hands to	fool	with only, and hinder other
nangered thee? Pinch. You're a	fool	. [Mrs. Pinchwife goes aside, and
must hate London. Alith. The	fool	has forbid me discovering to
laugh more than a stark	fool	, hal hal I shall burst
I am, I am a	fool	, that is, no wit, out
cards, blindman's-buff, or the	fool	with, sometimes! Mrs. Squeam. Foh
known thee sup with a	fool	for his drinking; if he
man drinks often with a	fool	, as he tosses with a
man in the world, a	fool	upon the stage you know
you shall hardly see a	fool	upon the stage but he's
a play, and dubbed a	fool	. Dor. Blame 'em not, they
must leave you.—[Aside.] The	fool	her gallant and she will
should you do with a	fool	to your husband? You intend
you think I am a	fool	? Pinch. [Aside.] She's afraid I
Lord, what d'ye make a	fool	of me for? Don't I
think me so arrant a	fool	, I cannot seal a letter
here to do? Pinch. This	fool	here now! Spark. What! drawn
is a cuckold, that every	fool	can make him ridiculous!—[Aloud
sir. Horn. What means the	fool	? if she and I agree
find out no easy country	fool	to abuse? none but me
Lucy. You'll believe then a	fool	may be made jealous now
like me, would marry a	fool	for fortune, liberty, or title
ay. Dor. Why, thou jealous	fool	, dost thou doubt it? he's
trusting your secret to a	fool	. [Aside to Horner. Horn. Peace

neither. Spark. Pshaw! with your	fooling	we shall lose the new
him go, I cannot stay	fooling	any longer; I tell you
make an end of this	fooling	. Har. With all my soul
short, I am for no	fooling	. Horn. Nor I neither: therefore
Pinch. An eunuch! Pray, no	fooling	with me. Quack. I'll bring
my love. Horn. No; a	foolish	rival and a jealous husband
that make men do all	foolish	things, make 'em write songs
story. Alith. So, so; very	foolish	. Spark. Lord, if you won't
64 Spark. Pshaw! upon a	foolish	scruple, that our parson was
Who trusts it with a	foolish	wife or friend. A Dance
as you do with rich	fools	, to laugh at 'em and
the better for you; for	fools	are most easily cheated when
serving-men only their stage-	fools	: but these rogues must have
Thou art one of those	fools	that think their attendance at
than women titles, or fortune	fools	. [Points at Sparkish. [Pg 298
like Fortune, only true to	fools	? Dor. Thou sha't not stir
Formerly women of wit married	fools	for a great estate, a
But men in love are	fools	; women may well be so

Table 3: Co-textual neighbourhood of the node 'fool*' (5L-5R) obtained by the Voyant Tools

The results provided by the software show that “fool” is used as a derogatory term mainly signifying “[a] person whose behaviour suggests a lack of intelligence, common sense, or good judgement; a silly person, an idiot” (*OED*, n.A.1.1), or “[a] person who is made to appear ridiculous by, or is in the control of, another; spec. a person who is tricked or duped; a gullible person” (*OED*, n.A.1.3). What is interesting is the continuous, intended ambiguity connected to the two connotations of “fool”, sometimes indicating a character who deserves to be insulted for being such a silly person and an idiot, sometimes one to be pitied because s/he was tricked, and sometimes both. For instance, when Harcourt is courting Alitheia right under the nose of her fiancé Sparkish, and pretending to encourage her to be with him, he ambiguously affirms that she deserves a man “[w]ho loves you more than women titles, or fortune fools” (3.2.329), pointing at Sparkish. The idea of the link between fate, destiny, and fools is clearly Shakespearean. In *Romeo and Juliet* 3.1.316, Romeo affirms “I am Fortune’s fool”, indicating that he is being tricked by Fate. He has just married Juliet, so he hopes the feud between the two families is over; yet on the contrary, he kills Juliet’s cousin Tybalt to avenge the death of his best friend Mercutio. By stating that he is

the “fortune’s fool”, Romeo anticipates his exile to Mantua and laments that destiny does not want him and Juliet to be together, not even after they are officially wife and husband. This connotation of “fool” is clearly contained in the second definition of the lemma given above, and it seems that Harcourt is using this connotation to advise Alithea to marry Sparkish because he loves her more than fortune loves fools, i.e. more than destiny, which always rages against the most gullible and vulnerable. The stage direction indicates that at this precise moment Harcourt points at Sparkish. On the surface this means that Harcourt points at the man who loves Alithea more than fortune loves fools, but he is actually insulting him, pointing at a fool. This intended ambiguity between the first and second connotation of the lemma “fool” surely provokes reader/audience laughter and also reveals Harcourt’s true intention: he is not saying that Sparkish loves Alithea more than anything, hence she deserves him, but rather that Sparkish is a fool, hence she deserves better – i.e. Harcourt himself.

Another recurring lexeme sometimes indicating an insult is “rogue”. It occurs 32 times in the play, and, like “fool”, has at least two different connotations: “[a] dishonest, unprincipled person; a rascal, a scoundrel” (*OED*, n.A.2) or “[f]requently as a playful term of reproof or reproach or as a term of endearment” (*OED*, n.A.3). The co-occurrences of the keyword ‘rogue*’ (rogue and rogues) are reported in the Voyant Tools table below (Table 4):

What, my dear friend! a	rogue	that is fond of me
his wife’s. Har. No, the	rogue	will not let us enjoy
Dor. The usurer, a poor	rogue	, possessed of mouldy bonds and
atheist; and your noisy pert	rogue	of a wit, the greatest
I warrant you. Har. The	rogue	is as jealous as if
sight; for he’s a cunning	rogue	, and understands the town. Har
not: I’ll treat thee, dear	rogue	; thou sha’t spend none of
in’t.—[Aloud.] Come, my poor	rogue	, but thou likest none better
choice?—[To Alithea.] Dear little	rogue	, I told you I’d bring
one of those, my pretty	rogue	, that are to dance at
shalt enjoy me sometimes, dear	rogue	. By my honour, we men
ha! ha! a silly wise	rogue	would make one laugh more
what?—[To Harcourt.] Now, dear	rogue	, has not she wit? Har
it were so, my dear	rogue	, I ask thee pardon; but
see a lovelier creature? The	rogue	has reason to be jealous
let us torment this jealous	rogue	a little. [Pg 302] Har

Come, prithee kiss me, dear	rogue	: gad I was always, I
veal. Horn. O thou damned	rogue	I thou hast set my teeth
more civil and obliging, dear	rogue	. [Pg 342] Pinch. Who desired
Then she is obliging, dear	rogue	. Pinch. You'll make her welcome
begin. This is my false	rogue	. [Claps him on the back
art thou a dissembler, a	rogue	? hast thou— Horn. Sol 82
Dear Mr. Doctor, let vain	rogues	be contented only to be
love makes us beggars, poor	rogues	, egad—and wine— Horn. So
checked, and abused; yet the	rogues	will hang on. Horn. A
go, sir. Spark. Why, dear	rogues	— Dor. No, no. [They all
290] Spark. Come, you bubbling	rogues	you, where do we sup
truth, we hate the silly	rogues	; nay, so much, that we
their stage-fools: but these	rogues	must have gentlemen, with a
and count money before poor	rogues	. Pinch. He that shows his
on't; for the poor virtuous	rogues	would not have it known
are all three my false	rogues	too, and there's an end

Table 4: Co-textual neighbourhood of the node ‘rogue*’ (5L-5R) obtained by the Voyant Tools

First of all, “rogue(s)” is used only by men, except on a single occasion when it is uttered by Lady Fidget who, wanting to unmask Horner, insults him by using a typically male term: “a false rogue”. In this case, the dysphemism she uses belongs to Culpeper’s positive impoliteness output strategy “use inappropriate identity markers” (1996, 357), this time inappropriate not for H, but for S.

Even more so than with “fool”, the connotations of “rogue” are extremely difficult to distinguish. The term is sometimes used to indicate apparent or true homosocial intimacy (e.g. “HORNER What! My dear friend! a rogue that is fond of me”, 1.1.209), sometimes as a term of endearment towards women (especially by Pinchwife and Sparkish when addressing Margery and Alithea with “(my) dear/pretty rogue”), and sometimes as an out-and-out insult (e.g. “HORNER . . . your noisy pert rogue of a wit”, 1.1.245). Given its polysemy and consequent need of a meaningful context, rogue is often preceded by adjectives that help the reader/audience understand whether it is a marker of intimacy or an insult by connotating it positively (e.g. dear, little, pretty, wise, poor, etc.) or negatively (e.g. jealous, damned, false, vain, etc.).

Lastly, it is worth examining the semantic fields to which most insults in *The Country Wife* belong. We can distinguish at least three of them:

- 1) Insults belonging to medical jargon (esp. infectious diseases);
- 2) Offences connected to animal imagery;
- 3) Tabooed expressions pertaining to religion.

The first semantic field is characterised by offences and swearwords borrowed from the jargon of infectious diseases, i.e. pox, small-pox, plague, ulcer(s), canker, etc., while such insults and taboo expressions as “damn”, “damned”, “hell and damnation”, “the devil”, or “rakehell” belong to the semantic field of religion. Moreover, a series of dysphemisms concerns ferocious or slimy animals, e.g. crocodiles, dogs, drones, toads, and zoomorphic mythological creatures negatively connotated, i.e. sirens and harpies. In all the examples quoted above, as in contemporary English, we witness a process of semantic bleaching, or de-semanticisation, where single expressions are partially or completely deprived of the literal meaning pertaining to their semantic field, and only their pragmatic function of insults remains, based primarily on the metaphorical, less specific meaning associated with them. For instance, the late-sixteenth-century multiword expression “a pox on” somebody or something does not literally mean that someone is wishing someone else to literally fall ill with the pox; instead, the expression is used as a generic insult, almost a filler expression used to swear, to hurl general curses upon somebody. In this case, as in the majority of the others, the denotative meaning of “pox” vanishes and the metaphorical, less specific connotation of “something really bad” remains, resulting in generic curses, insults, and offenses. Nevertheless, in *The Country Wife*, this kind of insult generally also implies an attack on someone’s honour and reputation. For example, by comparing Alithea to sirens and harpies, Sparkish is accusing her of being a charmer of dubious reputation who lures men. Similarly, when Horner is called a toad by the so-called ‘virtuous gang’, they are saying that he is as smarmy as a toad, attacking his brand-new reputation as a respectable man (which he is actually faking) and making all other characters believe he is now impotent.

4. Conclusion

Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* presents a rich and varied panorama well suited to a pragmastylistic analysis of taboo language, i.e. insults, offences, swearwords, etc. The offensive discourse, albeit primarily concerning pragmatics, has numerous interfaces with various levels of linguistic analysis, from phonetics/phonology to syntax and lexical semantics, with the main purpose, I have argued, of threatening and undermining the honour of the characters in the play, understood as rank and reputation, and ultimately, in pragmatic terms, as facework.

Power relations among characters are explained in terms of (im)polite conversational exchanges that also highlight social and gender boundaries at a time in the late seventeenth century when such issues were pivotal. We have seen that within the complex social framework of *The Country Wife*, incisive insults – that is, those offences that make both readers and audience laugh, and other characters react – are uttered by witty characters such as the rake-hero Horner and his friends, and are aimed at foolish stereotyped personae, such as the fop Sparkish, or women. Other insults, on the contrary, such as those thrown by Pinchwife, are not incisive, are semantically and pragmatically empty, and the result is that, by the end of the play, the apparent power exerted by the character who insults is annihilated. In the case of Pinchwife, the many unjustified offences he directs to his wife and sister completely vanish in the last scene of the play when he must accept that he is a cuckold – the worst-ever humiliation his honour can receive.

Adopting Wycherley's best-known comedy as case study for a pragmastylistic analysis of insults I wanted to offer an in-depth, yet quantitatively limited, exploration of the conscious exploitation of linguistic strategies by Restoration playwrights. Further research may expand on this topic, on any other branch of pragmatics (see Evans 2023, quoted above), and broaden the corpus of Restoration plays analysed, given that there are few territories so unexplored from a linguistic and stylistic point of view as 1660-1737 drama (comedies in particular). Broadening the corpus would also mean increasing the need for tools (e.g. software, online platforms, websites, etc.) that can manage big data, such as those employed by corpus linguists (e.g. the Voyant Tools used in this article), to carry out more elaborate corpus-based or corpus-driven analysis of Restoration drama.

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