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About the journal

Aims & scope

English Studies at NBU (ESNBU) is an entirely open access, double-blind peer reviewed academic journal published by the Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures, New Bulgarian University in two issues per year, June and December, in print and online.

ESNBU welcomes original research articles, book reviews, discussion contributions and other forms of analysis and comment encompassing all aspects of English Studies and English for professional communication and the creative professions. Manuscripts are accepted in English. Translations of published articles are generally not accepted.

Submission and fees

Submissions are accepted from all researchers; authors do not need to have a connection to New Bulgarian University to publish in ESNBU.

There are **no submission fees** or **publication charges** for authors.

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ROAD - Directory of Open Access Scholarly Resources
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WoS Core Collection (ESCI) - Web of Science Emerging Sources Citation Index
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NSD - Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers
Brill Linguistic Bibliography
CEEAS - Central & Eastern European Academic Source (EBSCOhost)
ICI Index Copernicus - Journals Master list database
RSCI Core - Russian Science Citation Index (РИНЦ)
CNKI SCHOLAR (CNKI) China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database
ZDB - Zeitschriften Datenbank
EZB - Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek
BASE (Bielefeld Academic Search Engine)
iDiscover, the University of Cambridge's search and discovery system
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EDITOR'S MESSAGE

Stan Bogdanov,
Managing Editor
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English Studies at NBU is pleased to present Volume 12!

This issue opens with six literary studies. **Barbara Miceli** examines Anaïs Nin's journal through the lens of trauma, desire, and paternal attachment, revealing tensions beneath the narrative of therapeutic incest. **Antony Hoyte-West** explores exclusion, domination, and resistance in JJ Amaworo Wilson's *Nazaré*, while **Armela Panajoti** analyses Conrad's *The Shadow-Line* as a narrative of maturation through lived experience. **Farzad Kolahjooei** applies Lacanian and Kristevan perspectives to Hawthorne's *The Hollow of the Three Hills*, highlighting guilt, abjection, and female subjectivity. **Selçuk Şentürk** investigates "gender minimalism" in Georges Perec's *A Man Asleep*, and **Kristina Yasenova** examines how sound, space, and mortality intersect in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

The issue also features contributions on language, education, and translation. **Georgi Niagolov, Darya Lazarenko, and Snezhina Petrova** present Escape Hamlet, a gamified approach to combining Shakespeare studies with competence-based learning. **Evgeni Stanchev** introduces MedLex-25, a diagnostic tool revealing significant gaps between receptive and productive medical vocabulary knowledge. **Stanislav Bogdanov** proposes a process-oriented reconceptualization of noticing in second-language acquisition, while **Andrej Birčák** examines the limited integration of remote interpreting into Slovak interpreter training.

In translation and media studies, **Mehmet Erguvan** analyses Turkish remakes of British television dramas as sites of negotiation between national and transnational identities. **Betül Özcan Dost** evaluates Turkish–English neural machine translation using the xCOMET-XL metric and finds substantial alignment between automated and human assessment. **Harika Karavin Yüce** explores how illustrations in translated environmental children's books contribute to ecological awareness through paratranslation.

The issue concludes with two articles addressing academic integrity in contemporary higher education. **Diana Yankova** discusses the challenges posed by AI-assisted cheating and proposes strategies for designing authentic, AI-resistant assessments. **Elena Blagoeva** examines students' perceptions of academic misconduct and argues that lasting integrity depends not only on regulation but also on institutional culture and ethical education.

We wish you an engaging and rewarding reading experience.

Be well!

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THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF 'NON-TRAUMA': THE FANTASY OF THERAPEUTIC INCEST IN ANAÏS NIN'S JOURNAL

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Abstract

Anaïs Nin (1903–1977) is widely known for her erotic fiction, her controversial personal life, and her monumental journal, published in instalments during her lifetime and later in an uncensored version in the 1990s. This unexpurgated edition revealed that she had engaged in an incestuous relationship with her father, the composer Joaquín Nin (1879–1949), in 1933. In her journal, Nin presents the episode through a combination of introspective reflection and explicit detail, while narratively foregrounding what appears to be an absence of the guilt, shame, and trauma typically associated with incest. This article does not take that absence as an objective psychological fact; rather, it examines how Nin's self-representation rhetorically constructs the experience as potentially therapeutic. Within her writing, the sexualization of the father–daughter relationship is framed as a way of reworking earlier narratives of abandonment and emotional injury, a framing that can be read as part of a broader process of narrative control. Accordingly, this contribution analyzes the discursive strategies through which Nin stages incest as "non-traumatic," interrogating the fantasy of healing that emerges within her textual and psychic economy rather than positing the experience itself as emancipatory or curative.

Keywords: Anaïs Nin, American Literature, 20th Century, incest, journal, therapy, trauma, abandonment issues

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Anaïs Nin (1903-1977) is known as one of the most controversial writers of the 20th century, and also as a symbol of "freedom, excitement and discovery" (Evans, 1962, p. 218). Some commentators, for instance Milton Hoffman in the 1970s, went as far as saying that the writer had come to embody "the notion of personal freedom" (2001, p. 310) which made her look as the quintessential liberated woman.

Author of erotic novels and short stories, nonetheless she owes her fame to her journal, which was published in instalments while she was still alive and in an unexpurgated version in the 1990s. The journal is an embodiment of Nin's "preference of the personal to the impersonal, of the subjective to the objective" (Evans, 1962, p. 224) and it contains the very detailed account of her non-monogamous sexual life: she was married with two different men at the same time, she entertained several affairs (with men and women), and she had a brief but intense sentimental and sexual relationship with her own father. The affair with musician Joaquín Nin (1879-1949), who had abandoned his daughter and the entire family when the writer was eleven years old, is quite possibly the most controversial incident accounted for in the journal. The work itself was actually started and conceived as a long letter to her father right after his departure. As Sharon Spencer puts it, "[i]n a strategy that was to become typical, Nin countered a painful loss with a creative act" (1990, p. 58).

Nin reconnected with her father as an adult woman, initiating a relationship that unsettles conventional familial boundaries. While her journal frames the experience as lacking guilt, shame, or regret, this article reads that apparent absence not as an empirical conclusion but as a discursive performance through which Nin reconfigures trauma and agency.

In a study on father-daughter incest, Judith Lewis Herman noted that at the basis of this kind of relationships is always fear of the parent's abandonment and not the attempt to revive an earlier experience of caretaking (Lewis Herman, 2003, pp. 31,57). Moreover, while incestuous relationships are frequently associated with trauma for daughters, Nin's account stages the episode through an affective vocabulary of love, obsession, and desire, framing it as largely untroubled. The unspeakable act committed by the writer and her father loses all the connotates of traumatic experience and becomes—at least apparently—the ideal way to sever the ties with a man who had mistreated her, her brothers Thorvald and Joaquín, and their mother Rosa Culmell. Once an adult woman, her father became an idealized figure to look for in other men and relationships.

The aim of this contribution is to analyze how Nin deals with the incest taboo in her journal to demonstrate how the therapeutic function of the experience might not have been as effective as it seemed, and how this task was passed on to the journal and the writing process: a practice through which the artist was able to embrace a raw, long, and excruciating analysis of incest and its consequences.

The original abuse

Father–daughter incest is conventionally understood as a form of abuse. In this specific case, however — perhaps due to the adult age of the individuals involved or the consent the daughter claims to have expressed — the relationship is never explicitly defined as abusive within the writer's journals. This study does not adopt that self-characterization uncritically; rather, it distinguishes between Nin's narrative framing of the experience and the analytical perspective applied here, which recognizes the broader ethical and power dynamics that complicate notions of consent and agency in incestuous relationships. The behaviors that she really deemed as abusive dated back to another era of her life, the one that determines the creation of traumas that will likely leave an indelible trace on the psyche of the future adult. Furthermore, the incestuous act can be considered a rather twisted way to heal the original abuse, to avenge the helpless child she had been, and to fulfill the need to put back in place the missing piece in her emotional life: the love of her father.

Much space in the journal is taken up by memories of Nin's childhood connected with her father's mistreatments. The abandonment of the family, indeed, was only the final act of years of violence that the writer was able to put in a more objective perspective and recognize as vicious acts. Rationalizing the memories, Nin could recognize that "this man of power—her father—once overwhelmed, enslaved [her], dominated [her] life exerted tyranny, and then betrayed [her]. He brutalized [her] childish weakness and dependency" (Nin, 1971, p. 144). Such a statement reveals an apparent clarity and awareness of the dynamics of the relationship, and the true nature of the man.

The person described in the journal is a narcissistic figure, cruel to his family in words and actions, and even more cruel with the daughter because of her gender. As she writes in the wake of the long psychoanalytic sessions with Dr René Allendy (1889-1942), the fact that she was a girl and not a boy made things more complicated, and the father's behavior more sadistic, because the composer did not want a daughter. Whenever Nin describes the father of her childhood, she displays several adjectives that are always synonymous with "overcritical" and "cold". This latter is often symbolized by the color of his eyes—icy blue—always scanning family members, the female ones in particular, in search of flaws and imperfections to punish with a harsh comment (Nin, 1966, pp. 73-76).

There is a recurrent memory that the writer mentions several times in various volumes of the journal: when she caught typhoid fever as a child and risked her life; once she recovered, all her father could do was commenting on her appearance, saying she was ugly (Nin, 1966, pp. 73-76). The only moment that sees a reconciliation between father and daughter is tinged with perversion, but as with many abuses during childhood, its contours are blurred and generate mixed feelings in the abused. Nin remembers her father's passion for photography and how he used to take pictures of little Anaïs naked. She describes those moments as "lovely" (p. 86), as they were the only moments they spent together, and "Nin's only physical and emotional intimacy with her father" (Henke, 1997, p. 124). Yet the gesture bears palpable erotic undertones, and it also involves what Vikki Bell, in a Foucauldian fashion, defines as "the disciplinary power of the Father's gaze", which turns the daughter into a surface, "an object [...] whose objectification is revealed by her subjection to the abuse" (1993, p. 69). This sort of "ritual punishment" (Henke, 1997, p. 124), sometimes is administered in the guise of beatings. As claimed by Tristine Rainer, a sort of "apprentice" of Nin's on womanhood and sex, the spankings of the father "had sexualized her too young because he hit her place of pleasure" (2017, p. 89). Rainer also comments on the photographs' incident, pondering that the breaking of the boundaries by Nin's father could be the reason for the writer's own lack of them, and also for her habit of sexualizing everything (p. 253). This is a typical mechanism for survivors of incestuous abuse, because, again according to Bell, the position of the father in the life of the abused daughter makes "his influence predominate amongst the various ways which she could come to understand her self and her sexuality" (Bell, 1993, p. 68).

In both episodes, even if the incestuous dimension remains implicit or incomplete rather than explicitly consummated, a profoundly dysfunctional bond emerges between father and daughter, and "the traditional role of parenting […] is brutally replaced by dismantling, perversity, and pathological bonds" (Alizade, 2005, p. 108).

The narcissism of the man is another feature that appears quite obvious, considering his job and his ever-present female fans, his passion for luxury, his dandyism and social life (Nin, 1966, p. 91). This is something that predictably causes the jealousy of Nin's mother, with whom the author develops a complex relationship of love and hate, identification and utter rejection. Nin places herself between her parents and writes that "what he meant for my mother I also took for myself, yet I had hysterical sorrow when he finally abandoned her" (p. 77).

One more narcissistic feature that Nin recognizes is the man's habit of wearing a virtual mask that makes him charming with strangers, while hiding his real provocative nature, all too often displayed within the household, leading to arguments and fights always witnessed by the kids, who get used to them without understanding their reasons (p. 212). Yet all the toxic features of the man are not enough to produce a complete rejection of him; quite to the contrary, as an adult, Nin questions herself on why her father's insufficient love should remain indelible (p. 77). It is a typical dynamic, one she shares with her mother who, despite the abuses and cheatings, could not help but recognizing the husband's "power of illusion" that made her unable to love someone else, as "they all seemed so prosaic and plain and homely beside him" (Nin, 1971, p. 149). Consequently, the abandoned daughter needs a strategy to fill the void left by such a fierce yet irreplaceable figure: someone familiar who would act as a surrogate father for her, but with a happier outcome.

In search of a surrogate father figure

The study by Lewis Herman mentioned earlier in this chapter describes a typical dynamic in cases of father–daughter incest, namely the impossibility for the daughter to relinquish the father's fantasy even when the erotic attachment itself is abandoned. The daughter is encouraged to "persist in the fantasy" that another man— "older, stronger, richer, more powerful"—will eventually possess her, thus reproducing a fundamentally submissive relationship (Lewis Herman, 2003, p. 57). This dynamic appears inescapable for Nin, who not only marries a slightly older man, Hugh Guiler (1898–1985), but repeatedly engages in relationships with men embodying the feared and idealized paternal features of her childhood. Unsurprisingly, much of her psychotherapeutic experience revolves around this dysfunctional paternal bond.

The sessions with Dr. Allendy bring this relationship into sharp focus, prompting Nin to analyze their conversations and ask herself: "If only I could be freed of this quest for the father. Father? Savior? God?" (Nin, 1971, p. 164). Within this apparently simple enquiry lies the essence of her lifelong search for a figure capable of rescuing her. The juxtaposition of God and father is revealing: both are imagined as distant, unattainable authorities. Equally significant is Nin's rebellious stance toward religion—particularly Catholicism, given her father's Spanish background. In her journal she recalls that at sixteen she rejected religion entirely, blaming God for refusing to grant her the reunion with her father she so desperately desired. God appeared deaf to the pleas of a girl who felt "fatherless in a strange country" (p. 72). This rejection of moral authority may partly explain her later refusal of conventional sexual restraint.

Therapy with Allendy illuminates several aspects of her relationships with men, especially her instinctive attraction to older figures capable of guiding and protecting her in the absence of her father (p. 80). At the same time, it lays the groundwork for the incestuous dynamic. After one session, Nin records Allendy's interpretation of her original trauma. Remarkably, his initial reflections do not focus on the photographic episode or the spanking; instead, he links sexuality to her father's abandonment of the family. As a child, Nin may have internalized the notion that a father leaves because of sex—that tours, travels, and mistresses are more seductive than domestic stability. According to Allendy, these experiences "may have created in [her] a certain obscure feeling against sex" (p. 81), a claim that appears paradoxical given Nin's later sexual openness. Only subsequently does he address the camera incident, viewing it as a reinforcement of his diagnosis. The paternal gaze behind the lens, he argues, generated in Nin an obsessive desire to charm, expressed through coquettishness and vanity (p. 87). Every attempt at seduction becomes, in his reading, an attempt to captivate the father. Nin herself internalizes guilt for his departure, imagining that she was not lovable enough. The solution, therefore, becomes transformation: she would "become interesting," acting "as a courtesan," because by the age of nine she had already experienced failure and felt compelled to seek alternative ways to attract men (p. 91).

Although this dynamic might seem self-evident, it resurfaces with renewed complexity when Nin begins another therapeutic relationship with Otto Rank (1884–1939), who eventually becomes her lover. Rank situates her case within a broader pattern, observing in many patients "a constant need of a mother, or a father, or a God," which he interprets as a sign of emotional immaturity. Nin recognizes herself in this description, admitting that she sought strength in men she symbolically identified as "the father" (Nin, 1967, p. 26). Rank himself becomes one such figure, yet she eventually claims to have rejected him and "conquered the need of a father" (p. 50). The assertion, however, remains questionable. Soon afterward, another man assumes the same symbolic role: the novelist Henry Miller (1891–1980). Older than Nin and sharing with Joaquín Nin the striking feature of blue eyes, Miller embodies a bridge between childhood memory and adult desire (Nin, 1966, p. 78). Through him, Nin appears to reenact the paternal relationship with the possibility of a different, more hopeful outcome.

In *Henry and June*, she writes: "When I listen, I am a child, and Henry becomes paternal. The haunting image of an erudite, literary father reasserts itself, and the woman becomes small again" (1986, p. 100). The boundaries between father and lover blur further when she contemplates meeting her father once more, imagining that she might finally experience their "sensual sameness" and hear from him the same obscenities and brutal language she admires in Henry (p. 111). It is precisely at this moment—when the paternal and erotic figures converge—that the most controversial episode of her biography begins.

The 'Father Story': The Illusion of a Non-Traumatic Account

"I find my father again when I'm a woman" writes Nin (1966, p. 190) in the section of her journal titled 'Father Story': the complete account of her affair with this pillar figure of her existence. The feelings connected to the reunion are analyzed in detail, especially when she writes that at her age she can see the man for who he is: a human being, and no more the "cruel, strong, hero, famous musician, lover of women, triumphant" (p. 190) deity she used to know. She also recognizes that when they meet again, she does not need a father anymore, and she deludes herself into thinking that "there is no possibility of fusion between father and daughter" (p. 190) but only one between man and woman. She has a fulfilling life, yet the child in her is still looking for a father. As Lewis Herman claims, what drives the incestuous relationship is "the adult's parental power and the child dependency" (2003, p. 70), even when the child is an adult herself. A proof of it is the fact that for years she has kept writing a journal that had been initially created as a long letter to her father when she was eleven, and at the eve of her first meeting with him she pens in a letter to Henry Miller that "[t]he damn journal should end with Wednesday when my father comes to Louveciennes" (Stuhlman, 1987, p. 168), as if the journal had exhausted its main function.

When they meet, as Nin writes in May 1933, the man before her is full of grace and youthfulness and "a gust of imponderable charm" (1966, p. 202). His narcissistic features are immediately visible when he displays his "supreme, open egotism" and wraps his daughter in "webs of talks, defenses against unuttered accusations" regarding his love for luxury and his life in general (p. 202), probably as a late excuse for his previous actions.

The immediate reaction to meeting the man is also the feeling that she is in the presence of a double of herself, someone "who will answer questions" (p. 204). Which contradicts what she writes later: "I had always lived not to be my father" (p. 204). The writer claims she had not wanted to be him, and she had always struggled to have a more honest life with real values, fleeing the aristocratic and dandy milieu in which her father lived. But, as claimed by Suzette Henke, what happened was exactly the opposite, as being unable to possess the absent father, "she was forced, psychologically, to become him" (1997, p. 125), emulating his libertine life, "imbibing his fierce sexual independence, along with his egotism, mendacity and aesthetic sophistication" (p. 125). The creative dimension of the emulation is also present, since she uses another medium—the word instead of music—in order to be an artist as he was. Henke goes on defining Nin's creative efforts as a "gesture of aesthetic compensation" through which she relives her life "in the mode of art, creating herself anew in a guise that will be acceptable" for her father and her many lovers (p. 126). The power of identification is recognized by Nin herself when she talks to her brother Joaquín and he negatively judges their father, something that makes her feel judged too, since "father lives in a non-human world, but so do I" (Nin, 1992, p. 166). Yet she cannot help but notice that she and her father "understand each other miraculously" (Nin, 1966, p. 209), therefore she can conclude that they love and need each other, and all the bad feelings are "annihilated in one day" (p. 212).

The incestuous relationship begins with Nin's *illusion* that her act of seduction grants her agency and reverses the power dynamic, allowing her to believe she has "finally achieved mastery over the master of her heart" (Henke, 1997, p. 127). Yet this sense of mastery remains structurally fragile, since the father–daughter hierarchy—marked by age, authority, and prior emotional conditioning—cannot truly be undone. She writes, enthusiastically, that she has "gifts for [her] father, and he craves them" (Nin, 1992, p. 168), as if their bond could become symmetrical and mutually negotiated. However, the apparent reciprocity masks a persistent imbalance: the relationship continues to operate within a framework shaped by paternal authority and by Nin's longstanding desire for recognition. The belief in equality is therefore a defensive fantasy rather than an actual redistribution of power.

What appears to Nin as triumph is instead the ultimate narcissistic gratification for the father, who can "physically embrace his own genetic model and copulate with himself" (Henke, 1997, p. 128). Even when she imagines herself as the initiator, the dynamic reinforces his centrality, turning her gesture into confirmation of his symbolic dominance. The narcissistic dimension of the relationship is something Nin partially recognizes—but also aestheticizes—when she poetically concludes that "father, the creator, had to give birth to the woman to whom he would give his soul, and he could only give his soul to his own image, or to the reflection of it, the child born from him" (Nin, 1992, p. 248). The language of creation and mirroring underscores how her supposed empowerment remains tethered to paternal validation rather than genuine autonomy.

This apparently triumphant union ultimately produces a defeated subject, one who reconstructs "the elusive Prince Charming of her dreams in ever more idealized images" (Henke, 1997, p. 129). In a letter written during the early phase of their reunion, Nin articulates the depth of her emotional investment:

> […] all the discoveries I have made about your life and about you correspond to what I so deeply wanted them and you to be. I realized that I searched dimly for them in others, but you, only you, feel a great void that I found in the world. […] when you came back, reality became beautiful, completely satisfying (Nin, 1992, p. 168).

The language of fulfillment reveals how the fantasy of mastery collapses into renewed dependency, exposing the enduring asymmetry at the heart of the relationship.

Even the appellations she gives her father later are only a consequence of this idealization, since he becomes "the lion, the jungle king, the most virile man I had known" (p. 212).

What starts the seductive dance between father and daughter is the following dialogue, which confirms once again the identification of the woman with her father:

> "I don't feel toward you as if you were my daughter".
>
> "I don't feel as if you were my father".
>
> "What a tragedy. What are we going to do about it? I have met the woman of my life, the ideal, and it is my daughter! I cannot even kiss you as I would like to. I'm in love with my own daughter!"
>
> "Everything you feel, I feel" (p. 208).

The act itself is not lived (and reported on the journal) with particular moral preoccupations except for an "inner holding-back" (p. 210) which keeps the writer from reaching the sexual climax. While the following discussion engages with explicit material drawn from Nin's own narrative voice, it does so from a critical and analytical perspective that neither normalizes nor aestheticizes the dynamics of incestuous abuse. As Ruth Charnock claims, "rather than displaying the obvious signs of trauma that we have come to expect from the incest narrative such as dissociation, blame and recrimination, the 'Father Story' is ambiguous in its tone" (2014, p. 56). Numerous are, instead, the details she mentions about her father's anatomy and his transgressive actions that arouse them both. The way they conceive the act is not unusual, as claimed by Miriam Alizade: incest for some people "is not a source of taboo or horror but of desire, upon which they act without any thought for the psychic consequences to the person whom they draw into forbidden intercourse" (2005, pp. 101-2); also, Lewis Herman reports a series of interviews to victims of incest abuse who claimed to have experienced sexual pleasure in the incestuous encounters (2003, p. 86).

The illusion of being the one who is in control of the relationship is ever present in the first days, when Nin writes that: "it was he who was preoccupied with enchanting me. It was he who talked, who was anxious, who displayed all his seductions. It was I who was being ported, magnificently" (1992, p. 210). Later, during a brief separation, when she receives a letter from him, she still thinks that he is the one with deeper feelings for the other, and so she speculates: "is it possible that my father should love me more than I love him? is there always to be an inequality of some kind?" (p. 223). The inequality she mentions, the eternal asymmetry between herself and her father, is a precise symptom of how the experience she recounted in the journal was only apparently a triumph: a way to win back the love of the person who had caused her so much sorrow as a child. But the feeling of being loved by him even more than she loves him is an illusion that brings about fluctuating sensations of insecurity and contempt for the man. The cognitive dissonance she experiences in the immediate aftermath of the incest is what allows her to finally disengage from a man who is not able to love her in a healthy way. But is it also a way to detach herself from his poisonous influence?

The incest aftermath

The detachment from the father figure in Nin's life is not an immediate result of the incest, as she needs to live again the whole story to come to the final conclusion that the presence of the father is a detrimental one. But the process is long and excruciating because it causes moments of cognitive dissonance where the writer oscillates between love and hate for the parent, in an evident desire to hold on to the good in him. In certain moments she struggles to find plausible justifications for his behavior, reckoning that, for instance, his habit of beating his children might have been a 'cultural' mode of child rearing deriving from his Spanish roots, or perhaps something he had undergone himself with his father, a military man who used to beat him as a child. Analyzing her childhood once again, Nin finds glimpses of "good": when he bought her a compass, or worked on her bedside when she was sick, and the loveliness of his letters from France when she was 12 or 13 years old and lived in New York (1966, p. 176). But eventually she realizes that the seduction of her father started as a revenge for the first trauma of abuse—and also as a sort of therapy—yet it generated more layers of trauma that needed to be worked on with the help of her therapists: Dr Allendy first, and Dr Otto Rank later. This latter was also the only one reckoning that sleeping with her father could have had some sort of therapeutic function (Henke, 1997, p. 107).

The confusion generated by the act makes her wonder: "how far back does the crime date? What was the crime"? (Nin, 1992, p. 166), highlighting a difficulty for the woman to make a distinction between abuse and normal behavior, and struggling to isolate the "real" crime committed by her father (or by the both of them).

There is a glimpse of confusion and wrongness in the whole situation after the first intercourse, when Nin ponders that:

> I was poisoned by this union. […] I had the man I loved with my mind; I had him in my arms, in my body. I had the essence of his blood in my body. The man I sought throughout the world, who branded my childhood and haunted me. I had loved fragments of him in other men: […] and the whole was there, body and face so beautiful, so ardent, with a greater force and more sensuality!
>
> This man's love, because of the similitudes between us, because of the blood relation, atrophied my joy. […] the sperm was a poison, a love that was a poison… (pp. 209-10).

The belief that the union is a dangerous and wrong one becomes even stronger when the two are separated and she starts detecting his pathological lies, and for that she reckons it is better to part for good (p. 232). But only a few pages later Nin is again immersed in her obsession for the man, not wanting anybody but him and living in the fear of not having loved him enough as he deserved (p. 244).

The feeling of being the other's double is what gives Nin some lucid moments where she claims that she is immune to all his deceptions, as "[her] double cannot deceive [her]" (p. 304) another delusion that ends up devoured by the same old mechanism between them, which also included the daughter's jealousy for his "cunt choosing" and his trips. Nin breaks up with him before one of such trips, in order to "make him suffer before he made [her] suffer" (p. 314). She even goes as far as informing her father's young wife Maruca that she intends to ask her husband Hugo for a divorce in order to marry Henry Miller (p. 322). In this way, Nin is sure that the woman will inform her father about such intention, causing his jealousy. The first real fracture with the father opens when she writes in her journal:

> […] battle won only for myself. Final parturition. Nascence of difference between father and me, therefore birth of my own isolated individuality. Father failed me. When he got ill after a scene, when he let me call with pity, when he came down with a tragic, theatrical air to say, "in front of Maruca I wish to prove that I ordered a double compartment" thus missing completely the great issue between us. All the rest he failed to see. He took refuge in Maruca's image of him as simple, loyal, truthful, honest man. […] I gave up; I wept. We were reconciled while I parted from all my hopes, my desire for an absolute and honest relationship. He wants gay lies.

> He is weak and puerile. He talks another language. I sought a match again—and found only differences (p. 315).

In this section, cognitive dissonance emerges as a central interpretive framework through which Nin's behavior can be understood: the simultaneous awareness that her father is not the idealized double she once imagined and the persistent emotional attachment that prevents an immediate rupture. Her writing reveals the gradual dismantling of a fantasy constructed over decades, as she attempts to sever ties with a man who ultimately fails to embody the mirrored self, she believed him to be. At the same time, both here and in the previous passage, father and daughter employ remarkably similar strategies of emotional manipulation, most notably triangulation, by involving third parties in their conflicts, such as Henry Miller and Maruca. This dynamic reinforces the cyclical nature of their bond, since triangulation, often associated with narcissistic relational patterns, involves the strategic use of a third person "to prove their point, gain power or hurt the other" (Rosenberg, 2013, p. 143).

Nin's position increasingly reflects a condition frequently described in survivors of narcissistic abuse: an acute awareness of cognitive dissonance that does not immediately translate into liberation. She recognizes the discrepancy between her emotional investment and the reality of the relationship, yet continues to struggle against her own perceptions and desires. This internal conflict becomes explicit when she resolves to disengage:

> I begin a letter to my father and I am stopped by sobbing. Frustration and despair. He is no father. I love an image of him which does not exist. When he is away this image begins to obsess me. I know that when he is near it is just misery" (1992, p. 367).

The passage crystallizes the paradox of cognitive dissonance: the simultaneous coexistence of insight and attachment, clarity and emotional dependence. Rather than a sudden awakening, Nin's separation unfolds as a gradual renegotiation of perception, in which the recognition of illusion becomes the necessary—though painful—precondition for autonomy.

So, Nin severs the ties with the father physically and materially, and more than a decade after the affair she could reflect upon the relationship detecting the attenuated influence of the man in her life. "I no longer fear the shallowness of my father when I give time to take care of my body, lie in the sun, swim, learn to drive a car" she writes in the spring of 1948 (Nin, 1974, p. 30), appreciating the separation between herself and her supposed double, that insane identification "which had to be broken" (Nin, 1966, p. 283). Even the mother figure, defied and criticized many times, comes to occupy a new place in her ever-evolving scale of values, because she considers that "[she] swerved from admiration of [her] father's values to that of [her] mother's. But [she is] slowly finding [her] own" (p. 50), revealing an inner fight for individuality and separation from her inadequate—in different ways—parental figures. Yet all these evolutions and steps towards overcoming the trauma turn out to be useless ones when she is confronted with the death of the parent. The unresolved issues with a figure she had abandoned years before resurfacing when life itself—or death—brings a forced closure to a story that was not closed at all. Nin's father dies on October the 20th, 1949, in Cuba, alone and poor, and she cannot help but report the event in her journal in a mournful entry:

> Hurt was so deep, the shock so deep, the sense of loss so deep, it was as if I died with him. I felt myself breaking, falling. […] I wept and felt the loss in my body, this terrible unfulfilled love. Never to have come close to him, never to have fused with him. […] I should have overlooked his immense selfishness. I should have sacrificed my life to him as he wanted me to. […] I cannot accept his death. It will never heal. Because it was an incomplete, and aborted, an unfulfillable relationship. One can accept death when it comes as a culmination, a natural death. But something here, this failure, was like an artificial surgery. Amputation, not natural death (Nin, 1974, p. 70).

In the moment of her father's death, she retrieves once again the memory of him taking pictures of her and her brothers, quite possibly the original trauma, the most confusing one:

> No memory of tenderness or care, and yet my mother tells me that he took thousands of photographs of us, naked. He was full of aesthetic admiration for his children. It was the only moment in which he showed interest. The moment of photography was the only moment we received attention. […] did he bring out the woman's coquettishness in the little girl? Eyes of the father behind a camera. But always a critical eye (p. 70).

The cognitive dissonance returns to twist the memory of those moments as the ones that brought them closer, but at the same time the ones that showed how shallow and superficial—purely aesthetic—the relationship of Joaquín Nin with his children was: a narcissistic one where he could only love his own physical reflection on them. This memory remains unresolved, as does the whole relationship, which will never reach proper closure.

Conclusions

The therapeutic function of art—writing, specifically—is widely acknowledged, and for Anaïs Nin it became a guiding philosophy: self-healing through creativity (Rainer, 2017, p. 266). She publicly maintained that both writing and psychoanalysis allowed her to overcome the trauma of her father's abandonment and to achieve forgiveness. Yet Rainer's account complicates this narrative, suggesting that such resolutions remained, at least in part, self-delusional. Near the end of her life, Nin reportedly continued to weep over her father, speaking of "the wound he'd inflicted still not healed" and of the enduring guilt associated with "replacing her mother in his bed" (p. 296). The lingering presence of these emotions challenges the image of closure she projected and underscores the persistence of unresolved trauma.

Even when Nin "presented herself in control of her adult reunion with her father" (Rainer, 2017, p. 299), the asymmetry of their relationship remained evident, revealing her less as the agent of seduction than as its subject. Her attempt to frame the incestuous relationship as a "Nietzschean fantasy," in which artists exist beyond conventional morality, can be read as a narrative strategy aimed at reconciling desire with transgression. Rather than dissolving the trauma, this aestheticization appears to have reworked it into a symbolic framework that allowed the experience to be narrated without fully confronting its psychological cost.

Nin's enduring need for paternal recognition led her, as Rainer argues, "to the trauma of adult incest" (p. 301), a trauma that demanded inscription in the diary despite promises of secrecy. Writing became both confession and survival mechanism: when she realized that there was "no one [she] could tell about [her] father," she felt "suffocated," and only the act of recording the experience allowed her to breathe again (Nin, 1992, p. 216). The diary thus emerges as a paradoxical space—simultaneously a site of self-fashioning and a repository of unresolved conflict—where healing and illusion coexist.

If writing as a therapy was not an effective tool, what was it? According to Henke, there is a lot of sophistication even in the journal, which cannot be seen as a pure and unmediated product but as a rather self-conscious instrument to gain the love of the audience, as she had once looked for the love of the "absent and idealized parent of childhood fantasy" (Henke, 1997, p. 121). Moreover, Wayne McEvuly analyzes the sense of the journal meticulously, and partly reaches the same conclusions as Henke's when he claims that "Nin's diaries are fiction, even if true" because "the sense of reality is the artist's creation […] and the fact becomes the myth which it always was but which without the artist's –one is tempted to say compassionate—intervention and inventions it would never have become" (1971, p. 166). According to McEvuly, what the diary creates is

> a fellowship of the abandoned […] which is perhaps at once the most intimate and the most universal of human bonds, that which even in a last analysis, could not be broken, for the basis of its being is not willed or chosen or invented or even created but rather woven into the fabric and texture of our existence (p. 166).

Mediated or not, truthful or otherwise, writing remains, nonetheless, a tool to attempt giving an order to a relationship that had no order whatsoever. As Nin writes in her journal: "whenever I feel sadness about father, I write. When I yearn for him, I write. When I feel regrets, I write" (Nin, 1992, p. 328). So, even if tinged with literary sophistication, there is probably no better way to get to the core of the artist than through the journal because, as claimed by Evelyn Hinz "she perceives life through aesthetic eyes and […] consequently art is her natural mode of expression. Many artists record their experiences with a view to eventually transmuting them into art: with Nin the transmutation is immediate" (1975, p. 122).

The function of the journal is probably best described by Sharon Spencer when she writes that: "[…] a diary can liberate one from incarceration, whether of the body or the psyche. In its pages the prisoner can maintain contact with all the dimensions of the self that have been denied expression and, by implication, life. The diarist can affirm those parts of his total being that are suppressed, inhibited, or split off from the center, the self. More, the diarist can bring to light secret thoughts and desires, recognize the authenticity of the veiled dimensions of the self, and actually reassure itself of its very existence" (1971, p. 249).

All these functions are reduced to a supposed truth, that of a woman trying to heal herself from trauma and simply recounting the ups and downs of a process that, evidently, is always in progress. As human as it is, the reality of recovery might shift every day according to thoughts and events, and what readers of the journal can do is appreciate the process and not the final result, which remains a mystery that died with the writer. The journal, as Nin writes in a very honest admission, "paints my father each day anew, with changes, paradoxes, contradictions, growth, and in these oscillations lies the truth" (1966, p. 204). This article has sought to demonstrate how Nin's writing constructs a space where trauma, desire, and narrative self-fashioning intersect, revealing cognitive dissonance and the persistent search for paternal recognition. It does not claim to resolve the psychological truth of Nin's experiences, nor to impose a definitive diagnosis, but rather to illuminate the ways in which her journal transforms lived conflict into a complex literary and therapeutic practice whose eventual outcome remains necessarily open.

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EXCLUSION AND REVOLUTION: AN EXPLORATION OF JJ AMAWORO WILSON'S NOVEL *NAZARÉ*

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Abstract

With exclusion and domination common themes in many world literatures, this exploratory study examines the portrayal of these topics in *Nazaré*, a prize-winning 2021 novel by JJ Amaworo Wilson. The book, which is set in a fictional dystopian city-state called Balaal, charts the story of Kin, a young street urchin who is prophesised to lead a revolution against the territory's hated ruling clan, the Matanzas. After briefly outlining the author's background and previous works, the study presents and analyses how aspects relating to exclusion and domination are depicted in the novel. It takes four selected excerpts from different sections of the work as a point of departure which were chosen for the way in which they particularly highlight these themes. Using close reading as the chosen method of textual analysis, these sections are evaluated with the aim of illustrating how these aspects are portrayed and transformed over the course of the narrative as a whole.

Keywords: domination, exclusion, dystopian fiction, revolution, 21st-century literature, *Nazaré*

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Aspects relating to exclusion and domination are widespread in contemporary culture and society, and as such represent a classic theme in many different world literatures (Vandello, Goldschmied, & Michniewicz, 2016). The notion of upstarts fighting against dominant hegemonies, or underdogs struggling against (and ultimately overcoming) adversity is a common topic – for example, as demonstrated by the strong social consciousness displayed not only in the oeuvre of canonical nineteenth-century authors such as Honoré de Balzac (see Pasco, 2016) and Charles Dickens (see Andrews, 2012), but also as recurrent motifs in many different settings and eras across various literatures (e.g., see Gubrium, 2014; Lalagalli, 2024; Kołakowski & Montes, 2024; Hoyte-West, 2025a, etc.). Many of these works explore how the struggle against domination and exclusion is embedded in various factors. These can include stringent social structures, contrasts between social classes, economic aspects such as wealth and poverty, as well as ideological and political aspects such as freedom and oppression capitalism and communism.

As such, literary portrayals of different forms of discrimination and exclusion exist both at the micro level (i.e., relating to specific characters) as well as at the macro level (e.g., relating to a specific setting or context). These depictions may be especially relevant with regard to discussions of race, gender, sexual identity and orientation, social class, and privilege. A further aspect is when such issues coalesce and potentially form multiple sources for discrimination and marginalisation, as Kimberlé Crenshaw's well-known conceptualisation of intersectionality outlines (see Crenshaw, 1989) and which has additionally been applied to literary studies across multiple time periods and contexts (see Armengol, 2019; Ilmonen, 2020; Fernée, 2020; Hoyte-West, 2025b, etc.).

Nazaré, a recent novel by JJ Amaworo Wilson – a writer not only of fiction but also of highly-regarded textbooks for non-native learners of English as a foreign language (British Council, 2017) – was born in Germany at the end of the 1960s. He has a diverse cultural background, with his website and materials presenting his identity as Anglo-American-Nigerian, and he has extensive international experience, having lived in almost a dozen different countries and having visited over 70. Currently based in the United States, Amaworo Wilson is currently affiliated with two universities, holding posts as writer-in-residence at Western New Mexico University, as well as a lecturer in the creative writing MFA programme at the University of Southern Maine (Amaworo Wilson, 2026).

His own fictional works include two novels – *Damnificados* (Amaworo Wilson, 2016), aspects of which were briefly analysed in Hoyte-West (2023) – and the subject of the present analysis, *Nazaré* (Amaworo Wilson, 2021). As will be summarised here, both works deal with themes relevant to the topic of domination and exclusion, and do not seem to have drawn much scholarly attention to date.

In adopting a thematic approach, the present article asks how the interrelated themes of exclusion, domination, and revolution are developed across the narrative of *Nazaré*. Rather than treating these motifs as static background elements, the study considers them as part of a thematic progression that moves from marginalisation and systemic oppression to collective resistance and symbolic justice. The four excerpts discussed below were chosen to represent key stages in the narrative development of the themes under discussion.

Damnificados* and *Nazaré

As mentioned above, the first of Amaworo Wilson's two novels to date is *Damnificados* (Amaworo Wilson, 2016), which was published by the independent American publishing house PM Press. As mentioned elsewhere (Hoyte-West, 2023, p. 9), the book has been translated into European languages such as German (Marivat, 2019) and French (Cochet, 2019; Barragán, 2020) and has received several prizes (Amaworo Wilson, 2026). The novel is notable for its setting, a dystopian nameless fictional world inspired by the real-life Torre de David, a derelict skyscraper in Venezuela's capital Caracas which has been utilised as an informal settlement (see Irazábal-Zurita, Sosa, & Schlenker, 2020). In Amaworo Wilson's first novel, a group of the so-called 'damnificados' take over and occupy the derelict tower. The narrative thus charts their struggle to survive against harsh external threats, which includes a multitude of natural and man-made disasters (see Hoyte-West, 2023). Yet, despite the oppression, the damnificados manage to overcome these disasters and create their own functioning society under the eagle-eyed stewardship of Nacho, the novel's capable hero. Though fictional, the book's setting is certainly influenced by Latin America, as demonstrated by various aspects including the use of Spanish, and magic realism (see Slemon, 1988) does indeed play a role in the novels and its otherworldly fantastical events. Additionally, many names of places and characters also reference a range of other languages.

Many of these elements also influence Amaworo Wilson's second novel, *Nazaré*, which is the object of the present analysis. Similarly to its predecessor, it was also published by PM Press and was awarded a range of prizes, including the 2022 New Mexico-Arizona Book Award for Literary Fiction (Amaworo Wilson, 2022). The book has additionally been reviewed by both online and print publications (e.g., Fernandes, 2022; Yiyi, 2022). Similarly to Amaworo Wilson's previous novel, *Nazaré* is also set in a dystopian world, although this time it has a name: a city-state with shifting territorial boundaries called Balaal. It is also inspired by Latin America, as again exemplified by the frequent use of Spanish words and terms, as well as certain culturally-inspired features and descriptions. Indeed, Balaal is ruled (and has been for generations) by a despotic family, the Matanzas. With their surname identical to the Spanish noun commonly translated as 'slaughter', 'killing', or 'massacre' (Collins Dictionary, 2026a), the Matanzas exercise their terrifying and murderous power through their secret police, the so-called Tonto Macoute. Indeed, the very name of Balaal's secret police is redolent of the real-life *Tontons Macoutes*, the nickname for the armed paramilitaries who enforced the lengthy dictatorships of 'Papa Doc' and 'Baby Doc' Duvalier on the Caribbean island of Haiti during the 20th century. Though the name *Tontons Macoutes* originated from the Haitian Creole for 'bogeymen' (Lawless et al., 2024), the nomenclature of the Matanzas' hated henchmen, the Tonto Macoute, additionally evokes the Spanish and Portuguese noun *tonto* – variously translated as silly, stupid, foolish, etc. (Collins Dictionary, 2026b; 2026c) – thus providing a comical touch and symbolising their ineptitude.

The novel's characters and setting draw inspiration from a vast panoply of ethnicities, traditions, languages, and cultures both real and fictional (PM Press, 2021); indeed, among its other origins, it could be advanced that the name given to the city-state, Balaal, is seemingly redolent of the Biblical Hebrew verb בָּלַל (*bālal*), meaning to confuse or confound (see Wiktionary, 2026), as well as being evocative of the resultant linguistic disarray which followed the destruction of the biblical Tower of Babel (see Kamusella, 2024, p. 149). The book's characters and location are all interspersed with judicious references to magic realism and associated fantastic events – for example, as shown by the roles played by prophecies, shapeshifting personages, and other inexplicably bizarre events that go far beyond the realms of conventional reality.

In briefly summarising the novel, the book is essentially the story of Kin, a young, orphaned street urchin who lives in the port of Balaal. However, it transpires that he has a magic ability; he is able to summon Nazaré, a giant wave. Indeed, the very word 'Nazaré' carries important symbolism, most notably as the Portuguese name for the city of Nazareth, the biblical birthplace of Jesus; it is also a town on Portugal's Atlantic coast which is world-famous among surfers for its huge waves (see PM Press, 2021; Azevedo, 2023, etc.). As has been prophesied (to the ire of the ruling Matanzas), the young boy holds the fate of Balaal in his hands. The novel, therefore, is the narrative of Kin's attempts to avoid being murdered and to bring about the foretold uprising, a peasants' revolt against the hated yet omnipotent ruling dynasty. Accordingly, as was also apparent in *Damnificados*, *Nazaré* holds significant potential for thematic analysis. Taking an approach based on four selected scenes excerpted from the novel, the principal aim of this contribution is to explore how exclusion and domination are depicted in the work, taking the example of Kin's putative revolt against the rule of the Matanza family. This will be done through presenting and analysing four selected excerpts – taken from different stages in the novel – which were chosen for the way in which they particularly highlight these themes.

Exclusion and domination in *Nazaré*

The analysis below follows the thematic progression outlined previously, moving from marginalised spaces and social exclusion to historical oppression, revolutionary mobilisation, and finally symbolic justice.

Peripheral poverty and social exclusion

The first excerpt takes place immediately after the so-called 'Popcorn Rebellion', where the inhabitants of the nameless fishing village where Kin resides join forces to overthrow a corrupt judge in dramatic style. Jesa, a poor widow who acts almost like a surrogate mother to the orphaned Kin, escapes from the fishing village to the inland settlement of Bujiganga. Indeed, Bujiganga has its own reputation as "a village of collectors and madmen, tinkers and scrap merchants" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 82), its name displaying a distinct lexical similarity with the Portuguese word *bugiganga*, which can be variously translated as a 'knick-knack' or 'trinket' (see Collins Dictionary, 2026d).

On arrival in the town, Jesa meets a local woman wearing a nun's habit, who says: "'You're here to stir up trouble. Or at least we hope so'" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 84), thus exemplifying the degree of antipathy towards the ruling Matanza regime. Indeed, the woman in nun's clothing goes on to say to Jesa that "we welcome you with open arms. Here, the government keeps attacking us. The Tonto Macoute raid our stores, take away our women. Sometimes they kidnap our children. They make us pay taxes, which go into their pockets" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, pp. 84-85). Accordingly, the fervent desire for change amongst the townspeople is clear: "The woman adds: 'We're planning a revolution. People say we're insane, but it's not true. We're just poor. And the reason we're poor is that the Matanza family has stolen everything. All we have left is dry land'" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 85).

By drawing attention to the barren landscape and the poverty of the settlement, the above quotation illustrates how the inhabitants of the village have been excluded from wider society. In addition, it highlights how these economically-deprived people, who are among the poorest residents of the city-state, have been taken advantage of by Balaal's corrupt power structures and rotten elite. As such, this sense of marginalisation is reiterated by the very fabric of the settlement itself; in terms of its construction, it is described as being made of "found materials" that had been "used and reused until the residents could no longer remember the original purpose of anything" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 82).

Historical domination and ideological control

The issue of domination comes to the fore in the second excerpt from the novel and shifts the thematic focus from local marginality to the historical and ideological mechanisms through which domination is reproduced. It takes place when Kin has also escaped to the countryside of Balaal, albeit with the hated Tonto Macoute secret police hot on his heels. Emaciated and exhausted, the youth fortuitously meets some hospitable people – a band of men known as the 'barbudos' (Spanish for 'the bearded ones'). These barbudos take him to their hobbit-like settlement, where Kin recovers from his ordeal on the run. The most important of the group of bearded men is nicknamed 'The Professor' – Kin meets him, and it transpires the barbudos are, in fact, "librotraficantes. Book smugglers" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 108). Indeed, life in their settlement is subject to the following requirement: "There's only one rule. Everyone reads every day. At least an hour. No excuses" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 108). Fortunately, Kin is literate, as Jesa had taught him how to read. The young hero starts with a 'History of Balaal', a weighty tome which, in demonstrating the interlinkage between dynasty and state power, is essentially the story of the various members of the city state's ruling family. As the quotation below demonstrates, it provides a veritable chronicle of the oppression endured by Balaal's populace under the Matanza regime:

> Kin read until his eyes were heavy. The more he read, the more he understood Balaal. Starving workers, aimless wanderers, desperadoes, desaparecidos, escaped camels, and ragged armies of street children, of which he had been one. They were nameless masses, huddled in corners of mines or put to work in factories. Occasionally they appeared in protest marches, chanting slogans and waving their fists, but nothing ever seemed to come of these marches. (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 108)

As he makes his way through the volume, Kin notes that the chapters would always finish in a similar manner – i.e., with the protestors being sprayed by water cannons, arrested and imprisoned, or – in the worst cases - shot by the regime's secret police. As shown by the actual 'excerpts' of the book which feature in the novel, the volume demonstrates that throughout the history of the state, resistance has ultimately been shown to be futile, with the oligopoly dominating Balaal's poor, unfortunate, and oppressed inhabitants. Kin continues reading the book, which contains important information about the tribulations endured by the citizenry:

> "the massacres / the assassinations / the slaughters / the imprisonments without trial / the insane decrees / the absurd proclamations / the massive statues / the gargantuan palaces / the colossal castles / the browbeaten masses / the bullied underclasses / the cowed communities." (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, pp. 115-116)

Myth, prophecy, and revolutionary mobilisation

In aggregating the catalogue of abuses enacted by the Matanzas, the list illustrates the scope of the dynasty's repressive acts. The themes of exclusion and domination become linked to mythic and prophetic structures, which begin to mobilise revolutionary action. As attested above, the acts of repression range from severe atrocities (such as large-scale murders and unlawful incarcerations) to ridiculous caprices (such as the construction of gigantic residences and monuments), all leading to one key aim – to demoralise Balaal's populace, thereby weakening their willpower and removing their sense of humanity. Therefore, this litany of the Matanzas' misdeeds serves as a motivator for Kin and the others to revolt against their hated rulers. Yet, as Kin's ultimately successful campaign proves, the strategy of the Matanzas has not been fully successful. An illustration of this can be seen in a further excerpt from the novel where, seeking revolutionaries to join them in their cause, Kin and Jesa arrive at the temple of Kakurega, with the name of the religious site referring to the Japanese 隠れ家 [/*kakurega*/], meaning hideout, shelter, or den (Collins Dictionary, 2026e). In imploring the warriors who reside there, Jesa asks them to:

> Help us to overthrow Matanza. […] Because the family is a cyclone. It sucks up everything in its wake. It kills and robs. It throws the people to the four winds. If we don't stop them, they'll destroy everyone and everything. So we're doing it for liberty and justice. (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 161)

Building on the facts that Kin has gleaned through reading about the city state's history, Jesa's bold proclamation utilises weather-related terms to highlight the destructive capabilities of the ruling dynasty. She also evokes the classical concept of the four winds, evoking ancient mythology to draw attention to how, if no action is taken, the population of Balaal will be scattered and ultimately disappeared. In appealing to the warriors, she also highlights to their sense of liberty and justice, key concepts underpinning democracy and human rights which the Matanza clan have wantonly disregarded during their reign.

Subsequently, Kin and Jena move on to the bombed-out town of Sklonište, which is described as a "war zone" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 162), despite the word directly denoting a shelter or refuge in several South Slavic languages (such as Serbian – see PONS, 2026). Here, the duo meet the one-eyed Bashir, who goes by the sobriquet of King of the Rats. On asking for his support, Bashir affirms that "'We'll help you kill Matanza'" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 163). Indeed, again evoking broader notions of responsibility, he notes that he and his gang believe that "'it's our civic duty. And besides, what's it the scripture says? An eye for an eye. He [Matanza] plucked out mine'" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 163). As a result, given the physical torture he suffered at their hands, Bashir feels an almost communal obligation to remove the hated Matanzas from power. As an aside, in quoting directly from the Bible, it is also noteworthy (as exemplified by the title of the novel) that scriptural allusions abound in the work, including with regard to names and nomenclature as well as the role that prophecies play in the narrative.

Public accusation and symbolic justice

In demonstrating a final example of exclusion and repression in the novel, the last excerpt is taken from a scene where Kin's revolutionaries have eventually overpowered the rulers. This represents the thematic culmination of the narrative, in which accumulated experiences of exclusion and domination are transformed into collective accusation and symbolic justice. The head of the dynasty, Porfirio Matanza, is captured alive, imprisoned, and then put on trial. The proceedings take place in a converted warehouse in the same nameless fishing village where everything began, and a huge crowd of the formerly oppressed populace begins to gather, eager to see their erstwhile ruler condemned:

> 'What are the charges brought against him?' […]. The people waved bits of paper, clenched their fists and began their accusations […] 'He bombed our villages and murdered our families!' […] 'He exploited the miners for thirty years.' […] 'He destroyed our town and took out my eye.' […] 'He stuffed my parrot!'. More shouts went up about ransackings and bribes and assassinations and stuffed animals. (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, pp. 230-231)

Now, at long last, the people of Balaal finally have the chance to air their grievances. As the quotation demonstrates, these vary from deadly-serious atrocities to quasi-comical acts, committed both on a large scale (e.g., against whole villages) as well as against individuals (through blinding someone in one eye). This wave of anger felt by the people culminates when Matanza himself is given the right to speak and to attempt to defend his actions, leading Kin to interrupt in dramatic fashion, shouting that "'this land belongs to the people of Balaal! Your family has no rights to it'" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 232). Matanza continues by arguing the contrary, justifying the actions through the notion that "'My family kept you safe'" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 233). It is at this point that a strange noise is heard:

> "[…] cries of help rent the air and the sounds of battering, the warp and whoosh of flames, buildings set alight, the cracking of roof beams. Old ransackings. Shouts from the Night of the Sixteen Daggers. Cries from the Slepvak Massacre." (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 233)

The din is described as "an echo of hell on earth that resounded through time, that was now in the very pores and creases of Balaal" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 233), thus demonstrating the pain and suffering that the city state's population had experienced during the regime. In providing auditory evidence, it is clear that "the music of mayhem was playing in their ears, turning Matanza's pleas to dust" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 234). By building on a musical aspect which is present elsewhere in the novel, this mysterious sound which resonates through Balaal's entire territory provides a fitting coda to the revolutionaries' struggle as they seek justice and renewal. Through judicial means, the fate of Matanza is sealed as he finally gets his comeuppance. And ultimately, the voices of the unheard can be heard once again, as the citizens recount – at length – the evildoings of the Matanza family and their henchmen.

Concluding remarks

In summing up, the core objective of this brief exploratory study has been to explore depictions of exclusion and domination in Amaworo Wilson's novel *Nazaré* through the prism of the revolutionary stirrings depicted in the work. The novel's thematic structure progresses from marginalisation and systemic domination to revolutionary mobilisation and public judgment. In this way, *Nazaré* presents revolution not as an abrupt rupture, but as the narrative culmination of accumulated exclusion, thereby framing justice as the symbolic reappropriation of power by the formerly marginalised. Indeed, as has been outlined, these aspects have featured in myriad ways, most notably via the pillaging and plundering of Balaal's people and its natural and economic resources, the resulting poverty, and the ever-present sense of fear, exclusion, and domination felt by the population. Yet, as ultimately comes to pass, the anger of the people is palpable, and this emotion proves to be a driving force in removing the hated ruling clan; as the prophecy details, it is Kin who motivates the population to rise up against their detested oppressors. Accordingly, in overcoming their excluded and marginalised status, the resolution of the novel demonstrates that power is ultimately given to the previously dispossessed, the voiceless, and the oppressed, who seek to use it in a positive and beneficial way.

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ABSTRACT IDEAS IN *THE SHADOW-LINE*

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Abstract

Conrad's *The shadow-line* is about the value of experience. The unnamed narrator's first command, an unmerited miracle, symbolically represents the crossing of the shadow line, or simply, the boundary between youth and maturity. In this paper, I propose that Schopenhauer's idea of education, as articulated in his essay "On Education," is exemplified in Conrad's story. It provides the theoretical foundation for the story's practical illustration of the complexities inherent in the pursuit of self-knowledge and personal growth. The story highlights the universal journey into the "twilight region between youth and maturity" (Conrad, 2003, p. 22). The young captain's identification of himself in the long legacy of past sea captains and his reliance on the abstract idea of his command prevent him from obtaining meaning from his experience. Once he detaches himself from the abstraction of his command and collaborates with the crew, he manages to obtain that "bit of [his] own" (Conrad, 2003, p. 3) experience. However, a full correspondence between his abstract ideas and his personal knowledge of the world is yet to be achieved.

Keywords: abstract ideas, Conrad, knowledge, maturity, youth, Schopenhauer

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Conrad's *The shadow-line* is about the value of experience and the profound complexities of reading it. A retrospective, affirmative, and indefinite mode of discourse marks the opening of the story, seemingly acknowledging the universality of experience and the transitional journey into "that twilight region between youth and maturity" (Conrad, 2003, p. 22), where all mankind has passed. However, this narrative framework also alerts us that such experiences, despite their universal "charm" (Conrad, 2003, p. 3), should contain "a bit of one's own" (p. 3) to hold genuine significance. The unnamed narrator's first command, perceived as an unmerited miracle after he has relinquished a job opportunity because "there was no truth to be got out of […]" (Conrad, 2003, p. 6), symbolically represents the crossing of the shadow-line—the boundary between youth and maturity, to put it simply—hence, encapsulating the pursuit for grasping the missing truth inherent in personal experience.

The story that unfolds echoes in many ways the themes articulated in Schopenhauer's essay "On Education."[1] The narrator's relentless quest to obtain some truth serves as a poignant illustration of Schopenhauer's assertion that "[t]o *acquire a knowledge of the world* might be defined as the aim of all education" (1893, p. 55; emphasis in the original). This pursuit reflects Schopenhauer's idea that understanding the complexities of human experience and existence is essential for personal growth and maturity.

In this paper, I will read Conrad's *The shadow-line* as a practical follow-up of Schopenhauer's essay "On Education." If Schopenhauer's essay serves as the theoretical framework, we can read Conrad's story as the 'exercise book,' illustrating and applying these philosophical abstractions in real-life contexts. In my analysis, I will seek to demonstrate how Schopenhauer's philosophical probing—in particular, his notion of 'abstract ideas'—embodies Schopenhauer's idea of education as a transformative process that goes beyond formal forms of learning. Instead, he emphasises the acquisition of experiential knowledge through meaningful engagement with the world. Schopenhauer's philosophical underpinnings about education will also manifest in the unnamed

[1] This essay first appeared in vol. 2 of Parerga and Paralipomena (1851). (Cf. the back cover of Schopenhauer, A. (2000). *Parerga and paralipomena: Short philosophical essays* (Vol. 2; E. F. J. Payne, Trans.). Clarendon Press.). In this paper, I have referenced the 1893 version, which was included in Schopenhauer, A. (1893). *Studies in pessimism: A series of essays* (T. B. Saunders, Trans.). Scholarly Press.

narrator's voyage, a journey that ultimately aims not only to reveal the truths of the external world but, most importantly, to foster a more profound understanding of oneself amidst the challenges of existence.

The influence of Schopenhauer's philosophy has been widely researched, interpreted, and acknowledged by literary scholars, who have approached its exercise upon Conrad's work in various ways, from indebtedness to tribute. While many scholars attribute Conrad's Schopenhauerian inspiration primarily to the philosopher's seminal work *The world as will and idea* (or *The world as will and representation*), I align with Stinchcombe's assertion (2010, p. 11) that Schopenhauer's essays represent a more plausible avenue for Conrad, a man of letters but not a professional academic, than *The world as will and idea*. That this could be the case is best understood within larger historical and personal contexts.

Besides being more approachable, Schopenhauer's volumes of essays became popular (Stinchcombe, 2010, p. 12) in nineteenth-century Britain, making them more accessible to Victorian readers. It is likely that Conrad's engagement with Schopenhauer was primarily through these essays, especially considering that, as Stinchcombe (2010, p. 11) points out, although Conrad was fluent in French and English, his fluency in German was not sufficient to read Schopenhauer in the original language. From a wider intellectual or historical context, as Woods (2018) argues, "the first truly impartial reception of Schopenhauer is to be found in Great Britain" (p. 421)[2] , making particular reference to John Oxenford's review of *Parerga and paralipomena* titled "Iconoclasm in German philosophy" and published in the *Westminster review* in April 1853 (p. 421), somehow reinforcing the idea that the British audience, including Conrad, encountered Schopenhauer's ideas through his essays rather than his major philosophical work.

Although Conrad himself has not yet been proven to have acknowledged his interest in Schopenhauer, Stinchcombe aligns Conrad's work with Schopenhauer's essays, observing that Schopenhauer's approach to self-knowledge and character could have particularly captivated Conrad (2010, pp. 1-5). As much as I can affirm this connection between Conrad and Schopenhauer, which stems from their mutual interest

[2] An English translated version of this chapter can be found at https://philarchive.org/archive/WOOG-3.

in character, particularly evident in Conrad's stories that feature young protagonists who embark on a journey or voyage and/or are dislocated from their local context, in this paper, for my reading of *The shadow-line*, I will focus on a somewhat overlooked essay of Schopenhauer's, "On Education," which I believe is critical for reading Conrad's stories that feature these young characters.

At one point in *The shadow-line*, the unnamed captain reflects: "[…] a command is *an abstract idea*, and it seemed a sort of a 'lesser marvel' till it flashed upon me that it involved the concrete existence of a ship" (Conrad, 2003, p. 33; emphasis added). Before taking command of the ship, the young captain views his captaincy as an abstraction, characterised by a "strong magic" (Conrad, 2003, p. 24), which he experiences as a combination of enchantment and daydreaming. The ship itself appears to him as being "disengaged from the material conditions of her being" (Conrad, 2003, p. 42). In this paper, I aim to illustrate that the young narrator's subsequent events aboard the ship are a direct consequence of this abstraction, which illustrates Schopenhauer's critique of what he terms "the *artificial* method" (1893, p. 91; emphasis in the original) of education[3], which implies learning from "general ideas[4] before you have any sort of extended acquaintance with the world as it is, and as you may see it for yourself" (p. 91). Against the artificial method of education, Schopenhauer posits "the *natural* method of education" (p. 91; emphasis in the original), "by which he, […], means that experience or 'particular observations,' as he calls them, that precede the formation of general ideas" (Panajoti, 2015, p. 13).

In retrospect, at the very beginning of the story, the young captain remarks, "One goes on recognizing the landmarks of the predecessors, excited, amused, taking the hard luck and the good luck together […]. Yes. One goes on. And the time, too, goes on—till one perceives ahead a shadow-line warning one that the region of early youth, too, must be left behind." (Conrad, 2003, p. 3) The "deputy-Neptune" (p. 24), Captain Ellis, soon presents him with the opportunity to leave behind youth when he appoints him to the

[3] As it has already been argued elsewhere, "By education Schopenhauer means the path that leads to maturity. In this respect, he distinguishes between knowledge received from schooling and knowledge of the world. It is the second type of knowledge that he is interested in." (Panajoti, 2015, p. 13)

[4] These ideas are an outcome of what one reads or learns and hears from others.

command of a British ship that had been left behind in Bangkok following the death of its previous captain.

His recognition of the "fellowship of seamen" (Conrad, 2003, p. 28) is affirmed by a growing sense of responsibility and obligation that overtakes the young captain. By viewing himself in the long line of tradition of former sea captains and invoking "the composite soul, the soul of command" (p. 43), he remains entrenched in the abstraction of his captaincy. He, like his predecessors, finds himself "subject for official writing," "ghosts," "symbols to juggle with in books and heavy registers" (Conrad, 2003, p. 29). Evidently, he tailors this strong sense of responsibility to match the abstraction inherent in his new role. Consequently, he perceives the ship as an item of his "possession and care" (Conrad, 2003, p. 33), regarding it as "an object of responsibility and devotion" (p. 33). The possessive nature of his abstraction, coupled with his collective or plural references to ships, compels him to view his first command as an important test, one that challenges him to reconcile his idealised notions of leadership with the concrete realities of his responsibilities:

> I discovered how much of a seaman I was, in heart, in mind, and, as it were, physically—*a man exclusively of sea and ships; the sea the only world that counted, and the ships, the test of manliness, of temperament, of courage and fidelity*—and of love. (Conrad, 2003, p. 34; emphasis added)
>
> For the time was approaching for me to behold *my* command and to prove my worth in the ultimate test of *my* profession. (Conrad, 2003, p. 40; emphasis added)

This perspective detaches him from the other seamen onboard, leading him to perceive his maturation process as a solitary enterprise:

> I might have smiled if I had not been *busy with my own sensations*, which *were not those of Mr. Burns. I was already the man in command*. *My sensations could not be like those of any other man on board*. In that community I stood, *like a king in his country*, *in a class all by myself*. I mean an hereditary king, not a mere elected head of a state. I was brought there to rule by an agency as remote from the people and as inscrutable almost to them as the Grace of God. (Conrad, 2003, p. 51; emphasis added)

He reflects, "And this horrible problem was only an extraneous episode, a mere complication in the general problem of how to get that ship—which was mine with her appurtenances and her men, with her body and her spirit now slumbering in that pestilential river—how to get her out to sea." (Conrad, 2003, p. 53) Moreover, he experiences a physical manifestation of his isolation: "I felt a slight tightness of the chest before I gave out the first course of my first command to the silent night, heavy with dew and sparkling with stars. There was a finality in the act committing me to the endless vigilance of *my lonely task*." (Conrad, 2003, p. 63; emphasis added)

Through these reflections, the young captain articulates the profound sense of isolation that accompanies his newfound authority, emphasising the weight of responsibility that sets him apart from his crew and underlining the solitary nature of his journey. The quality of his abstraction also affects his sense of self. He clearly dissociates himself, the captain, from himself, the narrator who tells the story. This dissociation is evident in his detached reflection in the mirror, his engaging in self-talk as if conversing with someone else, and in his decision to keep a diary:

> "Let us be calm," I said to myself. (Conrad, 2003, p. 30)
>
> […] I stared back at myself with the perfect detachment of distance, rather with curiosity than with any other feeling, except of some sympathy for this latest representative of what for all intents and purposes was a dynasty, continuous not in blood indeed, but in its experience, in its training, in its conception of duty, and in the blessed simplicity of its traditional point of view on life.
>
> It struck me that this quietly staring man whom I was watching, both as if he were myself and somebody else, was not exactly a lonely figure. He had his place in a line of men whom he did not know, of whom he had never heard; but who were fashioned by the same influences, whose souls in relation to their humble life's work had no secrets for him. (Conrad, 2003, p. 44)

As he now lives in the abstraction of his captaincy, he can dissociate himself from anything but the dynasty of sea captains, for which reason he feels ashamed of his predecessor's behaviour: "And like a member of a dynasty, feeling a semi-mystical bond with the dead, I was profoundly shocked by my immediate predecessor." (Conrad, 2003, p. 51) In these circumstances, it is obvious that the young captain struggles to derive meaning from his experience. On the one hand, despite having attained his captaincy through what seems to be luck or chance, he embodies and displays a profound sense of responsibility, devotion, and duty—qualities that he himself acknowledges can only be appreciated by "a man pursuing a calling he loves" (Conrad, 2003, p. 68). The young captain's situation resonates with Schopenhauer's concept of the first kind of knowledge, which he broadly summarises as cultural or professional knowledge, encompassing any type of knowledge that fits into this category. In Schopenhauer's view:

> Knowledge of the first kind would have to be classified, after an encyclopaedic fashion, in graduated courses, adapted to the degree of general culture which a man may be expected to have in the circumstances in which he is placed; beginning with a course limited to the necessary requirements of primary education, and extending upwards to the subjects treated of in all the branches of philosophical thought. The regulation of the second kind of knowledge would be left to those who had shown genuine mastery in the several departments into which it is divided; and the whole system would provide an elaborate rule or canon for intellectual education, which would, of course, have to be revised every ten years. Some such arrangement as this would employ the youthful power of the memory to best advantage, and supply excellent working material to the faculty of judgment, when it made its appearance later on. (1893, p. 98-99)

As it can be noted, it is the acquisition of the second kind of knowledge that holds significant philosophical implications for Schopenhauer. Within this framework, the young captain's position pinpoints the importance of accumulating essential knowledge that is directly pertinent to his role and responsibilities as a captain. The quality of the young captain's first kind of knowledge is undeniable, which becomes obvious from the very beginning by the evidence Captain Giles has obtained from the young captain's former employer. However, the young captain feels irritated because he does not understand Giles' motivation for learning about the circumstances of his departure from his previous ship. Giles' interest lies in understanding how the young captain's departure relates to experience, to the personal, that second type of knowledge that one acquires naturally, in Schopenhauer's terms, which accounts for that missing truth or knowledge, that "bit of one's own" (Conrad, 2003, p. 3) he seeks to obtain—one that is vital for his path towards maturity.

In his essay "On education," Schopenhauer (1893, p. 97) elaborates on the power of memory in youth, emphasising its significance for the lessons learnt in youth as they become deeply ingrained within the individual. He further posits:

> A man's knowledge may be said to be mature, […], when an exact correspondence is established between the whole of his abstract ideas and the things he has actually perceived for himself. This will mean that each of his abstract ideas rests, directly or indirectly, upon a basis of observation, which alone endows it with any real value; and also that he is able to place every observation he makes under the right abstract idea which belongs to it. Maturity is the work of experience alone; and therefore it requires time. The knowledge we derive from our own observation is usually distinct from that which we acquire through the medium of abstract ideas; the one coming to us in the natural way, the other by what people tell us, and the course of instruction we receive, whether it is good or bad. The result is, that in youth there is generally very little agreement or correspondence between our abstract ideas, which are merely phrases in the mind, and that real knowledge which we have obtained by our own observation. It is only later on that a gradual approach takes place between these two kinds of knowledge, accompanied by a mutual correction of error; and knowledge is not mature until this coalition is accomplished. (Schopenhauer, 1893, pp. 59-60)

Read along these lines, the young captain's development can be understood as a process that requires time and experience as he seeks to reconcile his abstract ideas with the realities of his observations. In youth, a significant disparity often exists between the abstract ideas one holds and the concrete knowledge derived from observation. It is only through a gradual process of maturation that these two forms of knowledge begin to align, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of life and the meaning of command.

Thus, it is at the juncture where the initial magic and enchantment of his command begin to turn into a malevolent spell under the guise of some apparently supernatural atmosphere set into play—unmerited and inexplicable, much like his captaincy—that the young captain begins to realise an important truth: despite his diligence, alertness, and commitment to duty, true success and meaning of his experience cannot be derived from living in the abstraction of his command and from assuming the guilt of others. The mystery of the serene sky abruptly bursting into a storm and the absurdity of the ship's stagnation are made to test the young captain's resolution to face the unpredictability of the weather amidst the open sea and Burn's, that is, the first captain's nonsensical conversations that the ship is hindered by the ominous influence of the late captain. Taking for granted the "seaman's instinct" (Conrad, 2003, p. 89) as a quality that applies to all seamen in the whole line of sea captains is where the young captain goes wrong because such a view distances him from his own experience.

When the young captain speaks of the seaman's instinct, he is actually referring to what Debra Romanick (1999, p. 240) sees as a product of some preparation in the service of a certain code of conduct. This form of preparation, which I would be inclined to read in Schopenhauerian lines as an artificial method of education, or preparation, if you wish, is indeed abstract and yet to be related to that "bit of one's own" (Conrad, 2003, p. 3). The young captain's detached perspective has prevented him from perceiving the essence of his captaincy and measuring his experience by his own standards, hence by the natural method of education/preparation. While his devotion and his strong sense of duty and responsibility help him to keep his presence of mind amidst the rising pressures of his command because he has strongly internalised these concepts from the code of maritime conduct (Dixon, 1981, p. 13)[5], they do not suffice to overcome the adversities of life at sea.

These events take on a mysterious and absurd quality to stimulate this kind of understanding. The quinine episode serves as a pivotal awakening for him. He almost reaches the verge of a mental breakdown when he discovers that the quinine, on which he had laid his hopes for the ailing crew, is missing, and instead, the bottles contain a different powder. His prompting to the deck, an action he credits to the seaman's instinct—"An example this of training become instinct" (Conrad, 2003, p. 73)—not only saves him from collapsing but, most importantly, leads to the realisation that "the difficulties, the dangers, the problems of a ship at sea must be met on deck" (p. 73).

[5] For more about the historical account of the code of maritime conduct, cf. Dixon, C. H. (1981). *Seamen and the law: An examination of the impact of legislation on the British merchant seaman's lot, 1588–1918* [Doctoral dissertation, University College London]. UCL Discovery. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1317735/

This event marks a turning point in his understanding and paves the way for that "exact correspondence […] between the whole of his abstract ideas and the things he has actually perceived for himself" (Schopenhuar, 1893, p. 99), that is, establishes a correlation between the artificial method of learning and the natural method of education, or between the abstract idea of his command and the real knowledge he has obtained by his own observation. This knowledge prompts a significant shift in his perception of the ship and the other seamen: "It's due to the ship, it's due to the men who are there on deck—some of them, ready to put out the last remnant of their strength at a word from me. And I am shrinking from it. From the mere vision. My first command. Now I understand that strange sense of insecurity in my past." (Conrad, 2003, p. 88) By channelling all his training, efforts, and devotion to the effect of his abstraction, the young captain failed to immediately realise that one's maturity and self-knowledge are inherently relational; they are constructed in relation to and interaction with those of the others.

Only upon finally acknowledging that the concrete existence of his ship means not merely the vessel itself but also requires the presence and involvement of the crew—regardless of their individual conditions—does he manage to obtain that essential drop of truth for himself. Only by overcoming his abstraction of the "composite soul" (Conrad, 2003, p. 43) of command and by collaborating with the crew does he manage to draw from "the charm of universal experience" (p. 5) that bit of his own. Does he mature? One cannot tell whether the abstraction of his command fully reconciles with the things he has perceived for himself, but his and Captain Giles' confirmation that he has grown older does testify to his transitioning beyond that "[T]wilight region between youth and maturity" (Conrad, 2003, p. 22)—the title shadow-line—that accounts for "the green sickness of late youth" (p. 5).

Upon the young captain's return, Captain Giles remarks, "You will learn soon how not to be faint-hearted. A man has got to learn everything—and that's what so many of them youngsters don't understand" (Conrad, 2003, p. 108), echoing Schopenhauer's trust in experience as a contributor to maturity and as a long process that "requires time" (1893, p. 99). The young captain's return—described unheroically—complies with Schopenhauer's "gradual approach" it takes to bring together his two kinds of knowledge, the one acquired through his maritime training and the one brought in by his personal experience. The unnamed captain's affirmation: "Well, I am no longer a youngster." (Conrad, 2003, p. 108), and Captain Giles' immediate approval is a form of confirmation that he has successfully passed the test implied by the metaphorical 'shadow-line' between his desire to leave behind youth and his aspiration for maturity but that a full correspondence between his abstract ideas resulting from his training and other forms of learning from other sources and his own personal "knowledge of the *ways of the world*" (Schopenhauer, 1893, p. 100; emphasis in the original) is yet to be obtained.

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THE ABJECT SUBJECT AND THE OTHER'S GAZE IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S *THE HOLLOW OF THE THREE HILLS*

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Abstract

This paper reads Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Hollow of the Three Hills" through key concepts from Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. I employ Lacan's notion of the Other and Kristeva's notion of the abject to discuss the suffering that the female subject undergoes in the story. I argue that the young lady's obsession with an implicit sense of guilt places her in a deadlock and turns her into an abject subject who embraces death as an escape from the impossible demands of the Other. Within the same line of thought, I suggest that the text, as a sociocultural product, displays unconscious, conflicting forces that stand at opposite poles in their demands from individuals.

Keywords: the abject, the chora, the gaze, Hawthorne, Kristeva, Lacan, the Other

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Artistic merit and psychological depth

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Hollow of the Three Hills" (1830) has a straightforward plotline. A young lady meets a very old woman, probably a witch, in a secluded place outside town and close to the woods. The former asks the latter to provide information about the family she has permanently left behind. She places her head on the crone's lap to hear accounts of her loved ones through auditory visions. The last vision, showing her child's funeral, is so traumatic that when it ends, the lady does not raise her head, implying that she has died of overwhelming grief.

Since literally no action takes place in the story, some critics have raised doubts about its artistic value. Doubleday (1972) considers "The Hollow of the Three Hills" and other stories Hawthorne produced early in his career "at best apprentice work" (p. 58). Others, however, have observed a degree of complexity that might go unnoticed at first glance because of the apparent simplicity of the story's plot structure. Bewley (1963) indicates that this short story "is not as simple as it appears," and Hawthorne's better and "more complex" fiction, produced later in his career, "carries no radical quantity, either of meaning or technique, that is not clearly indicated in this little work, elementary as it is" (p. 142). Some critics have gone a step further by linking its rather static narrative and psychological depth to the modernist stories that appeared during the early decades of the twentieth century. Iftekharrudin et al. (2003) argue that "The Hollow of the Three Hills," along with some other mid-nineteenth-century shorter fiction by authors such as Melville, which were "at first thought to be merely sketches," displayed "plot structures similar to modern stories" (ix). Aside from concerns regarding the story's plot structure, there have been references to this story as an early demonstration of Hawthorne's artistic skills. For Burhans (1961), while this short story is "slight" in terms of "length and incident," it is "important as a starting point in studying the development of Hawthorne's thought and art" (p. 286). Edgar Allan Poe's evaluation of "The Hollow of the Three Hills," which appears in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, is one of the earliest assessments that marks it as a work with several merits that demonstrate the writer's noticeable genius. Poe (1984) praises the story not simply because it displays "higher talent than any of the other pieces" in the collection, but also because it is "an excellent example of the author's peculiar ability" (p. 575). For Poe, no detail appears unnecessary in this short story: "not only is all done that should be done, but … there is nothing done which should not be" (1984, p. 575). In this sense, Hawthorne's work proves to be a carefully crafted story produced with mathematical calculation.

Even if critics diverge in their appraisal of the artistic quality of "The Hollow of the Three Hills," there is consensus that it is a profoundly psychological story dealing with the unconscious mind. The young lady appears as a tormented individual, imprisoned—even paralyzed—in a lingering past that continues to haunt her. The weird, surreal setting in which the story takes place and nightmarish visions that the crone produces to restage what happened when the young lady left her house create a story that is static in physical action, yet dynamic in psychic energy. In my reading of Hawthorne's "The Hollow of the Three Hills," I first explore the text through basic Lacanian concepts such as desire and fantasy to see how a close reading of the text depicts the central character of the story as a split subject of desire, traumatized by the Other's desire. In the subsequent sections of this article, I consider the text as a juncture where opposing unconscious forces demand societal roles from people living in New England in the 1830s. I further draw on Kristeva to explore how the Symbolic, as a reservoir of social mores, is shaped by certain sociopolitical forces that define womanhood and establish normative codes of behavior. Transgression of such codes would turn the female subject into an abject being, an isolated outcast who becomes repugnant to the community in which she lives. The abject individual dies twice: first, when she is ostracized by her society; and second, when she chooses death over life to pay for what she has done. The significance of this analysis lies in its departure from moral-allegorical interpretations of Hawthorne's story, offering instead a psychoanalytic examination of abjection as a gradual, structural condition of subjectivity rather than simply a form of social judgment. I finally argue that "The Hollow of the Three Hills" is not a story produced by an individual author with a clear-cut message, but a discourse formed by various unconscious, paradoxical forces that represent the Other of its era.

The traumatic return of the past and the subject's impasse

"The Hollow of the Three Hills" places the reader in a strange, rather impossible setting. The narrator informs us that the story occurs in a distant past where "fantastic dreams and madmen's reveries were realized" as part of everyday reality (p. 285). The narrator's statement sounds double-edged because it could refer to the author signaling to the readers to suspend realistic codes of reading and take fantasy for granted, yet it could also suggest that fantasy holds a mirror to the individual's psychic reality. Even if such a statement places the work within the borderline between fantasy and reality, its depiction of the impact of certain actions on the character's psyche feels real, even too real, especially when surreal imagery provides access to truth.

As in a psychoanalytic session between an analysand and an analyst, the young lady and the crone meet "at an appointed time and place" (p. 285). The young lady is "pale and troubled" and urges the witch to give her news from her family:

> Whence I come it matters not;—but I have left those behind me with whom my fate was intimately bound, and from whom I am cut off for ever. There is a weight in my bosom that I cannot away with, and I have come hither to inquire of their welfare. (p. 287)

The young lady's disturbed face, her conversation with the crone, and the content of the three visions imply that she has committed a sin—most probably adultery—and has lost all hope of being reunited with her relatives. Hawthorne's focus on the past of his characters is a dominant element of his fiction. Reznick (2022) highlights that both in his short and long fiction, Hawthorne was deeply concerned with "how the past influences the present to shape—and at times delimit—individual actions" (p. 105). His characters are, to some extent, conscious of the outcome of their actions, but there are always background forces which go beyond human understanding. Hawthorne illustrated how "actions do indeed have consequences," but "he was also skeptical about an individual's ability to fully understand the implications of his or her actions, and he often gestured to powerful forces operating beyond human ken" (Reznick, 2022, p. 105). The young lady's desire to know stems from her limited knowledge of how her actions affected her family; yet she is even more curious to see how the community in which she lived reflected on her actions during her absence.

The human obsession with the past has always been a subject of interest in myth and literature. When uncertainty haunts one's mind, one has no recourse other than digging into the past to see a small trace of truth. The mythical story of Orpheus and Eurydice and Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* are good examples of the way ancient Greeks understood how a moment of uncertainty would burn the individual with the desire to uncover truth. "The Hollow of the Three Hills" appears as a universal story about the impact of a traumatic past on the subject's psyche. The visions are vitally important for our understanding of the young lady's deeper feelings as they reveal the reason why she does not want to return home. They serve as free associations in the form of auditory dreams—they do not take place visually but through the ear—giving the readers details on the young lady's relationship with her family. Poe (1984) argues that Hawthorne employed a genuine strategy by providing the ear as the medium through which the images of the past reappear:

> It has been the fashion to describe, in such cases, a mirror in which the images of the absent appear; or a cloud of smoke is made to arise, and thence the figures are gradually unfolded. Mr. Hawthorne has wonderfully heightened his effect by making the ear, in place of the eye, the medium by which the fantasy is conveyed. The head of the mourner is enveloped in the cloak of the witch, and within its magic folds there arise sounds which have an all-sufficient intelligence. (p. 575)

The process of recalling the past through the crone's voice captures all the voices the lady had heard during the earliest days of her life. In a few seconds, she recalls the deepest layers of her unconscious: "For it seemed as if other voices—familiar in infancy, and unforgotten through many wanderings, and in all the vicissitudes of her heart and fortune—were mingling with the accents of the prayer" (p. 288). The recollection takes place through the ears, but everything is displayed "as vivid as if painted to the eye" (p. 288). If this text is the symbolic projection of the deepest layers of the unconscious, the adopted narrative strategy—the displacement of the senses through which the ear is preferred to the eye—serves a crucial function. An explication of such a narrative strategy through Lacan's notion of the gaze seems helpful here.

A visual projection of the most traumatic events paralyzes the subject: it produces a moment of pure anxiety where one, overwhelmed with an emptiness inexplicable through the logic of the Symbolic order, hangs between life and death. The split subject of desire needs recognition from the Other, an approval indicating to her that she is on the right path. This occurs through the gaze, "a gaze imagined by [the subject] in the field of the Other" (Lacan, 1998, p. 84). The gaze through the voice is preferred over the eye because any visual encounter would go beyond the limits, thus moving the subject towards jouissance, a situation that would put her mental health at risk. The young lady's insistence on such an encounter with the Real of her desire, which is too painful to endure, is essentially masochistic, even suicidal. Gollin (1979) argues that the lady's strong wish "to know the worst" through such "auditory hallucinations" is rooted in her "self-punishing desire to confront the consequences of her guilt" (p. 104). The return of trauma is facilitated by the crone. Hawthorne describes her as "an ancient and meanly dressed woman, of ill-favored aspect, and so withered, shrunken and decrepit, that even the space since she began to decay must have exceeded the ordinary term of human existence" (p. 285). Her face, body, and speech produce a grotesque mix of a soothing (m)other and a vengeful Other. She represents the maternal thing (das Ding), "the prehistoric, unforgettable Other, that later no one will ever reach," which turns into the objet a (Lacan, 1997, p. 53). The third vision puts the lady in a deadlock because when she discovers that her child is dead, she hears the voice of the Other, in the form of funeral mourners, scorning her because of her crime and her final escape from home. At the climax of this vision lies the return of the Real: the order which "resists symbolisation absolutely" and appears only as a fissure in the Symbolic order (Lacan, 1991, p. 66). The Real looms large and threatens the lady's mental health when she is placed within an unsafe distance from the objet a.

When the lady discovers that she is no longer the object of the Other's desire, her life is emptied of meaning. In a moment of crisis, she realizes that she is wanted no longer; thus, even before she dies biologically, she understands that she must choose death as the ultimate solution. One can clearly see the vicissitudes of the Other: in a theatrical performance reminiscent of an execution by electric chair, the individual undergoes a gradual death. This is an ironic moment in which the lady experiences total humiliation so that the Other obtains jouissance. One can see this through the last few words of the story: "'Here has been a sweet hour's sport!' said the withered crone, chuckling to herself" (p. 292). The crone's indifference to the young lady's miserable condition encapsulates the paradoxical structure of their encounter.

The sociopolitical unconscious of the text

There are often different, even incompatible ways to read literary works. While a story could be read within a universal framework, wherein every element would be applicable to people from around the world regardless of the time period in which they live, it could highlight certain standards of behavior in a particular time and place. A timeless, universal story may be informed by various factors including those that shape a certain community's moral codes. In short, the unconscious context holds sway over the text. This aligns with Fredric Jameson's idea that "the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (2002, p. 64). The invisible ideology is not necessarily something that the author is aware of, yet the text contains a society's deepest, almost unidentifiable forms of discourse. Jameson draws on Althusser's idea that history is an absent cause and mingles it with Lacan's concept of the Real to point out

> that history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious. (2002, p. 20)

Simply put, history as an absent cause is always present in the context of a narrative text. A work of fiction is a site of divergent forces which, though not visible in the text, are fundamentally effective in shaping it as a discourse.

In his reading of "The Hollow of the Three Hills," Johnston (1997) argues that Hawthorne's short story could be read in two rather conflicting ways: either as "a timeless story about the consequences of transgressing domestic order" with its focus "on the young woman" or as a temporal story about "the deforming power of a sexually repressive social order" with its focus "on the old woman" (p. 6). In this case, Hawthorne's "message is difficult to resolve" (Johnston, 1997, p. 7) because such views might cancel each other out:

> … Hawthorne in his art constructs a space that both is and isn't historical space, a space where the timeless world continually flip-flops with the historically constructed world of his own culture. In doing so, he calls into question the totalizing impulse of any atemporal vision yet at the same time places in relief the narrowness of a temporal cultural focus that denies the existence of the timeless. (Johnston, 1997, p. 9)

Whether read as a simple story about ethics of domestic life or as a more complex account of how culturally informed forms of power affect gender roles, Hawthorne's work is shaped by certain historical forces that are no longer present. My point here is not that a work of art is a reflection of its own age, because such a view implies that it holds a mirror to its context, providing a clear, direct connection to the world around it. There are various forces running in the background that move in diverse, even opposite directions, making it impossible for a work to be a simple reflection of its own time. The text is not simply the product of the author's imagination working in a vacuum. Hawthorne, as an author, is no longer available for us to ask about his intentions. Even when an author is alive, asking him about the ultimate message of his work proves pointless. Hawthorne's short story, I argue, more than being an autonomous literary work that narrates the story of the young lady and her never-ending anxieties, is a discourse that voices the complex sociocultural unconscious of its own time.

There is no conclusive evidence about Hawthorne's views on women. Easton (2004) points out that when one reviews Hawthorne's rather long career, one can find "evidence of both feminist and misogynist views" in his fiction and non-fiction (p. 82). Considering "inconsistencies and shifts" about women in Hawthorne's works, we could posit that "there simply is no certainty about what he believed" (Easton, 2004, p. 82). Such contradictory views on women support the perspective that Hawthorne's art does not necessarily represent what he thought about them. Therefore, we need to consider his work in relation to the way dominant voices on womanhood were functioning at the time the story was written.

The other side of the Symbolic and the abjection of the female subject

The social order of New England during the 1830s and after stipulated certain codes of behavior for women. Digging into the historical context of Hawthorne's short story reveals that there were certain ideals of womanhood at the time:

> The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. (Welter, 1966, p. 152)

A woman was expected to be pious and tie her piety to purity. Losing one's sexual purity would have turned her into an outcast, an essential nothingness, an abject body to be discarded: "the loss of sexual purity was a 'fate worse than death'" (Brannon, 2017, p.

47). If a woman committed adultery, she had limited options at her disposal. As Welter (1966) indicates, "to be guilty of such a crime…brought madness or death" because without purity any woman was "no woman at all, but a member of some lower order" (p. 154). Such a cultural framework deems sexual purity essential to any definition of womanhood.

In "The Hollow of the Three Hills," the young lady still views herself within the gender roles defined for her as it is "characteristic of the period's ideas about women" (Easton, 2004, p. 83). Living within a society that imposes strict laws on women leaves no space for anyone who violates such standards; it turns her into an abject body, a site of pure suffering. She has left the house because she is now an outcast who does not fit within the bonds of the Symbolic. Reading the setting through religious symbolism, Burhans (1961) points out that "Hawthorne consistently emphasizes the Trinitarian aspect of these hills" to finally assert that "the lady's punishment is ordained of Heaven to be death in a Hell of her own making" (p. 290). The lady's miserable ending, however, should not be attributed solely to her own actions, because even if there is a Hell, it is a construct of the Symbolic, the voluminous body of law and language that introduces the subject into a world of lack and desire. For Kristeva (1982), the semiotic chora, as "a strange space" or "a receptacle," precedes the Symbolic order (p. 14). The chora is "a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their states in a mobility that is full of movement as it is regulated" (Kristeva, 1984, p. 25). The maternal chora is the stage in the subject's life where she embraces the drives and denies the logic of desire. Kristeva (1984) refers to Freud's idea that "the most instinctual drive is the death drive" to argue that the semiotic chora "is on the path of destruction, aggressivity, and death" (1984, p. 28). The aggressive energy of the chora disrupts and destabilizes the Symbolic.

A closer look at Hawthorne's short story reveals the ways in which the semiotic chora disturbs the Symbolic. The location where the two characters of the story meet is a deep hollow surrounded by three hills. Hawthorne's descriptive language fuses layers of mystery and horror into the story. More than anything else, however, the portrayal of the hollow basin evokes death, decay, and evil. It is a place where one can see "nothing but the brown grass of October" on the ground, "masses of decaying wood," and "sluggish water at the bottom" (p. 286). The basin presents the irrational, unconscious forces that come to the fore. It is where dreamlike imagery produces a rupture in reality and the

Symbolic loses its solid texture. Aside from the surreal setting and its dreamlike aspects, the chora could be seen in the preference given to the vocal over the visual, i.e., sound functioning as semiotic disturbance. Here, the crone has an important role. The lady puts her head on the crone's lap, as a symbolic return to the womb and the maternal chora. This return to the maternal space is neither reassuring nor stabilizing; rather, it pushes the subject to the threshold of dissolution. The crone employs an auditory medium to convey the bitter truth, reminding us of pre-linguistic articulations of the semiotic chora.

On the other side of the equation stands Kristeva's concept of the abject. Kristeva (1982) indicates that the most basic form of the abject appears in "loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung" (p. 2). When individuals see such scenes of disgust, they fail to assimilate them thus they expel them: "… I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3). Kristeva argues that the subject's experience of abjection takes place when an external force threatens her being; therefore, she attempts to skip it because she cannot absorb it:

> There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. (1982, p. 1)

Individuals are unable to keep the abject at a safe distance. Kristeva describes the abject as a "real threat" that "beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" since it "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (1982, p. 4). In "The Hollow of the Three Hills," the vision of the coffin frames abjection as a dissolution of bodily boundaries, marking a traumatic encounter in which the lady becomes one with the corpse in a state of nausea.

In the overwhelming process of abjection, the subject realizes that existence is based on a void:

> The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection

> of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 5)

The play of signification is a metaphoric realm in which words replace things. Abjection separates us from the seemingly meaningful world of signification and exposes us to the essential lack at the core of our existence.

The morbid setting foreshadows the collapse of the Symbolic in the young lady. The rupture begins at the precise moment she is asked to lay her head on the crone's knees—a critical instant of hesitation in which "the anxiety, that had long been kindling, burned fiercely up within her" (p. 287). The encounter with "the muttered words of a prayer" proves so overwhelming that her initial thought is to evade it: "Let me flee,—let me flee and hide myself, that they may not look upon me!" (p. 287). With the return of the voice, however, she "hush[es] herself, and [is] still as death" (p. 288). The paralysis of the body is the result of her increasing anxiety. A step-by-step consideration of the three visions shows how the lady gradually succumbs due to the community's intolerance of her actions. Here, abjection emerges as a progressive, dynamic process which starts with social exclusion, turns into bodily confrontation, and ends in the subject's breakdown where the Symbolic fails to function properly. The story's framework surrounds the female subject and bombards her with scornful language. The parents describe her as "a daughter, a wanderer they knew not where, bearing dishonor along with her, and leaving shame and affliction to bring their gray heads to the grave" (p. 288). In the middle of the first vision, the narrative comes to a halt to intensify the lady's anxiety: "they alluded also to other and more recent wo, but in the midst of their talk their voices seemed to melt into the sound of the wind sweeping mournfully among the autumn leaves" (p. 289). When the first vision ends, the lady is filled with "a sense of intolerable humiliation triumphing over her agony and fear" driven solely by her concern that the crone might have heard her parents' voice (p. 289). Meanwhile, "strange murmurings" grow, "shrieks" emerge, the collective voice of feminine "singing" gives way to "a wild roar of laughter," and the ensuing "groanings and sobs" produce "a ghastly confusion of terror and mourning and mirth" (p. 289). This grotesque combination of divergent voices sets the scene for the more powerful encounters that follow.

The second vision, in which the husband recounts a "woman's perfidy, of a wife who had broken her holiest vows, of a home and heart made desolate," (p. 290) reverberates with overtones of an implicit sense of adultery. This vision is the precise moment that triggers the community's abjection of the lady through words that reposition her as an adulteress. While the first and second visions project her family members' bitter words, the third vision is a synthesis of all voices that reflect harshly on her actions. The last vision shows a funeral procession, a reference to the recent death of her child, thus setting up a scene where anxiety goes to extremes:

> Stronger it grew and sadder, and deepened into the tone of a death-bell, knolling dolefully from some ivy-mantled tower, and bearing tidings of mortality and wo to the cottage, to the hall, and to the solitary wayfarer, that all might weep for the doom appointed in turn to them. (p. 291)

The first instance of abjection occurs when the lady faces the coffin of her dead child. The coffin contains the corpse, recalling Kristeva's statement that "it is the human corpse that occasions the greatest concentration of abjection and fascination" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 149). She loses her ego and merges with the corpse. Almost at the same time, the second instance of abjection takes place when the people attending the funeral find the young lady disgusting because she failed to properly play the roles she was supposed to act upon:

> And though no voice but his was heard to speak aloud, still there were revilings and anathemas, whispered but distinct, from women and from men, breathed against the daughter who had wrung the aged hearts of her parents,—the wife who had betrayed the trusting fondness of her husband,—the mother who had sinned against natural affection, and left her child to die. (p. 291)

Her encounter with the other side of the Symbolic, in its most terrifying form, places her at a point of no return; thus, she dies of grief instantly. Yet, while an invisible force hurls a brutal attack at the deviant female subject, another less visible—and probably more impactful—voice can be heard that laments the suffering and death inflicted upon a solitary woman. This is the collective voice of political activists such as Margaret Fuller, Lucretia Mott, and Lucy Stone, who were already fighting for the rights of women.

Conclusion

In *The Hollow of the Three Hills*, the lady faces the return of trauma through the gaze of the Real. The gaze as voice is a way to protect her from the heavier visual encounter; however, she insists on going back to the core of trauma. Such a painful return brings her death. The descriptive language and the structure of the story move toward the semiotic chora, as an attempt to produce a rupture in the Symbolic. In the meantime, the abject appears in the most critical moment of the story: the collective voice of the mourners in the funeral procession brings the lady's spiritual death, and her encounter with the corpse of her child causes her biological death. The story explores sin and punishment on the surface, but its deeper concern is the subject's disintegration at the level of the Symbolic through abjection. If a woman's sense of guilt is a cultural construct shaped by a society that demands she perform her prescribed roles, any violation of such standards turns her into a misfit. However, culture is not a monolithic set of norms approved by every member. There is a clash in the deepest layers of the story between opposing forces of the era mediated through textual practice. Within the chaotic unconscious of the story, one can discern a struggle between those who want to set boundaries and those who want to go beyond them.

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MASCULINITY AND GENDER MINIMALISM IN GEORGES PEREC'S *A MAN ASLEEP*

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Abstract

This article examines Georges Perec's *A Man Asleep* (1967/1990) through the concept of gender minimalism, rethinking how masculinity operates in narratives shaped by withdrawal, stillness, and reduction. The novel follows an unnamed student in Paris who abandons his studies, cuts himself off from social life, and drifts through a routine of sleeping, walking, watching, waiting, and doing almost nothing. His withdrawal does not develop into a clear rebellion, psychological confession, or search for renewal. It is presented through a stripped narrative form in which action and social attachment are steadily reduced. Building on this narrative premise, the article approaches the protagonist's disengagement as a sustained practice of narrative subtraction in which gender gradually loses its capacity to organise action and value. Engaging masculinity studies while remaining alert to the limits of its dominant frameworks, the analysis places Perec's novel against models that privilege performance, recognition, hierarchy, and reform. It argues that such approaches struggle to account for texts in which masculinity is neither affirmed nor openly challenged but becomes functionally irrelevant. Through close textual analysis, the article focuses on sleep, temporal suspension, indifference, spatial contraction, and bodily persistence as formal conditions that weaken masculine legibility without offering an alternative identity. The article concludes that *A Man Asleep* proposes no new masculine ideal and does not turn vulnerability into ethical insight. Instead, it stages a condition of neutrality in which masculinity survives only as residue, showing how literary minimalism can register moments when gender ceases to function as a meaningful organising principle.

Keywords: Masculinity, Gender Minimalism, Narrative Withdrawal, Stillness, Georges Perec

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Georges Perec's *A Man Asleep* portrays a young sociology student who does not get out of bed on the morning of his final examination. There is no precipitating trauma, no stated grievance, no oppositional stance. The protagonist moves through Paris, inhabits a narrow room, and settles into a state of indifference that is neither melancholic nor defiant. This refusal levels the narrative into a temporal and affective monotony that resists crisis and cure. This study begins from a point where masculinity no longer appears as a problem demanding resolution. Instead of asking how masculinity is challenged, repaired, or reimagined, it turns to what happens when masculinity ceases to organise narrative meaning altogether. In this study, the term gender minimalism is introduced as a way of describing this condition. The concept does not name an alternative masculinity, nor does it describe a form of resistance. It describes a gradual process of subtraction in which gendered identity no longer structures action, affect, or value, persisting only as a residual trace.

Perec is widely associated with the experimental practices of the Oulipo group and with literary forms shaped by repetition, formal constraint, and reduction. First published in French as *Un homme qui dort* in 1967, *A Man Asleep* appeared in English translation by Andrew Leak in 1990 alongside *Things: A Story of the Sixties*. Although more marginal within Anglophone criticism than Perec's later works, the novel nevertheless attracted attention in both the United Kingdom and the United States for its unusual representation of withdrawal and suspended existence. Writing in the Los Angeles Times, Eder (1990) described the novel as revealing "a humanity on the far side of refusal," while Parrinder (1991), reviewing the text in the London Review of Books, drew attention to its formal and psychological intensity. Although the novel has commonly been approached through existentialism, formalism, and urban alienation, it has not received a clear attention within masculinity studies. From this perspective, the text has strong potential to contribute to ongoing debates in gender studies by examining a form of male subjectivity detached from familiar narratives of ambition, crisis, and self-realisation.

Critical work on *A Man Asleep* has largely approached the novel through postmodern malaise, withdrawal, and the critique of everyday life, while leaving masculinity analytically implicit. As Esin Kumlu observes, sleep in the novel functions as "a form of defense mechanism" through which "the physical pain of headache is tried to be cured," while the narrator's insomnia is set alongside an "illusion of safety" (2016, p. 145). From this perspective, the body does not function as a site of resistance or meaning, but as a surface on which discomfort is contained. Kumlu further notes that "the body finds a solution for the physical pain through spending so much time in bed" (2016, p. 145), framing withdrawal as endurance instead of disruption. While this reading illuminate the novel's attention to pain and vulnerability, they tend to treat masculinity as a condition of physical and psychological management, leaving unexamined how Perec's formal strategies reshape the narrative role of gender itself.

Eric Beck Rubin situates *A Man Asleep* within an aesthetics of absence and dismantling, observing that Perec "built an identity out of this void by assiduously dismantling the means of storytelling and communication, from the level of plot down to the sentence, word and letter" (2015, p. 111). This reading clarifies how subtraction operates as a central formal principle, yet gender does not emerge as a category explicitly affected by this process. Andrew Leak similarly emphasises indifference as a structural and semiological stance not as a psychological symptom. He argues that the protagonist seeks "by a long and patient ascesis, to transform his very perception of the world into the physical analogue of a purely denotational language" (2009, p. 136). As Leak further notes, indifference "does not involve blanking [the world] out; it simply implies an absence of reaction, either positive or negative" (2009, p. 136). Across this body of criticism, withdrawal is most often read as depression, resistance, or critique. These accounts clarify the novel's refusal of symbolic investment; however, they stop short of examining how such indifference alters the narrative functioning of masculinity.

Masculinity is best understood here not as an essence but as a social practice organised through action, recognition, and projection. Connell argues that "[m]asculinities do not exist prior to social behavior" but "come into existence as people act" and are "accomplished in everyday conduct" (2001, p. 18). Kimmel also claims that dominant manhood is associated with being "strong, successful, capable, reliable, in control" (1994, p. 125). These formulations help explain why masculine subjectivity is so often tied to movement, decision, and futurity. However, Perec in *A Man Asleep* unsettles this expectation by presenting a male protagonist who does not act, compete, or orient himself toward a horizon of becoming. The unnamed protagonist remains resistant to prescribed gender roles, while the novel articulates this resistance through a consistently critical tone:

> Just a little more effort, not even a little more effort, just a few more years, and you will be the middle manager, the esteemed colleague. Good husband, good father, good citizen. War veteran. One by one, you will climb, like a frog, the rungs on the ladder of success." (Perec, 1990, p. 153)

The protagonist's condition is not articulated as loss, protest, or transformation. It simply persists, gradually dissolving the usual coordinates of masculine subjectivity irrelevant. Perec's minimalist narrative form exposes a limit in masculinity studies once action, ambition, and visibility lose interpretive force. It is within this gap that the present study proposes gender minimalism as a way of accounting for moments in which masculinity ceases to organise narrative meaning altogether.

Theoretical Framework: Masculinity Studies

Masculinity studies emerged as a corrective to a critical tradition in which men were treated as the unmarked norm of humanity. While feminist scholarship has rigorously exposed gender as a structure of power, male subjectivity has often remained analytically implicit, treated as neutral rather than gendered within the logic of androcentrism.[1] The intervention of masculinity studies lay precisely in disturbing this neutrality. As Brod and Kaufman famously observed, the field was founded on the need to examine "men as men, rather than as generic human beings whose gender went unnoticed or undertheorized" (1994, p. 4). The turn toward masculinity studies reframed masculinity as a historically contingent and socially organised formation not a biological given. R. W. Connell's relational model was central to this shift. Rejecting essentialist definitions, Connell situates masculinity within configurations of power and hierarchy. Hegemonic masculinity, she argues, is "the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (1995, p. 76). Masculinity, in this account, is neither singular nor stable, but

[1] Androcentrism refers to the tendency to treat male experience as the neutral human standard while positioning women as gendered or secondary subjects. This idea is central to Gilman's early critique of androcentric culture and Beauvoir's account of woman as "Other" (Beauvoir, 1949/2011; Gilman, 1911). Bem (1993) later theorises androcentrism as one of the major cultural lenses through which gender inequality is reproduced. Bailey et al. (2020) provide empirical support for this framework by showing that people tend to associate the category "human" more readily with men than with women.

kept through socially authorised practices that define what is culturally legitimate. Connell's emphasis on hierarchy established masculinity as relationally produced: "Different masculinities do not sit side-by-side like dishes on a smorgasbord. There are definite social relations between them" (2000, p. 10). Yet this framework assumes that masculinity becomes visible through action. As Connell notes, masculinities "come into existence as people act" and are "accomplished in everyday conduct" (2001, p. 18). When literary texts present male subjects who refuse action altogether, this assumption begins to weaken.

Michael Kimmel similarly features recognition, arguing that "masculinity is a homosocial enactment" driven by the desire for validation from other men (1994, p. 129). Even when masculinity falters, it remains invested in visibility. What this model struggles to address has been a subject who abandons recognition itself. Todd Reeser's emphasis on masculinity's "cracks and fissures" (2010, p. 14) acknowledges instability, yet still presumes an attachment to gendered meaning. More recent models, such as Eric Anderson's theory of inclusive masculinity, continue to rely on visibility and plurality (2009, pp. 8-9). Across these approaches, masculinity remains something to be expressed or negotiated or even performed. This emphasis on performance, visibility, and reform points to a conceptual limit within masculinity studies. As Alex Hobbs observes, critical accounts have tended to privilege "what men have achieved rather than how they have lived," leaving everyday withdrawal, stillness, and disengagement underexamined (2013, p. 390). Literary texts, as it will be exemplified through *A Man Asleep*, often work through precisely these conditions. This study does not aim extending masculinity studies by adding another typology or alternative ideal. It simply asks what happens when masculinity no longer functions as an organising principle at all.

Masculinity in Sleep

Education, ambition, and productivity function as key social mechanisms through which masculinity becomes visible and validated. Hobbs observes that literary criticism and historical scholarship have often privileged men's public achievements over the lived textures of male experience (2013, p. 390). This leaves personal relations, health, and domestic experience comparatively neglected. This achievement centred model is also consistent with Kimmel's account of "Marketplace Masculinity," which he associates with "aggression, competition, anxiety" (1994, p. 124). Perec's protagonist withdraws precisely from this economy of achievement. By refusing the examination, the degree, and the future professional path attached to them, he interrupts the narrative machinery through which masculinity is normally made legible.

This interruption initially takes shape through the refusal of the examination: "Later, the day of your exam comes and you do not get up. It's not a premeditated action, or rather it's not an action at all, but an absence of action, an action you do not perform" (Perec, 1990, p. 138). Here the narration refuses to frame the missed examination as a gesture to be read, judged, or witnessed. The protagonist avoids not only intention or protest, but also performance itself. The examination would normally feature masculinity as competence, readiness, and institutional visibility. Its quiet non-occurrence dismantles that staging altogether. In this sense, gender minimalism signals the absence of performance that deprives masculinity of the conditions through which it would ordinarily acquire narrative weight.

In dominant narrative traditions, sleep rarely functions as an experience in its own right. In these narratives, sleep delays action until masculine intervention restores movement and plot. Fairy tale criticism has shown how canonical narratives often organise female characters through passivity, waiting, and suspended agency, especially in tales such as "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White" (Bacchilega, 1997; Warner, 1995). Perec's *A Man Asleep* unsettles this logic by assigning sustained dormancy, repetition, and temporal stagnation to a male subject. From the opening pages, sleep is described not as a fall from productivity or a pause before recovery, but as a practical state that simply continues: "You went to bed early, you slept peacefully… You do not move; you will not move" (Perec, 1990, p. 138). The insistence on immobility is crucial. Sleep here does not anticipate awakening, nor does it mark a deviation from an otherwise normative rhythm of action. It becomes part of an ongoing temporal texture in which nothing is resolved, and nothing accumulates. As such, Perec's treatment of sleep refuses the binary logic through which sleep and wakefulness are ordinarily opposed: "You are not asleep but sleep will never come again. You are not awake and you will never wake up" (Perec, 1990, p. 194). The sentence denies both terms of the binary without offering a third category to replace them. What remains is a suspended temporality in which neither alertness nor rest restores narrative momentum. This ambiguity is not a psychological symptom awaiting explanation. The novel consistently and explicitly resists framing the protagonist's condition as exhaustion, illness, or despair. Instead, sleep is reduced to biological continuity: "All you really need is your sleep, silence around you, your own silence, stillness… the rising and falling of your rib-cage, the beating of your heart [are] the only evidence of your continuing and patient existence" (Perec, 1990, p. 161). The emphasis on breath and pulse require a particular focus. These rhythms sustain life without generating intention, memory, or projection. Wakefulness, which ordinarily signals readiness and responsiveness, no longer performs its narrative function. As such, the protagonist does not miss opportunities, he rather moves beyond the conditions that give opportunity meaning. With time flattened, masculinity loses any temporal ground from which it might reassert itself. Sleep and wakefulness no longer carry narrative force, leaving gender without a rhythm to organise meaning.

The idea of gender minimalism becomes especially apparent when suspension carries into the future that masculinity is usually expected to secure. Perec lists what will not take place: "You won't finish your degree, you won't begin a postgraduate thesis. You will study no more" (Perec, 1990, p. 139). The blunt repetition matters. These negations do not gather into tragedy, critique, or refusal in any expressive sense. They quietly empty futurity itself, withdrawing the expectation that life must proceed through staged achievement and deferred reward. Because masculinity is so often narratively constructed by promised advancement, this evacuation of the future deprives it of one of its most reliable supports. Here the issue is not simply suspended career path, but the temporal structure through which masculine identity ordinarily takes shape. The refusal does not break a line of development so much as withdraw the expectation that life must move forward in ordered stages.

At its most explicit, *A Man Asleep* presents indifference as a force that dismantles the conditions of meaning itself. When Perec writes that "indifference dissolves language and scrambles the signs" (1990, p. 185), he identifies not silence but the collapse of the relations that allow signs to function. Language remains, yet it no longer carries intention, direction, or desire. The passage advances this suspension through a series of paired contradictions: "you are patient and you are not waiting," "you are free and you do not choose" (Perec, 1990, pp. 185-186). These formulations strip familiar terms of their operative assumptions, suspending agency without redirecting it toward any alternative form of action or intention. Accordingly, negation becomes structural. The withdrawal of agency is made explicit through the suspension of claim making itself: "You ask for nothing. You demand nothing" (Perec, 1990, p. 186). This refusal of demand removes the subject from any economy of exchange or assertion. Perception continues without direction such as "hearing without listening, seeing without looking" as attention disperses across minor details such as cracks, stones, passing cars, and clouds, without hierarchy or emphasis (Perec, 1990, pp. 185-186). From a gender minimalist perpective, the passage marks the moment at which masculinity loses its symbolic footing. Once choice, ambition, and hierarchy cease to operate, gender persists only as residue, present but no longer effective. Indifference functions instead as a neutralising force that suspends the very logic of valuation not as refusal or rejection as clearly indicated in the fiction: "You reject nothing, you refuse nothing. You have ceased going forward, but that is because you weren't going forward anyway, you're not setting off again, you have arrived, you can see no reason to go any further…" (Perec, 1990, p. 143). Then, masculinity, which relies on ranking and differentiation to stabilise itself, finds no room in a narrative economy where nothing is preferable or prioritized.

Minimal Presence: Space and Body

The novel develops gender minimalism by reducing masculinity to its barest spatial and bodily traces. This reduction becomes most visible in the organisation of interior and exterior spaces and in the diminished status of the body that inhabits them. As the narrative withdraws from hierarchy, ambition, and differentiation, spaces such as rooms, streets, and interiors cease to function as a field of movement, control, or expansion. The perception of the space becomes instead a condition of minimal presence, one that neither demands action nor offers orientation. The focus is not on where the protagonist goes, but on how little space he needs to remain. However, the novel does not simply portray a retreat into smaller spaces. It rather constructs a spatial order in which any potential masculine authority can lose its intelligibility. The protagonist's room is described in terms of sufficiency rather than lack: "You live in a narrow room, a narrow bed, a narrow life" (Perec, 1990, p. 160). Repeated nearly thirty-five times, the word "narrow" draws space, body, and existence onto the same diminished scale. The contraction offers no impulse toward correction or escape. It settles instead into a way of dwelling that leaves little room for the expansive gestures through which masculine authority is usually asserted.

Framing landscape as a site of affective restoration or ethical meaning is strongly challenged. Instead, spatial environments are represented as neutral, refusing to offer either refuge or challenge. This treatment of space becomes particularly visible in the novel's engagement with nature, where familiar pastoral cues are introduced only to be immediately withdrawn:

> Bird-song rings out: chirps, roulades, raucous cries. The great trees tremble. Nature is there and it beckons you lovingly. You chew on blades of grass that you quickly spit out: you are not really inspired by the landscape, or moved by the tranquillity of the fields, you are neither irritated nor soothed by the silence of the countryside. You are only occasionally fascinated by an insect, a stone, a fallen leaf, a tree: sometimes you spend hours contemplating a tree, describing it, dissecting it: the roots, the trunk, the branches, the leaves, every leaf, every rib of every leaf, every branch again, and the unending play of the indifferent shapes that your eager gaze solicits or conjures up: a face, a town, a maze or a path, coats of arms and cavalcades. (Perec, 1990, p. 153)

Here the opening gestures recall the language of romantic invitation, yet the response that follows is marked by a strong sense of absence. The protagonist remains unmoved. He is "not really inspired by the landscape," nor "moved by the tranquillity of the fields," neither irritated nor soothed by rural silence. Affect is suspended on both sides. What replaces emotional response is a prolonged, almost obsessive attention to form. The tree is not encountered as symbol or refuge but broken down into parts: roots, trunk, branches, leaves, ribs. Description multiplies without resolution, producing accumulation further reinforcing meaning. Nature is neither feminised nor romanticised, nor is it mastered. It becomes a surface for neutral observation, where looking persists without interpretation. In this way, space ceases to serve as a stage for masculine projection, reinforcing the novel's movement toward gender minimalism by stripping landscape of its capacity to organise identity or value.

Similarly, public space offers no counterweight to this contraction. When the protagonist moves through the city, he occupies positions that are spatially recessive rather than marginal in a dramatic sense: "You sit on benches, in cafés, in cinemas, always at the back" (Perec, 1990, p. 168). Being "at the back" is not framed as exclusion or resistance. It carries no narrative grievance. The centre, ordinarily associated with visibility and control, simply ceases to matter. Movement through the city becomes circular and non-accumulative, following routes that return without progression. Space no longer organises power or identity; it merely contains the body as it persists.

The narrator repeatedly describes the body in terms that reduce it to biological continuity beyond its expressive capacity. Sleep, breathing, and circulation replace intention, desire, and will. He observes that "the rising and falling of your rib cage, the beating of your heart [are] the only evidence of your continuing and patient existence" (Perec, 1990, p. 161). The phrasing remains deliberately restrained. There is no interiority offered for interpretation, no affect waiting to be uncovered. The body appears only to the extent that it continues to sustain itself. Reduced to respiration and pulse, embodiment is stripped of the cultural scripts that usually render the male body legible as productive, desiring, or agentive. This reduction is sharpened through comparisons that remove human distinction altogether: "You live like a rat. Like a mollusc. Like a fly" (Perec, 1990, p. 177). These similes do not operate metaphorically in any redemptive sense. They do not elevate or debase. Instead, they associate the protagonist with minimal forms of life defined by persistence rather than intention.

It is also notable that Perec refuses to translate this bodily minimalism into suffering. The text insists on affective neutrality: "You exist without joy and without sadness, without a future and without a past" (Perec, 1990, p. 177). Absence here is not framed as loss. It is presented as a condition that neither demands explanation nor invites recovery. The absence of affect forecloses familiar interpretive routes such as trauma or existential injury. Masculinity cannot return as a story of damage because damage no longer signifies: "You are just a murky shadow, a hard kernel of indifference, a neutral gaze avoiding the gaze of others. Speechless lips, dead eyes" (Perec, 1990, p. 145). The body neither seeks repair nor recognition. It continues, withdrawn from the emotional economies through which masculinity is typically made legible.

The culmination of this reduction is articulated through the language of transparency and disappearance. Perec writes: "You learn the art of transparency, immobility, inexistence. You learn how to be a shadow and how to look at men as if they were stones" (1990, p. 163). The body does not vanish, but it loses opacity. It no longer draws attention or invites interpretation. Here masculinity, which is ordinarily inscribed on the body through labour, competition, and demonstration, finds no surface on which to operate. To be "transparent" here is not to be vulnerable or exposed, but to be unreadable within existing symbolic frameworks. This condition reaches its most distilled expression in one of the novel's most striking passages: "You are invisible, limpid, transparent. You no longer exist… simply, self evidently, like a drop of water forming on a drinking tap" (Perec, 1990, p. 177). The comparison reduces existence to a physical process without intention, memory, or narrative direction. The body persists as a phenomenon, not as a subject. In this state, masculinity cannot be reasserted, revised, or mourned. It has no function left to perform. Gender minimalism thus culminates not in the transformation of masculine identity, but in its quiet exhaustion, leaving behind a body that continues to live without the burden of signification.

Conclusion

This study has approached *A Man Asleep* as a literary exploration of masculine withdrawal organised not through crisis, resistance, or reform, but through ongoing reduction. By attending to Perec's use of dormancy, temporal flattening, indifference and bodily minimalism, the analysis has shown how the novel systematically weakens the narrative mechanisms through which masculinity typically becomes legible. It has resisted a sense of dramatizing masculine failure or transformation, allowing withdrawal to persist long enough for ambition, hierarchy, and projection to lose their organising force. In *A Man Asleep*, masculinity is neither openly contested nor explicitly dismantled. It fades through a sense of neutrality sustained throughout the story. This fading distinguishes Perec's novel from narratives that seek to recuperate male vulnerability as moral insight or political critique, and it complicates theoretical frameworks that continue to privilege visibility, performance, and agency as the primary sites of masculine analysis.

Methodologically, this study suggests that literary texts structured around stillness and repetition can expose limits within masculinity studies itself. When action, recognition, and futurity are suspended, masculinity no longer appears as a problem to be negotiated, but as a category that gradually loses relevance within the narrative economy. Attending to such moments requires a critical vocabulary capable of reading absence, inertia, and neutrality not as interpretive gaps, but as meaningful formal conditions. To this end, gender minimalism has been proposed as a way of responding to this gap. The term is not employed to name an alternative masculinity, nor does it function as a corrective model within masculinity studies. Instead, it refers to narrative strategies through which gendered identity is progressively reduced until it no longer structures meaning, action, or value.

By reading *A Man Asleep* through gender minimalism, the article has aimed to shift attention from how masculinity is enacted or repaired to when and how it ceases to matter. It has been discussed that the novel does not portray the transformation of the male subject, but the exhaustion of the narrative demands placed upon him. Masculinity survives only as a remainder, attached to a body that continues to exist without symbolic obligation. Recognising this remainder allows literary criticism to approach withdrawal not as a failure of meaning, but as a mode through which gender quietly relinquishes its organising power.

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SOUNDING HOLLOWNESS: A CARTOGRAPHY OF A CHILD'S MIND IN *THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP* (1840-1841)

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Abstract

The article analyses the interplay between space, time and sound in The Old Curiosity Shop. Focus is on the reflection of these dynamics in Little Nell's mind as well as on Kit's interaction with sounded hollowness. The research methodology is grounded in phenomenology of sound with elements of deconstruction and existentialism. It is suggested that the structure of sounded and ghostly temporality from A Christmas Carol could be instrumentalised as part of the phenomenological analytical platform so as to attune this paradigm specifically to the Dickensian world. The research results show that phenomenological investigation of the auditory dimensions in *The Old Curiosity Shop* could help understand the functioning of the child's mind while surrounded by hollow spaces. Such a positioning disperses one's temporality/voice and reinforces a painful awareness of a nearing death, which promises a realisation of the novel's silent tragedy.

Keywords: hollow, echo, Little Nell, Kit, child, consciousness, time, Dickens

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Contextual scope, aims, and limits of the present investigation

The present text aims to focus on the character Little Nell from Dickens's novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841) and the aural way in which the consciousness of her impending death interacts with space. This interaction is connected both to the phenomena experienced by her consciousness and the way in which the consciousness toys with the phenomena via the forces of the child's imagination. I will attempt to describe how such processes of the consciousness prove to be the main engine of the tragedy of Little Nell's death.

For this purpose, I employ phenomenology, or rather, phenomenologies of sound. One of the main works that I will use was written by the phenomenologist Don Ihde and bears the name *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*. It was first published in 1976. Crucial for the development of such a kind of phenomenology proved names as Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Jaques Derrida, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Luc Nancy – for the present article, we shall content ourselves with only a mention of them, to rescue the focus of this piece of research from wavering, and in view of a larger investigation of which the current may be deemed an element. A basis – biographical, historical and intertextual – for the suitability of applying such a methodological platform to the interpretation of Dickensian novels could be found in the works *Stenography and Orality in Dickens: Rethinking the Phonographic Myth* (2017) by H. Bowles, *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* by Charles Babbage (1837), *Pen Photographs of Charles Dickens's Readings: Taken from Life* (1868) by Kate Field, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (2005) by I. Kreilkamp, *Victorian Soundscapes* by J. Picker (2003), *Dickens's London: Perception, Subjectivity and Phenomenal Urban Multiplicity* (2012) by J. Wolfreys, and *Dickens and Soundscape: The Old Curiosity Shop* (2016) by J. O. Jordan. I choose to discuss one of the works numbered – the one by J. O. Jordan – because of its direct relation to the present theme. This piece of literary criticism would offer some guidance in probing the hypothesis of whether Little Nell's consciousness of death reinforces the tragedy of the events because it is experienced as sounded hollowness. Her consciousness seems to transcribe its processes to outward objects while 'emptying' itself in acts of imagination that are oriented towards the uncanny world of the dead.

The contradiction of analysing sounds described / 'heard' in texts: Ihde and Ricoeur

One may as well begin by dwelling on acts of sounding hollowness. This is the sonorous part of the title of the current research. The second part of the title evokes something connected not to sounding hollow spaces but, rather, to visualising space by acts of mapping. Of course, this is to be understood as a metaphorical mapping of the child's consciousness of time and her experience of sound. It also touches on the form of the novel as a graphic representation of events which implies a 'functional "contradiction"' (Ihde, 2007, p. xx), as Ihde expresses himself. As long as we are trying to follow a phenomenology of sound and trace instances of such a phenomenology in a literary work, it becomes inevitable that we stumble upon such a contradiction. The way out of this knottiness is the act of consciousness by which the visually perceived becomes a sonorous experience in our minds. This is a very good example of synesthesia. Ihde gives an example with being able to 'hear' the voices of his friends while reading something written by them:

> There are vast differences between hearing voices and reading words; yet the distance between the language embodied visually and that which is heard is sometimes broached. Sometimes there is a "singing" of voice in writing. I have often been shocked at "hearing" a friend's voice on reading his or her latest article or book. The other sounds through in an auditory adherence to what is ordinarily soundless. The same phenomenon occurs with trained musicians who can "hear" the music they see when reading a score. (Ihde, 2007, p. xx)

This phenomenon of the consciousness provides us with the cautious bravery to claim that one sense could function through the other, achieving a bodily wholeness or even something close to a totality of perception, or to what Ihde terms 'artifactual synesthesia[1]' (Ihde, 2007, p. xvi). Artifactual synesthesia occurs when the process of synesthesia is set in motion by a certain artifact that could simultaneously be perceived on different sensory levels. One example is an image that could be 'heard' not because it actually emits any sound but because the visual suggests it, and the mind imaginatively

[1] An artifactual synesthesia is when the same data (which in our case could be sensory data) that is used for producing a visual image is used to produce an auditory image (cf. Ihde, 2007, p. xvi).

fills the gap between the suggestion and its realisation. Such a statement broadens the act of listening and endows its interpretations with new horizons that, to a certain extent, give new weight to imagination as a force uniting the senses. As Ihde says: ‘Listening begins by being bodily global in its effects’ (Ihde, 2007, p. 45). Hearing participates in the sight, the touch, the smell, the taste, in one’s imagination, or, more precisely, through one’s imagination. If the senses provide the raw data, then imagination makes the multimodality of this data possible. Ricoeur stated that ‘imagination […] **consists in the interpretation of the sensation**, as when we say this shadow is a person approaching in the fog’ (Ricoeur, 2024, p. 24, emphasis added). He also commented on listening as an act of imagination: ‘To listen is to know how the music will go on. It is the incorporation of this phase of knowing how that may be fancied. The element of fancy is put in this active phase of perceiving’ (Ricoeur, 2024, p. 110). In the cited extract, we can see that, the line between a raw sensation and sensation as an act of imagination is very thin. We could even say that, for Ricoeur, there is no such thing as pure sensation, or a sensation *in vacuo*. Sensation, be it seeing or listening, is always already contaminated by, or it always contains traces and residues of, imagination, which helps the senses be alert in the face of the unknown.

Visions could be perceived as something speaking or emanating voice even when they remain silent. This is what happens with the act of reading fiction. Dickens seemed to be very well aware of such philosophy. For in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, we can encounter such sentences as ‘they could only see him speak: not hear him’ (Dickens, 2001, p. 325). Such a statement makes one infer the author’s position on the matter of the fluidity of senses. He applies this fluidity to his characters’ experiences of objects and sound. The application takes different forms. They are discussed by J. O. Jordan.

Taxonomies of Dickensian sounds: John O. Jordan’s taxonomy

One of the most interesting and comprehensive analysis of soundscapes in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is probably the one developed by John O. Jordan. Its title is *Dickens and Soundscape: The Old Curiosity Shop*. Therein Jordan suggests a taxonomy of the different types of sounds that could be detected in the novel. There are non-human sounds (the sounds produced by nature and its various entities), mechanical sounds, human speech (the characters’ idiosyncratic vocalisations), ‘uncanny’ sounds, and silence (cf. Jordan, 2016, para. 11). I number these categories of sound production described by Jordan and appearing in the Dickensian novel because they offer a very structured prism of analysing the soundscapes while applying a basic differentiation between them. We will need the vocabulary of this differentiation to achieve our goal of explicating the way in which the child's mind gets shaped, influenced, changed or determined by them.

I attempt to study the child's consciousness of time in a sonorous context, and regarding this issue, there are some important observations on the part of Jordan which may be deemed apt and cannot be overlooked. One such observation that acts as a fruitful starting point is his remark considering the focalised narrative voice. Even though *The Old Curiosity Shop* begins with a first-person narrator, he abdicates shortly from this role and abandons the narrative to its characters, so that they can 'speak and act for themselves' (Dickens, 2001, p. 28). Jordan notes that there are episodes that are 'focalized entirely through the listening consciousness of Nell' (Jordan, 2016, para. 23). This shows us that even if the authorial voice after the first three chapters is prevalently omniscient, we could still be able to analyse the novel phenomenologically because there is access to the child's consciousness of time which is also a 'listening consciousness'. 'Listening consciousness', in the context of Jordan's text, could be defined as a moment when a character in a literary work is perceiving and experiencing the world through sounds. Depending on the sounds, the characters may feel either something as a communion with the world, or a sort of separation and estrangement from it.

The next important thing is that there is a direct allusion to sound in the name of Nell which is homophonous to 'knell', for instance (cf. Jordan, 2016, para. 40). In the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)* (Davies, 2018), we can find that knell is defined as 'the sound of a bell rung slowly to announce a death or a funeral or the end of something', and that the most common collocate of 'knell' is the noun 'death'. The two aspects, time and sound, as naturally conjoined in the child's consciousness, are presented to us through the monosyllabic name 'Nell'. This may also be interpreted as an instance of an 'incurable sense of derivativeness' (Rowland, 2021, p. 221), which is like a sense of a constant partition placed between one's actions and the world. It could also be described as a sense of secondariness, an existential lack of originality, an existential lingering between the echoes while losing a connection with one's own voice. This could be one of the reasons for the prevailing hollow tone of Nell's existence. She might even be perceived as a character representing embodied hollowness (she looks like her deceased mother). The sense of derivativeness could be felt because the bell that is tolled to announce one's death is something that derives from that person's life and the source, or the origin of the sound (the person's life, the person's presence) is no longer there.

The ring of the name of the main character leads us to an understanding of the novel's form and prevalent themes. We sense that the book will be about the tragic death of a child and it could be identified as tragedy because the very name of Nell announces it as such. The novel, quite literally, 'begins and ends with Nell's death' (Lamb, 2013, p. 127). An argument supporting the statement of classifying the novel as tragedy could be found in Ihde's phenomenology: 'In the wider Greek culture, however, the Apollonian love of light was balanced by the Marsyasian love of sound. The tragedies spoke in sonorous voices through the persona, or "masks," which later are held to mean also per-sona or "by sound"' (Ihde, 2007, p. 14). This deconstructionist connection between characters in tragedies living and acting and participating in the unfolding of the tragedy 'by sound' could act as a reasonable explanation of why one of Dickens's most extremely hopeless and heartbreaking novels is so full of soundscapes. He seems to prefer the aural over the visual. Little Nell, as presented in the novel, is the sounded hollowness of her mother's existence and, as such, her own derivative existence is doomed to peter away quite soon. Therefore, the way in which her name alludes to a sound that stands for death, and the fact that she, herself, stands for her mother, who is no longer among the living, are driving mechanisms decentralising the existence of Dickens's main heroine.

An alternative taxonomy of sound and temporality

It might be regarded as quite unusual, but for the interpretation of Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*, I should like to propose another taxonomy of sound and temporality, in order to 'attune' the analysis to the specific purposes of this text. Precariously enough, it may be based on another of Dickens' literary works – *A Christmas Carol*, which (rather than be involved in a conventional compare and contrast analysis), shall be employed as another dimension to our analytical platform. Dickens's novelette *A Christmas Carol* presents us with three ghosts – the ghost of the past, the ghost of the present and the ghost of the future. Temporality in Dickens's works is almost always, perhaps, united to sound. And the way in which the ghosts, symbolising different temporal dimensions, are sounded, could tell us a lot about the logic behind the mechanics of such connection.

The voice of the past is presented in the following way: 'The voice was soft and gentle. Singularly low, as if instead of being so close beside him, it were at a distance' (Dickens, 2013, pp. 26-27). The spirit of the present speaks with a 'cheerful voice' (Dickens, 2013, p. 48) from the beginning and after that he starts speaking with the words of Scrooge himself. The ghost of the future is silent; it does not utter a word. This personified and ghostly structure of time is very interesting and could give us a foundation that could come in handy while we attempt to delineate the child's consciousness of time in *The Old Curiosity Shop* as in other Dickensian novels. Sonorous time, therefore, could be said to be represented by the three spirits accordingly. We have a temporality which is close to us but sounds as if it comes from a distant place against the logic of its proximity. The voice gets lost somewhere between the entity that produces it and the entity that is supposed to hear it. We have the echoing temporality which, instead of giving us something new, echoes, or reflects, previous sayings and sounds. This temporality is of chief importance in an analysis of the child's mind in *The Old Curiosity Shop* – we shall argue that Little Nell's consciousness is just like her name – a sounded hollowness spreading or expecting an announcement of death. Many sounds reverberate in her consciousness, but she is not the source of them. This echoing temporality is the temporality of the present. The temporality of the future, as we have mentioned before, is a silent temporality. In Scrooge's story, this is the emptiest ghost of all – a ghost who does not speak a word, who is almost immobilized and who, unlike the other ghosts, seems to be composed of a hood and a dress that seem to be hollow, with nothing filling the frame. This image is connected with the process of growing old and being closer to the event of one's death. This is the temporal stage in life when 'man's spastically falling apart and losing contact with the world' (Rowland, 2024a, p. 224) plague one's existence and show the 'grief of the devastating muteness of departure that man dwells in' (Rowland, 2024a, pp. 224-225). Man begins to inhabit the fringes of his own existence by being de-voiced and emptied of content while his clothes are the only thing preserving his likeness to a human figure and his bond to an embodied human existence. The clothes appear as a skeleton of his social existence that is somehow industriously holding the threads of the perishing form of a man together.

Interaction between temporality, space, and sound: the echoing well

In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, temporality is represented mainly by past and future because distant voices and distance and hollow spaces with nothing filling the frame and breaking the silence are abundant in the story about Little Nell. The first example of such a place is the old curiosity shop itself. Other such places accompany Little Nell's journey very often, like graveyards with birds' hoarse voices echoing therein, churches, furnaces with flames that could tale tales, big manufacturing towns emphasizing the sense of loss and desensitising life. Nell's final destination mirrors the solemnity of the first destination – the shop. The child is often positioned in large buildings that are too quiet. If the space is larger, the sense of loss grows accordingly. Just like the spirit of the future seems empty and hollow. He somehow evokes a sense of death and a grave-like atmosphere. It is not a coincidence that hollow spaces in the novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* bear direct or indirect resemblance to graves. Such places affect Little Nell's consciousness of death, and she experiences them imaginatively, even without the objects' immediate presence. For instance, the old sexton with whom Nell speaks when she lives in the final stage of her journey, compares the well in the churchyard to a grave – because it is a hollow space:

> 'There's an old well there,' said the sexton, 'right underneath the belfry; **a deep, dark, echoing well**. Forty year ago, you had only to let down the bucket till the first knot in the rope was free of the windlass, and **you heard it splashing in the cold dull water**. By little and little the water fell away, so that in ten year after that, a second knot was made, and you must unwind so much rope, or the bucket **swung tight and empty at the end**. In ten years' time, the water fell again, and a third knot was made. In ten years more, the well dried up; and now, if you lower the bucket till your arms are tired, and let out nearly all the cord, **you'll hear it, of a sudden, clanking and rattling on the ground below; with a sound of being so deep and so far down, that your heart leaps into your mouth, and you start away as if you were falling in**.'
>
> 'A dreadful place to come on in the dark!' exclaimed the child, **who had followed the old man's looks and words until she seemed to stand upon its brink.**
>
> '**What is it but a grave**!' said the sexton. 'What else! And which of our old folks, knowing all this, thought, as the spring subsided, of their own failing strength, and lessening life? Not one!' (Dickens, 2001, p. 389, emphasis added)

This is an interesting extended metaphor of the well resembling a grave or a life's journey. When it is emptied it resounds better, there is more of a hollow space than of the splashing of water – more of a future amounting to a more intense sense death.

Emptiness and unreachable bottoms could be sensed by the sounds. The sound somehow betrays the end (the end of the well and the end of life). We can also see how Nell's consciousness is very much influenced by the story of this well that she is carried on the brink of that very well in her imagination. She 'hears' hollowness through imagination. This makes her conscious of death. Through the voice of the sexton, she somehow gets to experience the voice of the well. The hollow space of the well is described as coaxing. It swallows the voice and when the voice resounds, it creates the sense of the whole body falling down, or, in other words, a sense of departure and uncanniness. Nell could not even hear it for herself. She could only ever hear the sounded hollowness through the words of someone's story, but even under such circumstances, she would be able to hear the well's echoing to be presented to its brink though her sonorous imagination and the capability of deep immersion into imagined or narrative and narrated sounds. In such a case, the child's imagination is wavering between what is heard and what is created as a mental picture built on the basis of what is heard as a story. The sensory data is processed in a multimodal way that weakens the reality of Nell's present location and transports her to another one through the process of listening, which is also a process of imagining. A simple cartography of places here would work quite poorly. Ricoeur warns us about the wrongness of 'asking about the mind as a place with a location for images' (Ricoeur, 2024, p. 101). The child's mind is presented, rather, as a hollow spatiality applying the act of mapping to the act of listening, instead of applying it to fixed positions and unquestionable realities.

Then, there is secondary hearing – now not of the story but of the very sounds mentioned in the story – like the sound of a voice resounding in a well. Or this is hearing what was seen through the mental picture, or hearing through an imagined visionary product of one's consciousness. This is a product whose source and foundation happens to be another person's voice. While discussing imaginative auditory experiences, Ihde explains that when the imaginative mode is 'on' it 'continues to display itself as "like," its perceptual modality' although there are some differences because the imaginative field is often a more intense and richer mode than its perceptual counterpart (Cf. Ihde, 2007,

p. 123). Therefore, Little Nell 'hears' the well through the auditory mode of her imagination. It is not difficult for her to imagine a voice in the hollowness because the perceptions and, especially, the auditory experiences of her childhood were full of such.

The old curiosity shop as a hollow space experienced by the child

An important thing to be observed regarding sound and emptiness as features of identification, is the contrast between Little Nell and all the other people and things surrounding her. Noting her unsuitability and lack of place among her companions seems like an unavoidable observation. Her repetitiveness, her striking resemblance to her mother and grandfather turn Little Nell into nothing more than alien to herself and wanting a story of her own. Someone's past could be experienced as 'a peculiar instance of self-exclusion, self-denial, self-devaluation' (Rowland, 2023, p. 89), as Rowland observes. This is the case with Little Nell who seems to have no experiences of a past and, therefore, she cannot be experienced as something living, but rather, as an unearthly creature, an angel, or someone's double/echo. She is like a pure intention, a pure listening that lacks retention (orientation of the consciousness towards the past) or protention (orientation of the consciousness towards the present).

One of the characters, the man who is enchanted by the fire because it brings him the memory of his childhood, says to Little Nell: 'You may guess from looking at me what kind of child I was, but for all the difference between us [the man who stares at the fire and Little Nell] I was a child […]' (Dickens, 2001, p. 326). Such a remark on the part of the mysterious man implies that Nell was never really a child. She seems to be deprived of such idiosyncratic past, and this initial lack of temporality of her own makes her reflect other temporalities while never really plunging in the stream of her own. This peculiarity of the hollowness of Little Nell's consciousness of time, and thence, her temporality, is because she does not possess her past but rather the oral heritage of stories that form her as a replica of her mother. The episodes in which her grandfather told her stories about her mother are Little Nell's moments of happiness. But also, they are moments of 'primary listening' (Ihde, 2007, p. 115) in which Little Nell is more of the world around her than of herself. Ihde describes the phenomenon of primary listening in his work:

> I hear the voices of others, of things, of the World long before I speak my own words-or as a matter of the correct phenomenological procedure which begins

> with noema before taking up noetic acts. Phenomenologically the "self" is modeled after the World […]. (Ihde, 2007, p. 115)

Nell seems unable to escape the mode of primary listening. We could say that this is the mode which her consciousness applies to the world around her. Nell's little world seems modelled after her grandfather's words and stories and the way in which these stories could be sounded in the hollow spatiality of the shop.

The world of Nell's predecessors and the events that happened before her existence fulfil the role of prejudices – prejudices in the way Gadamer portrays them as 'conditions of understanding' (cf. Gadamer, 2006, p. 278) one's world: 'Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live' (Gadamer, 2006, p. 278). Primary listening and prejudices as conditions of understanding seem to be exacerbated by storytelling to the extent that they encroach upon subjectivity in a suffocating, rather than auxiliary, manner. Both Little Nell and her grandfather find this sonorous escape into the past a needed one – something that maintains the illusion of the grandfather's reality – Little Nell as his daughter, and the old curiosity shop as a space in which this inherited or falsely attributed redemptive identity resides:

> 'I used to read to him by the fireside, and he sat listening, and when I stopped and we began to talk, he told me about my mother, and **how she once looked and spoke just like me when she was a little child**. Then, he used to take me on his knee and **try to make me understand that she was not lying in her grave**, but had flown to a beautiful country beyond the sky, **where nothing died or ever grew old – we were very happy once**!' (Dickens, 2001, p. 49, emphasis added)

We can see that Little Nell was deeply influenced by those stories and intentionally wanted to replace her mother so that she could bring some happiness to her old grandfather. This is another good example of the sense of derivativeness – the existence of one as someone else's copy. The words of Nell's grandfather were working on her consciousness, moulding it into an echo of her mother's. She is merely a moulded creature, 'a wax girl' – this positions Nell 'outside of time and time's vicissitudes' (Lamb, 2013, p. 129). The source of this imagined identity of Nell as a reproduction of her mother, is the voice of her grandfather echoing in the old curiosity shop, wearing away, and altering the little child's consciousness as constant dropping of water. Some critics even go as far as to present the grandfather as one of the main villains: 'Directly responsible for her death by removing her from every point of safety and kindness, he [her grandfather], it is clear, is much closer even than Quilp to being the chief villain' (Kincaid, 1971, p. 80). Nevertheless, both of them equally suffer from one common thing: decentralisation, which is geographical and phenomenological alike. We could say that the figures of Little Nell and her grandfather both die at the end, and could be perceived as victims, because of the 'impossibility of attaining selfhood out of touch with an Other' (Rowland, 2021, p. 210). The journey out of the old curiosity shop is a journey which makes them grow apart from each other to an extent to which they appear as mutually unrecognizable. Or, they fail to be 'a steadfast external presence' (Rowland, 2021, p. 214) for each other, which would have preserved their integrity outside the shop.

Laughter in the old curiosity shop

A memorable sonorous moment that has to do with hollow space is also Nell's laughter which happens rarely. That is why the moment of Kit's appearance is so precious. Kit's character is introduced by a knock at the door to which Nell responds with a child's laughter which is significant probably because of the way in which it resounds in the quiet shop and also the way in which it appears as something strikingly unusual:

> We had scarcely begun our repast when there was a knock at the door by which I had entered, and **Nell bursting into a hearty laugh**, which I was rejoiced to hear, for it was childlike and full of hilarity, said it was no doubt dear old Kit come back at last. (Dickens 2001, p. 8, emphasis added)

After that Kit's manner of speaking becomes the focus of observation: 'The lad had a remarkable manner of standing sideways as he spoke and thrusting his head forward over his shoulder, as if he could not get at his voice without that accompanying action' (Dickens, 2001, p. 9). The hollowness of the shop creates these tangible and sonorous lapses in Kit's consciousness of time and that is why he, metaphorically, is trying to catch up with his voice/time for fear of losing the duration of his voice in the hollowness. John O. Jordan comments this part of the novel in a very interesting way pointing at the separation between voice and body: 'Voice here is figured as something outside the body rather than as a sound produced from within. Kit must make a physical effort to "get at" his voice lest it elude him altogether' (Jordan, 2016, para. 29). Following Dickens's own division of sounded temporalities in *A Christmas Carol*, the voice which was somehow separated from the one who emitted it and sounded as dispersed or being far away even when it is produced in an adjacency to us, was the voice of the past. In addition to this interpretation, we could say that this separation occurs because of the hollowness of space. This hollowness seems to expand the voice of the ones who produce it at the cost of redefining the belonging of the voice. Separation with one's voice is also a separation with one's time and presence. Such a struggle, as we could see, is experienced by the consciousnesses of two of the children in Dickens's novel – Nell and Kit.

Kit, for instance, is described exactly as a child who struggles to connect or find his voice and to hold it as his own possession.

> It was a great point too that Kit himself was flattered by the sensation he created, and after several efforts to preserve his gravity, burst into a loud roar, and so stood with his mouth wide open and his eyes nearly shut, laughing violently. (Dickens, 2001, p. 9)

The unexpected violent happiness seems to violate the stillness of the place. The hollowness of it probably intensifies the feeling of the sound being rather too prodigious. There is nothing wrong with Nell being so happy and about Kit being that loud. The problematic part is the contrast between the old curiosity shop and the two kids being there and laughing. When old Trent expresses his fears of losing Nell, Kit responds once again in a very loud voice, as if he is trying to make amends for the hollowness of the shop:

> 'I'd have found her, master,' said Kit, 'I'd have found her. I'd bet that I'd found her if she was above ground, I would, as quick as anybody, master. Ha ha ha!' Once more opening his mouth and shutting his eyes, and laughing like a stentor, Kit gradually backed to the door, and roared himself out. (Dickens, 2001, p. 10)

It seems as if Kit is scared to leave Little Nell to the voicelessness of the shop and that is why he accompanies his sayings with a great and nervously overexcited vocal enthusiasm, aiming at filling the emptiness of the place and leaving it well-voiced.

Dickens' 'realm of mute objects'

Ihde names the objects that keep the phenomenologist's attention busy 'the realm of mute objects' (Ihde, 2007, p. 50). According to him, in the history of philosophy many thinkers focused on the materiality of the visible worldly objects that take over their immediate experience. By referring to them and classifying them as 'the realm of mute objects', he achieves an intentional shift of the way in which we tend to perceive these objects. By such means, they also become part of a phenomenology of sound for they are perceived through their lack of voice. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, such objects are the well (which was already discussed), the furnace (in which the man who helped Little Nell and her grandfather in the manufacturing city, read melodious voices from the past), the sexton's spade, the Marchioness's garment, and Little Nell shoes. For instance, this is how the man who claims that he was raised by the fire in the furnace, describes it:

> 'It's like a book to me,' he said – 'the only book I ever learned to read; and many an old story it tells me. It's music, for I should know its voice among a thousand, and there are other voices in its roar. It has its pictures too. You don't know how many strange faces and different scenes I trace in the red-hot coals. It's my memory, that fire, and shows me all my life.' (Dickens, 2001, pp. 325-326)

Akin to the well, the poor man's fire, is turned into a melodious metaphor of human time. Hollow spaces as furnaces and wells seem to provide the needed acoustic space in which the consciousness could exercise its echoing attendance to itself. The realm of the 'mute', at first glance, objects, turns out to be functionally meaningful and to act as a sonorous reflection of the consciousness whose temporality is made visible by being thrown onto the somehow responding hollowness of their muteness and materiality.

The Marchioness, as Dick choses to call her, or, rather, the unnamed mysterious little girl, who lives underground and does all the housework in the home of Mr. Brass and Miss Sally, is described in the following way: 'a small slipshod girl in a dirty coarse apron and bib, which left nothing of her visible but her hands and feet. She might as well have been dressed in a violin-case' (Dickens, 2001, p. 251). Just as the Dickensian ghost of the future, the stature of the girl seems to be lost in an oversized apron compared to a violin case. This evokes another image of hollowness, not to mention her abode underground which is very much like a watery and suffocating grave. The violin part, of course, alludes to musicality, but hollowness seems to prevail. The girl being clad in a dress that alludes to the image of the violin case suggests one being emptied of one's identity and the idea of her melodiousness being restricted to instrumentality because, as we learn from the novel, she is ill-used by her dragon of a master – Miss Sally. As James Kincaid observes: 'The Brasses treat her purely as a thing, a noise-maker' (Kincaid, 1971, p. 86) because they make her fall down the stairs in their attempt to wake their lodger and to check whether he is alive or not.

The sexton's spade once again prescribes a possible superiority in terms of consciousness and memory to the realm of mute objects: 'If it could speak now, that spade, it would tell you of many an unexpected job that it and I have done together; but I forget 'em, for my memory's a poor one' (Dickens, 2001, p. 388). The sexton tells Little Nell that the spade cannot speak, so he acknowledges its muteness but he does not deny it the possibility of possessing a consciousness. It also possesses a kind of memory that is externalised and owned by the spade but emerges as a product of the mutual work between human and spade. This phenomenon is the result of the sonorous interaction between consciousness and object, in which the objects play a superior part. Philip Rogers observes: 'The novel emphasizes the mortality of men and things: time, represented by portentous sundials, hour glasses, and tolling bells, governs the motion of the stream of life [...].' (Rogers, 1973, p. 127). In this statement, we can see that Rogers also noted the way in which human consciousness and the objects it connects with submerge and are transformed from mute objects into curiosities.

Another very powerful example of hollowness that speaks of lived experience and temporalities is Nell's shoes:

> 'See here – these shoes – how worn they are – she kept them to remind her of our last long journey. You see where the little feet were bare upon the ground. They told me afterwards, that the stones had cut and bruised them. She never told me that. No, no, God bless her! And, I have remembered since, she walked behind me, sir, that I might not see how lame she was – but yet she had my hand in hers, and seemed to lead me still.' (Dickens, 2001, p. 524)

Empty objects like Nell's shoes, also get voiced. They speak instead of the child telling of her experiences and what she has gone through while being on a journey with her grandfather. All these imagined or prescribed, or visualised voices that sprout from the silence and with which the realm of the muted objects is characterised, align with the category of sound which John O. Jordan identifies as uncanny voices and silence. They also come to exemplify the hollowness and silence of the spirit of the future from *A Christmas Carol* who solemnly introduces a whole philosophical paradigm of the temporality of the future.

The child's consciousness is directed towards hollow space and towards objects. Consequently, the child's voice seems to be dislocated and to be oblivious to itself. There is always space, and there are always objects and voices that speak, live, and experience instead of the child, reinforcing the tragical element. Thus, the expectation of the child's death, manifested through the hollowness, seems to be even more frightening than the moment of her death itself.

A few words to sift the conversation spun so far

Firstly, we described the old curiosity shop as a hollow place where singular sounds of stories and laughter resound. After Little Nell and her grandfather's departure from the shop, the place is heard through Kit's ears as the hollowest ever:

> A group of idle urchins had taken possession of the doorsteps; some were plying the knocker and listening with delighted dread to the hollow sounds it spread through the dismantled house; others were clustered about the keyhole, watching half in jest and half in earnest for 'the ghost,' which an hour's gloom, added to the mystery that hung about the late inhabitants, had already raised. Standing all alone in the midst of the business and bustle of the street, the house looked a picture of cold desolation; and Kit, who remembered the cheerful fire that used to burn there on winter's night and the no less cheerful laugh that made the small room ring, turned quite mournfully away. (Dickens, 2001, p. 105)

Firstly, we could say that one of the reasons for Kit's deeply saddened condition, which is so untypical for him, is the indirect allusion between the poor urchins and Little Nell. He is unconsciously afraid of seeing her, even in his mind's eye, reduced to the state of poverty, a condition that her grandfather wanted to prevent her from too passionately and yet too unsuccessfully, most ironically, becoming the sole reason for her fall. Little

Nell is just like the ordinary and abandoned urchins which no one cares for. While analysing poverty and the de-facement[2] of children (and of their parents as figures defining the child's origin and self-integrity through voice, face, and body) in works that are crucial for defining the 'beastliness of Victorian society' (Rowland, 2024b, p. 234), Rowland notes 'The misery, defencelessness, and nobodiness of the pauper child reduce the adult to speechlessness' (Rowland, 2024b, p. 243). Till the end of the story, we could see that Kit is the only one who riots against this nobodiness and silence. He riots against the way in which the spatio-temporal constructs of both consciousness and world tend to consume and enfeeble the unrecognizable voices of the different nobodies, and especially the important 'nobody' from his childhood – Little Nell. Secondly, the segment quoted also shows us how different characters listen to the hollowness differently. Their imagination and memory adopt different directions. For Kit and Little Nell the shop is a place where they are taught to pursue their voice, to listen to it, to catch up with it, and even to be afraid of it because it would stir the thick silence. While the urchins are now playing with the silence. For them the place is not connected with memory but with mystery. What for Kit seems to be emblem of a childhood experience shaping his whole character, for them is a mere pastime which they would quickly forget when another, more interesting one, appears. Therefore, Kit is the only one bearing and 'hearing' the memory of the place.

After Nell's death, Kit becomes the 'voice' of her story. The same story of Little Nell is unwarily told by him to his children and other companions. This could lead us to the possibility that it has been Kit's child's consciousness of time the whole time, the voice we had been listening to was Kit's memories of Nell. At the end of the novel, hearing appears more superior than vision. Readers, or listeners, are brought back to the old curiosity shop and Kit, now a grown-up man with a family of his own trying to do a cartography of his child's consciousness of time by remembering where exactly the shop was but, alas, he is fretting and sweating to map it is of no avail:

> He sometimes took them [the listeners of his story] to the street where she had lived; but new improvements had altered it so much, it was not like the same. The

[2] A very important aspect that Rowland tackles in the text *Infanticide as Self-de-facement: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"* is the way in which the parent kills her child and in the act of killing the child, she wreaks havoc in the integrity of her own voice, vision, and body. Similar themes are figuratively present in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

> old house had been long ago pulled down, and a fine broad road was in its place. At first he would draw with his stick a square upon the ground to show them where it used to stand. But he soon became uncertain of the spot, and could only say it was thereabouts, he thought, and these alterations were confusing.
> Such are the changes which a few years bring about, and so do things pass away, like a tale that is told! (Dickens, 2001, p. 544)

It is only the voice, the oral inheritance that remains, and his attempt to illustrate his story fails. The story also passes away. Stories get told and then they pass just like a voice dispersing solemnly into the hollow space of time. Broad roads are built in the place of the shop as a sign that life goes on, the well is already empty, there is no water, only voices that resound and perish without a trace in its dull emptiness.

Concluding remarks and trajectories for further investigation

In this text, we attempted to propose a paradigm of analysis focusing on the way in which children in *The Old Curiosity Shop* experience sounded hollowness. For Little Nell, the sounded hollowness of space happens through stories that are narrated to her by human voices. She experiences many sounds through an imaginative auditory realm which intensifies the interiorisation of those sounds. We analysed two main examples to prove the hypothesis of sounds affecting Little Nell's temporality, identity and sense of death – her grandfather's stories about her mother in the resounding cavity of the old curiosity shop, and the sexton's story about the echoing well that is deep, dark and empty. We also saw that sounded hollowness creates a sense of physical departure from one's voice. Pertinent examples include Nell's imagined hearing of the well's echo, Kit's overexposed laughter and the loudness of his voice, accompanied by the toiling process of catching up with his voice because of the way in which the hollowness of the shop steals it from him. We also discussed the realm of the mute objects in the novel and their prescribed consciousness and memory, all of which presented as voiced ones. Little Nell's visit to the manufacturing city, her last days in the rural area, her interaction with the spatiality of the house and the church there, the event of her death, the way in which the narrative voice repeats the announcement of this event with minor alterations, and the enigmatic character, life and fate of the Marchioness – these are topics that require an investigation of its own through the prism of phenomenology of sounds – much food for thought ahead, in times resounding, hopefully, with the efforts and anxieties of research this paper was born of.

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THE ESCAPE HAMLET: TEACHING SHAKESPEARE AND KEY COMPETENCES THROUGH GAMIFICATION

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Abstract

The article presents the design and outcomes of an educational experiment conducted at New Bulgarian University, in which Escape Hamlet, a gamified learning activity based on William Shakespeare's Hamlet, was developed and implemented. The experiment explores the possibility to design an educational activity that successfully combines three objectives: serious engagement with a literary text, work on the key competences for lifelong learning, and student engagement through gamification. The article first outlines the educational context of teaching Shakespeare in Bulgaria and discusses the relevance of competence-based learning. It then explains the rationale for applying gamification and describes the process of designing the game. Based on observations of playthroughs it analyzes how participants interact with the puzzles and reflect on the learning effects of the activity. The article finds that combining subject-based learning with competence-based learning is both feasible and beneficial, and that gamification has significant potential to (re)engage students with learning. The full script of the game is provided in an appendix to encourage further adaptation and use in educational contexts.

Keywords: education, pedagogy, Shakespeare, key competences, gamification

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Since 2024 New Bulgarian University in Sofia, Bulgaria has been the host of an annual festival entitled *Tracing Shakespeare*. The festival's objective is to bring together people of various qualifications who are interested in William Shakespeare and his work – university students, professors, researchers, translators, school students, teachers, psychologists, special educators, speech therapists, social workers, actors, theatre directors, theatre managers, artists, musicians – and provide a platform for them to get to know each other, exchange ideas and start new collaborations, including interdisciplinary ones.

One such collaboration between members of the languages and the theatre departments of the university took the form of an educational experiment entitled *Escape Hamlet.* It targets both school and university students and aims to integrate two learning objectives – teaching Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and teaching the eight key competences for lifelong learning. In order to create a more immersive and engaging learning experience for the students, the methods of gamification are used. The final product is an educational game which takes about 90 minutes to play and has most of the features of an escape room.

In the following pages we will discuss the project in greater detail. First, we will provide more context concerning the choice of learning objectives. Then we will elaborate on why and how we have applied the methods of gamification. We will comment on some of the playthroughs and the learning effects we have observed. Finally, a Supplement to this article features an entire script of the game free for anyone to use in their classroom or adapt to their own educational needs[1].

Teaching Shakespeare in Bulgaria

After the re-emergence of the Bulgarian state from the Ottoman Empire, Shakespeare and his works were included in the first national school curriculum. Two famous Bulgarian intellectuals, who served as ministers of education – Konstantin Velichkov and Ivan Vazov, prepared the first Bulgarian chrestomathy "or collection of selected samples from all genres of literary writing, with the addition of short biographies of the most renowned authors". In it they included two passages from *Hamlet* and one from *Macbeth* in their own Bulgarian translation, as well as a concise yet substantial presentation of the author and his works. The objective clarified in the preface was „for students to become aware of their belonging to European civilization, as well as develop proper moral values and good taste" (Velichkov & Vazov, 1884). During the first half of the 20th century the interest in Shakespeare increased as more of his works were translated and his dramas were staged in Bulgarian theatres.

After the communist coup in 1944, Shakespeare was not purged from the curriculum like other "bourgeois" authors. This was probably due to Karl Marx's open admiration of his work, or to Maxim Gorky's much quoted opinion that every progressive communist must read *Hamlet*, Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*. Nevertheless, in order to conform to the cultural agenda of the communists, both Shakespeare and his work had to be "painted red". For the author this meant that his biography had to resemble more that of Gorky – humble origins, defender of the oppressed classes, revolutionary fervour, clear purpose, readiness for self-sacrifice. For his work it meant the imposition of only one "correct" way of interpreting his works forcing themes to align with the ideas of class struggle and anti-feudalism (Shurbanov & Sokolova, 2001). Hamlet, for instance, fought a struggle that "takes on a socialist, popular character"; that when he speaks of a "sea of troubles," his words "echo the sufferings and pains of the people"; that he "merges his own pain with the people's pain"; that in the figure of the prince "the people see embodied their hopes for a better life" (Nichev et al., 1973).

Despite the pervasive ideologization of Shakespeare, islands of normality remained within the education system. The quintessential example of this is the figure of Marko Minkov (1909–1987). After graduating in classical philology in Sofia and defending a doctorate in English studies as a Humboldt scholar in Berlin, he began his work in 1933 in the newly created English Philology programme at Sofia University. He developed and for many years taught most of the courses there, and from 1951 until his retirement in 1974, headed the department. Minkov quickly established himself as a world authority in the field of English studies and Shakespeare scholarship. After the establishment of the Iron Curtain, he was repressed, isolated, and harassed, but could not be replaced in his teaching position and stubbornly continued his work. In his teaching and research, he did not conform to the ideological framework imposed by the regime, and was instead guided solely by global academic standards, which led to many conflicts with the authorities (Shurbanov & Sokolova, 2001).

After the collapse of the communist regime in 1989 the approaches to teaching Shakespeare were gradually de-ideologized. Prominent scholars and intellectuals such as Alexander Shurbanov and Kleo Protohristova became involved in this process. For example, in the literature textbook for the 10th grade first published in 2001, Alexander Shurbanov presented different critical approaches to Hamlet – as a man suffering from melancholy, as an idealist, through Freudian theories, as a social critic (Shurbanov, Zvezdanov, Chernokozhev, 2001). At the time of writing this article, medieval and Renaissance literature is studied in the 8th grade. The latest generation of textbooks from 2017 offer teachers a rich and diverse platform of resources and tasks (e.g. Ivancheva et al., 2017). For over three and a half decades there have been no ideological restrictions on how Shakespeare is taught at universities.

Unfortunately, the larger political, economic and social aspects of Bulgaria's transition were not so straightforward. Despite the political mobilisation of democratically-minded citizens, the younger generation of communist-party functionaries, rebranded as "socialists" and in various other guises, retained a lasting control over the state. Using the siphoned funds and the secret police assets of the communist regime, they managed to prevent Bulgaria from becoming a properly functioning democracy and to perpetuate systemic corruption. This led to stalled development, a series of deep financial crises and a widening division between the haves and the have-nots. The resulting strong sense of social injustice and disillusionment was skilfully manipulated, so as to blame democracy, the market economy and generally the West that seemed to endorse them – even as the country joined NATO, the European Union, and more recently the Schengen Area and the Eurozone.

Against this backdrop, the school education sector remained unreformed and severely underfunded[2]. Many of the more skilled professionals found better employment,

[2] The description of recent developments and processes in Bulgarian school education were informed by the personal experiences of the authors as well as by a series of 10 qualitative interviews with 5 unrelated schoolteachers and 5 students form different Bulgarian schools conducted by Georgi Niagolov in the spring of 2025.

while those who remained had to cater for a frivolous market. In the absence of a coherent national policy, what the market generally demanded was a socially acceptable procedure for segregating the children of more ambitious families with higher socioeconomic status from the others. The objective was to give these students better opportunity for upward mobility and migration from smaller settlements to bigger towns, from there to the capital, and from the capital to study or emigration abroad – while applying much lower standards to the education of the others. The division between the so called 'elite' and 'non-elite' schools already existed in communist times and even though some adjustments were made, the model was generally preserved. As a result now, the 'elite' schools provide better quality education to about 10% of the students and receive most of the attention, while education at the 'non-elite' ones is largely formalistic and standards are so low that it is not uncommon for students to graduate without even basic literacy and numeracy skills (OECD, 2023).

In a flash of administrative 'ingenuity' education authorities discovered that they could use the same standardized tests to both regulate admission to 'elite' schools and demonstrate to the public that minimum educational standards are met. The tests simply had to have very wide performance scales and very low passing thresholds. As a result, nearly all students manage to obtain a pass mark, but in order to get a high mark, and compete for an 'elite' school, students must train hard and receive expensive private tuition. Either way, given the importance of these tests to students' lives, they inevitably determine what is important in the school curriculum. Knowledge of literature is tested at each stage of school education, but the focus is exclusively on Bulgarian literature.

This would not constitute a problem, were it not for the fact that the Bulgarian literary canon too has remained largely unreformed. It is focused on 19th-century National Revival and early 20th-century works carefully curated during communism so as to instil an eclectic mix of attitudes combining militant nationalism, mistrust of the West, Russophilia, admiration for workers and peasants, parochialism and patriarchalism. The presence of Western literature works in the school curriculum, including Shakespeare's, holds potential to counterbalance this to some extent and give students insight into the development of universal values such as respect for human dignity and rights, freedom, democracy, justice and empathy. However, since none of this is truly prioritized by the educational system, this potential remains mostly unused.

Even though technically Shakespeare is still included in the national school curriculum, his works, together with those of other Western authors, are typically overlooked, as is the objective stated by the founding fathers of Bulgarian modern education – that students should „ become aware of their belonging to European civilization, as well as develop proper moral values and good taste". More careful teaching of Shakespeare in Bulgaria today is limited to a handful of specialized secondary schools and a few university philology programmes – only a small fraction of whose graduates develop professionally as school teachers or university professors.

Key competences for lifelong learning

For Plato, justice was the harmonious cooperation of all citizens in order to achieve a good life together. However, they had to be prepared for their responsibilities – and this precisely was the task of education (*The Republic*). For Marcus Tullius Cicero, the study of the so-called liberal arts (*artes liberales*) was key. Through them one achieved a deep understanding of how human beings think and feel, as well as broad knowledge across all existing fields of knowledge. These abilities were necessary for the free person so that they would not become enslaved by the views of others, but would be able to defend their own convincingly, and thus achieve their goals in life (*On the Orator*). For medieval scholasticism the main function of knowledge was the correct understanding of God's word, but with the arrival of the Renaissance the focus shifted to what Giovanni Pico della Mirandola called the 'greatest miracle' – the human (*Oration on the Dignity of Man*). Several ancient texts were rediscovered and classical humanistic education (*studia humanitatis*) developed.

The main way of achieving knowledge during the Enlightenment was the collection of empirical data through systematic observation and their rational interpretation by means of the scientific method. This sharply increased humanity's understanding of the natural world but also changed the understanding of human nature. People are free, unburdened by their origin, and possess natural rights. In this context Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that students, like little natural scientists, confront the world and by the principle of trial and error empirically discover whatever it is they need to know (*Emile, or On Education*). When, against the background of the accelerating Industrial Revolution, at the very beginning of the nineteenth century universal, compulsory, state school education was introduced for the first time in Prussia, Wilhelm von Humboldt believed that there was a certain type of general education and cultivation of the personality (*Bildung*) which everyone must undergo before developing one or another professional skill. According to John Dewey, the ability for critical thinking is of key importance – teaching students to memorize whatever you tell them without questioning it is much easier, but this, of course, is only an imitation of education. True education is a moral task for teachers. If they fail to prepare future citizens to assume responsibility for the sequence of rational choices on which the quality of not only their own lives but also that of society as a whole depends, democracy cannot function properly (*Democracy and Education*) (see Curren, 2003).

During the 1960s, however, it became clear that educational systems are not successful in achieving these lofty goals systemically. In the usual case schools were organized according to the industrial model of the factory – the school day proceeded according to a programme predetermined and imposed from above, the bell signalled the beginning and end of lessons, knowledge was divided into different subjects, they were taught by different teachers, many of whom did not have high qualification – it was enough for them to be able to follow curricula written by more highly qualified specialists.

Thus, educational systems largely prepared students for employment in industrial production, yet they proved insufficiently capable of preparing them for the future. The industrial era was gradually giving way to a post-industrial one. This emerging socio-economic order was characterized by the increasing centrality of service production rather than the manufacture of goods; the transformation of knowledge into a key form of capital; and the growing importance of innovation and new ideas as primary drivers of economic development. Under conditions of globalization and the increasing automation of production, economic value shifted away from manual labour toward engineers, researchers, and individuals engaged in creative professions. At the same time, the information sciences, as well as the scientific study of behaviour and mental processes, expanded significantly and found increasingly wide-ranging applications.

In this context, by the early 1970s it had become evident that a substantial portion of the learning process was only formalistic and did not result in meaningful learning; that access to high-quality education remained largely restricted to children from families with higher socioeconomic status; and that while science was advancing rapidly, educational systems were failing to keep pace (Faure, 1972). It also became clear that, even where basic literacy rates statistically approached universality, a significant proportion of school graduates remained functionally illiterate. Importantly, even at this stage the concept of 'functional literacy' was not limited to the ability to read labels and instructions – rather, it was understood as the capacity to use language for "socio-economic and cultural activities," as well as "as a means for achieving greater personal freedom and personal development" (UNESCO, 1978).

Meanwhile, analyses were carried out in the United States which showed that until that moment policies in the field of education had been directed mainly toward controlling its content and the organization of the learning process. Experts recommend moving toward policies focused on learning outcomes. The concept that was used for this type of policy is "competency-based education" (Nodine, 2015). Three main characteristics define this approach: i) learning outcomes (competencies) are described in detail; ii) the degree of their achievement is assessed and, if they are not achieved, the reasons are sought and responsibility is borne; and iii) the procedures through which institutions achieve the results (competencies) are not controlled and standardized – they are adapted and personalized according to the needs of the learners.

Alongside UNESCO, other international organizations began rethinking education so that it would become more adequate to the future needs of the labour market and society at large – for example the Council of Europe, the World Economic Forum, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the World Bank, and the US Partnership for 21st Century Learning. As a result, a number of frameworks of learning outcomes were developed, which shared the same rationale, but differed slightly in terms of terminology and structure.

During the 1980s, a number of countries initiated fundamental reforms of their educational systems, including Finland, Ireland, Scotland, several U.S. states and Canadian provinces, Australia, South Korea, and Singapore. By the beginning of the new century, the first results had already become evident. These developments demonstrated clearly that processes of globalization, climate change, and above all rapid technological transformation were advancing at such a pace, and producing such profound changes in the lives of individuals, that educational systems failing to undergo modernization were falling irreversibly behind. By this time, countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, several countries in Eastern and Central Europe, Japan, China, and a number of Latin American countries had also joined the process of educational modernization.

In 2006 the Council of the European Union recommended, and in 2018 reaffirmed, its own framework of 'key competences for lifelong learning'. The framework includes the following competences: literacy competence; multilingual competence; mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering; digital competence; personal, social and learning to learn competence; citizenship competence; entrepreneurship competence; and cultural awareness and expression competence. There are also 'horizontal' learning outcomes that draw on elements from several or all of these competences. These outcomes are typically articulated either as literacies (e.g., language literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, numeracy) or as transversal skills (e.g., critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork).

In this context, the concept of 'competence' refers to a complex learning outcome that integrates specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes, which may be described in detail across different stages of education. A 'competence framework' denotes a structured set of interrelated competences, each of which holds equal significance in relation to the others. The notion of 'key' (basic, foundational, or fundamental) reflects the idea that has developed in Western philosophy of education, according to which there is a certain body of learning that everybody must acquire in order to develop adequately as an individual and member of a properly functioning society. The concept of 'lifelong learning', in turn, refers to Faure's theory that the successful societies of the future will be 'learning societies', whose citizens continue to learn and to pursue self-actualization throughout the course of their lives. The framework of key competences for lifelong learning may be further complemented by professional and other more specialized competences.

In 2016, a full decade after the initial recommendation was made by the Council of the European Union, a new legislative framework regulating school education was adopted in Bulgaria. It declares that developing the key competences for lifelong learning is the main goal of the national school curriculum. On closer inspection, however, it is visible that this legislative framework does not clarify what key competences really are, how the new competence-based approach to education is to be combined with the traditional subject-centred one, what students' learning outcomes in terms of developing competences should be for each stage of school education, how this is to be measured, who should be responsible for this and what such responsibility should entail. Without this clarification 'developing key competences' remains yet another piece of 'policy newspeak' without real effect on the ground. A coherent national policy for developing key competences beyond school education – in higher education or lifelong learning – has so far not been considered.

From the vantage point of 2026, another decade later, the consequences, at the systemic level, are there to be seen. In PISA 2022, Bulgarian students ranked last in mathematics and second-to-last in reading among EU countries, with more than half performing below the minimum proficiency level (OECD, 2023). Rather than compensating for social inequalities, the education system often reproduces them: socioeconomic status remains a powerful predictor of student achievement (European Commission, 2024). The problem extends beyond academic knowledge. Bulgaria ranks last in the Media Literacy Index 2023, indicating high vulnerability to misinformation (Lessenski, 2023), and remains among the lowest-ranking EU countries in basic digital skills (Eurostat, 2023). OECD surveys further show relatively low levels of key social and emotional skills among students – competences that are essential for well-being, responsible decision-making, and effective participation in democratic society (OECD, 2021).

Why gamification?

If most Bulgarian students are not versed in universal human values through their literary education, nor do they develop key competences to prepare for the future – then what do they learn during the twelve years they spend at school? The short answer to this question is – they learn how to jump through the hoops. Regardless of whether they have secured a place in one of the few 'elite' schools, or have ended up somewhere else, they invariably become aware of the system attempting to 'discipline' them. They have to learn to obey rules they not always understand, to sit still and listen to the teacher for hours, to memorize and reproduce information they may not be interested in, even to use the toilet only when they are allowed. They have to learn that going to school is hard work – a sacrifice in the name of unclear future benefits.

To some extent, this too is a remnant of communist times. A distinctive feature of the regime was the belief that it was the responsibility of the state, not of the individual or the family, to 'form' the character of its citizens. Schools had a crucial role in this process which was called 'upbringing' and kept theoretically distinct from 'education'. The idea was to shape young people's knowledge and understanding of the world by inculcating officially prescribed attitudes, values, and habits intended to make them good, hardworking, and loyal members of socialist society. The wave of de-ideologization and liberalization that started in the 1990s limited the authority of schools, but there is still a very strong sense in the teaching profession that this was a mistake, there is also a continuing demand for more power to impose 'disciplinary' sanctions on students and sometimes even on their parents.

An extravagant recent initiative, seriously considered and coming close to legislative adoption, concerned the introduction of compulsory religious education in all years of schooling. The publicly presented rationale was that due to the detrimental influence of a 'globalized' and 'all-too-liberal' world full of 'dehumanizing' technologies and social media, students fail to develop the right kind of attitudes, values, and virtues – and that this can be remedied by religious instruction. This is a classic example of looking for a magic (or should we say 'divine') solution to a complex systemic problem. Of course, students should develop attitudes and values that make themselves and the social fabric they partake of stronger. Of course, they should develop the digital and socio-emotional skills they need to resist the bad influences of algorithms and AI. The only way to do this, however, is through better education, more focused on their wellbeing, not through religious indoctrination.

In a regulatory framework that does not allow corporal punishment, one of the main instruments for 'disciplining' and 'bringing up' students is psychological manipulation. Some of the most common techniques include psychological coercion, guilt induction, emotional blackmail, shaming and gaslighting. As a result, many students develop a negative attitude not only to the person who uses these techniques, but to the subject he or she teaches, the school, the whole system, even learning in general. Some of them respond through overt forms of rebellion or aggression, but the majority withdraw psychologically, constructing an internal barrier that distances them from whatever is taking place in the classroom. This distancing becomes habitual and poses a significant problem when trying to truly engage them with formal education in the future (Yarrow, E., & Hedges, 2021).

At the same time, children are naturally curious, energetic, and inclined toward exploration and social interaction. When they become psychologically disengaged from school, they tend to seek alternative environments where they can socialize, exchange information, develop their identities, receive validation, and experience enjoyment. In earlier generations, when they were not at school children generally had two principal options – reading books at home or playing outdoors with peers. In contemporary societies unsupervised outdoor activity for children under the age of twelve is often restricted. At the same time, the rapid expansion of mass communication and information technologies has created increasingly attractive alternatives to reading. Children first began spending significant amounts of time watching television, later shifted toward computer games and, more recently, social media as alternative social and learning environments.

The systemic solution to the problems outlined so far requires a comprehensive reform of the Bulgarian education system. In its absence, however, when trying to re-engage students with learning activities, educators resort to certain palliative measures which are proudly referred to as 'innovative teaching methods'. A very effective one, because it connects directly to learners' alternative social and learning environments, is gamification. According to one of the foremost authorities on this subject, Karl Kapp, "[g]amification is the careful and considered integration of game characteristics, aesthetics and mechanics into a non-game context to promote change in behavior. It is most often used to motivate and engage people" (Kapp, 2012).

Since the 1960s, educational theory has increasingly recognized the importance of play in early childhood education. Influential theorists such as Jean Piaget argued that through free play with objects children actively explore their environment and construct knowledge by integrating new experiences into existing cognitive structures, a process he described as assimilation (Piaget, 1962). Lev Vygotsky similarly emphasized the developmental role of play, suggesting that it creates a supportive context in which children can perform beyond their current abilities within what he termed the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978). Contemporary educational research continues to build on these foundational ideas, exploring how structured and unstructured play can support cognitive, social, and emotional development. As a result, play-based learning approaches are increasingly incorporated into early childhood education practices.

Marc Prensky, one of the major proponents of game-based learning, argues that play and games have significant educational potential not only for young children but also for school students, university learners, and adults (Prensky, 2001). In recent years, other scholars have further explored these ideas, identifying practices that make educational games effective. Successful learning games tend to be voluntary, intrinsically motivating, and approached with a positive attitude. They emphasize the process of engagement rather than only the outcome and often rely on creativity, problem-solving, and active participation. Rules and structures may emerge through interaction among players, while mistakes are treated as opportunities for learning rather than failure. Continuous challenges, collaboration, and team-based interaction sustain motivation. Importantly, players should engage primarily for enjoyment, as the educational benefits of play often emerge most effectively as a natural by-product of the gaming experience (Kapp, 2012, 2014).

Another theory relevant to the gamification of learning is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's research on 'optimal experience'. In seeking to understand human happiness, Csikszentmihalyi discovered a phenomenon he called 'flow'. It is a state of deep engagement in which individuals become fully absorbed in an activity performed for its own sake. Although not always physically pleasant, this state represents an optimal psychological experience in which people voluntarily stretch their abilities to accomplish challenging and meaningful goals, such as mastering a complex musical piece or achieving an athletic milestone. Csikszentmihalyi found that happiness often emerges as an unintended by-product of such engagement. Importantly, flow can be intentionally supported through design. Across different contexts, it arises when individuals pursue a clear goal while their skills develop in balance with increasing levels of challenge. If skills exceed the challenge, boredom occurs; if the challenge exceeds skills, anxiety results. Effective learning design therefore requires meaningful goals, gradually increasing difficulty, and adequate support to help learners develop their abilities alongside rising challenges (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Designing the game

In this context, in 2025, on the eve of the second issue of the *Tracing Shakespeare* festival at New Bulgarian University, we, an interdisciplinary team of university professors, decided to conduct an educational experiment. We wanted to test whether it was possible to design an educational activity that could successfully combine three objectives: i) serious consideration of a play by William Shakespeare; ii) work on the key competence for lifelong learning; and iii) engagement through gamification. If this is possible on a small scale, we thought, then it should be possible to scale it up to the level of a course, programme, institution – even to the level of a whole curriculum. We were also inspired by a recent publication by our colleague Hristo Chukurliev in which he tells how he designed an escape-room-type learning scenario for his students in a museum (Chukurliev, 2024).

In our case, the participants would include school students, teachers, university students, professors as well as any other member of the audiences attending the festival. Based on this we selected the play. We opted for the most familiar Shakespeare play in Bulgaria – *Hamlet* – hoping that at least some of the participants will have studied it beforehand or seen a production in the theatre. We expected both Bulgarian and international participants, so we had to prepare two language versions – one in Bulgarian and another in English. For the Bulgarian version we used the most recent translation by Alexander Shurbanov published in 2016 in an interleaved bilingual edition (Shakespeare, 2016).

The duration of the activity had to be equivalent to a standard 90-minute university session so that it could fit into the festival programme. We also decided to extend the meaning of “room” in “escape room” to include the entire university campus. Since the key competences are equally important, we wondered whether it would be possible to divide the time evenly and allocate some to each of them. We reasoned that if we devoted ten minutes to each of the eight competences, this would leave participants another ten minutes to move from one location to another. This meant that we had to design eight tasks – one for each key competence. We also thought that the competences could be thematically linked to the locations; for example, the task related to cultural awareness and expression could be situated in the university gallery.

The first major challenge was how to connect the play meaningfully with the framework of key competences. The plot follows a linear structure, whereas the competences are interrelated and can be approached in any order. We therefore had to identify eight chronologically consecutive and dramatically significant moments in the play, each of which could be connected with one of the key competences. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is thematically so rich that this proved less difficult than we had initially expected. The first task connects the moment in Act II, Scene 2 when Hamlet decides to test whether the ghost is telling the truth with digital competence and the activity of fact-checking using the internet. The second connects the moment in Act II, Scene 2 when Hamlet engages in a multilayered conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with the personal, social and learning to learn competence and the activity of social-emotional mapping. The third connects the moments in Act II, Scene 2 and Act III, Scene 2, when the play-within-the-play is prepared and performed, with the cultural awareness and expression competence and the activity of looking for clues in a picture. The fourth connects the famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy in Act III, Scene 1 with the entrepreneurship competence and the exploration of opportunities for a more favourable outcome to the events of the play. The fifth connects the moment in Act III, Scene 4, when Hamlet confronts his mother, Gertrude, in her chamber, with multilingual competence and a focus on translation. The sixth connects the famous "How all occasions do inform against me" soliloquy in Act IV, Scene 4 with citizenship competence and a consideration of Hamlet's possible courses of political action from a contemporary perspective. The seventh connects Hamlet's conversation with the gravediggers in Act V, Scene 1 with mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering. The eighth and final task connects the final scene (Act V, Scene 2) with literacy competence and places participants in Horatio's shoes as they reconstruct the story of Hamlet.

The second major challenge was to design the tricky part of the tasks – the puzzles. In this stage of the work we found Paige Lyman's *The Do-It-Yourself Escape Room Book* extremely useful (Lyman, 2021). We also tried to connect the puzzles thematically with the locations and, as far as possible, with both the competences and the Shakespearean moments. As we did not have a dedicated budget, we tried to keep the costs to a minimum.

For the first puzzle we set up a virtual safe box on one of the machines in a university computer room that had to be unlocked digitally. Participants then worked in a social space on campus to piece together an emotional map. Next they went to the gallery and examined Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I* in order to find a hidden clue. They then solved a textual puzzle that produced a sequence of capitalised letters pointing to the next location—the library. Next participants compared an original passage from the play with its Bulgarian translation, identified an English phrase, and determined the rhetorical figure it uses. They then sorted political behaviours to reveal a hidden word. After that they went to a biology lab, where they had to differentiate between conspiracy theories, superstitions, religious beliefs and scientific truths. At the final location participants were locked in and had to retrieve a key from a box by solving the last puzzle, which required them to reconstruct the story of *Hamlet* from pieces of text, some of which were redundant.

Later, when we had to move the game to other locations and even bring it to a school, we discovered that it was possible to adapt the puzzles without changing the educational content of the tasks. From a technical standpoint, each task includes a verbal instruction that participants must read or hear in order to solve the puzzle and advance in the game. These instructions combine information about Shakespeare's play with information about the respective competence. They determine the activity in which participants apply this knowledge to the puzzle and reflect on it. This structure can be preserved regardless of whether the puzzle is textual, e.g. detecting hidden words to find the next location, numerical, e.g. working out a combination of numbers to unlock a padlock, or something else. We had to test and modify the puzzles to achieve the right level of difficulty. We did not want to make them too hard, as participants could become discouraged or take too long to solve them, nor too easy, in which case participants could lose interest.

From a visual and atmospheric perspective, the game benefited from two factors: that it was set on the university campus and that it was developed in the context of a festival. The university setting contributed to the atmosphere of the game because it enabled us to place participants in a number of interesting spaces – a hi-tech computer room, a comfortable social space, a gallery, a library, a bookshop, a museum, a biology lab, and a theatre room. The fact that the production of the game was part of a festival meant that we could use a small budget for printed materials and access the university graphic design lab. In this way, we were able to mark and decorate the locations with specially designed posters and stickers, and we could also print specially designed maps of the campus for participants. We were also able to purchase props such as boxes, padlocks, and a plastic human skull. All this contributed to participants' engagement.

Playing the game

To ensure that participants would not get lost on campus and that playing the game would not take longer than 120 minutes, we decided that during each playing session each group of participants would be accompanied by a 'gamemaster' – one of us or a previously briefed volunteer student. In this way, we could also observe first-hand how participants experienced and dealt with each of the tasks. In this section, we share our most important observations, with the caveat that they are subjective and context dependent. Therefore, we hesitate to claim that the effects we have observed are a direct consequence of the game but suggest that they are worth investigating further.

The first thing we observed was the fact that participants, regardless of their age, approached the topic of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with a mixture of awe and fear. Even if they knew little about the author and the play – which was, of course, not the case for everyone – they were aware that *Hamlet* is a great world classic and therefore assumed that it must be very difficult. It was clear that they struggled to imagine how they could have fun with it. There was also a faint sense of shame and guilt among some participants, who had probably not read the play or did not remember the interpretations they had been spoon-fed in school.

When participants were confronted with the first puzzle, they quickly understood that they would be much stronger if they collaborated against the game. Every group had its own dynamic, but in all of them participants organized themselves in some way – someone would read the instructions, others would look for clues, someone would be good with mathematical puzzles, and another with language-based ones. In order to maintain coordination within the group, they communicated with each other, which indicated that everyone was thinking about the instructions.

Another thing that became clear when participants were confronted with the puzzles was that gamification did actually work. They quickly forgot about their initial worries and engaged with the game. They found different ways to solve the puzzles, some of which had not been envisaged at the level of game design. Interestingly, they wanted not only to win, but also to do it honourably. When they got stuck on a puzzle, someone would inevitably suggest using an AI tool, which is something students often secretly do in the classroom nowadays. However, the group would always dismiss this idea, arguing that it would "spoil the fun" of the whole activity.

When asked afterwards about their experience, most participants reported that they enjoyed playing the game and would recommend it to others. They expressed regret that more of the classes they had attended were not organized in this way. When asked specifically about Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, they said that they felt they knew more about it and that they were more likely to (re)read the play or choose to see it performed on stage or on screen. Concerning the key competences for lifelong learning, participants reflected that they did not remember having been explicitly taught any knowledge, skills, or attitudes connected with them. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that what they learned about them during the game was useful and relevant to their educational, professional and social lives.

Conclusion

In this article, we have established the context of an educational experiment recently conducted at New Bulgarian University, explained the reasons that motivated us to undertake it, and described in greater detail both the design stage and our observations of its effects on participants. In this experiment, we aimed to test whether it was possible to design, on a small scale, an educational activity that could successfully combine the following objectives: (i) serious engagement with a play by William Shakespeare; (ii) work on the key competences for lifelong learning; and (iii) engagement through gamification. Based on our discussion, we can conclude that this is possible and that it has a positive effect on participants.

Furthermore, based on our experience of designing the educational game *Escape Hamlet*, we have identified two efforts that merit separate consideration: combining subject-based learning with competence-based learning, and using gamification as a method to (re)engage students with learning. Our experience suggests that each of these objectives can be successfully achieved and they can also be combined with one another. In the context of 21st-century education, we believe that the integration of subject-based and competence-based learning should become the norm across courses, programmes, syllabi, and curricula at all stages of education, including school, university, and lifelong learning. At the same time, our experiment also confirms that gamification has considerable potential to (re)engage students with learning. Given that this potential has so far been only rarely explored in Bulgaria, we argue that gamified approaches should be used more widely across all levels of education.

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MEDLEX25: DIAGNOSING THE RECOGNITION–PRODUCTION GAP IN MEDICAL ENGLISH VOCABULARY

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Abstract

This study introduces MedLex-25, a compact diagnostic instrument designed to quantify recognition–production asymmetries in medical English vocabulary. Second-year medical students at Medical University Varna, Bulgaria completed nine parallel test forms (50 targets per form; 225 unique lexical targets sampled from a coursebook corpus) under supervised conditions; usable data from 186 students were analysed, with a total of 9300 questions answered. Each form paired a four-option receptive item with a sentence-production task for the same targets; production responses were binary-scored (correct/incorrect) with tolerance for non-meaning-preventing surface errors. Results suggest a systematic recognition–production gap across five lexical categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, two-word multiword items): receptive accuracy consistently exceeded productive accuracy, and no item achieved perfect production. Counts of perfectly recognized items were: nouns 33/45, adjectives 27/45, verbs 23/45, adverbs 25/45, and multiword items 28/45. Verbs, adjectives and—most strikingly—adverbs exhibited the largest productive weaknesses (lowest production for erroneously = 0.071). Item-level diagnostics identify concrete teaching targets. The MedLex-25 test can guide focused instruction and recommend follow-up studies that expand item coverage, refine production scoring, and investigate etymology and cross-disciplinary exposure as mediating factors.

Keywords: Medical English, ESP vocabulary, recognition-production gap, error analysis, corpus-based item selection

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Effective communication in clinical settings depends crucially on domain-specific vocabulary: medical students must both recognise technical terms in texts and produce them accurately in writing and speaking. Research consistently indicates that receptive knowledge (recognition) tends to outstrip productive knowledge (use) in L2 vocabulary learning, a pattern that has practical implications for teaching in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses for medicine. Recent empirical work confirms substantial receptive–productive asymmetries across contexts, indicating that learners often understand more terms than they can reliably deploy in context (Malmström et al., 2025).

For medical ESP this asymmetry is particularly consequential: imprecise or incorrect lexical production can distort clinical meaning and potentially endanger patient care. Consequently, there is a pressing need for short, reliable diagnostic instruments that (a) sample domain-relevant vocabulary ecologically, and (b) distinguish recognition from production at the item level so instructors can prioritise teaching targets. Corpus-based selection of items is widely accepted as the most defensible way to ensure domain relevance, but corpus analysis alone does not reveal whether students can productively use the items in discourse. Recent studies in collocation and lexical acquisition underline that learning outcomes depend on both exposure and task design, and that productive mastery requires pedagogical practice beyond mere recognition (Pu et al., 2024).

This study introduces MedLex-25, a compact diagnostic instrument built from coursebook-derived corpus data and designed to measure recognition and production of medical English across five lexical categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and two-word multiword items). Unlike corpus projects that focus primarily on the compilation, annotation, and analysis of medical texts, MedLex-25 uses corpus evidence as the item-selection stage and then operationalises those items through paired receptive (multiple-choice) and productive (sentence-production) tasks completed by learners. In this way, the instrument adds a pedagogical and measurement layer that moves beyond corpus description toward classroom-based lexical diagnosis. While MedLex-25 is informed by corpus methodology and shares conceptual affinities with earlier MEDLEX projects in its domain focus and principled lexical sampling, it is not a descendant of those corpus initiatives and differs fundamentally in aim and procedure, shifting the emphasis from corpus construction to learner performance and diagnostic use (Kokkinakis, 2006).

The present study does not aim to provide a complete psychometric validation of MedLex-25. Rather, it reports the initial empirical piloting and exploratory validation of an early-stage diagnostic instrument, developed by the author as part of the broader research and pedagogical work in medical English for specific purposes. MedLex-25 was conceived as a formative, classroom-diagnostic tool intended to support instructional decision-making, rather than as a standardized or high-stakes assessment instrument. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine whether the instrument can function adequately in authentic classroom conditions, elicit stable and interpretable recognition–production asymmetries, and differentiate lexical categories in theoretically meaningful ways. The findings are therefore presented as initial evidence of diagnostic adequacy in a pilot context, intended to inform further refinement and future large-scale validation, rather than as claims of definitive instrument validation.

Research questions

The empirical work is guided by two primary research questions that connect diagnostic measurement to pedagogical decision-making:

1. Which lexical category—nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, or two-word multiword items—exhibits the largest receptive–productive gap among medical students assessed with MedLex-25?
2. Which factors account for observed receptive–productive gaps across lexical categories (e.g., item frequency in the coursebook corpus, collocational constraints, part-of-speech-specific processing demands, and task affordances)?

Expected contributions are twofold: (i) identification of lexical categories most susceptible to productive breakdowns in medical English; and (ii) specification of candidate explanatory mechanisms that can inform targeted pedagogical interventions and further refinement of the diagnostic instrument. Subsequent sections describe MedLex-25 development and validation, report classroom findings, and discuss implications for ESP assessment and instruction in medical contexts.

Literature Review

Recognition vs. production: empirical patterns and educational stakes

Receptive-productive distribution patterns are similar across contexts. This author's earlier empirical investigations are consistent with the idea that learners perform better on receptive tasks (multiple-choice, recognition) than on production tasks (gap-fill, sentence generation), and that the size of the gap is sensitive to a variety of factors. For example, large-sample studies of vocabulary in instructional contexts show that even experienced learners and teachers have larger receptive than productive inventories, a reality that has direct consequences for ESP syllabi which often emphasise reading comprehension at the expense of controlled production practice (Xulong & Sukying, 2021).

Collocational knowledge (the habitual pairing of words) has been shown to be particularly sensitive to the receptive–productive divide. In a longitudinal study tracking L2 German learners over three years, learners gradually shifted some collocations from passive (receptive) recognition to active (productive) use, depending on factors such as item frequency, congruency, and prior productive vocabulary knowledge (Boone et al., 2023). Cross-sectional data from Thai university learners similarly reveal significantly higher receptive than productive collocation knowledge across proficiency levels (Sonbul et al., 2023). Furthermore, an intervention using spaced retrieval practice of verb–noun collocations resulted in much stronger long-term productive collocation retention than massed schedules, indicating that repeated focused retrieval supports productive mastery (Yamagata et al., 2023). Educational research also documents generally low collocational competence among L2 learners, with productive collocation knowledge frequently lagging behind receptive knowledge — a pattern that underscores the utility of diagnostic instruments combining both receptive and productive measures (Begagić, 2025).

Corpus-based item selection in ESP diagnostics

Corpus analysis is the methodological backbone of domain-specific item selection: medical corpora allow test designers to identify high-value lexical items, typical multiword expressions, and the collocations that characterise discipline-specific discourse. The MEDLEX family of projects (notably Kokkinakis's Swedish MEDLEX corpus work) illustrates how carefully compiled and annotated medical corpora can support lexicon building and linguistic analysis for biomedical language processing (Kokkinakis, 2006). More recent corpus-driven ESP research shows the pedagogical potential of such resources: multimodal medical-English corpora have been integrated into instruction with measurable proficiency gains (Kang & Niu, 2024), and corpus-derived pedagogic word lists have been operationalised for materials development and learner support in specialised domains (Fraser et al., 2025). Experimental applications of corpus-derived vocabulary sets in ESP classrooms similarly suggests that corpus linguistics methods can be extended beyond descriptive analysis into empirically validated teaching and assessment tools (Đurović & Bauk, 2022). Furthermore, an intervention using spaced retrieval practice of verb–noun collocations resulted in much stronger long-term productive collocation retention than massed schedules, indicating that repeated focused retrieval supports productive mastery (Yamagata et al., 2023). MedLex-25 intentionally bridges these stages by using corpus frequency and distribution to select targets and then administering paired receptive/productive tasks to students. In doing so, MedLex-25 extends the corpus approach with an empirical classroom layer that measures actual learner performance on corpus-derived items.

Corpus-driven approaches have played a central role in establishing empirically grounded lexical inventories for medical English, ensuring that target items are selected on the basis of authentic disciplinary usage rather than pedagogical intuition. Research grounded in specialised medical corpora has demonstrated how systematic lexical extraction and categorisation can illuminate recurrent lexical patterns, including verb choice and distribution in medical academic discourse (Doykova, 2017). Such work provides a descriptive foundation for ESP materials development and assessment by identifying high-value lexical items and phraseological tendencies characteristic of medical texts. At the same time, corpus-based analyses are primarily concerned with the distribution and functions of lexical items within expert discourse and do not directly address how effectively these items are recognised or produced by learners in instructional contexts. Building on this corpus-informed tradition, MedLex-25 retains corpus-based item selection to ensure domain relevance but extends it through paired receptive and productive testing, thereby operationalising corpus-derived vocabulary as a diagnostic instrument which may help identify category-specific and item-level production bottlenecks in medical ESP learners.

Category-specific vulnerabilities: verbs, collocations and adverbials

Empirical research on vocabulary acquisition repeatedly identifies verbs, collocations, and adverbials as categories that pose particular production challenges. Verbs convey argument structure/- and subcategorisation possibilities that learners must master to produce functionally accurate clauses (Nakamura et al., 2022). Collocations demand associative strength and interlexical knowledge that often fails to generalise from recognition to use; large-sample and experimental studies document sizeable receptive–productive gaps for collocations and emphasise measurement and item-format effects (Tran & Waluyo 2021). Adverbials, because of their syntactic mobility and subtle semantic/pragmatic effects, frequently trigger placement and selection errors in learner output (Miller & Larsson 2024). Intervention research indicates that targeted task designs — for example, repetition with variation, spaced/interleaved retrieval practice, receptive–productive integration tasks, and explicit collocation training — are effective in strengthening productive knowledge and reducing receptive–productive gaps (Rogers, 2025). Instruction of this kind remains unevenly implemented in medical ESP curricula, limiting transfer of corpus-derived targets into controlled productive competence (Nguyen, 2025). These findings motivated testing of five discrete lexical categories and the reporting of item-level error profiles to guide concrete pedagogical responses.

Diagnostic instruments and recent methodological advances

Recent methodological work emphasises two complementary desiderata for vocabulary diagnostics: (1) ecological validity — items should reflect authentic domain usage, typically achieved through corpus-informed selection, and (2) diagnostic resolution — paired receptive/productive items and item-level error analysis, which can identify specific instructional targets, such as argument-structure issues or collocational misuse (Durrant, 2014). Technological affordances (e.g., online administration platforms, automated export of learner responses) further enable scalable, low-stakes testing, while emerging analytical practices—such as reporting counts of perfectly recognised items and flagging systematically low-performing targets—provide actionable insights for instructors (Edmonds et al., 2022). MedLex-25 adopts both principles: corpus-informed item choice enhances domain relevance, and a two-stage receptive–production format captures the production bottleneck characteristic of specialised vocabulary learning (Mohammadi et al., 2024).

MedLex-25 is therefore best understood as a hybrid: it is grounded in corpus evidence (to ensure that tested items are relevant and representative of medical discourse) but extends corpus analysis by operationalising those items in paired receptive and productive tasks and then analysing actual learner output. This second layer — the empirical measurement of production against recognition — is crucial because corpus frequency alone does not predict producibility in L2 learners (Webb, 2008; Lee, 2025); only by testing students on corpus-derived items under controlled conditions can one identify which items are merely familiar and which are functionally available for use. In short, MedLex-25 combines corpus constitution with pedagogical diagnosis, moving from description toward prescriptive classroom guidance (Fang et al., 2021; Rasikawati, 2019).

Method

Study design and aims

This study is a follow-up to earlier work, which employed paired receptive and productive tasks to demonstrate a systematic gap between medical students' ability to recognize specialized vocabulary and their ability to produce it accurately in context. While that study provides initial evidence of the existence of a recognition–production mismatch in Medical ESP, it did not differentiate difficulty across lexical categories. The present study extends this line of inquiry by systematically examining which parts of speech in medical lexis—nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and two-word multiword items — pose the greatest challenges for second-year medical students in both recognition and production. Using the MedLex diagnostic instrument, constructed from coursebook-based corpus data, the study combines receptive (multiple-choice) and productive (sentence-production) measures to quantify the recognition–production gap by lexical category.

Participants

Participants were 186 second-year medical students at Medical University Varna, Bulgaria. All participants were native speakers of Bulgarian; a subset attended language-specialist secondary schools and reported CEFR levels in the B1–B2 range. Testing took place during regular class sessions; students completed the instrument under supervised conditions.

Materials and item selection

The source material was the approved and currently used student coursebook for the Medical English course, *Professional Communication in English: Medicine*, authored by Assoc. Prof. Ilina Doykova (2022; ISBN 978-619-221-398-5). For the purposes of this study, the coursebook was compiled into a corpus using Sketch Engine. From this corpus, target items were extracted across five lexical categories: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and two-word noun *n*-grams.

For each lexical category within each test form, five target items were selected based on corpus frequency: one highest-frequency item, one lowest-frequency item, and three mid-frequency items. Nine parallel test forms were constructed, each containing a unique set of 25 target items (5 items × 5 categories). The use of nine non-overlapping forms yielded a total of 225 unique lexical targets, thereby increasing lexical coverage and enhancing the robustness of the instrument.

Instrument development rationale

The MedLex-25 was developed in response to a practical pedagogical need in medical ESP instruction: instructors require a classroom-feasible way to identify which corpus-relevant lexical items students can recognise but cannot reliably produce in context, so that instruction can be targeted toward the most consequential productive gaps. The instrument therefore prioritises formative, item-level diagnostics that can be administered within regular teaching time and used to guide instructional focus rather than summative evaluation.

Design choices were informed by prior classroom observation and by earlier paired receptive–productive work in medical ESP (~~Stanchev, 2025~~), which suggested that diagnostic instruments are most informative when they avoid extreme response patterns. For this reason, item selection within each lexical category deliberately combined *high-frequency, mid-frequency, and low-frequency items* drawn from the coursebook corpus. This stratified approach was intended to reduce the likelihood of uniformly correct or uniformly incorrect responses and instead to elicit performance distributions that fall between ceiling and floor effects, allowing meaningful category-level and item-level patterns to emerge. The pilot results confirmed this expectation, yielding non-polarised response profiles that are suitable for exploratory analysis and further instrument development.

Two additional decisions were adopted deliberately for this pilot stage. Production responses were scored *binary* (correct/incorrect), with tolerance for surface errors that do not impede meaning, in order to prioritise clear and replicable coding and to indicate whether the instrument could reliably capture recognition–production asymmetries before introducing finer-grained scoring schemes. In addition, the pilot focused on written sentence production, which is straightforward to collect at scale, reveals collocational and argument-structure difficulties, and minimises logistical complexity in classroom settings. These choices reflect pragmatic pilot-stage trade-offs rather than claims of comprehensive measurement and are intended to inform subsequent refinement, including graded scoring, reliability estimation, and the incorporation of oral production tasks.

Test format and administration

Each test form comprised two sections that used the same 25 lexical targets in the same order. The first section assessed receptive knowledge: each target item was presented with a four-option multiple-choice question (a–d) asking for the meaning of the item. The second section assessed productive knowledge: participants were required to use each target item in a self-constructed sentence to demonstrate correct usage in context. Tests were implemented in Google Forms. During class, each group received access to its assigned test via a unique QR code projected on the interactive whiteboard; students scanned the code and completed the test on their devices.

Scoring and coding protocol

All gathered data were exported into a Microsoft Excel table and coded systemically. Since the focus is on receptive and productive skills, being able to correctly use the words in proper context, all errors, which did not impede the understanding of the sentence, as a whole, were ignored. Thus, all correct uses were marked as 1 and the incorrect uses marked as 0, for both open and closed questions.

Data analysis

The data analysis showed the results from the written tests of 186 students. Each student completed a test, with 25 closed questions and 25 open questions. The students completed a total of 9300 questions, which were then analyzed. The information was exported into Microsoft Excel and coded by hand individually.

In addition to descriptive accuracy comparisons, category-level standardised mean differences (Cohen's *d*) were calculated as an exploratory indicator of the magnitude of receptive–productive differences. For each lexical category, mean accuracy and standard deviation were computed by pooling all items belonging to that category. Effect sizes were calculated using a pooled estimate of variability across receptive and productive scores. These estimates are reported for descriptive and diagnostic purposes only and are not intended as confirmatory hypothesis tests or as evidence of full psychometric validation.

Rationale for design choices

Using nine parallel forms with non-overlapping target sets increased the lexical sampling from a single 25-item instrument to 225 unique lexical targets, improving the generalizability of findings across medical lexis. Selecting items stratified by corpus frequency (high, mid, low) made it possible to examine frequency effects on recognition and production as well as category effects.

Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary and took place during regular instructional time. Students were informed of the study purpose and procedures and provided consent to use anonymized responses for the purposes of research.

Results

Overview of dataset and analytic focus

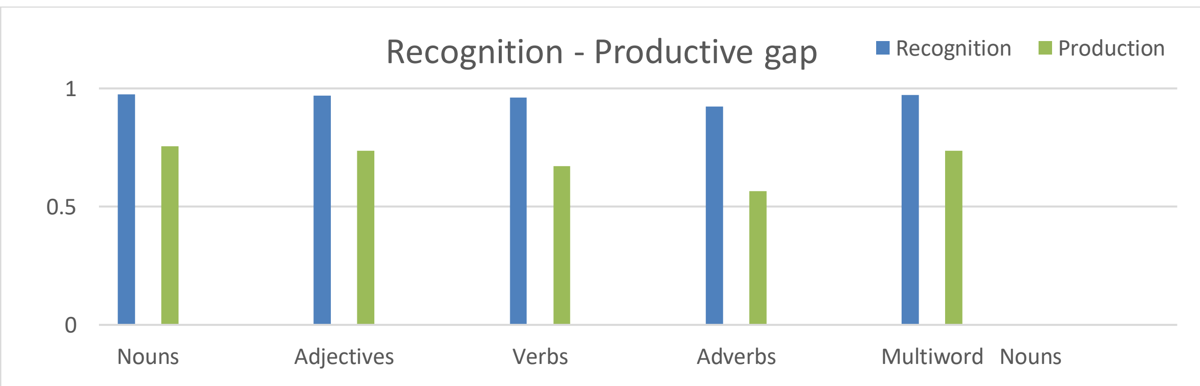
A total of 186 second-year medical students completed one of nine parallel MedLex-25 forms, yielding 9,300 item-level responses distributed across 225 unique lexical targets. The analysis below focuses on instrument performance in a pilot context, examining whether MedLex-25 can (a) elicit recognition–production asymmetries under classroom conditions, (b) differentiate performance across lexical categories, and (c) avoid ceiling or floor effects that would limit its usefulness as a formative diagnostic. Detailed item-level lists and full receptive and productive response distributions are reported in the Appendix; the Results section summarises the evidence these data provide about the behaviour and potential diagnostic utility of the instrument.

Evidence of receptive–productive asymmetry (stability of the core pattern)

Across the dataset, receptive accuracy exceeded productive accuracy for all lexical categories tested. Counts of perfectly recognized items (i.e., items with 100% correct receptive responses across groups) were: Nouns 33/45, Adjectives 27/45, Verbs 23/45, Adverbs 25/45, and Multiword items 28/45. In contrast, no lexical item achieved perfect production accuracy. The recurrence of this receptive–productive gap across five lexical categories and nine non-overlapping test forms suggests that MedLex-25 is capable of eliciting the intended asymmetric pattern in classroom conditions, rather than producing form-specific or random variation.

Figure 1

The Recognition – Production gap



In this pilot sample, MedLex-25 appears able to capture the recognition–production contrast it was designed to probe, providing preliminary evidence that the paired-task format can reveal productive weaknesses even when receptive familiarity is high.

Evidence of category-level differentiation

Performance patterns differed across lexical categories in ways broadly consistent with expectations from prior research. Nouns and multiword items tended to suggest smaller receptive–productive gaps, whereas verbs, adjectives, and adverbs exhibited larger declines from recognition to production. Adverbs, in particular, included items with both lower receptive values and very low production accuracy (e.g., *erroneously*, production = 0.071). While these results do not constitute definitive category ranking, they indicate that the instrument is sensitive enough to reflect category-related variation rather than yielding uniform performance across lexical types.

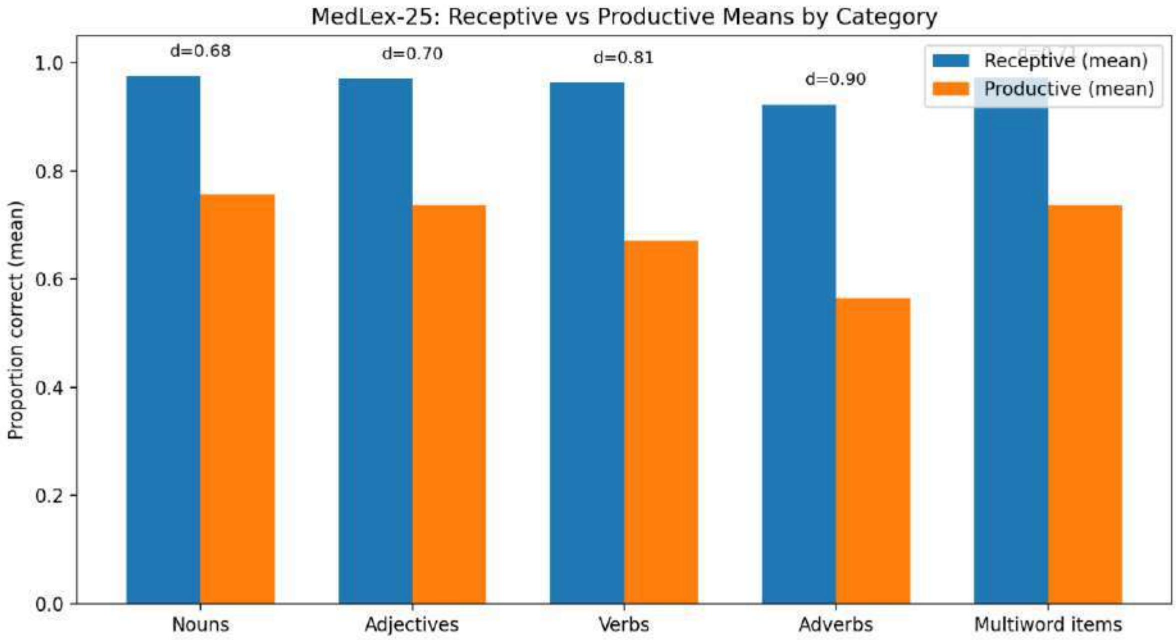
The category-stratified design of MedLex-25 appears to allow tentative differentiation among lexical categories, supporting its potential use for identifying broad areas of productive vulnerability in a formative, exploratory manner.

Magnitude of receptive–productive differences

To further characterise the magnitude of category-level differences, standardised mean differences (Cohen's *d*) were calculated between receptive and productive scores. Effect sizes ranged from moderate to large across categories, with smaller gaps observed for nouns and multiword items and larger gaps for verbs and adverbs. These estimates quantify the descriptive patterns reported above and indicate that receptive–productive contrasts vary meaningfully across lexical categories in this pilot sample. Figure 2 illustrates mean receptive and productive accuracy by category alongside the corresponding effect-size estimates.

Figure 2

Mean receptive and productive accuracy by lexical category with corresponding category-level effect sizes (Cohen's d). Values are shown for descriptive purposes in a pilot context.



Absence of ceiling effects in production

Short classroom diagnostics risk becoming uninformative if performance clusters at ceiling or floor levels. In the present pilot, production accuracy did not reach ceiling for any item, and productive scores were distributed across a broad range within each lexical category. This pattern reflects the deliberate inclusion of high-, mid-, and low-frequency items and resulted in non-polarised response distributions that permit exploratory analysis.

The absence of production ceiling effects in this pilot indicates that MedLex-25 may offer sufficient dynamic range to identify relative productive difficulty among items, a prerequisite for meaningful classroom diagnosis, though this should be re-examined in larger and more diverse samples.

Item-level diagnostic interpretability

At the item level, MedLex-25 yielded response profiles that appear pedagogically interpretable. Some items showed low receptive and low productive accuracy, whereas others were recognized reliably but produced inconsistently. These contrasting patterns are visible across categories and point to different potential sources of difficulty (e.g., limited exposure versus difficulties with proceduralised use). The instrument does not explain these difficulties, but it makes them visible in a systematic way. Full item-level results are provided in the Appendix.

In this pilot application, MedLex-25 generates item-level information that could support instructional decision-making by helping instructors distinguish between items requiring additional exposure and those requiring focused production practice.

Feasibility of classroom administration

MedLex-25 was administered using Google Forms during regular class sessions across nine parallel versions. Completion rates were high, and binary coding of production responses seemed manageable at classroom scale. The resulting dataset provides preliminary evidence that the instrument can be implemented without specialised testing infrastructure or disruption to normal instruction.

While feasibility does not constitute validation, the successful administration and data yield in this pilot context indicate that MedLex-25 can be used in everyday classroom workflows, supporting its intended role as a formative diagnostic tool rather than a high-stakes assessment.

Discussion

Limits of pilot validation

The present study reports findings from an early-stage pilot application of MedLex-25, and its conclusions must be interpreted within clear methodological limits. First, no reliability coefficients (e.g., internal consistency or inter-rater reliability) were calculated at this stage, as the primary aim was to examine feasibility and diagnostic behaviour rather than measurement precision. Second, the analysis is descriptive and exploratory; no inferential statistical testing was conducted, and observed category-level patterns should therefore be treated as indicative rather than confirmatory. Third, the use of binary scoring for production responses, while appropriate for a pilot classroom diagnostic, necessarily reduces variance and obscures gradations of partial knowledge. Finally, the sample is context-specific, consisting of Bulgarian L1 medical students with prior exposure to Latin-based terminology, which limits the generalisability of the results to other learner populations. These constraints are acknowledged as inherent to the pilot phase and define the scope of the claims made in this study.

Diagnostic instrument

Within these limits, the pilot results allow a preliminary evaluation of MedLex-25 as a diagnostic instrument rather than as a lexical test per se. The paired receptive–productive format functioned as intended, consistently producing non-polarised response distributions and revealing recognition–production gaps across lexical categories. The instrument also appeared feasible to administer and score within routine classroom settings, supporting its intended formative use. At the same time, the pilot highlighted several aspects requiring further development: the absence of reliability estimates, the reliance on binary production scoring, and the restriction to written production constrain interpretability and measurement precision. These outcomes suggest that, while the current version of MedLex-25 is suitable for exploratory classroom diagnosis, it remains a work in progress that would benefit from expanded scoring schemes, reliability testing, and validation across learner populations and modalities.

The findings of this study provide preliminary evidence of a recurrent recognition–production gap in medical ESP vocabulary, with receptive knowledge consistently outperforming productive ability across all lexical categories. Although students demonstrated strong recognition of many items—33 out of 45 nouns, 27 out of 45 adjectives, 23 out of 45 verbs, 25 out of 45 adverbs, and 28 out of 45 multiword items achieved perfect receptive scores—no lexical item in the entire instrument was produced perfectly by all groups. This divergence points to a distinct bottleneck in learners' ability to retrieve and use known lexical items accurately in context, rather than a global lack of vocabulary knowledge.

The category-specific patterns reveal meaningful differences in how medical vocabulary is acquired and activated. Nouns and multiword items emerged as the most stable categories, with high recognition and relatively strong production accuracy. Their comparatively small recognition–production gap can be partly attributed to students' prior exposure to Latin and anatomy courses during their first year of medical studies, which likely strengthens their familiarity with technical terms of Latin or Greek origin. Many medical nouns overlap cross-linguistically between English, Bulgarian, and Latin, making them more transparent to learners. This helps explain why nouns such as *neutrophil* or *emphysema* were recognized easily, whereas non-classical items such as *stool* (0.714 receptive accuracy) posed far greater difficulty. Even so, several noun items revealed notable weaknesses—*enanthem* (0.333 production) and *noncompliance* (0.500)—suggesting that transparent etymology alone does not secure productive mastery.

Verbs and adjectives displayed substantially larger disparities. Verb recognition was weaker overall, and verb production showed the steepest decline, with extremely low accuracy for items such as *underline* (0.111), *exhibit* (0.292), and *administer* (0.400). These patterns parallel long-standing observations in applied linguistics regarding the complexity of verb argument structure, voice alternations, and prepositional frames. Adjectives exhibited a similar, though slightly less severe, pattern: several were reasonably well recognized but remained difficult to produce accurately, including *concise* (0.350), *communicable* (0.435), and *innate* (0.529). The challenge here is primarily collocational and stylistic—learners may understand the meaning of an adjective but lack the intuitive sense of its typical noun pairings within medical discourse.

Adverbs proved to be the least stable category of all. Despite a relatively good number of perfectly recognized adverbs (25/45), several items showed weak receptive performance, including *erroneously* (0.286) and *considerably* (0.478). Production accuracy was markedly low, with *erroneously* (0.071) representing the weakest single score in the dataset. Unlike nouns, adverbs receive little to no reinforcement outside English classes, as they are absent from parallel instruction in Latin, anatomy, or other domain subjects. Their syntactic mobility and subtle semantic nuance further complicate real-time retrieval. These factors collectively help explain why adverb production—not noun production—emerges as the greatest vulnerability in students' lexical repertoires.

The item-level error patterns generated by the MedLex instrument offer practical diagnostic insight. Items with low receptive scores, such as *stool*, *erroneously*, or *anticipate*, likely require greater exposure, clearer definitional support, and repeated contextual encounters. By contrast, items with strong receptive scores but low production accuracy—*irrigate*, *concise*, *triggered by*, or *susceptible to*—represent cases where learners possess form–meaning knowledge but lack the procedural fluency to use these items in grammatically and pragmatically acceptable ways. These two error profiles call for different pedagogical responses: the former demands enriched input, while the latter necessitates controlled output and scaffolded opportunities to practise syntactic integration.

Pedagogically, the results suggest that curricula should prioritise structured, production-oriented practice for verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, with special attention to argument structure, collocations, and canonical adverbial placement. Multiword items—though relatively strong—still benefit from reinforcement that consolidates their status as formulaic units while encouraging flexible use across varying sentence patterns. Retrieval-based tasks, spaced repetition, and feedback that simultaneously addresses meaning and form appear particularly promising for narrowing the recognition–production divide.

Several methodological considerations should temper generalisation. The binary scoring scheme for production simplifies gradations of partial knowledge and may obscure intermediate competence levels. Although nine non-overlapping test forms expanded lexical coverage, this design prevented any single learner from encountering all items, limiting within-participant depth. The sample was restricted to Bulgarian L1 medical students at a single institution with prior Latin exposure, which strongly shapes the category-specific results. Finally, the study assessed written production only; future research should include oral production and spontaneous interaction to capture real-time lexical retrieval demands.

Looking ahead, the findings point toward the need for a more granular, qualitative examination of why specific items fail at either the recognition or production stage. A future study should focus on a single lexical category—or even a single problematic subset within that category—and investigate the sources of difficulty through etymological analysis, cross-linguistic comparison, and interviews that probe students' prior exposure to terms in Latin, Bulgarian, and non-ESP coursework. Understanding the role of etymology, transparency, and disciplinary reinforcement may clarify why learners excel with classical-pattern nouns but struggle with everyday medical terms such as *stool*, or why adverbs remain fragile despite adequate receptive knowledge. Such work would deepen our understanding of the cognitive and pedagogical mechanisms driving lexical development in medical ESP and inform the refinement of diagnostic tools like MedLex.

Conclusion

The results of this pilot study provide initial evidence that MedLex-25 may elicit systematic recognition–production asymmetries and yield item-level diagnostics that could be pedagogically useful in a classroom context. Rather than presenting a completed, standardised instrument, the study indicates that a compact, corpus-sourced, paired receptive–productive design may end up being a promising approach for formative diagnosis of medical English vocabulary.

These findings should be read as exploratory and context-bound: they suggest where instructors might prioritise production practice (notably verbs, adjectives and adverbs in this sample) and they provide practical evidence about the instrument's feasibility under supervised classroom conditions. At the same time, the results point to limitations inherent in this early stage of development — limited generalisability from a single L1 group, binary scoring choices that reduce variance, and the absence here of full reliability and inferential validation.

Accordingly, MedLex-25 is best understood as a working diagnostic tool that provides actionable, provisional information for teachers and that furnishes a basis for further psychometric refinement. Future work should expand sampling, introduce graded scoring and inter-rater reliability checks, report reliability coefficients and effect sizes, and attempt replication across different instructional contexts and L1 backgrounds to establish broader generalisability. These steps will help move the instrument from formative piloting toward more consistent validation while preserving its practical orientation to classroom diagnosis.

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RECONCEPTUALISING NOTICING IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: TASK RELEVANCE, EFFORT, AND EVIDENTIAL LIMITS

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Abstract

Noticing in second language acquisition (SLA) research is routinely invoked as a necessary condition for learning, yet its conceptual status remains unstable, and its empirical operationalisation persistently contested. Across the literature, noticing has been variously equated with awareness, selective attention, discrepancy detection, depth of processing, intake, or learning itself—often without reconciliation. This article argues that the enduring difficulty of measuring noticing reflects a failure of definition rather than a lack of methodological sophistication. Building on communicative, interactionist, and cognitive perspectives, it advances a process-oriented reconceptualization of noticing as a functional boundary within ongoing communicative activity. Under this account, noticing marks the point at which automatic, predictive processing becomes insufficient for task continuation and processing effort must be renegotiated under task-relevant uncertainty. Noticing is thus treated as relational, transient, and process-internal, rather than as a directly observable mental state. The article shows how this reconceptualization clarifies longstanding evidential ambiguities and outlines its implications for theory and research across modalities in SLA.

Keywords: Noticing Hypothesis, second language acquisition, attention, task relevance, processing effort, communicative processing, inferential limits

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Why Noticing Still Resists Definition

Noticing occupies a paradoxical position in SLA research. It is routinely invoked as a necessary condition for learning, yet there is no stable agreement on its ontological status. Across the literature, noticing is alternately treated as conscious awareness, selective attention, detection of discrepancy, depth of processing, intake, or learning itself. These uses are rarely reconciled, yet they are often operationalised as if they referred to the same underlying phenomenon.

This article advances a deliberately strong claim: the field's persistent difficulty in measuring noticing reflects a failure of definition rather than a lack of methodological sophistication. Over several decades, research has repeatedly attempted to operationalise noticing without first establishing what kind of phenomenon noticing is supposed to be. As a result, empirical work has accumulated without producing conceptual convergence.

Against this background, the article adopts the following definition, which governs the entire argument:

> Noticing is a process boundary within ongoing communicative activity, marking the moment at which automatic, predictive processing becomes insufficient for task continuation and the system must renegotiate effort under task-relevant uncertainty.

In its canonical formulation, the Noticing Hypothesis defines a direct and constitutive relationship between noticing and intake. Schmidt explicitly states that "noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input into intake" (Schmidt, 1990, p. 130) and further clarifies that "intake is that part of the input that the learner notices" (Schmidt, 1990, p. 139). Within this framework, noticing functions as the decisive threshold between mere exposure and input which is relevant to learning.

The present account does not contest the internal coherence of this position. Rather, it questions its empirical and conceptual adequacy for modelling extended, goal-directed communicative activity—particularly in reading—where processing may remain sufficient for task continuation despite incomplete intake, and where effort may be strategically allocated or withdrawn without stable form commitment. In such contexts, the assumption that noticing constitutes a necessary and sufficient gateway to intake risks conflating effort regulation with learning outcomes and obscures the dynamics of task-relevant uncertainty that precede, accompany, or bypass intake altogether.

This reconceptualization directly contradicts a long-standing assumption in SLA research—namely, that noticing is a detectable object whose presence or absence can be inferred from awareness reports, form-focused behaviour, or learning outcomes. Instead, noticing is treated here as relational, transient, and process-internal, and therefore systematically resistant to direct detection.

Crucially, this account also departs from the dominant interpretation of Schmidt's notion of "noticing the gap." In the present framework, the gap is not a discrepancy between interlanguage and target form, but a gap in task-sufficient understanding. Detection of such a gap does not itself constitute noticing; rather, it marks the point at which the process boundary called noticing becomes operationally consequential for subsequent relevance evaluation and the allocation or withdrawal of effort.

The Conceptual Inflation of Noticing

Since its original formulation, the Noticing Hypothesis has exercised an unusually strong gravitational pull on SLA research. Few claims are as intuitively compelling as the idea that learners cannot acquire what they do not notice. Yet this very plausibility has had an unintended consequence: noticing has gradually expanded to cover an ever-wider range of phenomena, often without clear justification. Rather than stabilising around a shared definition, the construct has come to function as a flexible placeholder for whatever aspect of processing a given method happens to foreground.

This expansion has not taken the form of explicit theoretical debate. Instead, it has unfolded incrementally, as noticing has been quietly reinterpreted in response to recurring methodological difficulties. When one way of evidencing noticing proved problematic, the construct itself was adjusted so that it could be supported by different kinds of data. Over time, noticing came to refer not to a single phenomenon viewed from multiple angles, but to a shifting set of processes linked primarily by terminological continuity.

The logic of conceptual inflation

The difficulty of defining noticing has not resulted in theoretical restraint; rather, it has encouraged conceptual expansion. Faced with persistent evidential challenges, researchers have repeatedly reinterpreted noticing in ways that align with the affordances of their chosen methods and theoretical commitments. What emerges is not a single construct with multiple operationalisations, but a family of phenomena that share a label while diverging in function.

This inflation follows a recurring logic. Introspective methods foreground awareness; verbal protocols foreground reportability; eye-tracking foregrounds visual attention; outcome measures foreground learning. In each case, noticing is reshaped to fit what the method can plausibly detect. Methodological convenience thus precedes conceptual clarity.

Schmidt himself repeatedly notes that noticing is constrained by task demands and learner goals. He explicitly observes that “what learners notice in input depends on what they are attending to, and what they attend to is determined by the task, the context, and the learner’s goals” (Schmidt, 1990, p. 143), and that when attention is directed primarily toward meaning, formal features may go unnoticed (Schmidt, 1990, p. 142). In later work, he reiterates that attention is selective and governed by current goals and task requirements (Schmidt, 2001). These observations are crucial, as they recognise that failure to notice form is not necessarily a deficit, but a predictable consequence of meaning-oriented activity. What remains under-theorised, however, is how task relevance regulates processing during ongoing activity and how learners renegotiate effort when task continuation is threatened—precisely the gap addressed by the present reconceptualization.

Noticing as reportable awareness

One response to the difficulty of evidencing noticing has been to equate it with reportable awareness. Following Schmidt’s operational emphasis on focal awareness and availability for verbal report, noticing is treated as present if learners can later articulate having noticed a form. This move underpins a wide range of introspective and post-task verbalisation methods.

While locally defensible, this operationalisation redefines noticing as what can be verbalised under experimental prompting. Processing that is rapid, automatic, or embedded in task performance is systematically excluded. Moreover, the absence of report cannot be taken as evidence that noticing did not occur, particularly in extended activities such as reading. The result is a construct that is method-bound rather than process-bound

Noticing as eye-tracked attention

As dissatisfaction with introspective methods grew, eye-tracking appeared to offer a more objective alternative. Fixations, regressions, and gaze duration could be measured continuously and without interrupting task performance. It was therefore tempting to treat prolonged or repeated fixations on linguistic forms as evidence that those forms had been noticed (e.g. Godfroid, 2012).

Here again, however, the construct shifts. Noticing is redescribed as visual attention, and visual attention as noticing. The inferential gap is substantial. The eyes may linger for many reasons—perceptual difficulty, unfamiliar orthography, momentary hesitation, or fatigue—none of which necessarily entail that processing priorities have been renegotiated. Within a process-boundary account, eye-tracking can constrain claims about superficial processing, but it cannot identify noticing itself.

Noticing as conscious awareness of form

In some strands of research, the ambiguity is resolved by stipulation: noticing is defined as conscious awareness of form. Learners are classified as noticers if they can report awareness of a feature during or after exposure (Rosa & O'Neill, 1999). This approach has the virtue of clarity, but at a cost.

Equating noticing with awareness narrows the construct to a specific experiential state and assumes that awareness coincides temporally with the moment of processing disruption. In extended activities such as reading, this assumption is difficult to sustain. Awareness may arise after effort has already been deployed, may lag behind the critical point of disruption, or may never arise at all despite task-relevant difficulty.

Under the present account, awareness is neither necessary nor sufficient for noticing. It is one possible accompaniment of processing disruption, not its defining feature.

Noticing as selective attention

Other researchers have attempted to sidestep the problem of awareness by redefining noticing as selective attention (Tomlin & Villa, 1994). On this view, what matters is not whether learners are conscious of a form, but whether attentional resources are allocated to it.

This move broadens the construct, but it does not stabilise it. Attention is itself a heterogeneous notion, encompassing alertness, orientation, and detection. Attentional capture can occur without disrupting automatic processing, and it does not, by itself, explain why effort becomes necessary at a particular moment.

From a process-oriented perspective, attention is a background condition that may make noticing possible, but it does not define noticing itself. Collapsing the two blurs the distinction between being momentarily drawn to an element and reaching a point where task continuation requires a change in processing strategy.

Noticing as discrepancy detection

Schmidt's notion of "noticing the gap" is often interpreted as the detection of discrepancy between interlanguage and target form (Schmidt, 1990). In later empirical work, this idea has been operationalised through error detection, contrastive feedback, or form–meaning mismatch tasks.

This interpretation shifts noticing toward metalinguistic comparison and implicitly privileges normative accuracy. The gap that matters is a deviation from target form, not a breakdown in task-sufficient understanding.

The present account departs from this view in a fundamental way. The relevant gap is not formal discrepancy but insufficiency for task progress. Detecting such a gap does not itself constitute noticing; it marks the point at which noticing becomes consequential by triggering relevance evaluation. Treating discrepancy detection as noticing therefore mistakes a precursor condition for the process boundary itself.

Noticing as depth of processing

In pedagogically oriented research, noticing is often absorbed into depth of processing, particularly in Leow's work (Leow, 1997; 2018). Here, noticing is associated with elaboration, hypothesis testing, and increasing cognitive engagement. Awareness and effort function as graded indices of noticing.

While coherent within an explicit-learning framework, this move effectively dissolves noticing as a distinct construct. Effort becomes both evidence of noticing and the mechanism by which learning occurs. The question of *why* effort becomes necessary at a particular moment is displaced by the question of *how much* effort is invested.

From a communicative perspective, this conflation is problematic. Effortful processing does not guarantee learning, and successful task performance often relies on underspecified representations. Equating noticing with depth of processing therefore collapses regulation into investment and obscures the functional transition the construct was meant to capture.

Noticing as learning itself

At the far end of this trajectory, noticing is inferred directly from learning outcomes. When learners demonstrate acquisition of a target feature, it is assumed that they must have noticed it during instruction or exposure (e.g. Shintani & Ellis, 2010). Noticing is reconstructed retrospectively from success. Here, the construct collapses entirely into its supposed consequence. Processing is inferred from outcome and then invoked to explain that same outcome. The circularity is obvious.

Under the present account, learning is explicitly decoupled from noticing. Noticing regulates effort under uncertainty; learning is one possible downstream consequence. Treating outcomes as evidence of noticing therefore obscures the very process the construct was introduced to explain.

Communicative Accounts and the Intake Problem

The difficulty of defining noticing has never arisen in isolation. It is tightly bound to a broader problem that has shaped SLA research since its inception: the relationship between input, intake, and successful task engagement. Communicative accounts of language learning have long recognised that learners do not process all available input uniformly, nor do they necessarily convert attended material into stable knowledge. Yet these accounts differ markedly in how they conceptualise the role of disruption, effort, and breakdown in communicative activity.

Two influential positions—Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Gass's interactionist framework—are particularly instructive in this respect. Both foreground meaning and communication, but they diverge in how they treat difficulty, attention, and the conditions under which processing becomes consequential. Examining these positions clarifies both what the present account inherits and where it departs.

Krashen: comprehension without disruption

Krashen's Input Hypothesis represents the strongest possible commitment to meaning-first processing. By collapsing the distinction between input and intake, Krashen argues that acquisition follows naturally from exposure to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982; 1985). When learners understand messages slightly beyond their current level, acquisition mechanisms are activated without the need for conscious attention to form, effortful processing, or explicit noticing.

From a communicative perspective, this position has considerable appeal. It foregrounds comprehension as the central driver of learning and aligns with the everyday observation that language users often succeed without analysing linguistic form. However, precisely because of this emphasis, Krashen's account leaves little room for processing disruption. Difficulty, hesitation, or breakdown are treated as peripheral rather than constitutive features of communicative activity.

This becomes problematic when we turn to, for instance, extended, goal-directed reading in a second language. Readers routinely encounter moments where comprehension is threatened but not entirely blocked, where understanding is partial, provisional, or strategically maintained. These moments are neither captured by a simple notion of comprehensible input nor easily assimilated to Krashen's acquisition logic. The present account takes such moments seriously. It treats them not as failures of input quality, but as points at which automatic processing becomes insufficient and effort must be renegotiated. In this sense, noticing—as redefined here—marks precisely the kind of disruption that Krashen's model leaves theoretically unarticulated.

Gass: noticing as mediated availability

Gass's interactionist framework occupies a different position. While retaining a communicative orientation, it reintroduces the distinction between input and intake and treats noticing as a necessary but insufficient condition for learning (Gass, 1997; Gass & Mackey, 2007). Crucially, noticing in this framework is often externally induced. Interactional difficulty, negotiation of meaning, feedback, and communicative pressure make certain aspects of input salient and thereby available for further processing.

This account has two important strengths. First, it recognises that attention is not evenly distributed, but regulated by communicative demands. Second, it acknowledges that noticing alone does not guarantee learning; it merely creates the conditions under which learning may occur. In this respect, the present account converges strongly with Gass's emphasis on relevance and task demands.

The point of departure lies in how noticing itself is conceptualised. In interactionist work, noticing tends to function as a mediating stage between input and intake, triggered by external contingencies. The communicative environment signals that something requires attention, and noticing follows. What remains under-theorised, however, is how relevance is evaluated and how effort is regulated when such external cues are absent or muted—as in silent, goal-directed reading.

The present framework extends Gass's insights inward. It treats noticing not as a stage that mediates between input and intake, but as a functional transition within ongoing processing. Noticing marks the point at which task progress can no longer be sustained automatically and where relevance must be evaluated internally. Interactional pressure is thus reinterpreted as one possible external instantiation of a more general regulatory mechanism, rather than as the defining source of noticing itself.

The intake problem revisited

Both Krashen's and Gass's accounts confront, in different ways, the fragility of intake. Krashen resolves the problem by collapsing intake into comprehension, thereby minimising the role of disruption. Gass preserves intake as a distinct construct but relies heavily on interactional triggers to explain how input becomes available for processing.

What neither account fully articulates is how learners manage uncertainty when communicative activity continues despite incomplete understanding. In reading, listening, and even speaking, language users often proceed with underspecified representations, tolerating ambiguity as long as task goals remain achievable. Effort is deployed selectively, withdrawn strategically, and not always aligned with learning outcomes.

The present account addresses this gap by reconceptualising noticing as a process boundary rather than as a mediating stage or a property of input. Noticing does not transform input into intake; it regulates effort under task-relevant uncertainty. Intake, where it occurs, is a downstream consequence of how this regulation unfolds, not its defining outcome.

Seen in this light, communicative success and learning outcomes can no longer function as proxies for noticing. A learner may notice and withdraw effort, notice and persist without learning, or achieve task success without stable intake. These trajectories are not anomalies but expected consequences of goal-directed communicative processing.

Why Form, Awareness, and Outcomes Are Insufficient

Much of the empirical literature on noticing has converged, implicitly or explicitly, on three classes of indicators: sensitivity to linguistic form, reports of conscious awareness, and evidence of learning outcomes. These indicators have proven attractive precisely because they are observable, reportable, or measurable. They offer the promise of grounding an elusive construct in data that can be collected, coded, and compared. Yet it is this very attractiveness that has obscured their conceptual limitations.

Sensitivity to form, whether indexed through behavioural manipulation, error detection, or increased attentional focus on linguistic features, is often taken as evidence that noticing has occurred. However, form sensitivity alone does not specify *why* processing priorities shift at a given moment, nor whether such shifts are functionally consequential for task continuation. Readers and listeners frequently register formal irregularities or unfamiliar elements without altering their processing strategy, particularly when those elements are judged peripheral to communicative goals. Form sensitivity, in other words, may accompany noticing, but it does not define it.

Awareness reports, whether elicited through questionnaires, stimulated recall, or verbal protocols, appear to offer more direct access to noticing by foregrounding subjective experience. Yet these reports are necessarily reconstructive. They reflect how learners make sense of their own processing after the fact, filtered through task demands, expectations, and available metalanguage. In extended activities such as reading or listening, the moment at which processing becomes insufficient for task continuation may precede, follow, or fail to coincide with conscious awareness of form. Treating awareness as constitutive of noticing therefore risks misplacing the phenomenon temporally and functionally.

Learning outcomes, finally, have often been invoked as retrospective evidence of noticing. When acquisition is observed, noticing is inferred; when learning fails to occur, noticing is assumed to have been absent. This logic collapses process into outcome and renders noticing explanatorily redundant. If noticing is inferred from learning and then used to explain learning, the construct loses its independent theoretical role.

Taken together, these approaches share a common assumption: that noticing must leave a durable trace—on form, in awareness, or in learning—that can be detected after the fact. From a communicative perspective, this assumption is unwarranted. Language users routinely succeed in understanding and task completion with partial, provisional, or underspecified representations. Processing may be disrupted, effort renegotiated, and priorities shifted without producing stable awareness or lasting learning. What form-, awareness-, and outcome-based approaches capture are *possible consequences* of such disruptions, not the functional transition itself.

The difficulty, then, is not that these indicators are useless, but that they have been asked to do too much theoretical work. They constrain interpretation, but they cannot define noticing. A different conceptualisation is therefore required—one that does not depend on the existence of a detectable residue.

Noticing Redefined: A Process-Boundary Account

The reconceptualization proposed here begins from a simple observation: communicative activity is ordinarily sustained by automatic, predictive processing. Readers, listeners, and speakers continually anticipate what comes next, allocating minimal effort unless expectations are violated or task progress is threatened. Within this flow, noticing does not appear as an object or state, but as a *functional turning point*.

Under the present account, noticing is defined as a *process boundary*—the moment at which automatic processing becomes insufficient to sustain task continuation, and processing effort must be renegotiated under conditions of task-relevant uncertainty. This boundary is not identical with detection, awareness, attention, or learning. Rather, it is the point at which these phenomena may become consequential.

Detection of a gap in understanding often precedes noticing, but it does not define it. A gap may be registered and immediately dismissed as irrelevant, allowing processing to continue unchanged. Conversely, processing priorities may shift even when the source of difficulty cannot be explicitly identified. Noticing, in this sense, is not the recognition of a discrepancy, but the *functional significance* that such a discrepancy acquires for ongoing activity.

Similarly, awareness is not constitutive of noticing. Conscious awareness may arise as a result of processing disruption, or it may fail to arise altogether. What matters is not whether the learner can later report having noticed something, but whether the system was forced to reassess effort allocation in order to continue the task.

This account also departs from dominant interpretations of Schmidt's notion of "noticing the gap." Here, the relevant gap is not a discrepancy between interlanguage and target form, but a gap in *task-sufficient understanding*. The concern is not whether a form deviates from a norm, but whether current processing resources suffice to maintain communicative progress. In this sense, noticing is fundamentally communicative rather than normative.

Redefining noticing as a process boundary explains why it has resisted stable operationalisation. Process boundaries are transient, relational, and internal to activity.

They do not persist as states, nor do they guarantee downstream effects such as awareness or learning. Yet they play a crucial regulatory role by determining when and how effort is mobilised.

This reconceptualization does not deny the relevance of form, awareness, or learning. It repositions them. They become downstream phenomena whose presence or absence depends on how effort is managed after noticing occurs. By separating the *trigger* for effort renegotiation from its possible outcomes, the present account restores conceptual clarity to a construct that has long been stretched beyond its explanatory capacity.

Extending a Process-Boundary Account Beyond Form and Modality

The reconceptualization proposed in this article is intentionally modest in scope. Its primary aim has been to clarify what kind of phenomenon noticing is, not to offer a comprehensive process model or an exhaustive taxonomy of learning mechanisms. By redefining noticing as a process boundary within ongoing communicative activity, the article seeks to resolve a persistent definitional problem that has undermined decades of empirical work.

If this reconceptualization is plausible, however, it has implications that extend beyond the specific contexts in which noticing has traditionally been studied. In particular, it suggests that noticing should not be treated as a construct tied exclusively to lexical items, grammatical structures, or form-focused instruction, nor as a phenomenon confined to a single language skill.

Under a process-boundary account, noticing arises when automatic, predictive processing becomes insufficient to sustain task progress and effort must be renegotiated under task-relevant uncertainty. This condition is not specific to reading, or speaking, or listening, nor to the processing of form. It is a general property of communicative activity across modalities.

In reading, such boundaries emerge when underspecified lexical or propositional representations threaten coherence and the reader must decide whether further inferencing is warranted. In listening, they arise when acoustic degradation, unfamiliar expressions, or rapid speech compromise comprehension and tolerance of ambiguity must be reassessed. In speaking, they surface during formulation, repair, or monitoring, when automatic production fails to meet communicative demands and additional effort must be allocated—or strategically withheld.

Across these domains, the functional role of noticing remains constant. It does not consist in the conscious apprehension of linguistic form, nor in the accumulation of detailed representations, but in the regulation of effort in response to task demands. Awareness may accompany this regulation; learning may follow from it; neither defines it.

Importantly, this account also decouples noticing from specific instructional targets. Noticing is not inherently about lexis or grammar, nor does it privilege accuracy over communicative sufficiency. It operates wherever communicative activity is sustained under uncertainty, regardless of whether the outcome is precise, partial, or strategically underspecified.

The implication is not that noticing should be studied everywhere at once, but that its conceptualisation should not be artificially restricted to those domains where it has been most easily operationalised. Treating noticing as a process boundary rather than as a detectable object allows its role in reading, listening, and speaking to be theorised within a single coherent framework, without presupposing that it must be evidenced in the same way across tasks or modalities.

This article does not attempt to formalise these extensions. Nor does it propose a unified model of processing across skills. Its contribution lies in establishing a conceptual footing from which such extensions become possible without reproducing the definitional instability that has characterised earlier work. If noticing is a process boundary within communicative activity, then its relevance is not limited by modality, linguistic domain, or instructional focus, but by the conditions under which effort must be renegotiated to sustain meaning-oriented action.

Summary and implications for future research

This article has argued that the long-standing difficulty of operationalising noticing in second language acquisition is not, at its core, a methodological failure, but a conceptual one. Over time, noticing has been stretched to cover awareness, attention, discrepancy detection, processing depth, intake, and learning itself, producing a sense of continuity in terminology while obscuring differences in function. The result has been an accumulation of evidence without corresponding conceptual convergence.

Against this background, the article has proposed a reconceptualisation of noticing as a process boundary within ongoing communicative activity. Noticing is understood here not as a mental state or measurable quantity, but as the functional point at which automatic processing no longer suffices and effort must be renegotiated under task-relevant uncertainty. Detection of difficulty may precede this boundary, and awareness or learning may follow from it, but none defines noticing itself.

Framed in this way, noticing's resistance to stable measurement becomes intelligible rather than problematic. Process boundaries are transient, relational, and internal to activity, which explains why form sensitivity, awareness reports, and learning outcomes cannot serve as privileged indicators, even when triangulated. At the same time, this reconceptualisation restores noticing to a central regulatory role in communicative processing, aligning it with how language users manage uncertainty in real time rather than with retrospective evidence or normative accuracy.

Finally, the article has suggested that treating noticing as a process boundary is not limited to specific linguistic targets or skills. Wherever communicative progress is sustained under uncertainty—whether in reading, listening, or speaking—the same type of boundary arises: the moment at which effort must be reassessed to continue the task. The contribution offered here is therefore conceptual rather than empirical: a principled redefinition intended to constrain interpretation, sharpen inference, and provide a more stable foundation for future research on attention, effort, and learning in SLA.

Reconceptualising noticing as a process boundary within communicative activity has several implications for future SLA research. First, it suggests that empirical work should shift away from attempts to detect noticing directly and toward designs that examine how learners manage uncertainty, relevance, and processing effort under task constraints. Rather than asking whether noticing occurred, studies can investigate when and why effort is allocated, sustained, or withdrawn, and how these trajectories relate to task success without presupposing learning.

Second, the account calls for greater inferential discipline in the use of existing methods. Eye-tracking, verbal reports, neurophysiological measures, and learning outcomes can all contribute evidence, but only as constraints on interpretation, not as indicators of noticing itself.

Third, the process-boundary account invites broader scope. If noticing marks a functional transition rather than a form-specific event, it can be examined across modalities and skills—reading, listening and speaking— and in relation to discourse-level coherence rather than isolated linguistic features.

Finally, the reconceptualisation opens space for research that treats partial understanding, strategic disengagement, and withdrawal of effort not as noise or failure, but as theoretically informative responses to task demands. Such work would move SLA research closer to modelling how language users actually regulate processing in real communicative activity, rather than how they approximate idealised learning outcomes.

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REMOTE INTERPRETING AS PART OF INTERPRETER TRAINING AT SLOVAK UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Remote interpreting experienced a global surge during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the restrictions that prohibited face-to-face meetings. Although pandemic measures have since been lifted, remote interpreting has remained a relevant and deliberately chosen modality rather than merely an emergency solution. Given its strengthened position on the market, this study examines how translation and interpreting programs at Slovak universities prepare future interpreters for remote interpreting. The data were collected through four focus group interviews and three individual interviews with a total of fifteen university teachers of interpreting courses across all five Slovak universities offering translation and interpreting programs. A thematic analysis of the interviews reveals a lack of systematic approach to remote interpreting training. Remote interpreting is addressed theoretically at two universities and practiced at one, but in each case only superficially, usually as a broader package of interpreting modalities or as a space for experimentation. At the same time, the participants agree that dedicated remote training would benefit students. The findings also outline ways to integrate remote interpreting into existing curricula and identify key challenges, such as the insufficient number of interpreting courses and limited technological resources. Understanding how remote interpreting is currently incorporated into interpreter training in Slovakia can support future improvements to better align education with market needs.

Keywords: remote interpreting, interpreter training, university curriculum, teacher, Slovakia

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Remote interpreting (RI) is a type of interpreting of both spoken and signed languages in which the interpreter is located in a different geographical position from the rest of the participants (Spinolo, 2022). AIIC (2025) defines RI as a specific type of distance interpreting, the difference being that in RI, the interpreter is isolated from all other participants, and in distance interpreting, the interpreter is co-located with at least one participant, while another is not physically present. For the purposes of this article, the term remote interpreting (RI) will be used as the overarching hypernym to encompass both remote and distance modalities, prioritizing the shared communicative challenges of physical separation. De Boe (2023) suggests that RI is not simply a logistical change when compared to on-site interpreting, but rather a transformation that alters the basis of interpreter-mediated communication.

Today, RI is a relevant form of interpreting. While RI has been slowly gaining popularity ever since its introduction in the 1970s, the COVID-19 pandemic caused the wide-spread adoption of this modality (Hickey & Hynes, 2023). The implementation was facilitated through internet and videoconferencing technologies (Šveda & Poláček, 2025) thanks to the relentless technological turn (Colman, 2025; Štefková & Krajčovič, 2025). During the height of the pandemic, 95% of all interpreting contracts were carried out remotely and RI remained relevant even after the lift of the restrictions (Hickey & Hynes, 2023). In Slovakia, numerous public institutions had to adopt RI as a result of the pandemic (Štefková & Krajčovič, 2025). The previous research (Birčák, 2024; 2025a) found that 55% of Slovak interpreters (freelancers) and 66% of Slovak language service providers (agencies offering translation and interpreting services) do provide RI services. Another survey for Slovak interpreters by Velčeková (2024) revealed that before the pandemic, only 1.6% of interpreters worked mainly remotely, while after the pandemic, this number rose to 27.4%. As Hickey & Hynes (2023) point out, the interpreting landscape no longer resembles that of the pre-pandemic era.

Šveda & Poláček (2025) commented that the pandemic and the emergence of AI-based tools caused significant changes both in the content and delivery of interpreter training. Due to the emergence and significance of RI, this article explores whether the universities in Slovakia preparing the future interpreters reflected this market change. In Slovakia, interpreting is studied together with translation in a joint program and cannot be studied separately. The point of interest will be the form and quantity of RI training across the 5 universities in 5 study programs on master's level. Four of these programs are focused on translation and interpreting: Comenius University in Bratislava, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Matej Bel University, and University of Prešov. The fifth program is philological – English Language in European Institutions and Economy – offered at the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice. Additionally, possible ways of implementing RI into interpreter training will be discussed.

By understanding the current situation, it is possible to identify both good and bad practices in the training and suggest improvements, should the situation demand it. Adjusting the training and adapting to the needs of the market can involve unique cognitive and technical skills, reduce cognitive load through preparation, and keep interpreter training programs competitive and up to date, which makes the students better prepared for the real interpreting contracts once they finish their studies, therefore improving the experience of all involved parties, e.g. interpreters, clients, language service providers etc.

RI as a Part of University Training

Based on the changes in the market, it is natural to think about the future interpreters and their training, and about the ways how RI should or could be a part of the training. Szabó (2020) argues that the training should be adapted to the market trends if the students want to succeed. Ziegler & Gigliobianco (2018) suggested already in 2018 that interpreters have to be prepared for RI during their training. Hlavac (2013) pointed out that the training models have been shaped by the norms of face-to-face communication, which can result in unpreparedness of future interpreters for the specifics of online communication. Mahyub Rayaa & Martin (2022) claim that remote simultaneous interpreting is the future of the profession, and therefore the students should be prepared for it. The findings from the Elis Survey (2025) point out that the implementation of technology is consistently higher in universities belonging to the EMT network, with the exception of RI.

The shift to RI, the emergence of remote simultaneous interpreting platforms, and the presence of AI tools put the traditional training models into question (Šveda & Poláček, 2025; Colman, 2025). The Directorate-General for Logistics and Interpretation for Conferences of the European Parliament (2023) also suggests that students should be taught to work with new technologies and platforms for remote simultaneous interpreting. Similarly, the Quality Assurance Standards by the EMCI consortium state that students should be exposed to new technologies and that lectures should include technology-mediated work scenarios (Donovan & Manzoni, 2024). The encouragement to learn new technologies is not surprising, as the European Union institutions rely on RI, to varying degrees (Colman, 2025). A confirmation of the importance of technological competences can also be found in Braun's (2014) study, which showed that interpreters who had undergone RI training not only improved the quality of their interpreting, but also reported lower levels of stress and cognitive load. Wren (2018) argues that in RI training, familiarising students with the specific interpreting settings is more important than introducing them to the technology, because experienced interpreters tend to struggle more than novices to adapt to RI conditions.

When it comes to the previous initiatives to include RI in the training, Furtado (2015) mentions that a course unit by the name "Teleconferencing and Remote Interpreting" was integrated into the training in Portugal as early as in the academic year 2007/2008. Donovan & Manzoni (2024) highlight that RI is already present in training at various institutions around the world, such as in Glendon college in Canada, Geneva University, or Lomé University in Togo, and the authors conclude that RI is being taught at many universities, if not in the form of a regular course, then at least in the form of additional lectures.

While international research has focused on how technology-mediated interpreting can be integrated into interpreter training through simulations, platform-based practice, and blended pedagogical models (e.g. Sandrelli, 2015; Wren, 2018; Davitti & Braun, 2020; Fantinuoli, 2023; Colman, 2025), much of this work assumes conditions to introduce dedicated courses, specialised infrastructure, or flexible curricula as models for best practice. In comparison, relatively little is known about how RI is treated in smaller educational contexts typical by joint translation-interpreting programmes and limited institutional resources. This study addressed that gap by examining how Slovak universities handle the integration of RI within the existing institutional limits.

Djovčoš et al. (2023) suggest that RI will need to be implemented into the training in Slovakia, since it requires specific set of skills which warrant a distinct didactic approach (Šveda & Djovčoš, 2021). In the Slovak context, a survey for interpreters by Velčeková (2024) shows that 59.2% of Slovak university students were introduced to the theory of RI during the lectures or seminars, even though the answers were rather contradictory and even some classmates chose contradicting answers, which was probably caused by the different set of studied languages, or, as the author suggests, the coverage of RI was only on a surface level, and therefore some of the students forgot about it. The survey (Velčeková, 2024) also shows that 52.1% of students were introduced to videoconferencing platforms during their lessons. Lastly, 73.3% of students believe that including more RI-related lectures or seminars would improve their performance and 67.6% think the current training for RI is not sufficient (Velčeková, 2024). Štefková & Krajčovič (2025) point out that in the context of Slovak public services, the use of RI is limited and fragmented and it lacks the training standards. Additionally, RI has not been yet systematically implemented into the interpreter training for public service settings and previous efforts have been largely ad-hoc, short-term, and project-based (Štefková & Krajčovič, 2025).

Methodology

There is a consensus among the literature that including RI training in the curricula is beneficial for the students, as it prepares them for the real-life contracts and enables them to better develop other skills. This article therefore explores the position of RI in the interpreter training in Slovakia. The aim is to identify whether Slovak universities offer training for RI and to what extent, as well as to create suggestions on how to improve the position of RI in the training or how to implement it from the ground-up. The approval of an ethical commission was not necessary for this kind of research.

To accomplish the goal, qualitative data were gathered, as they provide direct look on the interpreting training process. Convenience sampling was used for the selection of participants, as the choice of participants was intentional. The target group were university teachers who teach interpreting courses at Slovak universities. The list of all courses offered within the university could be found on their respective websites. The lists also included the names and email addresses of the teachers for the corresponding courses. For the purposes of this research, a database of teachers for each university was created and 50 teachers were subsequently invited to participate in the research via mail. No remuneration or other benefits were offered for participation.

To gather data, four online semi-structured focus group interviews and three online individual interviews were conducted with a total of 15 teachers of interpreting courses (they will be referred to as participant 1 – 15 (P1 – P15)) working at all five Slovak universities where translation and interpreting courses are being taught. The original research design expected five focus group interviews, one per university, but due to time constraints of some of the teachers, compromises had to be made in the form of individual interviews. Out of the 35 teachers who did not participate, 3 were willing to participate but were unable to join the interviews at a time that was convenient for the others. Two other teachers replied that they have no experience with RI and therefore will not participate in the interviews, despite being explicitly instructed in the invitation mail and the follow-up mail that this is not a requirement. The other 30 teachers have not replied.

Author of this article is affiliated with Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra and the invited participants from this institution are their colleagues. Three other participants across two different universities were already acquainted with the author of this article before the research begun.

Interviews were carried out between June 2024 and March 2025. Interviews were held for 32 to 83 minutes, with an average interview time of 48 minutes, resulting in a total of 339 minutes of recorded material. All interviews were held online via the university's internal videoconferencing platform, Zoom, or Google Meet, depending on the preferences of the participants. Within the recordings, participants orally consented to participate on the interviews as well as having them recorded and subsequently transcribed, anonymized, and analysed. The transcripts contain from 4,574 to 11,202 words per interview. The complete dataset contains 44,688 words. The transcription was done manually using Microsoft Word, since the previous attempts to use various online tools to convert speech to text were unsatisfactory, due to limitations of the tools, such as producing a high number of errors or offering only a limited amount of transcription in the free versions.

The seven transcripts were subsequently qualitatively analysed using thematic analysis of participants' responses to interview questions. The coding was done through the identification of basic units of analysis, e.g. segments of text that included information relevant to the research topic. The coding was inductive without the use of any qualitative software, and it was done on multiple levels, identifying topics, themes, and keywords (see Appendix 1 for the Interview Protocol).

Alternative approaches, such as content analysis for theme frequencies, discourse analysis for linguistic interactions, or grounded theory, could have been employed but were deemed less suitable. Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility in handling inductive coding across the given dataset, which enables pattern identification without imposing formal structures or quantification, which aligns with the exploratory aims of mapping RI training practices.

To ensure credibility, randomly selected passages of the transcripts were compared to their corresponding recordings by the author's PhD supervisor, who was granted access to the materials for this purpose exclusively. The supervisor compared approximately 10% of the dataset and found no discrepancies. A codebook was developed as a result of the coding process.

The interview recordings, transcriptions, and codebook are stored on the author’s personal computer and on an online storage in order to prevent the loss of the data in case of the hard disk failure. The access to both the computer and the online storage is exclusive to the author of this article, protected by a password.

The main research problem was to understand the position of RI in the interpreter’s training at Slovak universities. Based on the emergence of RI on the market, it might be beneficial to explore whether Slovak universities adapted and started preparing students for specific modalities, such as RI. If yes, the question of quantity and methods would be the point of interest. If not, exploring the reasons and limitations could provide a deeper insight into the internal processes of the institutions. The following research questions were designed to deal with the research problem:

1) To what extent is RI implemented into the training of future interpreters at Slovak universities? If implementation is present, what forms does it take and in what scope? If RI is not implemented, what are the factors and limitations hindering its implementation?

2) What is the optimal scope and structure for the training of RI according to the participants?

The participants were also asked about the position of RI before and during the pandemic in the university context, as well as about additional aspects of RI (Topics 1, 2 and 4 in Appendix 1) but due to the scope of the answers, only findings from the post-pandemic era will be presented in this paper (See Appendix 1 for a complete set of questions). Findings from the Topics 1 and 2 were already published in another paper (Birčák, 2025b).

Research Limitations

The study has limitations in number of participants who joined the interviews. Across all five addressed universities, a total of 50 interpreting teachers were invited to participate in the interviews. In the end, 15 of them participated across the seven interviews. A higher number of participants would provide more authentic and complex data, minimizing the potential of missing important facts and details.

Another limitation concerns the uneven distribution of collected data across the interviews, both in terms of quality and quantity, as some interviews were represented up to four participants and some were only individual interviews with one participant. The interviews with less participants lacked the possibility to further discuss the questions among participants, which resulted in shorter and less informative interviews. Moreover, certain universities were less represented by the number of participants than others, which could mean that important information regarding the practices of the institution is missing.

The third limitation is tied to the scope of the study, since the perspective is limited to interpreting teachers. The study does not take into consideration other perspectives, such as the perspectives of students, freelancers or agencies. Including these groups in the study could potentially create a more complex image about the reality of RI in today's training.

Due to the mentioned limitations, the article does not have the ambition to present absolute and complete data about RI and its integration in the interpreter training in Slovakia. Despite the limitations, the author believes that the collected data are complex enough to point towards general tendencies.

Participants

The teachers participating in the interviews had various experience both in terms of teaching and practical interpreting skills. Within the 15 participants, 3 have up to 5 years of teaching interpreting experience, 3 have up to 10 years, 3 have 10 to 15 years of experience, 1 has up to 20 years, and the other 5 have 20 or more years of experience. 8

participants interpret professionally, half of them for the European Institutions and the other half for private sector. The other 7 participants do not interpret professionally, or they do it very irregularly.

The working languages of the participants also varied. Some participants were working with more than one foreign language besides Slovak language. The following were represented: 7 participants were working with English language during the interpreting courses; 7 participants with German language; 2 participants with Russian language; 2 participants with Spanish language; 1 participant with French language. The covered languages are representative of the languages offered within the study programs; however, some languages that are offered at some of the universities are not represented in the interviews.

Regarding the engagement in interpreting research, 5 participants actively engage in interpreting research; 5 participants have different research interests, but they occasionally conduct their own research or co-author a publication focused on interpreting; the other 5 participants do not engage in interpreting research at all and have different research areas.

Results

Results of the qualitative thematical analysis of the participants' answers will be presented in the following section. The analysis covers Topic 3 from the Interview protocol (see Appendix 1). The analysis is divided into 6 themes that were identified. The order of the identified themes does not necessarily follow the order of the questions from the Interview protocol. The reason can be found in the semi-structured format of the interviews, as some participants strayed from the given question and already started covering a different theme or mentioned a completely new one that may or may not have been relevant to the study. The presented order of themes was handpicked for the best possible clarity.

The Post-pandemic Era

The post-pandemic era refers to the timeline spanning between the return to the on-site training (March 2022) to today. The main focus is on the changes in the training and the reasons for their existence, as well as the form and quantity of RI incorporated in today's training.

Theme 1: Changes in training immediately after the pandemic

This theme focuses on changes in the interpreter training after the return to on-site training. Participants generally agreed that there were no major changes immediately after the shift from distance training to on-site training. Instead, the prevailing tendency was to resume pre-pandemic teaching practices, which was a decision that five participants across three universities associated with the relief and satisfaction of being able to meet colleagues and students in person again. However, there were a couple of small adjustments. Seven participants across three universities reported continued use of digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams and various Moodle applications as repositories for teaching materials, including glossaries, homework or speeches.

Theme 1.1: The first appearance of RI in the on-site training

This theme deals with the first deliberate inclusion of RI in the on-site training. Participants indicated that RI first appeared primarily in theoretical and demonstrative form rather than as a systematically integrated component of the curriculum. For example, P5 started covering in theory various modes of delivery, including remote simultaneous interpreting during the classes. However, this coverage was described as a showcase rather than structured practice.

Six respondents across three universities continued with the analysis and discussion of their own professional interpreting contracts, informing students about the latest practices and explaining their nuances, which is a practice from pre-pandemic and pandemic times.

P8 explained the importance of the specifics of online communication, as they became increasingly visible during the pandemic. Therefore, P8 described using selected video materials to familiarise students with atypical speaking conditions and technical disruptions that are more common in remote settings. Although such activities were not directly framed as RI training, they reflect an emerging awareness of the demands of RI.

Theme 1.2: Hybrid classes

This theme deals with the use of hybrid classes, in which some students attended interpreting seminars on-site while others joined remotely, primarily for health reasons.

This setting is not used deliberately to practice RI, but as an emergency solution for students unable to attend classes. Participants who offered hybrid classes used Microsoft Teams and internal videoconferencing systems to connect with the students. The preference of the videoconferencing tool was based on the familiarity with the given platform from the pandemic times.

The hybrid interpreting classes were effective for the rest of the summer semester (until June 2022), while participants from three universities offered hybrid classes even until the end of the winter semester of 2022 (December 2022). All participants admitted that hybrid classes were not ideal, since it was difficult for the teacher to synchronize both groups of students. Additionally, some students struggled with poor internet connection either at home or at dorms and the presence of roommates negatively impacted their performance. Several participants also noted that some students exploited the possibility of remote participation for convenience. As a result, faculties and teachers gradually discontinued hybrid classes, and only one participant continues to offer them.

As P12 explained, "it is difficult to synchronize these students with the ones that are present in the classroom, especially during simultaneous interpreting[1]"

Theme 2: The presence of RI in training today

This theme revolves around the position of RI in the current interpreter training. Participants indicated that RI is not systematically integrated into curricula and remains a peripheral component of training. At present, four participants across two universities cover RI theoretically during introductory lectures to interpreting that are attended by all students of the program despite their language combination. In these cases, RI is addressed briefly alongside other modes of delivery. Participants admit that not enough time is dedicated to RI alone.

Regarding the practical training of RI, none of the participants cover it systematically during seminars. P6 continues to experiment with RI in the form of telephone interpreting during seminars focused on community interpreting.

[1] All excerpts from the interviews were translated from Slovak language into English by the author of this article.

Theme 3: The optimal scope of RI in training

The following theme discusses the participants' views on the appropriate scope and structure of RI training within university programmes. Participants generally agreed that theoretical aspects of RI could be covered within existing lecture-based courses, such as Methodology of translation and interpreting or Praxeology of interpreting. These courses are attended by all students of the given year despite their language combination, as these lectures are held in Slovak as a common language. Participants noted that such coverage would not be time-consuming and could be implemented within a single 90-minute lecture, as is being already done at two universities.

Regarding the practical training of RI, seven participants were unsure about how much time should be allocated to RI and preferred not to answer, because they did not want to offer a random estimate. The other eight participants agreed that a reasonable portion would be one to three 90-minute classes per semester (one semester refers to 13 classes), or alternatively offering a standalone, non-compulsory course dedicated to RI. P2, for example, proposed a gradual approach in which RI activities would first be piloted within regular seminars and later adjusted based on student feedback and consultation among teaching staff.

Theme 3.1: The specifics of RI training

This theme highlights the participants' views on the need to adapt RI training to specific language combinations and market contexts. P6 agreed that while general theoretical principles of RI could be covered uniformly, the practical training should reflect the settings in which different languages are most commonly used. For example, in Slovakia, English would be most used in conference settings, while Ukrainian language in community context due to the current geopolitical situation. In this sense, RI training is not viewed as a universal component of interpreter education but as a modality whose implementation should be shaped by contextual factors.

One participant (P6) stressed that interpreter training in Slovakia is oriented towards conference settings and topics such as international politics or sustainable development, whereas RI is frequently employed in other contexts, such as public service interpreting. Given this perspective, participants suggested that practical RI training should incorporate topics and scenarios relevant to healthcare, social services, or community settings, especially for languages that are more likely to be used outside the conference market.

> "I can imagine that English language students would focus more on the cooperation in virtual booths or on dedicated RI videoconferencing tools. The topics covered could also lean towards the conference spectre and have a more commercial character. While in smaller languages, interpreting will most likely not happen via Kudo or Interprefy, but rather it will be a raw telephone interpreting via Messenger or Whatsapp, and the topics will lean towards the community sector" (P6).

Theme 3.2: Additional activities for RI training

This theme outlines additional activities for RI training that were suggested by the participants. The most common suggestion was the simulation of remote settings and role-playing situations, in which students would form small groups and each of them would be assigned a role, such as interpreter, client, or administrative worker. Apart from simulations, participants agreed that showcasing popular videoconferencing platforms and their features should be included in the coverage.

One participant (P10) had a more structured vision centred on simulating non-ideal working conditions commonly encountered in remote settings. These included deliberate technical disruptions, such as poor sound quality or malfunctioning equipment, as well as tasks designed to increase cognitive load by limiting breaks or introducing additional tasks.

P10 also recommended to interpret speakers that are unusual in some way, for example speakers with fast delivery or read speeches, which are more frequent in online environments. In addition, P10 suggested additional activities, such as using AI during RI, for example for subtitling, respeaking or using machine translation. Lastly, P7 suggested that professional interpreters or other teachers covering RI could be invited to provide a workshop for the students on a voluntary basis.

Taken together, these activities were framed as a way of developing students' adaptability and problem-solving strategies in technology-mediated interpreting contexts.

Theme 4: Arguments against implementing RI into the training

This theme deals with the reasons why it might be unfavourable to implement RI into the training according to the participants. While all participants except P4 agreed that covering RI would be beneficial, P1, P5 and P9 expressed concerns related to curricular priorities. These reservations did not constitute a rejection of RI as such, but rather reflected caution about introducing an additional modality into already demanding programmes.

P5 and P9 commented that the interpreting courses should prioritise on-site consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, suggesting that RI should be introduced as an extension of on-site interpreting. P1 questioned the need for extensive theoretical coverage of RI, arguing instead for a practical overview of platforms, workflows, and potential problem situations.

P4 was the only participant that would not recommend covering RI at all. This can be explained by the joint structure of translation and interpreting programmes in Slovakia, which include students with differing levels of interest in interpreting.

> "I would not burden students with RI. It is enough that they have consecutive interpreting, and even worse for them, simultaneous interpreting, where many of them are visibly uncomfortable, so I would not want to put them through additional pressure" (P4).

Theme 5: Limitations in implementing RI into the training

The following theme focuses on the structural and institutional limitations that hinder the systematic implementation of RI into training. Participants emphasised that these obstacles were not related to a lack of interest in RI, but rather to broader constraints affecting university programmes in Slovakia. P2 and P7 argued that implementing major changes can be problematic, since the accreditation commission of the Ministry of Education examines the study programs and approves them every couple of years, which includes a heavy administrative process. Similarly, introducing a brand-new course requires a lot of paperwork, according to P2 and P7.

Four participants across three universities highlighted the insufficient number of interpreting courses within existing programmes, noting that introducing RI would require reducing coverage of other modalities unless additional contact hours were made available.

Technological limitations constituted another barrier. Five participants across three universities emphasised that an investment in hardware equipment and software licenses in the interpreting laboratories should be made to allow for the training of RI and other modalities, as the existing facilities are designed primarily for on-site interpreting. P5 explained that they would need licensed versions of remote simultaneous interpreting platforms or videoconferencing platforms in general. P6 commented that innovation and acquisition of new equipment would be desirable, since 'it would be unfair to expect from the students to bring their own devices' (P6).

Considering these limitations, the integration of RI into interpreter training depends not only on pedagogical intent but also on institutional capacity and resource availability.

Theme 6: Students' initiatives

This theme highlights the students' interest and initiatives to gain exposure to RI despite its limited presence in training. According to four participants across two universities, students' initiatives are one of the more promising developments regarding RI. Some students are active within students' associations. Participants specifically mentioned the student-led association called *Sa zobuď!* (https://www.sazobud.sk) that unites the students of translation and interpreting programmes in Slovakia, organising various events, workshops, discussions, podcasts etc. Some students within this organisation voluntarily provide RI during various events, including the ones that are organised directly by the association. Remote simultaneous interpreting is the most frequent type of interpreting during these events.

Apart from gaining experience, the students are also able to fulfil their mandatory practice demanded by their university. The mandatory practice requires the students to work a certain number of hours or days translating, interpreting or both. Interpreting at the students' events can be a part of this mandatory practice or, if in a sufficient amount, some students can fulfil their whole required practice by RI.

P11 admitted that such initiatives cannot be seen as a replacement for the university training, since interpreting at these events is on a voluntary basis.

> 'It is better than nothing. In this way, the students are compensating for what we could not deliver as teachers' (P11).

Conclusion

After the pandemic, it became clear that RI is not just an emergency solution, but rather a unique modality of interpreting that has its benefits. The emergence and presence of RI on the market was the main motivation to explore its position in the interpreter training at Slovak universities.

The central contribution of this study lies in providing insight into the institutional and pedagogical factors that shape the position of RI within the training programmes. By exploring teachers' perspectives, the study advances disciplinary understanding of how emerging interpreting modalities are viewed and incorporated into existing educational structures.

Šveda & Poláček (2025) highlight the institutional lag that is often present in the development of professional standards and terminological clarity and further comment that universities alongside professionals are often adapting to the tools only after their emergence, rather than shaping their trajectories. The answers to Research question 1 support these claims, as RI remains a peripheral component in the interpreter training at Slovak universities, with theoretical coverage being unsystematically provided at two universities and practical coverage limited to experimenting at one university. Informal discussions with the students about participants' interpreting contracts are continuing, which is beneficial for the students since the Elis Survey (2025) highlighted that students rely on their teachers for information about the industry.

The findings regarding Research question 2 reveal that there is no universal rule how to apply RI into interpreter training, and it is rather a matter of possibilities of each institution. As Štefková & Krajčovič (2025) explain, the Slovak context could benefit from international training models, but not through direct replication, since the specifics of each institution should be considered and adjusted accordingly to its possibilities. Taken this into account, the integration of RI into training might be best incorporated through gradual approaches rather than comprehensive curricular reform. Theoretical coverage, context-sensitive practical activities, and exposure to non-ideal remote working conditions could provide students with necessary competences while remaining compatible with existing programme structures. This aligns with prior research concerning the ways how to implement RI into interpreter training (Alley, 2012; Wren, 2018; Davitti & Braun, 2020; Seeber & Fox, 2021; Alarcón-García, 2023; Colman, 2025). In the context of platforms for RI training, the Slovak authors Šveda & Djovčoš (2021) mention the platform I-nest which was developed based on the impulse of some of the teachers from Slovak universities during the pandemic, but this platform was designed to provide training for simultaneous interpreting in an online environment, and not specifically for training RI. The authors further suggest that specialised platforms like Kudo would be ideal for the training, but due to their high cost, more feasible alternatives would be popular non-specialised platforms, such as Zoom. Such low-threshold strategies may offer a realistic way for integrating RI within existing institutional constraints, providing an alternative to the specialised platforms and fully fledged RI modules that are often described as best practice in international research.

The findings primarily elaborate on existing research that has identified RI as an increasingly relevant yet unevenly integrated component of interpreter training (Seeber & Fox, 2021; Spinolo, 2022; De Boe, 2023). In line with prior studies, such as Donovan & Manzoni (2024), participants in this study acknowledged the relevance of RI and expressed general support for its implementation into training. The findings enrich the literature by demonstrating that the limited presence of RI in training at Slovak universities characterised by joint translation-interpreting programmes is less a result of pedagogical resistance than of structural constraints, such as rigid accreditation frameworks, limited contact hours, and inadequate hardware and software in the interpreting laboratories. Unlike specialised interpreting programmes, the Slovak model must balance the needs of translation-focused students, creating unique curricular demands. Therefore, strategies developed for high-specialisation contexts may not be viable in joint-degree programmes unless they are adapted accordingly. The findings are further in line with the observations by Šveda & Djovčoš (2018) and Colman (2025), who note that interpreter training programmes often struggle to accommodate new competences within existing curricula. In this view, the Slovak case illustrates a tension between evolving professional practices and comparatively slow-moving educational practices. The findings complement existing research by foregrounding feasibility and institutional capacity as central variables in the integration process of technology-mediated interpreting into university programmes.

The study also reveals context-specific dynamics, such as the impact of joint translation and interpreting programmes on curricular design. Concerns about student workload and uneven commitment to interpreting partly explain why some participants were cautious about introducing an additional modality. Other explanations for the peripheral position of RI within the programmes, such as lack of awareness or undervaluation of the modality, were not strongly supported by the data, since participants demonstrated familiarity with RI and its challenges. The findings also add a contextual dimension to international discussions on RI training by demonstrating how programme structure and market size shape decisions about technological integration.

The study also shows that RI is already entering training in informal ways, through students' own initiatives. The presence of student-led RI practices, particularly within voluntary associations, indicates a demand for structured exposure to RI and suggests that students are aware of its growing relevance. While such initiatives cannot replace formal training, they underscore the gap between market realities and institutional provision.

Methodologically, the focus groups and individual interviews provided interactional data and enabled the identification of shared positions among interpreter teachers. However, the findings are limited by the scope of the data. A higher number of participants would provide a more complex image about the position of RI, especially within institutions that were represented only by a single participant. Additionally, the national focus on Slovakia limits the transferability of the findings to other institutional or market conditions. And while the findings are grounded in the Slovak context, they may be informative for other countries with comparable programme structure, market sizes, and limited institutional resources.

Future research could build on this study by conducting comparative analyses across national contexts or evaluating the effectiveness of specific RI training implementations in similarly structured programmes. Despite its limitations, the study suggests that RI has the potential to become a more structured component of interpreter training at Slovak universities, provided that its integration is aligned with institutional capacities. Such developments could contribute to better preparing future interpreters for contemporary professional realities and improving the quality of interpreting services.

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Appendix 1

Protocol of semi-structured interviews with university teachers of interpreting courses

Topics and questions (Translated from Slovak into English)

Introduction

Interviewer introduces themselves and explains the aim of the interview, the procedure, data collection, and expectations about the interviews and the handling of data.

Introduction of the participants

- How much experience do you have with professional interpreting?
- How long have you been a university teacher?
- What courses (interpreting or otherwise) do you teach?
- What are your working languages?
- Are you an active interpreter yourself?
- Do you engage in research related to interpreting?

Topic 1: Pre-pandemic era

- **Question 1**: Describe how the interpreting courses were carried out before the COVID-19 pandemic (class activities, structure of the seminars, evaluation methods etc.).
- **Question 2**: Was remote interpreting being taught during the classes before the pandemic in any way?
- **Question 3**: If yes, how exactly was it being taught? (methods, activities, theory)
- **Question 4**: If yes, how much space was dedicated to remote interpreting?
- **Question 5**: If yes, what platforms were being used and how were they financed?
- **Question 6**: If not, what were the reasons?

Topic 2: Pandemic era

- **Question 1**: What were the main differences in teaching interpreting classes after the pandemic started?
- **Question 2**: What platforms have you been using during this era?
- **Question 3**: What were the advantages and disadvantages of remote education?
- **Question 4**: What were the reactions of the students on the remote education?
- **Question 5**: Have you noticed the rise of remote interpreting during this era?
- **Question 6**: If yes, have you reflected on this in any way during the interpreting classes?

Topic 3: Post-pandemic era

- **Question 1**: What has changed after the return to on-site training compared to the pre-pandemic era?
- **Question 2**: Is RI being taught in interpreting seminars today?
- **Question 3**: If yes, how exactly is it being taught?
- **Question 4**: If yes, what software tools are being used and how are they financed?
- **Question 5**: If not, do you think it would be beneficial for the students?
- **Question 6**: If not, how would you incorporate RI into training?
- **Question 7**: How much space should be dedicated to the training of RI?

Topic 4: Additional aspects of remote interpreting

- **Question 1**: Do you think RI requires new or different competences compared to on-site interpreting?
- **Question 2**: If yes, what are they and how are they important?
- **Question 3**: If not, what do you think are the biggest differences between RI and on-site interpreting?

Thank you and end of the interview.

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RE(IMAGINING) NATIONAL IMAGINATION IN TURKISH REMAKES OF BRITISH DRAMAS

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Abstract

This article examines how Turkish remakes of British television dramas deconstruct, reformulate, and (re)construct national, non-national, and transnational imaginaries, particularly in relation to their potential resonance among English-speaking audiences amid the limited export success of Turkish dramas in Western European and North American markets. Focusing on intra-medial transcultural television remakes in Türkiye, the study conceptualizes remaking as an isosemiotic, interlingual, and inspirational form of audiovisual translation (Gottlieb, 2007), employing qualitative thematic analysis of interpretants to examine how cultural meanings and identities are negotiated through adaptation. The findings suggest that Turkish remakes primarily serve domestic audiences and therefore retain a distinctly national character, especially through transformations of source genres and the reconfiguration of characters via interventions in gender identity and representations of sexuality. At the same time, some remakes depart from dominant television conventions, generating innovative and hybrid imaginaries. The study argues that national imagination in Turkish remakes is not fixed but continuously negotiated within transnational media circulation, contributing to scholarship on audiovisual translation and cultural adaptation while offering directions for future research on audience reception and international resonance.

Keywords: transnational exchange of dramas; Turkish remakes; Thematic interpretants; National imagination; Indigenization

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A brief overview of the global reach of Turkish dramas

Audiovisual translation (AVT) has evolved significantly from its early stages, with new types catering to the growing demand for diverse audiovisual content (Abend-Davis, 2014; Díaz-Cintas, 2013; Pérez González, 2014). Amid a plethora of media content, this research spotlights the transnational exchange of television dramas[1], concentrating on remakes as a distinctive form of AVT. With the historical evolution of television as an institution and expressive form deeply linked to the nation—to national culture, national politics—television drama represents a distinctly contentious transnational environment. It also harnesses the universal language of serialized television, accessible across various terrestrial and digital mediums, thereby garnering widespread transnational appeal, as highlighted in recent analysis by *The Economist*. The genesis of this research lies in *The Economist* article, positing Turkey as the third largest exporter of television, after the US and the UK, primarily for scripted shows ("Third largest exporter of television", 2024).

The article opens by noting that Turkish drama series (*dizi*) *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* [*Magnificent Century*] (Savcı, 2011-2014) spearheaded the international wave of Turkish dramas, underscoring its worldwide appeal with a fanbase featuring American rapper Cardi B. Based on data sourced by *The Economist* through Parrot Analytics, between 2020 and 2023 global demand for Turkish shows grew by 184%, compared with 73% for Korean dramas. This growth, as the article pinpoints, reflects the expanding popularity of Turkish shows beyond the Middle East into regions such as Europe and Latin America, while export rates reached $600 million in 2022 and are predicted by some analysts to soon total billions. The article finalizes with several underlying reasons for why Turkish shows attract attention in a great number of countries, what effects they have on the perception of Turkish culture across the world, and in what ways the Turkish shows that Turkish non-mainstream media such as streaming services provide diverge from those in mainstream networks. The article's concluding assumption, particularly pertinent to this research, is: relaxing in terms of content, representation, the way of storytelling, what can appear on screens is likely to bolster Turkey's chances of captivating English-speaking

[1] In this article, "drama" serves as a broad term encompassing various types of serialized narrative fiction (semi-fiction) designed for and broadcasted on television. For this research, distinctions between narrative-based audiovisual works such as series, serials, and sitcoms are not considered.

audiences, who have historically shown more reluctance towards translated dramas compared to audiences in other regions.[2] Despite the well-documented global audience engagement with Turkish dramas (Salamandra, 2012; Yeşil, 2016) and the recognized soft power implications of their popularity (Algan & Kaptan, 2021; Yörük & Vatikiotis, 2013), the question posed by *The Economist* remains insufficiently problematized, particularly within the framework of Translation Studies.

Given that the influence of British television on Turkish TV is longstanding, this article will specifically focus on the corpus of Turkish remakes based on British dramas, largely reflective of the ongoing dynamics in the transnational flow of television dramas. Offering a broad selection of images and narratives that everyone can cleave to as a nation, TV dramas have been navigating a challenging and debated boundary between national and non-national realms, balancing the production and broadcast of domestically produced programs that reflect and bolster native culture, with the import of content and practices from elsewhere. Considering this, the focus of the research is on the workings of national and non-national imagery, representations, and identities within British dramas —often criticized for their perceived darkness, slow pace, gritty content, and depiction of unlikeable characters (Steemers, 2005; DCMS, 1999a/1999b)— and their Turkish remakes, characterized by their fast-paced narratives, emotional depth, and compelling storytelling (Bhutto, 2019). Through an analysis of (non)national and transnational imaginary constructs, narratives, and representations in Turkish remakes, this article interrogates the potential for Turkish dramas to transcend into Anglophone contexts.

Television Remakes as Audiovisual Translation

Adaptations and remakes in translation studies are commonly understood as transcultural transfer strategies involving substantial changes in wording, style, mode, or

[2] It would be reasonable to acknowledge that Turkish dramas have already taken some steps to appeal to these audiences. In 2017, Turkish drama *Kara Sevda* [*Endless Love*] (Çatay, 2015-2017) secured the title of Best Telenovela at the International Emmy Awards ("Emmy Love", 2018). The preceding year, NBC aired *Game of Silence*, a crime drama remade from the Turkish drama *Suskunlar* (Savcı, 2012). Although it lasted only one season, it marked the first American remake of a Turkish show, paving the way for others like *Ölene Kadar* [*Eternal*] (Savcı & Sağyaşar, 2017) to follow suit (raninitv, 2017). Also, Istanbul-based screenwriter Ece Yörenç, renowned for her work on drama such as *Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne?* [*What Is Fatmagul's Fault?*] (Çatay, 2010-2012) and Aşk-*ı Memnu* [*Forbidden Love*] (Çatay, 2008-2010), has held discussions with ABC and the producers of *House of Cards*. They have secured remake rights to one of her shows, *Kuzey Güney* [*North and South*] (Şen, 2011-2013), intending to remake it (Bhutto, 2019).

medium, frequently observed in political discourse, children's literature, advertising, and localization. *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* defines them as "a set of translative operations which results in a text that is not accepted as translation but is nevertheless recognized as representing a source text of about the same length" (Bastin, 2009, p. 3), highlighting the blurred boundary between translation and adaptation/remake. Similarly, Mark O'Thomas notes that translation is often privileged over other translative operations (2010, p. 48), while Susan Bassnett pinpoints that "[m]uch time and ink has been wasted attempting to differentiate between translations, versions, adaptations […]" and that "all texts are translations of translations of translations" (1991, pp. 78–79). Many scholars emphasize that transcultural transfers treat source texts as cultural and textual resources that inform new acts of meaning-making (Hermans, 1999). Extending this insight to audiovisual media, this study adopts a broader, semiotic understanding of translation, in which images, sounds, objects, and corporeal expressions are considered sign systems akin to language, and translation is approached as a contextualized process of interacting semiotic codes.

Given that adaptations and remakes are widely encountered across various media and artistic forms—and that they manifest in diverse ways depending on shifts in medium, language, and source material—it is important to clarify that this study focuses specifically on intra-medial transcultural television remakes. Drawing on Gottlieb's terminology, this practice is conceptualized as "an isosemiotic, interlingual, and inspirational form of translation" (2007, p.7). As a form of composite translation, it is driven by multiple social agents and conditioned by a new sociocultural, economic, and ideological environment. Within this mode of translation, the relationship with a given source text tends to be more flexible and less predictable than in more conventional forms of audiovisual translation.

To further demonstrate the relevance of remakes to audiovisual translation, this study draws on Gideon Toury's translation postulates—namely the "source text," "transfer," and "relationship" postulates (1995, p. 33). In this framework, transnational television remakes are conceptualized with reference to Toury's notion of "assumed translation." In order to better understand how these postulates operate in the context of television remakes, case studies can map particular remakes onto their assumed source texts and examine the intricate relationships between them. Drawing on Toury's model, the transfer relationship between a television remake and its assumed source can be understood as a cross-textual interaction. Television remakes generally originate from earlier television dramas produced in another cultural or linguistic context, thereby fulfilling the source-text postulate. In many cases, viewers recognize that the remake relocates a foreign television dramas within a new network of circumstances in the Turkish context; in others, the relationship is formalized through legal agreements between rights holders and producers. The second postulate—the existence of a transfer process through which the target text is produced from the assumed source—can also be observed in the television remakes examined in this study. According to Toury, identifying a textual production as a translation further requires the presence of shared features between the texts involved. Such similarities become evident when comparing the overall storylines, themes, and narrative structures of the remake pairs included in the corpus (see Table 1).

Toury's third postulate concerns the accountable relationships linking a target text to its assumed source. Importantly, Toury notes that "there is no inherent need for intertextual relationships to always be of the same kind or intensity" (1995, p. 35). This observation applies well to television remakes, as the nature and extent of these relationships vary considerably across different remake pairs. Some officially licensed remakes—such as *Yalancı* [*Liar*] (Atukman & Özoflu, 2021) *and Evlilik Hakkında Her Şey* [*All about Marriage*] (Bülbüloğlu, 2021)—remain relatively close to their source texts due to contractual agreements between rights holders and producers.

Overall, the transcultural television remakes examined in this study appear to draw on television dramas from other cultural and linguistic contexts, to be produced through a process of transfer from their assumed sources, and to maintain identifiable—though varying—relationships with those sources.

Problematization of national and non-national components in remakes

This research contends that in television dramas, specifically, in remakes, the meanings of "non/national" and "transnational" are contested within their storytelling, narratives and characters. As Karen Petruska and Faye Woods (2019) articulate, the concept of a program's "original" identity transcends traditional definitions, no longer being solely defined by the content's setting, the location or ownership of its production, or its primary audience. Instead, it mostly emerges from a complex system of transnational negotiations spanning various levels, from national policies to production processes, writing, and reception conditions. These dynamics underscore the need for a new terminology that goes beyond the dichotomy of "national" and “non-national” and provides greater specificity than "global".

Traditional TV broadcasting has always been associated with shaping collective national imaginary (Hilmes, 2012; Chalaby, 2005) and is seen essential in building the nation, which Anderson refers to as an imagined community (1983). The case of Canada serves as a telling example of this: in Canada, private television's influence is moderated by the state-funded Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and its French equivalent. The Canadian Broadcasting Act of 1991 emphasizes the public broadcaster's role in preserving national identity and cultural sovereignty (Dorland, 1996), aiming to counteract U.S. cultural dominance. Likewise, Nordenstreng and Varis (1973) express concerns that the prevalence of American programming in Latin American countries led to a one-sided dissemination of content, impeding cultural diversity. These instances highlight how television shows contribute to shaping national imagination and have a notable impact on personal and social identities (Sandbrook, 2015).

Itamar Even-Zohar's hypothesis suggesting that even cultures with diverse repertoires may encounter deadlock if all alternative options are blocked remains globally relevant (Even-Zohar, 1997a). This theory underscores the potential for utilizing available repertoires to navigate such situations. Remakes as scripted formats appear to be a strategic response aimed at transcending constraints and breaking deadlock, yet they are costly to tailor for cultural relevance and require substantial knowledge transfer. Indeed, many television dramas, as evidenced by the German remake of *Married with Children*, face challenges in transcending national borders. Steve Kent, senior executive vice president of international production, emphasizes that direct translation of scripts does not yield successful outcomes: "We learned you cannot directly translate the scripts and expect it to work well because we found, in fact, that it works terribly" (“Smile and the world smiles with you”, 2006).

Within British and Turkish drama landscape featuring a rich assortment of domestic, imported, and remade dramas, this research adopts Even-Zohar’s approach, considering remakes as a subsystem within the broader “polysystem” of global drama flow, which showcase "potential models of life" and offer a diverse array of "life images" (Even-Zohar, 2010, p.185). I also incorporate Lawrence Venuti's concept of thematic interpretant (2007) as part of the methodological framework while conducting a textual analysis on Turkish remakes within the corpus. Interpretant refers to the application of a category/categories to inscribe an interpretation by mediating between a given source and target product (Venuti, 2007). Researchers’ use of an interpretant “determines the formulation of hermeneutic relation and its interrogative effects [as a result of the disclosure of the sociocultural environment and conditions of adaptations and their source materials and of the adaptation that has processed them]” (Venuti, 2007, p. 41). According to Venuti, while identifying and analyzing the interpretants, researchers should concentrate on shifts that arise from a comparative analysis between the target text and its source. This article employs Venuti’s suggestion of thematic interpretants —such as codes, values, and ideologies— to interrogate remake norms within Turkish remakes of British dramas.

Also, within this research, instances where a given remake conceals traces of its original source to align with national imaginary will be referred to as examples of “indigenizing remake strategy”, whereas instances where non-national elements are displayed in remakes as a result of merging the conventions of both source and target television drama repertoires will be labeled as examples of “confrontational remake strategy” (Anonymous, 2020). Unlike the former, the latter strategy fosters the inclusion of confrontational ideas within the target television repertoire. By valuing non-national images and representations more highly, confrontational remake strategies disrupt prevailing television norms and sociocultural constructs, leading to the creation of new narratives, representations, and ideas. Within this context, the next sections will reveal how ideas of non/national and transnational identities and imaginaries are articulated on British dramas and their Turkish remakes.

Discussion: Turkish remakes of British dramas

The corpus of the article covers all Turkish remakes based on British TV dramas broadcasted on Turkish television. All the shows within the corpus were closely watched, with comprehensive notes taken to scrutinize the extent to which their content, representations, and storytelling —thematic interpretants— reflects national versus non-national and/or transnational spirit.[3] These detailed observations were subsequently transferred to the NVivo, and the data were meticulously tagged to highlight the key thematic interpretants, which were then categorized under relevant codes for comprehensive analysis.

Table 1

List of British Dramas and their Turkish Remakes

British drama	British network	Turkish remake	Turkish network	Legal status[4]
***Yes Minister* (1980-1984)**	BBC One	*Sayın Bakanım* (2004-05)	ATV	acknowledged
***Prisoners' Wives* (2012-13)**	BBC One	*Görüş Günü Kadınları* (2013)	STAR TV	unacknowledged
***Shameless* (2004-13)**	Channel 4	*Bizim Hikâye* (2017-19)	FOX TV	acknowledged
***Doctor Foster* (2015-17)**	BBC One	*Sadakatsiz* (2020-22)	Kanal D	acknowledged
***Liar* (2017-20)**	ITV	*Yalancı* (2021)	Show TV	acknowledged
***Mistresses* (2008-10)**	BBC One	*Yalancılar ve Mumları* (2021)	FOX TV	acknowledged
***The Split* (2018-20)**	BBC One	*Evlilik Hakkında Her Şey* (2021)	FOX TV	acknowledged
***Happy Valley* (2014-23)**	BBC One	*Son Nefesime Kadar* (2022)	FOX TV	acknowledged

Note: Source: Author's own elaboration

The content analysis of the Turkish remakes has identified 604 tags for 10 categories through the tagging and coding of specific thematic interpretants. The

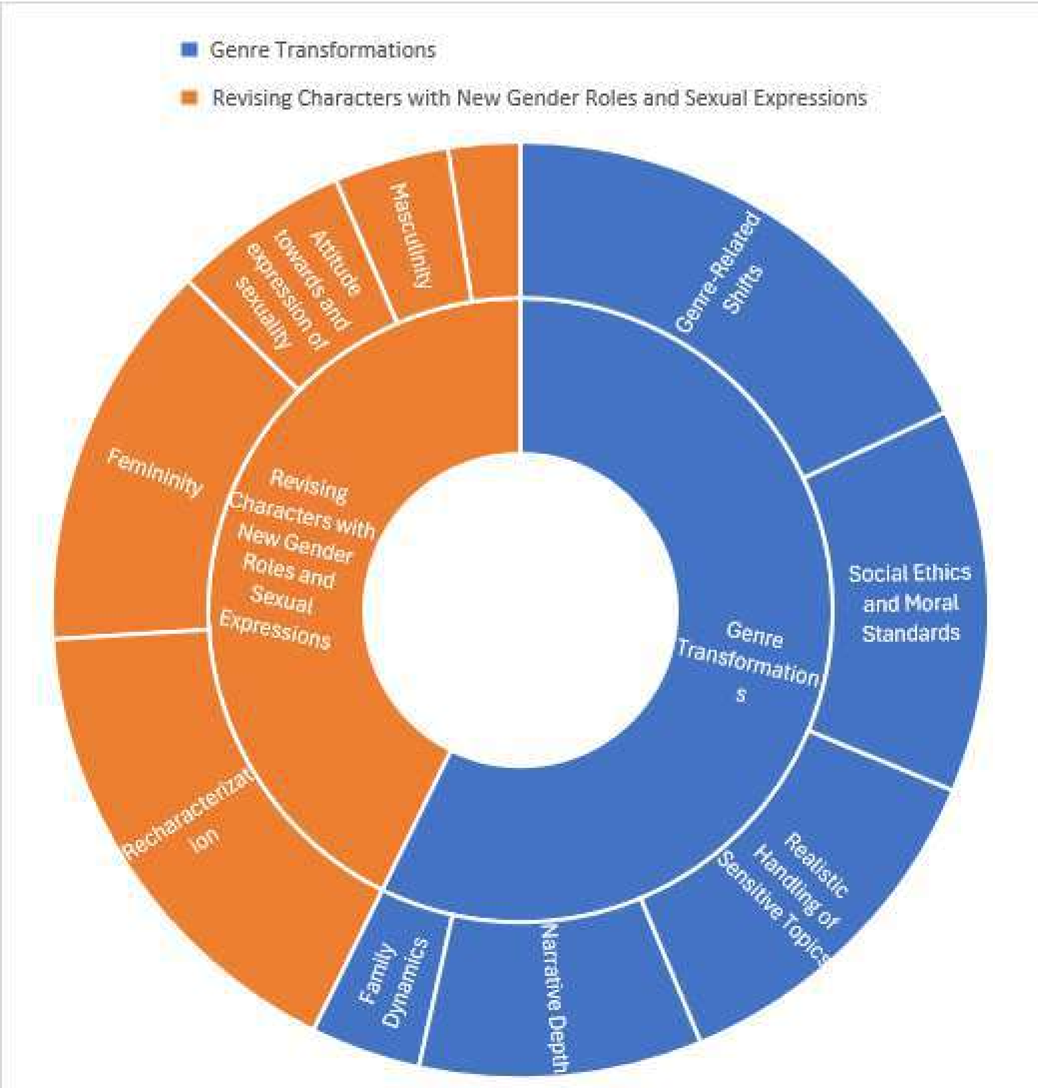
[3] Given that revenue from transnational sales has financed improvements in content and production quality within the Turkish dizi industry, and that engagement with global markets was instrumental in establishing the dizi genre during the 2010s (Öztürkmen, 2023), this study will examine Turkish remakes of British dramas from that decade. Consequently, the Turkish version of *Yes Minister*, titled *Sayın Bakanım*, falls outside the scope of this study.

[4] I found that numerous television remakes are made without any licensing or payment to the copyright holders, and the term "unacknowledged" is used to describe these cultural products.

identified categories/interpretants, along with their corresponding tag counts, include: genre-related shifts (109); recharacterization (101); femininity (81); social ethics and moral standards (80); realistic handling of sensitive topics (75); narrative depth (59); an attitude towards and expression of sexuality (37), masculinity (24); family dynamics (23); as well as portrayals of LGBTI+ characters (15). Upon reviewing these categories alongside the research questions, the initial ten have been condensed into two main themes of "genre transformations" and "revising characters with new gender roles and sexual expressions" along with their respective sub-interpretants.

Figure 1

Interpretants



Note: Source: Author's own elaboration

Genre transformations

In my analysis, 109 tags directly indicate a genre shift between British dramas and their Turkish remakes, representing the highest tagging frequency among all interpretants. The analysis also reveals that four other interpretants can be subsumed under the theme of genre transformations, positioning a total of five interpretants as sub-interpretants contributing to genre transformations. This section delves into the extent of genre transformation in Turkish remakes of British dramas, investigating how these changes manifest through specific examples, and examining how these changes allow the Turkish productions to negotiate between non/national and transnational spheres.

Social ethics and moral standards, intertwined with the realistic portrayal of sensitive topics, constitute the two primary interpretants driving genre transformations. In the dark comedy drama *Shameless* (Abbott, 2004-2013), alcohol consumption, drug use/dependency, and nudity are prevalent in nearly every episode. *Shameless* is also lauded for its depiction of what it means to be lower-working class in the UK without eschewing its connection to politics. In S1/E2, viewers see the Gallagher family watching a news broadcast on television; this scene is devoid of dialogue, with the entire emphasis placed on the news report. The news content in the background states: "Blair came to power promising to redress Britain's position on poverty. The debates today could affect the way one in three families live for the worse..." The broadcast also features the lament of a woman concerning her living conditions and governmental policies: "Four kids and half a wage! What am I supposed to do if they cut the single parent benefit by 30%?". In the Turkish remake, the "gritty" and "realistic" storytelling[5], which British audiences have grown accustomed to and preferred over time, has been set aside. Similarly, in the Turkish remake of *Prisoners' Wives* (Gearey et al., 2012-2013), the incorporation of fundamental thematic interpretants that often enrich the crime drama genre and bolster the drama's realism—such as the abundance of bloody violent scenes, Harriet's (single mother) involvement in her son Gavin's drug procurement, Gavin's exploration of Islam in prison,

[5] Since the 2000s, British drama has increasingly adopted styles and practices from American Quality Television, imparting a more American feel to British television. Moreover, the evolving nature of early twenty-first-century television drama, alongside technological advancements like digital cameras and editing facilities, has revolutionized the “look” of British television dramas (Chapman, 2020).

and the profound discussions between Harriet and a prison chaplain on Islam and Christianity—has been noticeably overlooked.

In Turkish *Shameless*, the narrative axis involving the father character Frank having sex with Karen (his son Lip's girlfriend), and the ensuing intense fights between father and son after the revelation of this clandestine relationship has also been omitted. From this perspective, the omission of father and son conflict and the subsequent evolution of family dynamics—another sub-interpretant identified—that markedly challenge moral and ethical norms reshapes the British product's genre from its original form as a dark comedy drama into a melodrama-infused comedy, thereby fitting it more into the "national" genre on Turkish television. This inclination toward melodrama is evident in domestic Turkish dramas, which frequently exhibit features characteristic of the genre (Şentürk, 2018; Tanrıöver, 2015). The handling of moral and ethical imperatives in the British and Turkish *Doctor Foster* marks a similar divergence between the two shows. In the original (S2/E3), hours after Gemma (main lead) and her ex-husband Simon had consenting but violent hate-sex, during which fifteen-year-old Tom (their son) was upstairs in a home with thin walls, Gemma discovers that a drunken Tom had sexually abused his schoolfriend. The sexual encounter takes place in the same home where Simon brutally abused Gemma two years before. Meanwhile, Kate, Simon's wife, forbids Tom from entering her home out of concern that he will molest Amelia, her kid. The Turkish remake has omitted this sequence altogether, which was key to adding narrative depth in the original drama as it represents "non-national" family dynamics that often diverge from the typical portrayal in the Turkish drama repertoire which adheres to pro-family regulations preserving the sanctity of moralistic conservative family values on Turkish television (*Resmî Gazete*, 2018).

In Turkish remakes, melodramatic storytelling is also consistently utilized, particularly in the portrayal of romantic dynamics between couples. In Turkish *Shameless* (S1/E3), Barış's (main male) declaration of his aspirations concerning the future home he envisions with Filiz (main female), his jealousy over someone calling Filiz, and his reassurance to Filiz, "Don't be scared, I will always be by your side," introduce scenes and themes imbued with melodramatic sentiments to the Turkish remake, entirely absent from its original. A more striking example of genre intervention through emotionally charged storytelling is also found in the Turkish remake of *Happy Valley* (Wainwright et al., 2014-2023). The scene added to the Turkish remake in the first episode and its execution are deliberate moves aimed at entirely transforming the series into a melodramatic narrative. In both series, the daughters of the main female characters (Catherine and Mihri) have tragically taken their own lives after they were raped and subsequently became pregnant. This tragic event is briefly mentioned in passing conversations in *Happy Valley*, while, in the Turkish remake, we witness Mihri's (Turkish female lead) daughter committing suicide by hanging herself, with Mihri witnessing the very moment. The scene is accompanied by Mihri sobbing uncontrollably, set against the backdrop of a deeply emotional song by the famous pop star Sezen Aksu.

However, the Turkish remake of *Liar* occasionally draws inspiration from its British original, suggesting a closer engagement with certain taboo themes, even though the overall treatment of such topics still unfolds differently on Turkish television. The narrative in the Turkish version centers on a woman named Deniz, a smart and capable teacher amid a breakup, who is set up on a date with a recently widowed surgeon and believes that the day after something has gone wrong and she has been raped, very closely echoing the original storyline. Much like *Liar*, the remake focuses solely on Deniz's (Laura in *Liar*) story without introducing a male character who develops emotional intimacy with her—a fresh, "non-national", approach for the Turkish drama repertoire. It portrays Deniz questioning whether she was assaulted and subsequently narrating her efforts to ensure that Mehmet Emin, her assailant, faces the appropriate judicial process. The portrayal of this struggle, emphasized through suspense and action-oriented elements, indicates the remake's genre affinity with the original drama *Liar*.

The analysis suggests an evident genre transformation of British crime, thriller, and action dramas into melodramatic Turkish remakes, achieved by incorporating melodramatic narrative mechanisms and expressive techniques. However, in a small yet notable number of cases, Turkish remakes embrace the fundamental tenets of melodrama while skillfully escaping its typical expressive features and devices.

Revising characters with new gender roles and sexual expressions

Based on this research, a second major reason why Turkish dramas often fail to capture enough interest among English-speaking audiences, as discussed in *The*

Economist's article, is the frequent deployment of imagery and representations that closely mirror "national" conceptions when dealing with matters of gender and sexuality. The examination suggests that the primary reason for the character changes between British dramas and their Turkish remakes is to adjust the characters to fit the gender roles and expressions of sexuality that are prominent in their respective national imaginaries. The distinctive conceptualization of the remade characters aligns with recent research emphasizing that deconstructing "gender representations of source cultures and their (re)construction in the target culture via remakes are important within the framework of sex/gender distinction […]" (Sancaktaroğlu Bozkurt and Okyayuz, 2021, p. 267).

As with their British counterparts, who also cannot entirely avoid the prevailing ideals of femininity dictated by dominant national imagination in the British context, female leads in Turkish remakes predominantly uphold moral norms concerning binary gender and standards of femininity. The relative rigidity of gender roles in Turkish remakes is underscored by their emphasis on melodrama, genre that supports patriarchal norms by relegating women to secondary roles, associating them with the private domestic sphere, and seeking to regulate their behavior (Tunalı, 2006). On the other hand, the analysis of thematic interpretants also reveals a significant number of instances where Turkish remakes closely align with their originals in addressing issues related to femininity while simultaneously crafting their own narrative universe through non-national and/or transnational women images and representations. In these instances, the hybridity of Turkish remakes becomes evident through the selective incorporation of national, non-national and transnational sensibilities, in other words, with the use of indigenizing and confrontational remake strategies.

The quintessential melodramatic dichotomy of "either/or," characterized by starkly contrasting moral positions, finds limited application in the Turkish remake of *Doctor Foster* (Bartlett et al., 2015-2017), which showcases a confrontational remake strategy. In *Doctor Foster*, characters mostly defy facile categorization into purely virtuous or malevolent roles. For instance, *Doctor Foster*'s lead female character, Gemma, embodies a nuanced persona, evoking ambiguity rather than clear moral delineation. She engages in revenge sex with her ex-husband Simon to sabotage his marriage, continuing even after the camera stopped filming, purely for the pleasure of it. Viewers also discover that Gemma left her son as a baby during a severe episode of postnatal depression.

Despite her evident flaws, such as impulsivity and engaging in risky sexual encounters without even thinking about its negative consequences for her son, Gemma's portrayal elicits complex moral considerations, transcending simplistic judgments. This complexity reflects a departure from traditional melodramatic conventions, indicative of a synthesis of melodrama with realism-infused storytelling, as evident in many British dramas (Chapman, 2020). Typical of the melodrama genre, Turkish female leads often embody moral rectitude, frequently vocalizing their purity and ethical stances, which help perpetuate idealized female characters within the realm of Turkish dramas, characterized by predominantly positive attributes and adherence to societal norms (İmançer, 2006c; Mutlu, 2013). While Turkish Gemma, Asya, is portrayed as slightly more morally elevated than Gemma and more aligned with the national imagination, Asya's character consistently intrigues Turkish viewers by demonstrating influences from Gemma and embodying an "alternative" female archetype. Cansu Dere, who portrays Asya, describes her character as potentially defying conventional expectations of Turkish women, displaying qualities that defy straightforward categorization as either strong or weak but undoubtedly deviating from societal norms. In a cultural context where male infidelity is often trivialized as stemming from uncontrollable sexual urges, while female infidelity is heavily stigmatized, Asya's decision to engage in sexual intercourse with her friend Mert as a form of revenge against her husband defies societal norms and expectations regarding women's fidelity in the Turkish context.

In *Happy Valley*, Catherine (a divorced 47-year-old woman) secretly engages in a sexual relationship with her ex-husband Richard, and upon learning about Royce's (her daughter's rapist) release, Catherine goes for dinner with him, primarily to distract herself from Royce. *Mistresses*'s protagonist Katie, a general practitioner, engages in an affair with her terminally ill patient, John Grey, who is married. Also, she assists him in physician-assisted suicide, resulting in her suspension from work for a year once the affair and her involvement are exposed. Fiona from *Shameless* randomly sleeps with a man named Steve at the very beginning of the drama; viewers also learn that she previously had casual sex with a police officer responsible for the neighborhood's security purely for amusement. She is portrayed as a woman who enjoys going to nightclubs and refuses to be held accountable to anyone for her lifestyle choices. Her closest friend, Veronica, is seen engaging in topless webcam streaming to generate income. In *The Split*

(Morgan et al., 2018-2024), it becomes obvious that Hannah had slept with her former lover Christie on the day just before her wedding. It is even understood that during that time, Hannah became pregnant and had an abortion, with a strong possibility that the baby could have been Christie's.

In Turkish remakes, viewers do not witness Mihri (Turkish Catherine) engaging in romantic or sexual intimacy with her ex-husband. Similarly, Turkish Fiona does not establish even a kissing-level intimacy with a man she has just met, let alone engage in sexual relations. Filiz, the Turkish character, questions the propriety of Barış visiting her home, a behavior not seen in her counterpart Fiona. Filiz's best friend does not prefer earning money by appearing half-naked on camera, unlike Fiona’s best friend. Instead of going to nightclubs, Filiz and her friend socialize by attending weddings held in their neighborhood. Hannah’s Turkish counterpart Azra does not engage in any romantic involvement with a man she previously loved. These examples, illustrating an indigenizing remake strategy, are consistent with the portrayal of typical Turkish female protagonists who frequently emphasize their purity and moral perspectives, aiding in the portrayal of idealized female characters recognized for their positive attributes.

The examination of the corpus has also revealed that Turkish remakes have erased and/or straightwashed LGBTI+ figures in British dramas by employing an indigenizing remake strategy; by so doing, they not only render LGBTI+ characters unrecognized, ignored, and sometimes denied, but also affect the perspectives and assumptions conveyed through their representation, thereby reproducing heterosexist dogmas, and strengthening heteronormativity (see Anonymous, 2023). In *Shameless*, numerous LGBTI+ characters are featured. Among the main cast, Ian Gallagher stands out as one of the most prominently represented gay characters. Monica Gallagher, the often-absent mother of the Gallagher family, is revealed to be bisexual. Jessica from *Mistresses* engages in relationships with both male and female characters, and through her, viewers can also observe an open relationship experience. *The Split* features multiple LGBTI+ representations within its cast. Through these representations, viewers are exposed to various LGBTI+ characters expressing their sexuality, engaging in different sexual acts, and displaying the realistic and specific concerns of LGBTI+ individuals. Regarding LGBTI+ representation, Turkish remakes in the corpus have served the goals of identity politics at the expense of the multilayered nature of queerness, resulting in a lack of diverse and confrontational ideas within the Turkish television repertoire (see İnceoğlu, İ. & Akçalı, E., 2018).

This section also examines the construction of masculinities in both the original shows and their remakes, exploring how this contributes to the process of recharacterization in the Turkish remakes. Overall, only a small number of interventions (24 tag counts, representing roughly %9) were identified regarding male characters in the corpus. In these interventions, while Turkish remakes often depict male characters as tougher, emotionally and physically more stoic, aggressive, offensive and dominant, a considerable number of examples show that Turkish remakes inspired by British male characters also explore alternative masculinities with a confrontational remake strategy in the remakes. An example from Turkish *Doctor Foster* is Volkan (the male lead), who is portrayed as a character unafraid to express emotions such as grief, fear, and love, challenging traditional masculine imagination in the Turkish context and the universal concept of hegemonic masculinity (Donaldson, 1993). Volkan sharing with his female friend all his uncertainties, weaknesses, sadness, and dilemmas about being in love with two women at the same time—his wife Asya and his girlfriend Derin—has sparked considerable debate in both mainstream and social media in Turkey ("Televizyon dizisindeki sahneye tepkiler yağdı", 2020). In *Yalancı* (Turkish Liar), Okay's character exemplifies an alternative masculinity by maintaining rational, calm, and moderate demeanor when suspecting his wife of cheating on him with her ex-mother-in-law. Upon discovering the betrayal, he calmly separates his children from their mother to start a new life, consistently reminding her that he has always taken care of the kids as she has always been busy with work. Alongside these traits of him, in the series finale, he adopts a non-hegemonic masculine stance towards his wife's infidelity, choosing to forgive her for their past troubles, ultimately resulting in a happy conclusion for their relationship. These alternative masculinities help mitigate the intolerance towards diverse masculinities often seen on Turkish television, which has historically stigmatized and negated non-hegemonic expressions of masculinity.

Yet, there are also many cases where an indigenizing remake strategy is employed to evoke the national masculine imagery in the Turkish context (İnceoğlu, İ. & Akçalı, E., 2018). Barış, the Turkish counterpart of Steve from *Shameless*, immediately becomes a hero by saving Filiz's purse from a thief in the first episode, a feat Steve couldn't accomplish. In subsequent episodes, we see Barış taking on the role of Filiz's savior and promising her a better life. Unlike Steve, Barış easily becomes jealous of Filiz, which he openly demonstrates through his behavior towards her. In contrast to Frank's role as a father, we witness scenes where Fikri in Turkish *Shameless* passionately confronts the man his daughter likes to ensure her honor remains intact. Similarly, a behavior pattern not seen in the original drama is how Filiz's brothers instinctively protect her from external threats, especially from men in the outside world.

In the context of reconceptualizing characters from British originals, the analysis highlights that Turkish remakes occasionally employ both confrontational and indigenizing strategies. This dual approach introduces contradictions that challenge prevailing ideologies in the Turkish national imagination. Despite presenting ostensibly progressive narratives, Turkish remakes in the corpus are firmly entrenched within a normative conservative framework. Consequently, while they outwardly endorse liberal values, they ultimately reinforce traditional values and conservative ideologies, particularly evident in their portrayal of women, LGBTQ+ characters, and depictions of sexuality.

Conclusions

Even with the redefinition of television by global economic shifts, regulatory liberalization, and myriad technological changes in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, it remains a source of content—such as local dramas—that plays a role in forming "a sense of unity and belonging among citizens of the nation" (Turner, 2009, p.62). Television dramas significantly shape the national imagination and mold personal and social identities, particularly in extensive, multi-part formats (Sandbrook, 2015). Thus, in contemporary media landscapes, creating dramas that delicately balance national images, representations, and imaginative with economic opportunities by transnational engagement remains significant, acting effectively as both a seismograph and a catalyst for collective sentiment.

This research has set out to examine the potential of Turkish dramas to captivate English-speaking audiences through an analysis of Turkish remakes of British dramas, investigating the interplay of national and non-national imagery, representations, and identities within original dramas and their Turkish remakes. The findings suggest that dramatic divergences in two major thematic interpretants—i) genre transformations and

ii) revising characters with new gender roles and sexual expressions—between British dramas versus their Turkish remakes within the corpus heighten the likelihood of a cultural dissonance among English-speaking audiences. Delving into genre transformations reveals that while remaking British dramas in the corpus, which feel quite local and specific to their UK context, storytelling and narrative structures in Turkish remakes are not crafted to be “odorless” or to avoid “the smell” of Turkish national identity and imagination, borrowing Iwabuchi’s (2002) term. The frequent tagging of interpretants including social ethics and moral standards, realistic handling of sensitive topics, narrative depth, and family dynamics highlights the inclination of Turkish remakes to embody traits of the melodrama genre, which is characterized by its emphasis on upholding moral values, moderating discussions of sexuality, presenting straightforward narratives with easily discernible characters categorized as either good or bad, while avoiding the complexities in between, and reinforcing traditional family values.

Additionally, Turkish remakes have demonstrated a pronounced emphasis on national imagination, particularly in the reconfiguration of femininity and the portrayal of LGBTI+ characters and sexuality. In the qualitative analysis undertaken, recharacterization emerged as the second most prominent distinction in the examined Turkish versions of British dramas, following genre-related shifts; upon review of tag counts, it becomes apparent that the primary impetus behind recharacterization lies the re-evaluation of thematic interpretants concerning femininity and sexuality. The (re)construction of LGBTI+ characters in Turkish remakes, though not often emphasized by tag quantity, represents the most substantial transformations in recharacterization, primarily due to the use of indigenizing remake strategies, particularly omission. While Turkish remakes sometimes draw direct inspiration from original productions in terms of femininity and masculinity themes and at other times apply the strategy of repetition by toning down— a process where Turkish remakes follow the source material while softening its narratives and underlying messages—, LGBTI+ and sexuality-related interpretants are most often completely disregarded. Hence, characters appearing “too Turkish” might potentially deter English-speaking viewers and undermine Turkish dramas’ market appeal in these markets, yet likely increase their success potential in the LAC, MENA, Balkans, and the Far East.

There is no doubt that the dynamic between Britain and Turkey's television drama repertoire since the inception of Turkish television has involved a push-and-pull scenario, marked by a historical pattern of unilateral influence from Britain to Turkey, juxtaposed with the recognition of broadcasting as a pivotal nationalizing force on both sides. This study is confined to remakes that aired exclusively on mainstream Turkish networks. Thus, in the context of emerging streaming video on demand (SVoD) services, this research posits, the widespread acclaim of television dramas from Britain and Turkey are likely to underscore the ongoing strategic focus on transnational audiences by television industry stakeholders, who are expected prioritize the deployment of delocalized, non-national, narratives, images, and characters to safeguard against potential declines in marketability. All in all, the discourse emerging from the analysis emphasizes the concept of a fluid and continually negotiated national imagination. Rather than conceiving of national culture as a static construct that can be fully represented and mirrored, this perspective is better suited to accommodating the inherent fragmentation and subjectivity within national cultures amidst the transnational circulation of dramas.

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Note: The Turkish and source versions of the television series examined as the primary research material in this study are marked with an asterisk.

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INVESTIGATING NEURAL MACHINE TRANSLATION QUALITY: AN XCOMET-XL-BASED ANALYSIS ACROSS KATHARINA REISS'S TEXT TYPOLOGIES

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Abstract

This study examines AI-driven neural methods that reduce human involvement in machine translation evaluation. Traditional evaluation approaches face challenges related to consistency, scalability, and evaluator subjectivity. To address these limitations, the study employs xCOMET-XL, which evaluates translation quality within a shared semantic space. Within the scope of this study, fifteen Turkish source texts, classified according to Katharina Reiss's typology as informative, expressive, and operative, were translated into English using Google Translate and DeepL. The translations were evaluated using xCOMET-XL, followed by human evaluation. The originality of the study lies in its comparative design examining the alignment between xCOMET-XL scores and human judgments. After comparing results, alignment between the methods was analysed. Findings signal a relatively high degree of alignment with human judgments in certain texts, highlighting neural metrics' potential as a fast, scalable, and systematic alternative. The study contributes to Translation Studies by supporting alternative translation evaluation approaches.

Keywords: machine translation, xCOMET-XL, translation assessment, text types, Katharina Reiss

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The rapid pace of global communication and technology has moved translation into a new dimension, in which researchers and translators seek new methods to supplement the traditional methods and meet the growing demand for fast and high-quality translation. This trend has brought modern technologies such as Machine Translation (MT) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to the forefront in translation. Although MT tools seek to provide a fully automated and smooth translation process and product by reducing the need for human intervention, their performance remains a subject of ongoing debate.

Within this context, translation quality evaluation has gained importance in Translation Studies (TS). In particular, it mainly relies on a systematic comparison of the Source Text (ST) with the Target Text (TT). This process becomes even more challenging in distant language pairs, such as the English–Turkish pair examined in this study, where comparison becomes more demanding. Therefore, both researchers and translation professionals are searching for reliable approaches that integrate both traditional and modern approaches. Accordingly, the emergence of neural evaluation metrics necessitates a reconsideration of existing practices to keep up with global advancements.

In line with this shift, this study aims to examine the translation quality of MT from Turkish into English through the neural evaluation metric xCOMET-XL, based on Katharina Reiss's text typology. For this purpose, three text types—informative, expressive, and operative—are utilized to examine MT quality and xCOMET-XL performance across different text types. The study also investigates whether modern metrics show a high alignment with human judgments. In line with the study's aim, the research questions are as follows:

- Is there a meaningful difference in MT performance across informative, expressive, and operative text types in terms of xCOMET-XL scores?
- To what extent does xCOMET-XL align with human judgments in assessing the quality of Turkish–English machine translations?

By comparing xCOMET-XL-based evaluations with human judgments, this study offers empirical insight into how effectively neural metrics capture meaning beyond surface-level correspondences. Furthermore, it addresses a significant gap in the literature by providing a systematic analysis of neural evaluation metrics specifically within the context of the structurally distant Turkish–English language pair across diverse text types. In this respect, it contributes to discussions on the role of AI in translation assessment, highlights the importance of text type-sensitive evaluation, and supports the development of more consistent, scalable, and context-aware assessment models that bridge traditional and data-driven modern approaches.

Literature Review

Katharina Reiss's Text Typology

Text typology provides a framework for text analysis according to their functional, structural, and contextual features. Since texts serve different communicative purposes, they vary in content, linguistic structure, and discourse organization. Therefore, typologies help explain both formal features and communicative functions of texts. Due to its relevance across language-related fields, text types have been classified by various scholars according to criteria such as communicative purpose, linguistic features, and structural organization.

Within this theoretical background, as Delibaş (2023, p. 1020) states, translation involves recreating a text for a target audience while considering its type, communicative purpose, function, and cultural context. Central to this perspective are functionalist approaches, which prioritize the text's communicative role. In line with this paradigm shift in TS, the function-based classifications of text types have become prominent.

Reiss and Vermeer (2014, p. 181) argue that the wide range of texts in professional translation makes it useful to draw on text linguistics to organize this textual "cosmos" into a clear classification system. Such frameworks provide insight into translator behavior beyond intuition and offer a theoretical basis for explaining variations in translation. They highlight the distinction between text typology in text linguistics and Translation Studies based on the specific needs and priorities of each field. Unlike text linguistics, which focuses on monolingual analysis, TS is concerned with texts in translation, pre-translation, or post-translation contexts, which necessitates attention to their functional status in both source and target cultures.

Building on this functionalist perspective, Reiss is a prominent figure who developed a text typology grounded in the three functions of language identified by the German linguist Karl Bühler: informative, expressive, and appellative. She linked these functions to corresponding language dimensions and the text types or communicative situations (Reiss, 1977/1989, pp. 108-110), identifying informative texts, expressive texts, operative texts, and later expanded the classification to include audio-medial texts (Chen & Zhang, 2020, p. 34). By proposing a framework for translators that considers the functions, linguistic characteristics, and translation strategies associated with each text type (Uğurlu & Dolmacı, 2020, p. 87), she made a significant contribution to TS. Munday summarizes the main characteristics of each type as follows:

1. **Informative Text Type**: It is defined by factual content, including information, knowledge, and opinions, and primarily focuses on content, using logical and referential language to ensure clarity.
2. **Expressive Text Type**: It is characterized by creative composition and the aesthetic use of language, foregrounding the author and the stylistic form of the message.
3. **Operative Text Type**: It aims to elicit specific responses; texts such as advertisements and political speeches use persuasive and typically dialogic language to engage and influence the audience.
4. **Audio-medial texts**: This text type integrates visual, auditory, and other sensory elements alongside language, thereby complementing the other text functions and include texts such as films and audiovisual advertisements. (2016, pp. 115-116).

Extending this classification further, hybrid text types are also acknowledged, as texts may display features of more than one category. In such cases, Reiss (1977/1989, p. 109) argues that 'the transmission of the predominant function of the ST is the determining factor by which the TT is judged'. The following table (Table 1), adopted from Reiss by Munday, summarizes these functional characteristics and their corresponding translation methods.

Table 1

Functional characteristics of text types and links to translation methods

Text type	Informative	Expressive	Operative
Language function	Informative (representing objects and facts)	Expressive (expressing sender's attitude)	Appellative (making an appeal to text receiver)
Language dimension	Logical	Aesthetic	Dialogic
Text focus	Content-focused	Form-focused	Appellative focused
TT should…	Transmit referential content	Transmit aesthetic form	Elicit desired response
Translation method	‘Plain prose’, explicitation as required	‘Identifying’ method, adopt perspective of ST author	‘Adaptive’, equivalent effect

Note: Source: (Munday, 2016, p. 115)

In this study, Reiss’s text typology was adopted for its systematic and functional relevance to translation evaluation. This framework enables clear distinctions between text types and supports a nuanced analysis of variation in translation quality within the xCOMET-XL based evaluation.

Machine Translation

Machine Translation (MT) enables automatic translation between languages and plays an increasingly important role in global communication. It seeks to provide accurate, fast and cost-effective translations, while reducing the need for human intervention. However, despite the continuous advancements, MT tools still face challenges arising from factors such as differences in language structures, word polysemy, contextual cues, and cultural nuances, which remain areas where human translators are generally considered to perform more effectively. In this context, MT tools are often considered in terms of their ability to preserve the integrity and semantic depth of the ST, along with word-level correspondence. A clear understanding of their main principles is essential for scholars and practitioners to comprehend their advantages and limitations, which subsequently contributes to their improvement in line with ongoing technological developments.

To better understand the principles and developments in the field, it is useful to consider how MT is defined in the literature. In their influential work, Hutchins and

Somers (1992, p. 3) define MT as "computerized systems responsible for the production of translation from one natural language to another, with or without human assistance". Beyond this definition, which establishes the fundamental scope of the technology, it is significant to consider MT's practical development and evolving capabilities over time. In this regard, Korkmaz (2019, p. 164) observes that MT has made significant progress in its relatively short history and evolved from simple dictionary-like systems to more complex platforms capable of processing large volumes of data rapidly and supporting multilingual translation. In line with these developments, Şahin and Duman (2013, p. 409) state that rapid developments in MT tools and their continuously improving database capacities are expected to reduce language barriers, leading to a more globalized world in which communication problems arising from language barriers are gradually minimized across domains of human interaction.

Although technology has recently become more prominent in translation, the use of technology in translation is not a new issue. The historical development of MT can be summarized as outlined by Hutchins (1995) in his study. The early systems appeared in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the ALPAC report affected the process adversely in the mid-1960s despite being criticized as "narrow, biased and shortsighted". In the 1970s, the revival period started mainly based on the needs of countries such as the United States, Canada and European countries that were among pioneers in the field. The 1980s witnessed the emergence of commercial and operational MT tools, together with new research in the field. At that time, there was also expansion and diversification in terms of MT use. In the 1990s, there was new research and subsequently, there was an increase in the use of the systems. (Hutchins, 1995). Building upon this historical foundation, it is clear that MT tools have constantly evolved. They appeared on the scene as simple machines that have decoding functions and an electronic dictionary look. Currently, they can analyze large amounts of data in a short time and provide translations in a variety of languages (Korkmaz, 2019, p. 164). Furthermore, the recent advancements in deep learning enabled MT technology to be combined with AI. This combination generated neural network machine translation, leading to the emergence of a novel phase concerning MT and artificial intelligence translation (Lin, 2023, p. 133). These game-changing Large Language Models (LLMs), which can be described as "AI models that are trained on vast amounts of text data in order to learn how to understand and generate human language", enable more accurate and effective translations thanks to their working principle based on learning the patterns and relationships within a language by being trained on massive amounts of text data (Ray, 2023, p. 134).

Beyond its historical and technological development, the increasing role of MT in global communication should also be considered as it has increased with the rise of globalization. This growing demand has necessitated new approaches to translation, while technological advancement plays a pivotal role in this transformation. People can now access translation instantaneously and at lower cost compared to traditional methods. Considering its benefits, MT has been integrated into various professional, interpersonal, and social communication contexts worldwide (Orrego-Carmona, 2020, p. 323).

Çetiner (2021, p. 582) states that in recent years, MT has also profoundly influenced the translation industry, with both companies and individual translators increasingly relying on Neural Machine Translation (NMT), which uses AI to generate outputs that appear more fluent and natural than earlier Statistical Machine Translation (SMT) systems. Despite this apparent fluency, Çetiner highlights that NMT outputs often conceal errors that are not immediately visible, making it essential to identify and correct them to ensure professional-quality translations.

While the developments in the field highlight the growing impact of MT on the translation industry, they also point to ongoing challenges related to translation quality and reliability. In this regard, Palanichamy and Trojovský (2024, p. 1) summarize the situation by stating that “Machine translation facilitates cross-linguistic communication by converting text between languages”. However, producing contextually accurate translations remains a challenge. Metin Tekin (2025, p. 162) also states that despite the advantages of MT, it still presents several challenges in terms of accuracy and quality, particularly when dealing with distant or complex languages where errors may compromise meaning and clarity. She further adds that MT often fails to capture nuance, context, register, idiomatic expressions, cultural references, and context-dependent meanings, and therefore requires careful checking, critical evaluation, and revision before it can be used reliably. Building on this discussion, Palanichamy and Trojovský (2024, p. 4) state that “researchers are constantly exploring novel techniques to enhance MT models further, addressing challenges such as domain adaptation, low-resource languages, and cross-lingual transfer learning", which signals the efforts to find robust evaluation frameworks, such as the neural-based metrics examined in this study.

This technological and industrial progress is also reflected in academic studies. Research on translation technology has increased significantly starting in 2019, with theses and articles introducing new perspectives on MT, translation technologies, and translation education. This growth continued in 2021-2023, with academic output on MT, AI, and related fields roughly doubling, reflecting a growing recognition within Turkish academia and the development of a stronger research tradition in translation technology. This rise in publications also highlights the need for more scholars in this area, in line with the evolving translation industry and the increasing focus on the profession's future (Moralı & Şahin, 2025, pp. 211–212).

Modern Tools for Measuring Translation Quality

Technological advancements on a global scale have not only revolutionized MT but have also reshaped the landscape of translation evaluation. The increasing speed of translations has also increased demand on rapid and reliable translation quality evaluations. Consequently, translation quality evaluation has started to play a more central role in both academic research and professional practice. While traditional methods are appreciated for their focus on factors such as semantic integrity and contextual accuracy, modern tools enable evaluations conducted in a more objective, systematic, and data-driven manner. By enhancing the speed and efficiency of the translation process, they provide more structured evaluation framework for both researchers and translators.

In this context, automatic evaluation metrics are evolving beyond their traditional role in model selection, now serving as tools for enhancing the performance of large language models (LLMs) across their entire development pipeline (Pombal et al., 2025, p. 1319). Furthermore, they are increasingly utilized to evaluate translation performance automatically (Perrella et al., 2024, p. 20689). However, this shift is not without challenges. Ahsan et al. (2025) state that the automatic evaluation of translation remains challenging due to the orthographic, morphological, syntactic, and semantic diversity among languages. While neural-based metrics have helped overcome some limitations of traditional string-based measures, their effectiveness is still limited by the scarcity of gold-standard evaluation data, especially for languages beyond the typical high-resource pairs. Based on these challenges, they describe translation as a “chimera” and translation evaluation as a “daunting task” (Ahsan et al., 2025).

These limitations, however, also highlight the increasing necessity of improving MT tools and their evaluation mechanisms to ensure more reliable global communication through translation. Despite these challenges, enhancing global communication depends on improving the efficiency of MT tools and mitigating their existing limitations. This necessitates both the refinement of text-processing algorithms and the development of more robust quality evaluation metrics, which consequently enable translations to more accurately convey the meaning and contextual nuances of the ST (Khakimov, 2025, p. 2432).

In response to these challenges and demands, a range of translation quality evaluation tools has been launched by different companies. Tools such as BLEU, TER, ChrF and COMET are significant as they improve MT quality and reduce post-editing time by addressing diverse aspects of translation (Phrase, 2024). Among these tools, COMET and its variants have gained particular prominence due to their semantic sensitivity and higher correlation with human judgments. On its official website, COMET is described as “an open-source framework for MT evaluation that can be used for two purposes: to evaluate MT tools with our currently available high-performing metrics and to train and develop new metrics” (Unbabel, n.d.). Rei et al. (2020) state that COMET, as a metric based on contextual models, evaluates translation quality by considering sentence context, the TT, and existing quality assessments. The system functions by encoding the ST, the MT output, and the reference translation separately to produce sentence embeddings that are later combined to produce an overall quality score. Given its semantic-based approach, COMET has quickly become a preferred tool in academic research and industrial MT evaluation. The option of adding reference texts (reference translations) and the capacity to provide an automated but human-like assessments have also contributed to its popularity. Rei et al. (2020) proposed the COMET framework, which harnesses cross-lingual pretrained models and incorporates information from both the ST and the target reference translation, resulting in evaluation models that have a significantly higher correlation with human judgments. Furthermore, COMET (Guerreiro et al., 2024) also marks a significant advancement in fine-tuning-based evaluation frameworks by effectively modeling the relationship between STs, MT output, and reference translations.

This integrated approach enables a more sophisticated analysis that aligns more closely with human judgments of translation quality (Zhang et al., 2025).

In line with these advantages, this study employs xCOMET-XL, an extended and more recent variant of COMET, due to its improved robustness and enhanced correlation with human evaluations across diverse text types. Compared to standard COMET, xCOMET-XL also provides more detailed segment-level analysis and captures quality differences more effectively, making it more suitable for the purposes of this study.

Despite the advanced capabilities of these systems, it is important to note that no automated system is entirely free from limitations. As stated by Joshi et al. (2025), all automatic metrics have their own limitations. Therefore, research in MT evaluation aims to develop metrics or machine learning models capable of producing results that closely align with human judgments. Consequently, research on the topic contribute to the refinement of these tools, which indirectly improves MT quality. Moreover, such research might shed light on the performances of these metrics, providing valuable feedback for their creators.

Method

Research Design

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the translation quality of MT from Turkish to English. Johnson et al. (2007, p. 120) state that "mixed methods research is the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study," which aligns with the integration of automated xCOMET-XL evaluation and human evaluation in this study.

Corpus Design

The sample was chosen based on Reiss's (1977/1989) typology, which categorizes texts according to their communicative functions. Reiss's framework was employed for its systematic and functional orientation, enabling a clear differentiation between informative, expressive, and operative texts and supporting the analysis of variation in translation quality across these categories. Within this scope, three text types—informative, expressive, and operative—were included while audio-medial texts were excluded due to technical limitations and the primary focus of the research. A total of 15 STs in Turkish, consisting of 5 from each text type, were selected and then translated into English to facilitate a comparative analysis. The Turkish–English language pair was selected because Turkish is morphologically complex and syntactically distant from English, which enables a meaningful evaluation of MT performance. The direction from Turkish to English was chosen specifically because AI tools tend to develop more rapidly in English due to its global dominance and widespread use. The dataset includes 360 sentence-level segments, which constitute the unit of analysis for both xCOMET-XL and human evaluation. Each segment is considered an independent evaluation unit to ensure comparability across MT tools and text types.

Translation Procedure

Machine translation was carried out using Google Translate and DeepL. Google Translate was selected for its widespread use and support for Turkish–English translation, while DeepL was chosen for its context-aware translation capabilities, making it particularly suitable for evaluation in academic and professional contexts.

Evaluation Framework

To address the research questions, the study integrates automated evaluation using the xCOMET-XL, (Guerreiro et al., 2024), which is a Multidimensional Quality Metrics (MQM)-based metric, with human translators' evaluations. This hybrid approach combines neural-based scoring with the expertise of two human evaluators to ensure a comprehensive analysis of translation quality. In this framework, xCOMET-XL evaluates translations by comparing MT against both source texts and reference translations using scores between 0 and 1 and identifying MQM-based error types (minor, major, critical) to enable qualitative interpretation. Additionally, each sentence is treated as an independent evaluation unit to enable comparability across MT tools and text types.

The evaluation was conducted in two stages. First, numerical scores were obtained using the AI-powered neural evaluation tool xCOMET-XL (Guerreiro et al., 2024), which computes scores using cross-lingual semantic representations, providing an objective measure of translation quality based on comparative analysis with the STs. xCOMET-XL was selected for its capacity in translation quality assessment across multiple languages and its ability to provide both source- and reference-aware scoring. This automated assessment laid the foundation for subsequent human evaluation. Second, the translations were assessed by human evaluators. The results were later aggregated to generate text-level scores for MT tool comparison across text types. This aggregation was conducted by calculating the mean of segment scores for each text and tool.

The combination of xCOMET-XL results and human evaluation enabled the cross-validation of translation quality from multiple perspectives, thereby enhancing the depth and originality of the study.

Human Evaluation and Reliability

In order to ensure reliability and avoid anchoring bias, two independent human evaluators, both of whom are expert translators and academics, assessed the dataset separately without access to each other's evaluations and xCOMET-XL's evaluation. Human evaluation was conducted using a structured form aligned with xCOMET-XL outputs. Evaluators rated each segment on a 0–1 scale considering semantic accuracy, fluency, and functional adequacy. A guideline scale was provided to ensure consistency, but final scores relied on expert judgment.

Data Analysis

Overall, the study evaluates the efficiency of neural translation evaluation platforms while analysing MT quality across text types and identifying the text types in which performance is strongest and weakest. By combining automated and human evaluations, this approach seeks to offer a thorough understanding of translation quality.

Human and machine scores were compared across MT tools and text types. Alignment was measured using score differences (|H−X|), and descriptive statistics (means and alignment comparisons) were calculated at both segment and corpus levels. In order to measure alignment, two metrics were used: mean score difference, representing the average difference between xCOMET-XL and human scores, and *winner agreement*, which refers to the percentage of texts in which both methods agree on which MT system performs better.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study and analyzes MT performance alongside the alignment between xCOMET-XL and human evaluator scores. The results highlight differences in translation quality across text types and the relationship between automated and human evaluations.

Overview of Corpus

The corpus consists of 15 STs and 30 machine-translated TTs produced by two MT tools (Google Translate and DeepL), resulting in a total of 45 texts, with each output subsequently segmented for analysis. Table 2 shows the number of segments per text.

Table 2

The number of segments per text

Text	Segments (n)
Informative T1	15
Informative T2	16
Informative T3	17
Informative T4	21
Informative T5	29
Expressive T1	32
Expressive T2	36
Expressive T3	22
Expressive T4	21
Expressive T5	30
Operative T1	22
Operative T2	28
Operative T3	18
Operative T4	31
Operative T5	22
Total	**360**

RQ1 asks whether there is a meaningful difference in MT performance across informative, expressive, and operative text types. Table 3 presents mean xCOMET-XL scores for both MT tools across all fifteen texts, grouped by Reiss type.

Table 3

xCOMET-XL mean scores by text and Reiss type

Text	n	Google Translate Score	DeepL Score	Winner
Informative T1	15	0.968	0.979	DeepL
Informative T2	16	0.926	0.937	DeepL
Informative T3	17	0.978	0.971	Google Translate
Informative T4	21	0.987	0.979	Google Translate
Informative T5	29	0.973	0.975	DeepL
Informative average	**98**	**0.966**	**0.968**	**DeepL**
Expressive T1	32	0.784	0.816	DeepL
Expressive T2	36	0.968	0.977	DeepL
Expressive T3	22	0.884	0.905	DeepL
Expressive T4	21	0.798	0.791	Google Translate
Expressive T5	30	0.830	0.877	DeepL
Expressive average	**141**	**0.853**	**0.873**	**DeepL**
Operative T1	22	0.945	0.957	DeepL
Operative T2	28	0.960	0.963	DeepL
Operative T3	18	0.939	0.960	DeepL
Operative T4	31	0.972	0.974	DeepL
Operative T5	22	0.976	0.979	DeepL
Operative average	**121**	**0.958**	**0.967**	**DeepL**

Variations Across Text Types

Text type has a substantial effect on xCOMET-XL scores. The combined averages are 0.967 for informative texts, 0.963 for operative texts, and 0.863 for expressive texts, indicating that expressive texts score 0.104 lower on the 0–1 scale, which is a meaningful difference in MT evaluation.

This pattern aligns with Reiss's typology. Informative texts use stable, predictable structures that are well suited to MT tools. On the other hand, operative texts are more challenging due to tone and audience sensitivity, but they still remain within a range that MT tools can handle. Expressive texts, however, prioritise authorial voice, figurative language, cultural specificity, and aesthetic form, which are difficult for MT tools to reproduce and are therefore assigned lower scores by xCOMET-XL.

Variation within expressive texts is also notable. *Expressive T2* achieves near-informative scores (0.968/0.977), whereas *Expressive T1* records the lowest results (0.784/0.816), reflecting differences in the linguistic and stylistic demands across expressive texts.

Google Translate vs DeepL Across Text Types

DeepL outperforms Google Translate in 12 of the 15 texts across all three Reiss categories. Google Translate marginally leads only in three texts: *Informative T3, Informative T4* and *Expressive T4*, and in each case the margin is minimal (maximum Google advantage: 0.0082 in *Informative T4*). These differences remain within a very narrow margin and are not substantial. This consistency indicates a general rather than text type-specific advantage for DeepL.

However, the margin of this advantage varies by text type. In informative texts, the gap is negligible (0.9664 vs 0.9682; difference: 0.002). In operative texts, it is small but more consistent (0.9584 vs 0.9665; difference: 0.008). In expressive texts, it is most pronounced (0.8528 vs 0.8732; difference: 0.0204). This pattern suggests that DeepL's advantage increases in parallel with translation complexity, particularly in handling register and stylistic nuance.

Error Span Analysis

Table 4 presents the total number of errors flagged by xCOMET-XL, categorised by severity and Reiss text type. These figures complement the score averages by showing not only overall translation quality, but also the types of errors that drive the scores.

Table 4

Total error spans by severity and Reiss text type

Text Type	Google Critical	Google Major	Google Minor	DeepL Critical	DeepL Major	DeepL Minor
Informative (5 texts)	0	6	45	1	3	44
Expressive (5 texts)	5	84	69	8	68	88
Operative (5 texts)	1	10	55	0	1	65
Total (15 texts)	6	100	169	9	72	197

The error distribution confirms and extends the score findings. Informative texts reveal very few major errors, with 6 for Google Translate and 3 for DeepL across five texts and 98 segments. Operative texts show a moderate number, with 10 for Google, 1 for DeepL. In contrast, expressive texts account for 84 of Google Translate's 100 total major errors and 68 of DeepL's 72. This pattern suggests a clear concentration and shows that the most serious MT failures are predominantly associated with translation of expressive texts. Critical errors follow the same pattern, with 5 of Google's 6 and 8 of DeepL's 9 occurring in expressive texts. This indicates that both informative and operative texts largely avoid errors that would render a seriously misleading or unusable translation.

Alignment Between xCOMET-XL and Human Evaluation

RQ2 asks to what extent xCOMET-XL aligns with human judgements. Table 5 brings together the xCOMET-XL scores and averaged human scores for all fifteen texts, and identifies whether the two methods agree on which system is better.

Winner Agreement

Across the fifteen texts, xCOMET-XL and human evaluation agree on the better-performing system in 10 out of 15 cases (66.7%), indicating that agreement is strongly linked to text type. For operative texts, both methods fully agree (5/5), which consistently identifies DeepL as superior. For expressive texts, agreement occurs in 4 out of 5 cases, with the only disagreement in *Expressive T4*, where xCOMET-XL marginally favours

Google Translate (0.798 vs 0.791), while both human evaluators prefer DeepL. For informative texts, agreement decreases to 1 out of 5 cases.

Table 5

xCOMET-XL and averaged human scores with winner agreement per text

Text	xCOMET-XL Google Translate	xCOMET-XL DeepL	Human Evaluation Google Translate	Human Evaluation DeepL	xComet-XL Winner	Human Evaluation Winner	Agreement
Informative T1	0.968	0.979	0.850	0.750	DeepL	Google	✗
Informative T2	0.926	0.937	0.800	0.900	DeepL	DeepL	✓
Informative T3	0.978	0.971	0.850	0.900	Google	DeepL	✗
Informative T4	0.987	0.979	0.800	0.900	Google	DeepL	✗
Informative T5	0.973	0.975	0.900	0.900	DeepL	Equal	✗
Expressive T1	0.784	0.816	0.700	0.850	DeepL	DeepL	✓
Expressive T2	0.968	0.977	0.600	0.800	DeepL	DeepL	✓
Expressive T3	0.884	0.905	0.750	0.900	DeepL	DeepL	✓
Expressive T4	0.798	0.791	0.650	0.800	Google	DeepL	✗
Expressive T5	0.830	0.877	0.700	0.900	DeepL	DeepL	✓
Operative T1	0.945	0.957	0.800	0.850	DeepL	DeepL	✓
Operative T2	0.960	0.963	0.800	0.900	DeepL	DeepL	✓
Operative T3	0.939	0.960	0.750	0.900	DeepL	DeepL	✓
Operative T4	0.972	0.974	0.750	0.850	DeepL	DeepL	✓
Operative T5	0.976	0.979	0.800	0.900	DeepL	DeepL	✓

The disagreements in informative texts highlight a limitation of automated evaluation. In four cases, xCOMET-XL's decisions are based upon very small score differences. For instance, 0.9870 vs 0.9788 in the *Informative T4* (0.008 difference) and 0.9782 vs 0.9709 in the *Informative T3* (0.007 difference). These differences remain within a very narrow margin and are not substantial enough to indicate a clear performance difference. Human evaluators do not treat these marginal differences as meaningful and reach different conclusions. The clearest case is the *Informative T1*, where xCOMET-XL favours DeepL (0.979 vs 0.968), but both evaluators prefer Google Translate by pointing to "repetitions and some broken phrases" and "slight structural issues" that reduce clarity. These are holistic, text-level issues that sentence-level evaluation methods like xCOMET-XL do not fully capture.

Score Differences

While winner agreement indicates whether the two methods align in their ranking, mean score difference indicates the distance between their scores. Table 6 presents the average difference between xCOMET-XL and human scores, which are categorised by text type and MT system.

Table 6

Average score difference between xCOMET-XL and human evaluators by text type and MT system

	xCOMET-XL Google Translate avg	**Human Google Translate avg**	**Differences (Google Translate)**	**xCOMET-XL DeepL avg**	**Human DeepL avg**	**Differences (DeepL)**
Informative	0.966	0.840	0.126	0.968	0.870	0.098
Operative	0.958	0.780	0.178	0.967	0.880	0.087
Expressive	0.853	0.680	0.173	0.873	0.850	0.023
Overall	0.926	0.767	0.159	0.936	0.867	0.069

Overall, xCOMET-XL scores are consistently higher than human scores for both systems, with an overall difference of 0.159 for Google Translate and 0.069 for DeepL. This suggests that xCOMET-XL tends to assign higher scores than human evaluators, particularly for Google Translate, where the difference is more than twice that of DeepL on average and within the operative and expressive text categories.

The difference is most pronounced in the expressive category. For DeepL, both methods are closely aligned (0.023 difference), whereas for Google Translate the difference increases to 0.173, with human evaluators scoring its output about 0.173 points lower. This suggests that xCOMET-XL captures local lexical and phrase-level errors but not the combined effect of limited stylistic variation, literal phrasing, and the loss of authorial voice.

A similar pattern appears in operative texts, where human evaluators rate Google Translate 0.178 and DeepL 0.087 points lower than xCOMET-XL. This points to evaluation differences at the discourse level, where tone, coherence, and persuasive effect play a central role but are not fully captured by sentence-level metrics, which suggests that all numerical comparisons should be interpreted with consideration of the relatively small margins observed in certain categories.

Inter-Rater Agreement

Before drawing conclusions from the human scores, it is important to note that the two evaluators showed a strong level of agreement. Across all thirty ratings, 63.3% of scores were identical and 83.3% differed by no more than 0.1 on the 0–1 scale. The average difference between the evaluators was 0.040, which is less than half of the overall gap between human and xCOMET-XL scores. This level of agreement confirms that the human scores are consistent and that the differences observed between human and xCOMET-XL evaluations reflect genuine methodological differences rather than inconsistencies among the human evaluators. Human evaluators tended to use rounded score values (e.g., 0.750, 0.800), reflecting an intuitive anchored rating approach rather than fine-grained continuous scaling.

Text Type as the Primary Driver of MT Quality

The xCOMET-XL results provide a clear answer to the RQ1, showing a meaningful difference in MT performance across the three text types. The difference is primarily driven by the expressive category. With a combined average score of 0.863, approximately 10 percentage points lower than informative and operative texts, expressive texts represent a distinct challenge for both MT tools. This aligns with Reiss's theoretical framework, as expressive texts prioritise aesthetic and stylistic form over content transmission, a dimension that current MT tools have difficulty in handling.

In contrast, differences between the non-expressive categories are relatively small and largely within the margin of normal variation. Both informative and operative texts show high and relatively stable scores across all texts in each category. The results suggest that across these text types that include texts such as technical documents, administrative texts, and promotional materials, both Google Translate and DeepL reach a broadly adequate level of quality. However, they still consistently fall short of the quality expected from a professional translator, as confirmed by the human evaluation.

Alignment Between xCOMET-XL and Human Evaluation

RQ2 examines to what extent xCOMET-XL aligns with human judgements. The findings suggest that alignment depends strongly on text type. For operative texts, alignment is high, as both methods consistently identify the same system as superior in all five cases. This is also reflected in the evaluators' qualitative comments, which point to DeepL's stronger promotional tone, more natural phrasing, and better brand sensitivity, and these observations closely correspond to the patterns in xCOMET's scores. For expressive texts, alignment is moderate, as the two methods agree on four of five winner decisions. However, xCOMET-XL substantially underestimates the gap between Google Translate and DeepL as perceived by professional translators, particularly in its handling of Google's expressive text translation. For informative texts, alignment is low, as the score differences driving xCOMET-XL's conclusions are too small to be noticeable at the holistic level, and human evaluators' text-level impressions often signal a different direction.

These findings have a significant implication for translation quality. xCOMET-XL and human evaluation are not interchangeable methods, but rather complementary ones. xCOMET-XL provides fine-grained, reproducible, and scalable sentence-level analysis across large corpora, by identifying problematic segments and classifying error severity. Human evaluation, on the other hand, captures what xCOMET-XL cannot, including overall text quality, discourse-level coherence, tonal and stylistic adequacy, and the cumulative effect of translation decisions across a full text. A mixed-methods approach, as used in this study, therefore provides a more complete picture than either method alone.

Conclusion

This study evaluated 360 segments from fifteen Turkish texts translated into English by Google Translate and DeepL. Adopting Reiss's typology, the texts were equally distributed across informative, expressive, and operative categories. Quality assessment was conducted using xCOMET-XL and human evaluation.

The study shows that text type plays an important role in MT quality. Expressive texts consistently present greater difficulty for both systems, while informative and operative texts yield more stable and higher-quality outputs. Overall, DeepL performs slightly better than Google Translate, with the difference becoming more visible in expressive texts. These results are consistent with Reiss's functional typology, which distinguishes text types according to their communicative priorities.

The comparison between xCOMET-XL and human evaluation indicates a generally similar pattern in identifying the stronger system, especially in operative texts, where alignment is highest. However, differences between the two approaches become more noticeable in expressive texts, where human evaluators tend to be more sensitive to stylistic and pragmatic aspects that are less visible at the segment level. In informative texts, both methods show the lowest alignment because the subtle numerical variations that are prioritized by xCOMET-XL do not always correspond with the holistic judgments of human evaluators.

Overall, the results suggest that automatic evaluation metrics such as xCOMET-XL are effective in capturing local and segment-level translation quality, particularly in large-scale comparisons. However, human evaluation remains necessary for capturing broader textual and stylistic dimensions of translation quality, especially in expressive texts where tone, style, and interpretive meaning play a central role. This highlights the complementary nature of automated and human-based evaluation approaches.

The study also shows that such metrics provide a useful and scalable alternative for translation quality assessment. At the same time, they do not fully replace human judgment, particularly when it comes to holistic reading and contextual interpretation of texts. Therefore, combining both approaches offers a more balanced and reliable framework for evaluating machine translation quality.

This study examined the applicability and effectiveness of the neural, AI-based evaluation metric xCOMET-XL in the assessment of MT quality, with a particular focus on Turkish-to-English translations that are categorized according to Reiss's text typology. By using the xCOMET-XL, the research conducted a systematic, semantic-aware evaluation of MT. By comparing xCOMET-XL scores with human evaluations, the study examined the extent to which automated, neural-based translation assessment aligns with human assessment. These findings highlight the growing importance of AI-based evaluation tools as complementary resources to traditional evaluation methods by offering insights into how they can contribute to more objective, adaptable, and context-sensitive assessments of translation quality.

There are limitations of this study. Firstly, the analysis was restricted to Turkish–English language pair and a comparatively small corpus of texts categorized according to Reiss's typology. This might limit the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, while xCOMET-XL offers a robust semantic-based evaluation, it remains an automated metric and may not fully capture all the nuances of human judgment, such as cultural, pragmatic, or stylistic nuances. Thirdly, the study examined only two widely used MT tools, Google Translate and DeepL, and results may differ with other tools.

On the other hand, the results of the study might pave the way for further academic studies. Future research could address these limitations by extending the scope to additional language pairs and larger corpora. Comparative analyses incorporating multiple neural evaluation metrics alongside human assessments could further clarify the relationship between automated and human judgments. Finally, longitudinal studies on the integration of these metrics into professional translation workflows could also provide insights for both research and practice.

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TRANSLATING THE VISUAL ECOLOGY: PARATRANSLATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Abstract

Illustrations in children's books offer a multi-sensory learning experience that enhances children's understanding of complex ecological concepts such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity. By employing visual metaphors, perspectives, and expressive imagery, illustrations turn environmental challenges into tangible and relatable representations. Apart from complementing textual narratives, they can serve as a catalyst for enhancing environmental awareness among children in various ways, such as instilling environmental behaviors or encouraging children to engage in environmental actions. Based on these facts, this study aims to analyze the role of translating illustrations on the environmental awareness of children in relation to Turkish translations of environmental picture books. Applying visual content analysis and multimodal content analysis of the illustrations in the translations, it explores how these translated paratexts represent the agentic relations between humans/non-humans and the environment in order to understand whether they can reveal how the target culture understands, or is supposed to understand, the culturally specific image of the child-environment relations. For the visual content analysis of the illustrations, the concepts of paratranslation and multimodal translation are informed by a post-human and new materialist perspective. The findings demonstrate that translating illustrations in environmental children's books can have a significant impact on children's environmental awareness and engagement, bridging global environmental issues and local concerns.

Keywords: children's books, environmental awareness, illustrations, paratranslation, post-humanism

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Paratexts and environmental awareness

Environmental awareness has become a vital part of early childhood education, and children's books are extensively used to introduce complex and abstract environmental issues in an accessible way. As the most pivotal form of "paratexts" (Genette, 1997) in children's story books, illustrations play a crucial role in this process, turning abstract environmental concepts such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss into concrete images that young minds can grasp. Through different types of relations with the text, illustrations have been found necessary to convey a concrete and complete understanding of the physical and natural environment (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006, pp. 241-242). Accordingly, illustrated children's books have long been recognized as powerful tools for environmental education, enabling children to connect with nature by fostering a sense of responsibility for the environment from very early ages (Qi, 2021; Sun et al., 2025). They have been found very useful for clarifying vocabulary and ideas (Hansen & Zambo, 2005, p. 40), "enhancing and enlarging the reader's personal interactions with a subject" (Vacca & Vacca, 2005, p. 161), and "strengthening students' understanding of complex concepts" (Massey, 2015, p. 46). Involving environmental elements, through text-image interdependence, these books contribute not only to cognitive growth but also to the development of eco-awareness among children, which is significant for evoking emotional responses and fostering pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors (Gönen & Güler 2011; Yang, 2024).

Although illustrations in literary works were initially defined by Genette as "paratexts", the theoretical development in the field of children's literature has necessitated considering visual and verbal elements on equal terms regarding the construction of meaning (Unsworth & Wheeler, 2022). In other words, in illustrated children's books, meaning is constructed through an interaction of verbal and visual components shaped by the author and illustrators. As Sipe (2008) observes, these books integrate text and picture that work together to provide an aesthetically satisfying experience for children (p. 23). Even though describing the interaction between verbal and visual elements in picture books is still considered a highly complex issue, some approaches are widely used to examine how these books make meaning in both visual and verbal modes (Painter, 2017, p. 420). In "social-semiotic perspective", which is usually adopted in the analysis of picture book narratives, meaning is always made across multiple modes (verbal, visual, spatial, etc.) and socially constructed with semiotic resources, which are always multimodal (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 84). For this reason, a multimodal analysis of children's story books requires a meticulous investigation of the meaning potential of verbal systems with those of visual ones (Painter et al., 2013). The interaction of the verbal and the visual systems can also be explained through Lewis's (2001) views about the ecology of picture books. Lewis clarifies the relationship of the verbal and the visual through three factors: "interanimation, flexibility, and complexity". Picture books are "interanimated" through the interaction of the verbal and the visual; "flexible" through the changes of interanimation from page to page due to the activity of the author, illustrator, and reader; and complex as books contain diverse words and images (Lewis, 2001, pp. 48-60). This relationship becomes especially significant in environmental children's books, where the visual metaphors and anthropomorphic imagery are frequently used to convey various ecological ideas to children. While the verbal content might carry factual information or moral lessons (e.g., "only 1.5% of Earth's water is drinkable"), illustrations can show the consequences or emotional stakes of those facts (e.g., a sad-looking Earth or thirsty animals by a dried-up water hole). A recent study carried out by Laliena and Sala (2023) considers paratextual elements in children's books as one of the key elements to an effective eco-critical reading. As they observe, illustrations in canonical picture books go beyond the concept of "paratext", playing a crucial role in the representation of meaning about nature and our relationship with it through the visual discourse that potentially triggers emotional responses in the reader (Laliena & Sala, 2023., p. 4).

Given that a significant volume of children's literature is translated across various languages, translation of paratextual elements becomes very important, especially in countries such as Türkiye, where translation has always had a very formative role in shaping the literary canon of children's literature (Neydim, 2020, p. 864). It is known that these paratextual elements (such as titles, covers, illustrations, and blurbs) are usually subject to shifts when moving from the source system to the target system. Nevertheless, while the analysis of paratextual elements in children's picture books has attracted the attention of researchers for decades, relatively little attention has been paid to the study of their translations (Oittinen, 2001, p. 109). In *Translating Picture Books: Revoicing the Verbal, Visual and the Aural for a Child Audience,* one of the most comprehensive works on translating picture books, Oittinen et al. (2017) analyze the topic from various theoretical and analytical viewpoints, focusing specifically on the role of illustrations. They examine how visually presented information changes in the translation process, and what strategies translators adopt in order to re-create the word-image relationship in the target text. Throughout the book, they underline the importance of training translators to understand and reinterpret the visual, verbal, and aural information in translating picture books and make a call to all universities to incorporate multimodal education into their translator training curriculum (pp. 21-22).

Conscious of this gap, this study aims to examine the role of paratranslating illustrations on the environmental awareness of children in relation to Turkish translations of environmental picture books. This study also sets out to elucidate the role of paratranslations in representing the agentic relations between humans/non-humans and the environment in order to understand whether they can reveal how the target culture understands, or is supposed to understand, the culturally specific image of child-environment relations. For this purpose, visual content analysis and multimodal content analysis is carried out on the selected corpus, which involves reading the original and translated picture books separately, examining word-image interaction in the representation of the environmental content, comparing the verbal and visual elements of both the source and target texts, identifying paratextual shifts (if any) in the target text, and problematizing the effect of paratranslations of illustrations on eco-awareness of children in the target culture. In order to contribute to the theoretical framework of the field, the following section provides space for the discussion of paratranslating picture books in children's literature.

Paratranslating children's picture books

Although translation of children's literature has usually been undervalued, it is thanks to these translations that children across the world can get in touch with other literatures and cultures. On the contrary, it is necessary to emphasize that the translators of children's picture books are involved in a more challenging process, where they deal not only with words, but also with images considered as part of a creative and synergic whole (Sipe, 2012, p. 4). The importance of this synergy is explained by O'Sullivan as follows:

> The translator's reading of the original picture book is one that takes in the words (A) and the images (B); the reception is of the combined, synergetic effect (C), which is more than the sum of A + B. When faced with the task of translating the verbal text (A), it is not always easy for him or her to disentangle the elements that contributed to the overall reception. (2010, p. 135)

As mentioned above, paratextual elements in picture books are equally significant as the verbal text, which potentially influences children's view of other cultures verbally and visually. On the one hand, they can help translators to better understand the context, the location, the time, cultural references, and the relationships between the characters. In addition, they can create higher translation complexities to the translators, requiring them to have specific skills and abilities, including reading skills of both the verbal and visual elements and possessing good knowledge of their cultural references (González Davies & Oittinen, 2008, p. xiii). In order to uncover how cultural elements and word-image interaction may create problems during the translation process of children's books, Garavini proposes a new communicative model applicable to translating children's picture books with the aim of identifying "the multiple voice-types interacting in the process" (2017, p. 72). Her study shows that the translation act is affected by both the child's image of the translator and the publishing house, which underlines the voice of the translator, the publishing house, and even the illustrator in the final translation (Garavini, 2017, p. 84).

Accordingly, the role of the paratexts in translating children's picture books has attracted the attention of some scholars around the world. As one of the early researchers in this field, Riitta Oittinen (2011) foregrounds the significance of the relationship between verbal and visual elements in relation to translating picture books for children. Defining picture books as iconotexts, Oittinen (2011) discusses the translation of illustrations within the wider framework of hermeneutics and semiotics, using Peirce's triadic sign model (p.190). Considering the translation of the visual as a semiotic process is also supported by other researchers (Mahasneh & Abdelal, 2022). They underline the pedagogical importance of illustrations in translated and non-translated children's literature from an intersemiotic perspective. For instance, the study titled "Resemiotization of Illustrations in Children's Picture books between English and Arabic" explores whether illustrations in children's picture books translated / resemiotized from English into Arabic (Mahasneh & Abdelal, 2022, p. 2). Analyzing illustrations and their Arabic translations from the *Diary of* *a Wimpy Kid* series, it concludes that the illustrations in children's picture books are translatable to a great extent, which goes through resemiotization processes (Mahasneh & Abdelal, 2022, p. 12). Another study examines the covers and illustrations of twelve Australian children's novels translated into German (Gerber, 2012). This analysis demonstrates that the use of paratextual material in German translations of Australian children's literature reflects a constrained inclination to present these texts in alignment with pre-established perceptions of Australia (Gerber, 2012, p. 59). In a similar study, different covers of the children's novel *Keeperen og havet* (*The Goalkeeper and the Sea*) by Parr are examined in order to understand how the child-environment relations or assemblages are represented on the source cover and its various translations (Goga & Pujol-Valls, 2024). The findings of this study show that the child-environment relations on the various covers display diverse agentic relations. As the authors have claimed, it is not always easy to determine whether the different agentic relations reflect the target culture's stereotypical view of the source culture, or whether they result from the target culture's own needs to reassure, support, or challenge its readers (Goga & Pujol-Valls, 2024, p. 406). Therefore, more comprehensive research is needed to understand how each target culture may have shaped the representations found on the cover.

Apart from covers, titles have also attracted the attention of researchers studying the translation of paratextual elements in children's literature. In this context, as the creator of the notion of "paratranslation", José Yuste Frías (2012) highlights "orthotypography" as a central paratextual element in the transmission of meaning in translation (p. 117). It offers a detailed analysis of the typographical design of the title letters on the covers of *Dans ma maison, il y a…* and *Dans ma forêt, il y a…*, two children's books published by the French publisher Mila. Through close examination of the typographical format, the analysis demonstrates how the symbolic use of playful stripes contributes to shaping children's imaginative worlds. This study also indicates how this paratextual dimension has been overlooked by the Spanish publisher, emphasizing the urgent need for ongoing collaboration between translators and editors to ensure that no translation is produced without its corresponding paratranslation. On the other hand, Mary Louise Wardle (2012), questions Genette's classification of translation as a paratextual element, arguing that such a view reduces translation to a subsidiary position in relation to the source text. She demonstrates, however, that in certain cases the hierarchy can be reversed, with the original text functioning as a paratext to the translation. Wardle illustrates this through the example of Aldo Busi's controversial 1988 Italian version of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, where Busi's public persona—shaped by his reputation, scandals, and media presence—effectively became a paratext to his own translation (pp. 27-42). These studies are significant as they all show that translating children's literature is not just about words — it is about translating the whole book as an object (its visuals, design, marketing, and cultural framing). This makes paratranslation research central to understanding how stories travel across cultures for young readers.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on the concepts of "paratranslation" (Yuste Frías, 2012) and "multimodal translation" (Elleström, 2010) within a post-humanist and new materialist framework (Bennett, 2010). Accordingly, this study stands at the intersection of translation studies, multimodality, and post-humanism/new materialism. Within translation studies, the concept of "paratranslation" provides a methodological framework to examine "all the possible productions that surround, wrap, accompany, extend, introduce, and present a translation" (Yuste Frías, 2012, p. 118). Multimodal translation, on the other hand, provides a useful framework to understand how different modes of communication (verbal, visual, auditory, etc.) work together in media, and by extension, how meaning can be translated across modes (Elleström, 2010, pp. 28-29). This perspective allows for a nuanced analysis of how textual and pictorial elements co-construct meaning, particularly in children's literature, where images often serve as critical mediators of environmental and ecological concepts. In addition, in order to describe the role of illustrations on eco-awareness of children and understand the agentic relations between humans/non-humans and the environment, a post-humanist and new materialist (Bennett, 2010) perspective is adopted, which enables to study the effect of both humans and non-humans in the co-construction of meaning, emphasizing interdependence, interconnectness and the agency of the matter.

Paratranslation: Translation beyond the text

"Paratranslation" is a relatively new concept in Translation Studies, which was coined by the Translation and Paratranslation (T & P) research group at the University of Vigo with the aim of "approaching and analyzing the impact of the aesthetic, political, ideological, cultural and social manipulations at play in all the paratextual productions situated in and out of the margins of any translation" (Yuste Frias, 2010, p. 118). In other words, this concept was created to underscore the fundamental role of paratextual elements, together with text, in the construction and representation of meaning in the published works. In this sense, it was used to analyze how much time and space are required in translating paratextual materials that enclose, support, expand, or present the translated text to "ensure the translated text's existence, reception and consumption in the publishing world". Conscious of the significance of the paratextual elements in the production, distribution, and reception of the translated texts in the receiving culture, Yuste Frias defines "paratranslation" as "what translates appear as a complete translation in the publishing world (Yuste Frias, 2010)

However, it should be emphasized that the notion of paratranslation extends beyond the mere rendering of paratextual elements, encompassing a broader and more intricate conceptual framework. According to Yuste Frias, one of the purposes of paratranslation is to serve as a symbolic reference to the "physical and virtual space occupied by all the productions that surround, wrap, accompany, extend, introduce and present a translation" (2010, p. 119). Crucially, paratranslation also signifies the professional domain inhabited by translators themselves, situated within the dynamics of the everyday translation market. In this sense, the concept of paratranslation captures the uncertain and transitional spatiotemporal space that translators occupy when confronted with a task whose quality relies on their decisions regarding both texts and paratexts. On the other hand, paratranslation highlights the visibility of translators within published works, foregrounding their role as active agents (Venuti, 1995). It also emphasizes the inherently ethical, political, ideological, social, and cultural dimensions of translation, framing it as a practice that is never neutral. By engaging with what lies adjacent to or at the threshold of translation, paratranslation underscores the vitality that permeates every translated text. In this way, translators—positioned as the first paratranslating agents—are called to read, interpret, and paratranslate any kind of semiotic codes that accompany the texts to be translated (Yuste Frias, 2010, p. 119).

Even though the concept of "paratranslation" has been regarded as a pratical term to analyze the verbal and non-verbal elements surrounding a translation, Christiane Nord (2012) raises some methodological and conceptual criticisim against it, claiming that this area of research is not a new discovery of the "Vigo school," since earlier translation studies had already examined the interaction between texts and their surrounding elements (p.8). In addition, Nord emphasizes that new theoretical concepts should be historically grounded and clearly defined in relation to existing frameworks, noting that the idea that translation involves more than a simple linguistic transfer had already been articulated in functionalist approaches. She also raises a terminological objection, arguing that if paratranslation refers to the environment of a translation, it denotes an object of study rather than a professional activity, making the term "paratranslator" conceptually inappropriate (Nord, 2012, pp. 8-9).

Despite these criticisms, the concept of paratranslation is adopted as the conceptual framework of this study due to its explanatory and comprehensive capacity to analyze, compare, and interpret the role of paratextual elements in the representation of environmental knowledge in the source and target texts. Even though the selected corpus covers various paratextual elements that contribute to the meaning-making process (cover design, fonts, series branding, names of the characters, illustrations, etc.), this study focuses specifically on the role of paratranslating illustrations on the eco-awareness of children, questioning whether and/how the function of the source text illustration is reflected in the target text.

Post-humanist and new materialist perspective: The co-agency of humans and non-humans

In recent years, post-humanism and new-materialism(s) have been used as umbrella terms to explain some evolving set of theories and projects that propose a non-dualistic understanding of nature and culture (Coole & Frost, 2010), which no longer takes human exceptionalism as a point of departure (Braidotti, 2013). Post-humanism is often defined as a post-humanism, a post-dualism, and a post-anthropocentrism, which criticizes the traditional human-centric perspectives and seeks to eliminate binaries separating human vs. non-human and culture vs. nature (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 37-38). New materialism, in turn, insists on the agency of the matter and the non-living, assuming that all "things" have the capacity to act to a certain extent as forces and agents with propensities (Bennett, 2010, p. viii). Accordingly, agency is no longer an exclusive property of human subjects; it is an emergent property of all things, substances, and forces in the environment. Jane Bennett, one of the lead thinkers of the new materialism, introduces the concept of "thing-power" to describe "the agency of material objects to act and impact other materials" (Bennett, 2010, p. 2). She also underlines the interconnectness and interdependence of humans and non-humans in a "knotted world of vibrant matter" (Bennett, 2010, p. 62). These perspectives open up new possibilities for revisiting the notion of subject-object relations with a more-than-human world where humans are considered one member of a broader community of life and matter (Malone, 2016, p. 3). In the humanities and social sciences, they are offering new paradigms that oppose the emphasis on language and discourse characteristics of poststructuralism, focusing on a more material(ist) understanding of social and cultural life (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 3).

The interactions among humans, non-humans, and matter have also been extensively examined within the field of children's literature studies (García González & Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2020, p. 47). Post-humanism and new materialism(s) provide a useful framework to understand how children's books represent the relationship between children, non-humans, and nature. Adopting these perspectives, this study explores how the illustrations in the source and target texts represent the relationship between humans/non-humans and the environment. It also questions how these illustrations portray the agency of humans, non-humans, and the matter, and whether they illustrate the interconnectness and interdependence among all entities in the texts in order to understand the effect of illustrations on the eco-awareness of children in the target culture.

Data collection and methodology

The corpus of the study consists of Lisa Bullard's *Planet Protectors* series[1] (part of Cloverleaf Books collections), a set of illustrated children's books that encourage young readers to adopt environmentally friendly behaviors alongside two child protagonists, Trina and Tyler. Illustrated by Xiao Xin and Wes Thomas, each book in the series addresses various environmental issues – from littering and recycling to water conservation and energy use – framing the Earth as a patient in need of urgent help. For instance, the book titled *Earth Day Every Day* opens with the line, "On Earth Day, we find ways to help the Earth", and shows Trina planting trees and forming an Earth Day club.

[1] Although the author of this article previously examined this series in terms of content within the scope of a project funded by TÜBİTAK 2219 – International Postdoctoral Research Fellowship Program for Turkish Citizens, this article complements the project by specifically focusing on non-verbal elements in the series.

The recurring motif in the series is that "Earth has a problem" (whether a litter problem, water problem, pollution problem, or trash problem), and that children can be "planet protectors" by taking actions, which is presented through verbal and visual content. As illustrations play a very significant role in the representation of environmental messages and implicitly raise questions about the agency of non-human entities – animals, plants, objects, ecosystems, and technologies – throughout the series, this corpus provides a representative and comprehensive case study to examine the role of illustrations on eco-awareness among children. All titles were translated into Turkish by Nimet Bihter Özcan, who specializes in translating children's books, and published in 2017 by Teleskop Popüler Bilim as part of a seven-book set called *Gezegen Koruyucusu*.

This study carries out a qualitative visual content analysis of the illustrations in the selected corpus and compares their paratranslations in the target texts to understand the role of paratranslating illustrations on eco-awareness of children. For this purpose, how the visual and verbal elements complement each other in conveying environmental concepts/messages/information is systematically examined from a post-humanist and new-materialistic perspective. During the analysis of illustrations, special attention is directed towards characters and their expression (e.g., how humans and non-humans are drawn), use of visual metaphors or symbols (e.g., using concrete examples), perspective and composition (e.g., child's relationship with nature; agency of humans and non-humans), color and mood (e.g., bright vs. dark imagery). The analysis of the illustrations in the source texts is followed by their paratranslated versions in the target texts in order to identify paratextual shifts (if any) in the translations.

Findings

Combining literature-based insights with close visual and multimodal content analysis, the findings suggest that paratranslating illustrations shape environmental narratives across cultures and affect the eco-awareness of children in the target culture by both reinforcing intra-textual information and functioning as the primary source for communicating information on various ecological issues. Accordingly, it has been found that paratranslated illustrations have a significant role in rendering ecological content by using visual metaphors, showing sample behaviors/actions, depicting child-environment relations, reflecting the emotions of the characters, and foregrounding the agency of humans and non-humans. In addition, it has been seen that some of the paratranslated illustrations serve as a form of independent narrative texts, capable of conveying information, emotion, and moral lessons.

As the findings reveal, throughout the series, the illustrations make abstract and large-scale environmental issues relatable to children. For instance, in *Power Up to Fight Pollution*, the illustrations displaying smoggy skies, trash on water, dirty soil, cars emitting exhaust gas, etc., enable children to understand how pollution spreads on the Earth, while *Look out for Litter* uses illustrations to show the negative impact of the plastic problem on animals. The illustrations in *Rally for Recycling* visualize the whole process of "recycling", translating an abstract environmental system into a sequence of clear and child-friendly images. The illustration in Figure 1 presents the complex environmental concept of "recycling" into a continuous visual story, where everyday materials (plastic, paper, metal) become recycled products, enabling children to understand an abstract concept in an accessible manner.

Figure 1

Illustrations showing the recycling process.

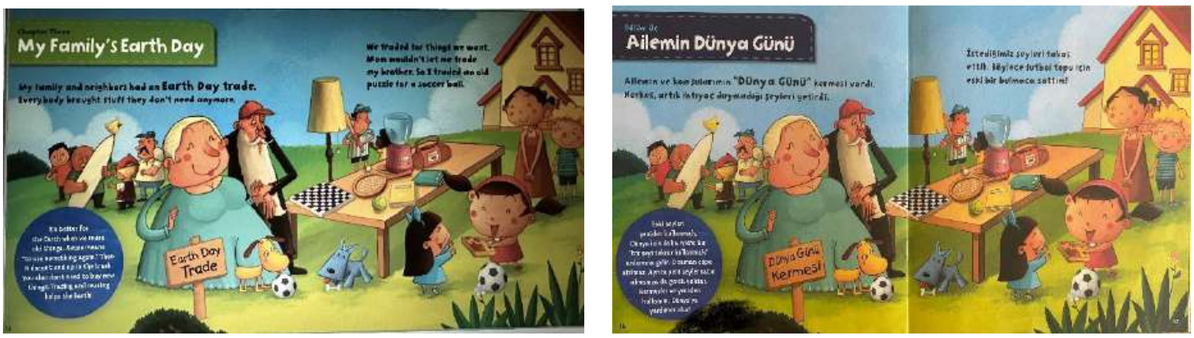
The Turkish translation paratranslates the illustration by preserving the image intact in the target text, which may result in new interpretations among the target readers. Considering the time period when the book was translated into Turkish, it is possible to say that for many Turkish children, recycling is a school-led or community-driven activity, while the illustration in Figure 1 portrays Tyler as a role model among a group of people working in a factory and shifts the focus from community to personal initiative.

The findings also suggest that the illustrations in the series have a significant role in visualizing sample environmental behaviors and actions by modelling positive actions sequentially, connecting their small actions to visible environmental changes, linking such personal behaviors/actions to community action, and a familiar setting. For example, in *Rally for Recycling*, the illustrations depict what and how one can get involved in recycling, while the illustrations in *Choose to Reuse* show different scenes where the characters are reusing various objects. In *Power Up to Fight Pollution,* Tyler is portrayed taking environmental actions (turning off electricity, trading, and collecting litter) in order to fight pollution. The illustrations in *Looking out for Litter* visualize some solutions to minimize the litter problem. With these illustrations, abstract ideas (like energy saving, water conservation, etc.) are translated into visual stories that children can follow step by step.

The findings imply that paratranslating these illustrations has a crucial role in filling up knowledge in the target culture, as they portray unknown or little-known environmental behaviors/actions. Figure 2 depicts a scene from *Earth Day Every Day*, where the readers are made familiar with the concept of “Earth Day Trade”. The following illustration visualizes this concept, showing neighbours of all ages coming together to exchange items they no longer need.

Figure 2

Illustrations visualizing “Earth Day Trade”.

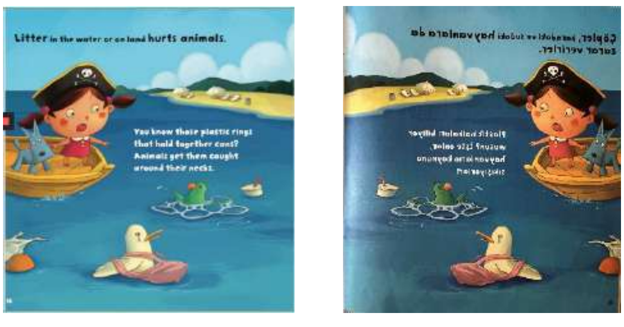


In the Turkish translation, the text on the sign is paratranslated as “Dünya Günü Kermesi”, which means “Earth Day Fair” or “Bazaar” in the target language. As is clear, the translator chooses to render “trade” as “kermes”, a widely understood concept in the target culture for a community charity sale. This shift in paratranslation can enable children to align what they see in the pictures (friendly local exchange) with what they know culturally, helping them understand and internalize the value of exchange and reuse in their own cultural terms. This domestication also anchors a global environmental idea (recycling through trade) in a local cultural practice (community charity fairs).

In line with post-humanist and new-materialist perspectives, the analysis provides evidence that the illustrations emphasize the agency of both humans and non-humans, foregrounding the connection and interdependence among all living forms on the Earth. A post-humanist and new-materialist reading of the illustrations provides an insight into the representation of object, waste, and material agency as well as technology and tools, as part of a more-than-human story. In this regard, it has been seen that the illustrations consistently depict children as active agents in protecting the environment. In each book, the child protagonist (either Trina or Tyler) is drawn at the center of the action, visually emphasizing the theme that kids can and do make a difference. However, it is obvious that the illustrators often depict the child characters and the environment in the same frame, emphasizing their relationship and interdependence. In other words, it has been found that the illustrations have a significant role in representing child-nature relations, giving nature small moments of vibrancy and response (e.g., the sadness of the bird, the contentment of the crab, the plant's growth). This eco-centric representation fosters what ecocritics call an ethic of care, emphasizing that nature has its own character that reacts and reciprocates. Figure 3 shows a scene from *Look Out for Litter*, where the illustrator visualizes the response of the birds to the plastic pollution in the sea.

Figure 3

Illustrations visualizing the emotional response of birds.



Moreover, some illustrations in the series foreground the agency of animals both as victims and protectors of the environmental crisis. The illustration in *Watch Out Water* visualizes the emotion of fish in reaction to water pollution, while another illustration in *Rally for Recycling* shows the contribution of a dog in the recycling process. A similar message is given in Figure 4, where the animals are represented as the protectors of water. In this way, the illustration influences the ecological narrative, aligning with the post-humanist aim of fostering empathy, responsibility, and interconnectedness between humans and non-humans. The target text paratranslates the illustration by preserving the original image.

Figure 4

Illustrations representing the protectors of water.

On the other hand, it has been clear that the plants, especially trees, are given a more explicit positive agency in the illustrations, underlining their agentic capacity and active collaboration to make a change on the planet. *Power up to Fight Pollution* and *Earth Day Every Day* complements the verbal messages with tree illustrations, positioning the simple act of planting as the beginning of a larger story of Earth healing in which plants are agents of change.

Apart from humans and animals, the clearest representation of non-human agency in the series comes from the way inanimate objects and waste are portrayed in the illustrations. In line with new materialist approaches (Bennett, 2010), the illustrations provide significant insights into understanding the dynamic and active role of objects in climate crisis discourse. In *Choose to Reuse*, the illustrations visualize various reused objects, clothes, borrowed books, and repaired bicycles as potential ways of protecting the planet. In other words, they are empowered as agents of change. On the other hand, the illustrations show how plastic objects can travel very long distances and pollute oceans and harm animals in the sea, which implies the probable effects of objects that can escape human control and intention. Figure 6 portrays a similar scene from *Rally for Recycling,* where the dead objects display their own agency, which has become uncontrollable by humans.

Figure 5

Illustrations showing the agency of objects.

Finally, the findings indicate that the tone of the illustrations supports the theme of hope and empowerment, which will help buffer eco-anxiety among children both in the source and target cultures. An analysis of the facial expressions and body language of Trina and Tyler throughout the series reveals that they are mostly depicted as confident, cheerful, and determined when dealing with environmental issues. Compared to the general negative tone observed in environmental children's books written in Turkish during 2014-2023, translating the illustrations in the series by preserving the tone of the source text illustrations contributes to decreasing eco-anxiety among children in Türkiye.

Discussion and conclusion

This study demonstrates that paratranslations—particularly in the form of illustrated elements— do not only complement textual narratives in children's environmental literature, but they also act as vital meaning-making agents mediate cultural, ecological, and ideological dimensions of environmental awareness. The visual and multimodal content analysis of the illustrations in the *Planet Protectors* series and its Turkish translations reveals that paratranslating illustrations in environmental children's books can have a significant impact on children's environmental awareness and engagement, bridging global environmental issues and local concerns. The findings also underline the role of paratranslations in representing the agentic relations between humans/non-humans and the environment, enabling us to understand how the target culture understands, or is supposed to understand, the culturally specific image of child-environment relations. As the translators preserve almost all the source text illustrations in the translations, it is possible to conclude that paratranslations preserve the function of the source text illustrations in the target texts.

From a post-humanist and new materialist perspective, the findings underscore how illustrations construct a more-than-human narrative ecology where human, non-human, and material agencies coexist. The visual strategies in both the source and translated texts highlight how children's environmental consciousness is shaped not only through human protagonism but also through the affective vitality of non-human entities—animals, plants, and even waste materials. This perspective foregrounds the significance of paratranslations in rendering global environmental narratives across cultures and generations. In addition, it can enable to describe paratranslatios as cultural ecosystems, where meaning, matter, and agency intersect. By attending paratranslations as active participants in these ecosystems, scholars and practitioners can better understand how visual ecologies can shape the environmental discourses in children's books.

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COMBATTING ACADEMIC DISHONESTY IN ONLINE ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

The article explores the importance of avoiding artificial intelligence (AI) misuse in university assignments, highlights the key considerations and strategies for devising effective assessment tasks in online education in order to create effective and authentic assessment tasks that circumvent the use of AI, and offers strategies to mitigate this problem. AI technologies, such as text generators, language models, and automated problem solvers, can assist students in completing assignments, sometimes to the point of undermining the purpose of assessment. The challenge lies in designing tasks that require genuine engagement and critical thinking from students, making it difficult for AI to replicate their efforts. This requires a shift towards assessments that emphasize originality, creativity, and the application of knowledge in unique contexts.

Keywords: academic integrity, AI, online education, online assessment, assessment guidelines

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Aims and Rationale

The aim of this article is to highlight the all-important component of language teaching – the process of assessment. It will be discussed in relation to avoiding "Google" answers in testing. This will firstly involve looking at the type and content of assignments that are available for examiners; namely, tasks that assess not so much knowledge, but application of knowledge in the digital learning environment, and secondly, the technical parameters of assignments that can assist in preventing the possibilities of getting ready answers from the internet. How to set tasks which cannot be performed by using generative artificial intelligence will be an important aspect to be discussed with some guidelines provided for designing assessment activities that can avoid its use. Good practices in using online platforms and avoiding AI tools in the process of teaching and learning English will be shared from my experience of online teaching in Bulgaria, Spain and the UK.

In recent years AI has become an integral part of various fields, including education. While it offers numerous benefits, such as personalized learning experiences and efficient administrative processes, it also poses significant challenges, particularly in the sphere of academic integrity. One of the most pressing issues is the potential misuse of AI in student assignments. The shift to online education in some higher education institutions has necessitated a rethinking of how assessment tasks are devised and implemented. Effective assessments in an online environment must be designed to evaluate student learning comprehensively while addressing the unique challenges and opportunities presented by digital platforms. To maintain the value of assessments and accurately measure student learning, educators must devise tasks that minimize the potential for AI misuse.

The emergence of online teaching marked a significant turning point in the history of education and can trace its roots back to the concept of distance education, which began as early as the 19th century with correspondence courses. However, the inception of online teaching as we know it today is closely linked to the rise of the internet in the late 20th century. One of the earliest instances of online teaching was the introduction of computer-assisted learning in the 1960s and 1970s, which involved using mainframe computers to deliver educational content.

The real transformation began in the 1990s when personal computers became more widely available, and the internet started to gain traction. Universities and educational institutions started experimenting with online course delivery, utilizing email, bulletin boards, and early learning management systems (LMS) to connect students and instructors, thus enabling more interactive and accessible forms of education. Early forms of online learning were limited to text-based content and asynchronous communication, but they laid the groundwork for the robust platforms we see today.

The advent of technology has revolutionized various sectors, and education is no exception. Online teaching and learning have emerged as significant developments in the educational landscape, offering new dimensions that were previously unimaginable. The rapid transition to digital education, accelerated by global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has also brought to light several issues.

Academic integrity is the cornerstone of education, fostering an environment where honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility are upheld. When students use AI to complete assignments, it undermines these principles, leading to several adverse consequences. The wrongful application of AI can compromise the quality of education, as students may rely on AI-generated content instead of developing their own understanding and skills. Learners who use AI tools to complete assignments gain an unfair advantage over their peers, skewing grading and evaluation processes. Relying on AI deprives students of the opportunity to engage deeply with the material, hindering their learning and intellectual growth (Naidu and Sevnarayan, 2023). Academic institutions risk damage to their reputation if widespread AI misuse is discovered, potentially affecting their credibility and the value of their degrees. All the above consequences, namely the erosion of academic standards, the unfair advantage to some students, the lack of learning and the damage to the reputation of the institution present enough grounds for an in-depth study of how to devise assessment tasks for university level whereby the use of AI could be minimized if not eradicated.

Understanding the Purpose of Assessment

Before designing assessment tasks, it is very important to understand their primary purpose. Assessments in education serve several functions. They measure learning results and determine whether students have achieved the intended learning outcomes of a course or a module. They provide feedback to students, helping them understand their strengths and areas for improvement. Assessment results can inform faculty about the effectiveness of their teaching methods and identify areas needing adjustment and can motivate students to engage more deeply with the course material and strive for excellence. Therefore, the process of assessment is a crucial component of the learning curve, plays a pivotal role in the teaching and learning process, serving multiple functions that are essential for the development and improvement of both students and faculty. The importance of assessment extends beyond the mere act of grading; it encompasses the evaluation of student understanding, the effectiveness of instructional strategies, and the alignment of educational goals with outcomes.

Before devising the specific online assessment tasks, there are some key considerations to be taken into account. Assessment tasks must correspond to the learning objectives of the course. Each task should be designed to measure specific skills or knowledge areas that the course aims to develop. Clear alignment ensures that assessments accurately reflect student learning and provide meaningful insights. Then, using a variety of assessment methods can cater to different learning styles and provide a more comprehensive evaluation of student performance. Examples include quizzes, essays, discussion posts, projects, presentations, peer reviews. This variety helps to capture a broader range of student skills and competencies. It is important to use authentic assessments, which involve tasks that mirror real-world challenges and applications. These tasks require students to apply their knowledge and skills in practical, meaningful contexts. Examples include case studies, simulations, and project-based assessments. Authentic assessments enhance the relevance of learning and better prepare students for real-life situations.

Yet another important consideration is incorporating continuous and formative assessments throughout the course, which can provide ongoing feedback to students and instructors. Formative assessments, such as short quizzes, reflective journals, and regular assignments, help track student progress and identify areas needing improvement before final evaluations. In addition, assessment tasks must be accessible to all students, including those with disabilities. This involves ensuring that online platforms are compatible with assistive technologies, providing alternative formats for assessment materials, and allowing reasonable accommodations as needed.

Last but not least, is the issue of academic integrity. Ensuring academic integrity is a significant concern in online assessment. Strategies to maintain integrity include using plagiarism detection software, designing open-book exams, employing question pools for randomized quizzes, and incorporating oral exams or interviews. Clear communication about academic honesty policies is also essential.

Advantages and drawbacks of online assessment

Distance higher education has been growing in scope and variety even before the Covid-19 pandemic. It has experienced a significant rise in importance and frequency, driven by advancements in technology, changes in societal needs, and the ongoing quest for accessible and flexible learning opportunities. This mode of education, which allows students to pursue their academic goals without the constraints of time and location, has transformed and reshaped the educational landscape.

This process has led to the higher need for online courses or entire BA, MA and PhD programmes at universities across the globe. This is a tendency that will definitely continue into the future as more and more students enroll to study at institutions geographically far from their place of residence for a number of reasons: the university can be higher in the academic ranking, the tuition fees may be lower, perhaps the subject is specialized and not freely available locally, etc. For educators who are interested in attracting more paying students this tendency can ensure the enrollment of a larger number of students in each course/programme, as well as offer the possibility to more easily hire specialists to teach on these programmes without their physical presence at the other side of the globe.

Online education comes with online assessment. Although online assessment has recently been more often discussed from the point of view of the challenges it poses, it has to be underlined that it has revolutionized the educational landscape, offering a myriad of benefits that cater to the needs of students, faculty, and institutions alike (cf. Topping, 2023, Nikola-Richmond et al., 2024). As technology continues to advance, the adoption of online assessment methods is becoming increasingly prevalent. What follows is a discussion of the advantages of online assessment, namely its flexibility, efficiency, accessibility, and potential for enhancing educational outcomes.

One of the most significant benefits of online assessment is its flexibility. Unlike traditional paper-based tasks, online assessments can be administered at any time and from any location with internet access. This flexibility is particularly beneficial for students who may have scheduling conflicts, live in a geographically remote area, or have other commitments and handicaps that make attending in-person exams challenging. It allows students to take assessments at their convenience, reducing stress and enhancing their ability to perform to their best potential. This is corroborated by a study whose findings led to the conclusion that students' attitudes were positively affected by online learning. It also increased their motivation and decreased their anxiety, and attitudes (Jiang et al., 2022). The findings from another recent study (Slack and Priestley, 2023) on the effect of online learning and assessment on students' well-being established that although for some students it presented (for a number of reasons) a greater effort, most appreciated the flexibility afforded by online learning and assessment. For faculty, online assessments offer the convenience of automated grading systems, which can significantly reduce the time and effort required to evaluate student performance. This automation allows lecturers to focus more on instructional activities and personalized feedback, ultimately improving the quality of education.

Online assessment makes the process more efficient and timely. The use of digital platforms enables quick and accurate scoring of objective questions, such as multiple-choice or true/false items. This rapid turnaround time allows students to receive immediate feedback on their performance, facilitating a faster learning cycle. Instant feedback helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses promptly, enabling them to address any misconceptions and improve their understanding without delay. Additionally, online assessments can be easily administered to large groups of students simultaneously. This is particularly advantageous for institutions with a high number of students or for standardized testing environments. The efficiency of online assessments reduces administrative burdens and logistical challenges associated with traditional exams, such as printing, distributing, and collecting test papers.

Formative and summative assessment administered in an online form promotes accessibility and inclusivity. Tasks can be designed to accommodate diverse learning needs and preferences, offering various formats and question types, including text, audio, video, and interactive elements. This multimodal approach caters to different learning styles and ensures that all students, regardless of their abilities, can participate fully in the assessment process. Online assessments can also incorporate assistive technologies, such as magnifiers, speech-to-text tools, provide support with reading, enhanced comprehension, visual tracking assistance, among others, to support students with disabilities. These accommodations aspire to provide equal opportunities for all students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

One of the most powerful advantages of online assessment is its ability to generate detailed data and analytics. Online platforms can track student performance across various metrics, such as time spent on each question, patterns of responses, and overall scores. This data can be analyzed to gain valuable insights into student learning behaviors, strengths, and areas for improvement. Educators can use these insights to personalize instruction and provide targeted support. For instance, if an online assessment reveals that a student is struggling with a particular concept, the teacher can offer additional resources or one-on-one tutoring to address the issue. This personalized approach enhances the effectiveness of teaching and helps students achieve better learning outcomes.

Online assessments contribute to environmental sustainability by reducing the need for paper, printing, and physical transportation of test materials. The shift to digital assessments minimizes the carbon footprint associated with traditional exam processes, aligning with broader efforts to promote eco-friendly practices in education. From a financial perspective, online assessments can also be cost-effective. They eliminate expenses related to printing, distributing, and storing paper-based tests. Additionally, the automation of grading and reporting reduces the need for manual labor, further lowering operational costs for educational institutions.

Therefore, online assessment offers a host of advantages that make it an increasingly attractive option for modern education. As technology continues to evolve, the adoption of online assessment methods is likely to grow, further transforming the educational landscape for the better.

While online assessment offers numerous benefits, it also comes with a set of drawbacks that need to be carefully considered when devising online assessment tasks. These challenges can affect the efficacy, fairness, and overall quality of online assessments, and include issues related to technical difficulties, security and academic integrity, accessibility, the limitations of automated grading, among others.

One of the most significant drawbacks of online assessment is the potential for technical difficulties which can range from minor glitches to major disruptions that can impede the assessment process. Students may encounter problems such as slow internet connections, software bugs, or hardware malfunctions that can cause frustration and anxiety. In some cases, technical issues can prevent students from completing their assessments, leading to unfair disadvantages and necessitating rescheduling or additional administrative efforts. For faculty and institutions, maintaining the technical infrastructure required for online assessments can be challenging. It demands regular updates, technical support, and robust systems to ensure smooth operation. The costs associated with these requirements can be substantial, particularly for institutions with limited resources.

Ensuring the security and integrity of online assessments is another major concern. Unlike traditional in-person exams, where invigilators can monitor students to prevent cheating, online assessments often lack such oversight, making it easier for students to engage in dishonest behaviors, such as using unauthorized resources, collaborating with others, or even impersonating another student. While there are various invigilating technologies available, such as webcam monitoring, screen recording, and plagiarism detection software, these solutions are not foolproof and can, and often do, raise privacy concerns. Students may feel uncomfortable by continuous surveillance, and there are always ways for more computer literate individuals to bypass these measures. Maintaining academic integrity in online assessment remains a significant challenge that can undermine the validity of the results.

Despite the potential for online assessment to enhance accessibility, there are still significant barriers that can prevent all students from participating equally. Not all students have reliable access to the necessary technology, such as computers or high-speed internet. This digital divide can exacerbate existing inequalities, particularly for students from low-income families or rural areas. Furthermore, while online assessments can incorporate various assistive technologies to support students with disabilities, not all platforms are equally equipped to handle the diverse needs of each individual student.

The lack of standardization in accessibility features can result in inconsistent experiences and additional obstacles for some learners.

Automated grading systems, a key feature of many online assessments, offer significant time savings but also have significant limitations. While highly effective for objective questions, such as multiple-choice or true/false items, these systems often struggle with more subjective and complex tasks, such as essays or open-ended responses. Automated grading algorithms can misinterpret nuanced language, fail to recognize creative or unconventional answers, and lack the ability to provide detailed, personalized feedback. As a result, students may not receive the comprehensive evaluation they need to understand their errors and improve. This limitation can impact the quality of education and hinder the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

The shift to online assessment can alter the dynamics of learning in a negative way. The impersonal nature of online assessments can reduce opportunities for meaningful interactions between students and educators. Traditional assessments often involve direct feedback and dialogue, which can be crucial for student development. The lack of face-to-face communication in online assessments can make it harder for educators to gauge student understanding and provide timely, personalized support. The focus on standardized, easily gradable questions in online assessments can also lead to a narrower curriculum. Faculty might prioritize content that is easier to assess electronically, potentially neglecting important but less quantifiable skills such as collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking.

In conclusion, while online assessment offers many advantages, it also presents several significant drawbacks. Technical difficulties, security and academic integrity concerns, accessibility issues, and the limitations of automated grading are all challenges that need to be addressed to ensure the effectiveness and fairness of online assessments. Additionally, the impact on learning and teaching dynamics highlights the need for a balanced approach that integrates both online and traditional assessment methods. As education continues to evolve in the digital age, it is crucial for educators, institutions, and policymakers to recognize these challenges and work towards solutions that enhance the benefits of online assessment while mitigating its drawbacks.

Strategies for Effective Online Assessments: Guidelines

In order to achieve effective online assessment, first and foremost clear instructions should be laid out, with well-defined expectations. Providing clear instructions and setting explicit expectations for assessment tasks is crucial in an online environment. Detailed rubrics and guidelines help students understand the criteria for success and reduce ambiguity.

Assessment can also be interactive and engaging. Interactive assessments, such as multimedia presentations, virtual labs, and collaborative projects, can enhance student engagement and participation. These tasks encourage active learning and allow students to demonstrate their understanding creatively.

Online education platforms offer various tools and features that can enhance assessment tasks. For example, learning management systems (LMS) can facilitate automated grading, discussion forums, and peer assessments. Utilizing these tools can streamline the assessment process and provide richer learning experiences.

Involving students in the design of assessment tasks can increase their engagement and ownership of their learning. This can be achieved through collaborative discussions, surveys, and opportunities for students to propose project topics or formats.

Academic misconduct has recently been the focus of academic research, leading to a serious review of existing institutional policies at universities. Undeniably, such efforts should be part and parcel of the general institutional academic integrity strategy to be designed jointly by students and faculty on the basis of common objectives and standards (Morris, 2018).

First and foremost, to maintain academic integrity and ensure that students genuinely engage with their coursework, universities can implement several strategies to avoid AI misuse in assignments which start with promoting awareness and understanding. Therefore, as a first step, at the university level, clear guidelines should be developed and communicated on the acceptable use of AI tools, specifying what constitutes misuse, i.e. lucid academic integrity policies should be established and conveyed to students, faculty and staff regarding the use of AI and other technologies in assignments and it should be ensured that students understand the consequences of academic dishonesty. A study by Stevens et al. (2022, p. 25) amongst 271 students and 70 faculty at a US southwestern university found that "the most common safeguard to thwart cheating was a statement in the syllabus about cheating".

Therefore, it is not enough for a university academic misconduct policy to be in place, it also has to be visible and easily accessible (cf. Suryani and Sugeng, 2019, Miron et al., 2021). Also, vague academic integrity policies need to materialize into clear resources for students and faculty and converted into coherent rules guaranteeing consistent and objective response to academic dishonesty (Reedy et al., 2021).

Then educational workshops should be conducted to educate students (and faculty!) about the ethical implications of using AI inappropriately and the importance of academic honesty. Such policies and practices can provide the building block of all further actions taken by specific departments or faculty. The underlying idea is to educate students and faculty on the definition of cheating.

Fostering a culture of integrity is another important component of the overall university academic integrity policy. Honor Codes need to be established and enforced. They should emphasize the importance of academic integrity and the consequences of AI misuse. Also, there is a need for role models whereby faculty and administrative staff should be encouraged to model ethical behavior and integrity, reinforcing these values through their actions and interactions with students.

Yet another significant aspect of the policy is ensuring academic support systems which can provide services such as tutoring, writing centers, and study groups, to help students develop their skills and reduce the temptation to misuse AI. Mental health resources should also be offered to combat stress and anxiety, which can drive students to seek shortcuts in their academic work (for a more comprehensive discussion of what constitutes a felicitous university policy on academic misconduct see Yankova, 2024).

There is another important factor to take into consideration when devising online courses and online assessment and that is the reluctance of some faculty members to embrace teaching and learning that happens online. There can be several reasons behind such resistance. For instance, many lecturers have spent years perfecting their teaching and assessment strategies based on traditional methods. They may feel comfortable and confident with established practices and may be reluctant to change. The familiarity and predictability of traditional assessments provide a sense of stability that can be difficult to relinquish. Besides, adapting to new assessment methods often requires a certain level of technological proficiency. Faculty members who are not tech-savvy may feel overwhelmed by the prospect of integrating new technologies into their teaching practices. The learning curve associated with adopting new tools and platforms can be a significant barrier.

Implementing new assessment methods can initially increase the workload for lecturers. Designing authentic assessments, learning to use new technologies, and developing new grading rubrics can be time-consuming and demanding. Lecturers who are already burdened with heavy teaching loads may resist changes that they perceive as adding to their workload. In addition, some university lecturers may be skeptical about the effectiveness of new assessment methods in accurately measuring student learning. They may question whether these methods can provide reliable and valid assessment of student performance. This skepticism can stem from a lack of familiarity with the research and best practices surrounding innovative assessment techniques.

There could also be objective factors to this resistance as well – and this is where institutional policies and constraints come into play. Universities and colleges may have rigid assessment frameworks and accreditation requirements that make it difficult for faculty members to implement new methods. Additionally, a lack of support and resources from the institution can hinder efforts to adopt innovative assessment practices.

Addressing this resistance requires a multifaceted approach that includes professional development and training, highlighting benefits and success stories, providing adequate support and resources, encouraging incremental changes, fostering a culture of innovation and collaboration, and aligning new methods with institutional goals and policies. By implementing these strategies, higher education institutions can support lecturers in embracing innovative assessment methods, thereby ensuring the integrity and quality of education in the age of AI.

We as lecturers should be constantly aware of the possibilities of generative AI that change with each new generation. For instance, in a study conducted in the Netherlands (de Winter, 2023) ChatGPT was used to complete a reading comprehension exam in English and compared with the achievements of high-school students who were enrolled in one of the most academically rigorous programme (VWO) in the Netherlands. The tasks set were of the type reading for gist, interpreting words and phrases, making inferences.

Some questions were multiple choice out of three, five or six options, others were open questions or arranging answers in a specific order. The results indicate that ChatGPT-3.5's results were similar to those of the average Dutch student, while ChatGPT-4 performed considerably better than the average student, providing insights into ChatGPT's capabilities and performance compared to human students.

What follows are some strategies that may facilitate a fair assessment of tasks performed by students themselves and preclude the use of AI in one form or another. To address the challenges, university faculty need to develop and implement new strategies that promote academic integrity while leveraging the benefits of generative AI technologies such as ChatGPT. Educators can incorporate AI literacy into the curriculum, teaching students about the capabilities and limitations of AI tools like ChatGPT. By fostering a deeper understanding of AI, students can be encouraged to use these tools ethically and responsibly. Additionally, discussing the ethical implications of using AI for academic work can promote a culture of integrity.

Traditional assessment methods, such as take-home essays and assignments, are particularly vulnerable to misuse of AI tools. Educators can redesign assessments to include more in-person, supervised components, such as oral exams, presentations, and practical demonstrations. These formats require students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in real-time, making it harder to rely on AI-generated content.

Authentic assessments that focus on real-world applications and problem-solving tasks require critical thinking, creativity, and personal reflection. By designing assessments that are context-specific and tailored to individual students' experiences and insights, educators can make it more difficult for students to use AI tools dishonestly.

If the tasks are unique, they will be difficult for AI to replicate. In order to emphasize originality and creativity, the assignments can require students to develop a project over time, incorporating research, design, and practical application, and thus students' work will be less susceptible to AI intervention. These projects can be tailored to individual student interests and real-world problems, making them distinctive and not susceptible to texts generated by AI. Any tasks that involve creating art, writing original stories or poems, or designing experiments require personal creativity and expression. These assignments are inherently individualistic and less likely to be effectively completed by AI.

In recent paper Katz et al. (2023) tested GPT-4 on the Uniform Bar Examination against prior versions and against human achievement and found that GPT-4 received better results than both the prior GPT versions and humans taking the exam, concluding that the capabilities of large language models can provide legal services to clients.

ChatGPT was also tested in the sphere of medical education. A study by Kung et al. (2023) revealed that without specialized training, ChatGPT easily passed thee three medical exams that form part of the United States Medical Licensing Exam (USMLE) and exhibited sound judgement and consistency in its answers. One step above, Thirunavukarasu et al. (2024) demonstrated that GPT-4 compared favourably with expert ophthalmologists, doctors in training and unspecialised junior doctors when they all underwent a mock examination of 87 questions. The results from these two studies of the use of GPT-4 in the medical sphere indicate that large language models are advancing to an expert-level knowledge and may soon be of benefit not only to medical education, but also provide medical help in cases when it is not easily available.

Therefore, AI poses significant challenges for educators in accurately assessing student performance and learning outcomes and devising such tasks that will truly demonstrate student's learning and acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Strategies for Devising AI-Resistant Assessment Tasks

While there has been ample research about the compromise of online exams by ChatGPT and AI in general (cf. Kerrigan et al., 2022), other research has focussed on the reexamining and rethinking of current assessment methodology (cf. Susnjak, 2022, Geerling et al., 2023, Ifelebuegu, 2023). What has become increasingly clear is that recent research findings:

> challenge prior assertions about the limitations of LLMs in multimodal reasoning and emphasise the need for robust online exam security measures such as advanced proctoring systems and more sophisticated multimodal exam questions to mitigate potential academic misconduct enabled by AI technologies. (Susnjak & McIntosh, 2024)

Therefore, assessment should be adapted to answer the requirements of the new environment and encourage cognitive processes that materialize in critical thinking, whereby faculty should engage in assessment reform which highlights more the process of learning rather than the learning output (cf. Smolansky et al., 2023).

Another strategy that may preclude the use of AI is devising assessment tasks that apply knowledge in real-world contexts. For instance, tasks that require students to analyze and respond to complex case studies relevant to their field of study encourages critical thinking and the application of theoretical knowledge to practical scenarios. Each case study can have multiple potential solutions, making it difficult for AI to provide definitive answers. Also, designing tasks that present students with real-world problems to solve encourages active learning and critical thinking. Students must demonstrate their reasoning and decision-making processes, which are challenging for AI to emulate accurately.

An alternative way to avoid the misuse of AI by students is to set reflective and metacognitive tasks. Asking students to write reflective essays on their learning experiences, challenges faced, and personal growth encourages introspection and self-assessment. These tasks require personal insights and experiences that AI cannot easily replicate. In addition, maintaining a learning journal throughout a course, where students document their progress, thoughts, and reflections on the material, promotes continuous engagement and self-evaluation.

Collaborative and peer-assessed tasks such as group projects and peer reviews can mitigate the risk of cheating by fostering a sense of accountability and collective responsibility. With group projects that require collaboration and collective problem-solving the collaborative process itself becomes a critical component of the assessment. Incorporating peer review processes, where students evaluate each other's work, can add a layer of accountability and diverse perspectives, making it more challenging for AI-generated content to go unnoticed. When students work together and provide feedback to each other, they are more likely to engage deeply with the material and less likely to rely on AI-generated content.

Conducting oral and interactive assessments can also be a way to prevent the use of AI. Organizing oral exams or presentations allows instructors to engage with students directly, assessing their understanding and ability to articulate concepts. This method provides immediate feedback and reduces the likelihood of AI involvement. Also, incorporating live discussions, debates, and Q&A sessions into the assessment process can reveal students' depth of understanding and their ability to engage with the material dynamically. However, that strategy can only be applied to smaller groups of students and would be unthinkable for a course with a large student body.

What is also advisable is the implementation of continuous formative assessments, where students receive regular feedback and have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning, and thus reduce the pressure to cheat. These assessments can include short quizzes, reflective journals, and interactive discussions that track student progress over time.

As AI-generated content becomes more sophisticated, so do the tools designed to detect it. University faculty can leverage AI-powered plagiarism detection tools that are capable of identifying AI-generated text. These tools can be integrated into the assessment process to ensure that submitted work is original and genuinely reflects the student's own understanding.

All of the above strategies that are particular to online assessment may not have the required effect unless they are performed in the context of a culture of integrity. Fostering a culture of academic integrity within higher education institutions is crucial. This involves setting clear expectations, providing education on the importance of honesty in academia, and implementing strict consequences for academic misconduct. By creating an environment where integrity is valued and upheld, students are more likely to adhere to ethical standards.

To sum up, the potential posed by ChatGPT, and similar generative AI technologies necessitates a proactive approach from educators in higher education institutions to prevent cheating in assessments. By redesigning assessments, promoting authentic learning experiences, integrating AI literacy, utilizing detection tools, encouraging collaborative learning, implementing continuous formative assessments, and fostering a culture of integrity, educators can address the challenges posed by AI and uphold the quality and integrity of education. Embracing these strategies will not only mitigate the risks associated with AI misuse but also enhance the overall learning experience for students.

Some Specific Examples of Tasks That Can Preclude the Use of AI

Ensuring academic integrity in the age of artificial intelligence requires designing assignments and tasks that inherently discourage or preclude the use of AI-generated content. After discussing some of the strategies that can be applied when devising assessment activities, I would like to give some examples of specific tasks for university students that achieve this objective and that can be directly applied in class. I have tried these tasks with students in Bulgaria (New Bulgarian University), Spain (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya), and the UK (University of Lincoln), where I have been teaching for various lengths of time. The suitability and reliability of the activities was tested by first presenting them in class to a group of students and then setting them as online tasks to other groups of students. The study showed that both groups demonstrated similar results with the standard statistical deviation. The differences were based to a certain extent on the various abilities and knowledge of the individual students.

A. Tasks related to personal reflection and experience

Reflective Essays: Write a reflective essay on a personal experience, such as a significant life event, a volunteer activity, or an internship.

Journals: Maintain a weekly journal documenting personal progress and reflections related to a course or project.

B. Interactive and Oral Tasks

Oral Presentations: Prepare and deliver a presentation on a specific topic, followed by a Q&A session.

Oral Exams: Participate in an oral exam where you must answer questions and discuss your understanding of the subject matter in real-time.

C. Creative and Applied Projects

Creative Writing: Write a short story, poem, or play based on a given theme or prompt.

Design Projects: Create a design (e.g., a piece of artwork, an architectural model, or a product prototype) accompanied by a detailed explanation of the design process and choices.

D. Practical Assignments

Laboratory Reports: Conduct an experiment and write a detailed lab report documenting the methodology, observations, and conclusions.

Fieldwork Reports: Complete a fieldwork assignment (e.g., in environmental science, anthropology, or sociology) and write a report based on observations and data collected in the field.

E. Collaborative and Group Tasks

Group Projects: Collaborate with peers to complete a project, such as a research paper, presentation, or case study analysis.

Peer Reviews: Provide constructive feedback on a peer's assignment or project.

F. Continuous and Process-Oriented Assignments

Draft Submissions: Submit multiple drafts of an essay or research paper, showing the evolution of the work and incorporating feedback from instructors.

Progress Reports: Submit periodic progress reports for long-term projects or theses, detailing the work completed, challenges faced, and plans for future work.

G. Real-World and Context-Specific Assignments

Case Studies: Analyze a real-world case study related to the course material and provide a detailed report with recommendations or solutions.

Internship Reports: Complete an internship and write a report detailing the experience, learning outcomes, and reflections.

Concluding remarks

By designing assignments that require personal reflection, creativity, innovation, practical application, interactive engagement, and continuous assessment, university lecturers can create tasks that naturally discourage or preclude the use of AI-generated content. When the focus is on originality, real-world application, interactivity, reflection, and collaboration, educators can create assessments that accurately measure student learning and development. These types of assignments not only uphold academic integrity but also enhance the learning experience by fostering critical thinking, creativity, and personal growth. As AI technology continues to evolve, it is essential for educational institutions to remain vigilant and constantly innovative in their approach to assignment design, ensuring that students develop genuine understanding and skills. Implementing robust academic integrity measures further ensures the authenticity of assessments.

Devising effective assessment tasks in online education requires careful consideration of learning objectives, assessment methods, academic integrity, and inclusivity. By incorporating a variety of assessment types, ensuring clear instructions and expectations, providing timely feedback, leveraging technology, and involving students in the assessment process, educators can create meaningful and effective assessments that enhance learning outcomes.

Avoiding AI misuse in student assignments is crucial for maintaining academic integrity and ensuring that students gain the full benefits of their education. By promoting awareness, designing thoughtful assignments, utilizing technological solutions, implementing continuous assessment, fostering a culture of integrity, and providing support systems, universities can effectively mitigate the risks associated with AI misuse. These strategies not only uphold academic standards but also prepare students for future success by emphasizing the importance of ethical behavior and genuine learning. The ongoing evolution of online education presents both challenges and opportunities, and thoughtful assessment design is key to maximizing the potential of digital learning environments.

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ACADEMIC INTEGRITY - FRAGILE BY DEFINITION OR BY NEGLECT?

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Abstract

The article examines academic dishonesty as a persistent and deepening issue within university environments. Cheating is considered not only an ethical concern but also a socially and culturally conditioned phenomenon. The article presents original research involving a survey of 125 respondents and focus group discussions. The first set of questions addresses the types of academic misconduct students have observed, while the second explores what they perceive as dishonest behavior. The focus groups revealed ambivalence: cheating is seen as "wrong," but often "not that serious." The causes of academic dishonesty are multifaceted: low self-esteem, pressure to succeed, lack of understanding of academic rules, weak moral culture, and societal tolerance for unethical behavior. Information technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, are also identified as additional catalysts. The article reinforces the idea that academic integrity cannot be enforced through statements and declarations alone. What is needed is a cultural shift within universities—through the implementation of clear policies, ethical education, institutional transparency, and student engagement. Cheating is not merely an individual failure, but a systemic issue that requires a comprehensive institutional response.

Keywords: academic misconduct, academic integrity, plagiarism, cheating, Higher education

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Academic Misconduct: A Complex and Cross-Cultural Issue

Academic misconduct is a complex issue that transcends borders and cultures, encompassing behaviors such as plagiarism, falsification, and even impersonation. Such actions are regarded as ethical issues involving judgments about right and wrong, and are perceived as a growing epidemic influenced by various factors such as culture, age, and the university environment. Academic integrity is one of the many essential values that all educational institutions strive to instill in their students. Most universities have written guidelines and codes of conduct, which students rarely read. Moreover, the definitions and severity of terms such as "cheating" and "misconduct" are not clearly defined and are often open to (arbitrary) interpretation.

At first glance, the definition of cheating seems clear: cheating is dishonest or unfair behavior aimed at gaining some kind of advantage or benefit. In education, students mainly cheat because of the impact on grades or other consequences related to assessment. Assessment is a key aspect of the educational process, increasingly emphasized by accrediting bodies. Cheating undermines the purpose and process of assessment, and even more so, the process of acquiring knowledge. It is important to recognize that what an individual student considers cheating and permits themselves to do—and what they do not consider cheating—is influenced by individual and situational variables, such as level of development, motivation, personal morals, and ethics. On the other hand, the motivational orientation of the academic environment is just as important as the individual one.

Extensive research on this issue has been going on for years. A large-scale study by Vandehey et al. (2007) covering a 20-year period compared student misconduct in 1984, 1994, and 2004. In 1984, it was found that 54% admitted to cheating during various types of exams. The main reasons identified were characteristics of the students themselves—immature, lacking educational engagement, and inclined to rationalize their actions to reduce the guilt associated with cheating. By 1994, the percentage had risen to 61%. Interestingly, both those who cheated and others felt less need to seek justifications to neutralize their sense of guilt or wrongdoing. This leads to the conclusion that academic dishonesty had almost become normative and was no longer perceived by students as deviant behavior requiring justification. In 2004, the percentage was 57.4%, encompassing not only final exams but the entire period of university education.

Similar trends are observed in European universities. A 2008 study conducted in various universities across four countries found significant instances of plagiarism. In Spain, about 59% admitted to plagiarizing from digital sources, and 47% from books, journals, or academic articles. In the UK, 35% admitted to plagiarism, and 49% didn't even consider it a violation when the sources were from the internet. In Bulgaria, 47% admitted to cheating, and 75% of them said they knew others who did so but had no intention of reporting them. In Croatia, 82% of students admitted to some level of plagiarism, with 52% copying at least 10% of a source verbatim (Pupovac et al., 2008). A 2019 study by Bucciol et al., (2020) in Italy found that 61% of students cheated at least once, including students from top universities like the University of Bologna. A study involving over 1,000 students at the University of Lleida, Spain, revealed that 69.3% copied and pasted text into their written assignments, and 68.3% paraphrased. Furthermore, 82.1% of students believed that translating a text was plagiarism, while 13.6% insisted that citing digital sources was unnecessary (Olivia-Dumitrina et al., 2019).

The methods of cheating began to change after 1994 due to the rapid advancement of technology. This phenomenon brought many advantages to people and the economy but also introduced new opportunities for cheating. The internet provides unlimited information accessible at any time. Today, it is relatively easy to find information on a given topic online and just as easy to copy and use it—even store it on mobile phones or small devices that can be hidden easily. As a result of this easy access to information and advanced technologies, some students are more likely to disregard their values and choose to engage in plagiarism and cheating. Currently, ChatGPT and similar tools are seen as the biggest challenge to learning assessment—providing vast and rapid information that is almost impossible to trace. Its potential role as a study assistant is still not fully understood. Once again, value orientation plays a crucial role—when speed, convenience, and efficiency are valued more than ethics and integrity, abuse becomes much more likely.

Educational researchers have sought to explain the causes of academic dishonesty through a range of theoretical frameworks (DiPietro, 2010). From a learning process perspective, students may resort to cheating due to a lack of effective study strategies or an unwillingness to invest the time and effort required to implement them. From a developmental standpoint,, the tendency to cheat can vary according to the student's cognitive, social, and moral maturity. From a motivational viewpoint, the reasons are highly diverse: some students are strongly driven by external rewards such as grades; others are concerned with maintaining a particular self-image in front of parents or peers; and some lack the self-efficacy needed to engage with complex academic tasks, or are influenced by personality traits developed over time (Miller et al., 2007).

Game theory offers a particularly interesting explanation that closely matches the current reality and is especially applicable in the Bulgarian context. In essence, students and instructors are "playing a game", each seeking to optimize outcomes. Students aim to complete academic tasks through the easiest means possible, often attempting to demonstrate some knowledge acquisition while avoiding more rigorous academic expectations. The prevalence of dishonest behavior today may stem from an equilibrium of sorts—where student tactics are matched by equally calibrated faculty countermeasures. This dynamic fosters a "cheating culture" characterized by sentiments such as, "I succeeded, I outsmarted the system, I didn't get caught, I'm clever." Such a mindset not only normalizes dishonest behavior but also encourages its replication. It may also explain why Bulgarian students tend to avoid admitting personal misconduct—even in anonymous settings—yet display detailed familiarity with dishonest practices, express admiration for them, and share them widely among peers.

Diekhoff et al. (1996) found that the most significant deterrents to academic dishonesty are external and related to potential punishment. Internal deterrents—such as guilt or anxiety about being exposed—tend to have far less influence and are often rationalized. The primary factor discouraging misconduct is fear of being caught by an instructor, which may result in a failing grade or institutional disciplinary action. These findings are supported by numerous other studies, reinforcing the conclusion that reducing academic misconduct depends largely on proactive measures by faculty and institutions. However, instructors often show reluctance to actively monitor or report cheating (Coren, 2011). They are discouraged by various factors such as emotional burden of potential conflict with students, fear of confrontation, the time-consuming nature of redesigning assessments to prevent cheating, the effort required to gather evidence and address incidents, concerns about retaliation, the possibility of institutional or legal disputes, and the fear of receiving low course evaluations from students.

Methodology

The current study employed both a survey and focus group discussion. A questionnaire was developed targeting current undergraduate and graduate students, as well as alumni who had graduated within the past five years and more than five years ago. This approach was chosen to allow for a broader analysis of attitudes and behaviors associated with academic dishonesty. The study was designed in response to the current educational landscape, which is shaped by instant access to digital information, collaborative learning formats such as group projects, and the influence of students' professional work environments.

Tools and Data collection

The survey was structured around two core sections:

Reported Observations of Academic Dishonesty

The first group of questions aimed to assess the extent to which students were aware of or had witnessed specific dishonest behaviors during individual assessment tasks or exams throughout their studies. In an effort to encourage honest responses, participants were not asked to disclose their own misconduct, but rather to indicate which practices they were aware of or had witnessed. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale: Always, Often, Rarely, Sometimes, Never.

Perceptions of Acceptability

The second group of questions aimed to find out what the students' attitudes were, how they perceived various practices of misconduct. Respondents were asked to classify specific behaviors as either dishonest or acceptable. Responses included “Yes,” “No,” or “Cannot decide.”

A focus group discussion was conducted with current students only. The discussion centered on the results of the survey, exploring the reasons behind academic dishonesty during exams and coursework, and potential strategies for its prevention and reduction.

Procedure and Participants

The survey was administered in May 2025 using an online Google Forms questionnaire, which was distributed electronically to current and former students. After the survey results were compiled, a focus group discussion was conducted with students from New Bulgarian University to further explore the findings and address specific issues highlighted by the data.

Results

A total of 130 survey responses were collected, with 91% from current students and 9% from alumni. Gender distribution was 44.8% male and 55.2% female. Age distribution was as follows: 80% of respondents were between 19 and 24 years old; the remaining 20% were aged 25 and above.

First set of questions: "Have you heard of or observed the following actions during individual assessment tasks or exams during your academic studies?"

The first group of questions provides information about whether students engage in various forms of cheating. Since in the focus groups participants expressed some reluctance to fully share their opinions, the final analysis combined answers as follows: "rarely" and "never" were grouped as clearly negative; "sometimes," "often," and "always" were grouped as positive. Nevertheless, negative answers clearly predominate—from 65% to 86%. (Table 1). However, this is somewhat questionable because it contradicts the results from the focus groups, except for the third and fourth questions. In those discussions, students clearly stated that mass copying from the internet for written assignments is common, especially after the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI), and that group test solving is a usual practice. The discrepancy between the focus group discussions (where students admitted widespread cheating) and the survey results (where negative responses dominate) suggests a possible social desirability bias—students may underreport misconduct when surveyed.

The first, second, fifth, and sixth questions have the highest percentages of affirmative answers (48%, 36%, 31%, and 36%, respectively), indicating that even if some negative answers are not fully honest, these practices are the most widespread.

Copying without citing the source, group test solving, and using AI to complete written assignments are also the most frequently detected forms of plagiarism by instructors. Unfortunately, no official reports have been registered by faculty in this regard.

Table 1

Reported frequency of observed academic misconduct during assessments or exams

Question	Predominantly Negative Response (Never, Rarely)	Predominantly Positive Response (Sometimes, Often, Always)
1. Does it happen that information from the internet is used without citing the source?	55.4%	48.4%
2. Does it happen that someone uses answers from others for an individual assignment completed outside class (e.g., purchased answers)?	67.7%	35.6%
3. Does it happen that a student from a higher semester gives their written work to students from following semesters?	86.4%	14.5%
4. Does it happen that students from higher semesters provide exam information to students from following semesters?	76.9%	23.8%
5. Does it happen that students from the same course gather to complete online tests that should be done individually?	71.6%	30.8%
6. Does it happen that artificial intelligence (AI) is used to entirely produce a written assignment?	64.6%	36.2%

(More than one answer may be indicated)

Two additional analyses were performed according to respondents' age and student status based on the first group of questions.

Table 2

Distribution of reported academic misconduct by age

Age of Respondents	Predominantly Negative Responses (Never, Rarely – Number of Responses)	Predominantly Positive Responses (Sometimes, Often, Always – Number of Responses)	Ratio (No Such Practices : Such Practices)
Up to 24 years old	465	158	3 : 1
25 years and older	68	83	0.8 : 1

Table 3

Distribution of reported academic misconduct by student status

Student Status	Predominantly Negative Responses (Never, Rarely – Number of Responses)	Predominantly Positive Responses (Sometimes, Often, Always – Number of Responses)	Ratio (No Such Practices : Such Practices)
Current Students	507	196	3 : 1
Graduated Students	27	46	0.6 : 1

Second set of questions – "Do you consider these specific activities to be academic dishonesty?"

The second group of questions investigates which forms of cheating students perceive as improper behavior and violations of academic ethics (see Table 4). The results are interesting, especially if we add the "I don't think so" answers to the "I cannot judge" responses, which suggest that some activities are perceived not as academic cheating but as normal preparation or allow for ambivalent behavior. There is strong consensus that submitting someone else's work as one's own (69.2%), using AI to fully complete assignments (68.5%), and using ready-made test answers (60.8%) constitute academic misconduct. At the same time, more than half of the respondents do not perceive as misconduct helping a friend with an out-of-class assignment that they should do alone (73.1%), receiving help for such an assignment (70%) or submitting one's own previous work for a new course (57.7%). A significant share also do not perceive copying internet sources without citation as cheating (44.7%). The findings suggest that some behaviors, such as group work on assignments that should be individual, reusing one's own work, or copying from online sources without citation, have become normalized or are not perceived as serious ethical violations by many students.

Table 4

Classification of specific behaviors as either dishonest or acceptable

Question	Yes	No	Not sure
1. Do you consider submitting your completed work from a previous course as an assignment in a subsequent course to be academic dishonesty?	42.3 %	29.2 %	28.5%
2. Do you consider submitting a completed work from a student in a previous semester as your own assignment in the following semester in the same or similar course to be academic dishonesty?	69.2 %	21.5 %	9.2%
3. Do you consider taking exams for a friend that you completed in a previous semester (e.g., test answers) to be academic dishonesty?	60.8 %	21.5 %	17.7%
4. Do you consider receiving help from a friend for completing an out-of-class assignment that was supposed to be done individually to be academic dishonesty?	30.0 %	47.7 %	22.3%
5. Do you consider giving help to a friend for completing an out-of-class assignment that he/she should do individually to be academic dishonesty?	26.9 %	52.3 %	20.8%
6. Do you consider obtaining instructions from the internet for completing an out-of-class assignment, which are copied and used without citing the source, to be academic dishonesty?	55.4 %	16.2 %	28.5%
7. Do you consider using artificial intelligence to fully complete an assignment to be academic dishonesty?	68.5 %	19.2 %	12.3%

An additional analysis was conducted for the second group of questions, segmented by the respondents' age.

Table 5

Distribution by age of perceptions regarding certain activities as academic dishonesty

Question/Age Group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Up to 24 years old – Total	Negative – 367 / Positive – 340 / Ratio – 1,1:1						
По-скоро отрицателен отговор – (не; не мога да преценя – брой отговори)	59	32	43	76	76	47	33
По-скоро положителен отговор (да – брой отговори)	42	69	58	25	25	54	67
25+ годишна възраст - общо	Отрицателни – 67 / Положителни – 101 / Съотношение – 0,7:1						
По-скоро отрицателен отговор – (не; не мога да преценя – брой отговори)	10	18	18	11	9	16	19
По-скоро положителен отговор (да – брой отговори)	14	6	6	13	15	8	5

Discussion

From these data we can derive some implications for institutional policy and educational processes. The mixed perceptions about what constitutes misconduct highlight the importance of clear communication from institutions regarding academic integrity policies and expectations. Educational interventions should focus on clarifying ambiguous areas and foster critical reflection on ethical standards.

The data shows a clear difference between younger students (up to 24 years) and older students (25+ years) in terms of admitting to engaging in academic misconduct. One in three respondents up to 24 years old do not even acknowledge the presence of cheating at universities, unlike respondents aged 25+, who are more candid and nearly all admit to such practices. The same ratio is observed between current students and graduates. More than half of the students under 24 do not recognize many forms of cheating as such, implying they allow such behavior. Younger students tend to be less strict in labeling certain behaviors as academic misconduct compared to older students. The ratio of negative to positive responses indicates a more permissive attitude among younger students toward certain questionable practices.

This raises an important question: is cheating simply a stage in personal development that most students overcome over time? Do students change their behavior with professional growth and awareness of the connection between actions and consequences? Or do habits formed during university years become entrenched, leading to disregard for moral norms and prioritizing success at any cost over personal integrity? This topic is scarcely researched. Only Whitley (1998) identifies factors influencing cheating propensity and suggests that the hypothesis of personal development deserves attention. His study shows that older and married students cheat less frequently, a finding confirmed by our research. This leads to the conclusion that with increased maturity, independence, and responsibility, the tendency to cheat decreases.

Students in the focus groups generally believe cheating is wrong because "it's unfair." Most consider some situations clearly wrong—stealing a colleague's work, falsifying research results, or buying an article online and submitting it as their own. However, in many cases, they judge cheating as acceptable or do not perceive it as improper—such as submitting the same work for two courses, using a citation without reading the original article, paraphrasing without citing the source, or jointly solving an online test.

The reasons for engaging in cheating can be divided into several main types:

- **Inability to complete the task** – "I can't do it," "It's too hard," "I don't understand what's required."

- **Lack of interest or irresponsibility toward studies** – "I don't care," "I'm just trying to pass," "I'm not interested in this subject."

- **Coping strategy under stress and pressure** – many students are under pressure to achieve success (need for scholarships, rising fees, parental expectations, public emphasis on grades, tight job market). Under such pressure, cheating may be a way to cope and secure good results. According to Whitley (1998), external pressure to achieve high grades, heavy workload, and competition strongly influence cheating behavior. Grades are not only measures of learning but also criteria for scholarships, internships, and jobs. This system fosters the motivation to cheat to succeed.

- **Unclear instructor expectations** – some behaviors which are considered cheating by instructors may stem from unclear guidelines. Many students think it is acceptable to cite without a source if the text is paraphrased or translated. Whether work should be individual or group also depends on the instructor, and unclear rules can cause inadvertent violations. Clear communication of expectations and their rationale could prevent this.

- **Learned behavior and cheating culture** – if the value of academic integrity and consequences for cheating are not taught in secondary education, and if cheating goes unpunished, it may become habitual. Given the prevalence of cheating, it is likely that students grow up in a cheating culture. Since this is likely to be the case (at least for a portion of students), reducing cheating requires serious work to change attitudes on the part of the university. The "Codes of Honor", applied alone, are not particularly effective, but may help if combined with other measures.

- **Societal model for professional development** – frequent public scandals in Bulgaria show people who reached high positions through various cheating and even criminal acts without consequences. Some students interpret events such as fake diplomas, economic or political fraud and corruption as the only route to success. This is a serious issue that requires societal and governmental efforts to address.

Conclusion

Plagiarism represents a serious and widespread problem in the higher education system across Europe. The extent to which it occurs depends on the specific country, academic discipline, and the methods used for its detection. Results from various studies indicate that a significant portion of students admit to having engaged in some form of academic misconduct. The reasons for such behavior are diverse — ranging from unclear rules about citation and pressure to achieve high results, to poor time management and easy access to information on the internet, which facilitates copying others' texts. To address this issue, universities apply a combination of technological tools for detecting plagiarism and educational measures such as seminars and training on academic integrity. Nevertheless, progress remains limited and largely depends on the institution's internal culture, policies, and societal attitudes towards cheating in education.

As previously noted, cheating is closely linked to ethical norms, personal values, and an individual's subjective understanding of what is right and wrong. The lack of a clear and concrete definition of cheating can confuse students and lead to a misunderstanding of the significance of academic integrity. To counter this, most universities implement codes of ethics that establish behavioral standards to which both students and faculty are expected to adhere. However, even when rules exist, they are not always communicated effectively, nor fully understood or observed by all. It is the institution's responsibility to ensure that the code and other measures are accessible, clear, and known to students. When effective preventive mechanisms are lacking in the university environment, the propensity to cheat increases. If a student manages to cheat once without being caught, the likelihood of repeating such behavior rises significantly. When students are convinced that they can cheat without consequences, this leads to wider spread of academic dishonesty. Moreover, when they realize that others also benefit from cheating, it further fuels their desire to follow suit.

Different types of cheating behaviors should lead to penalties of varying severity, with repeat offenses sanctioned more strictly than first-time violations. It is important that punishments are proportionate — overly harsh sanctions may discourage instructors from applying formal procedures. The key is balance: penalties should be fair and realistic. Equally important is that students believe cheating will be detected and punished. This, however, is difficult to achieve because procedures are often carried out opaquely, others do not learn about them, do not see the enforcement and impact of university policy, and tend to underestimate the problem.

In some European countries, strict legal sanctions exist, while others emphasize more educational and disciplinary approaches. When rules are clearly formulated and applied consistently, cases of plagiarism tend to decrease. Codes of ethics, sanctions, and increased monitoring by faculty should be united around the idea that open dialogue with students about cheating is essential. Students should be encouraged not only to follow rules but to think critically about their own actions and actively participate in discussions on the topic.

Changing attitudes demands systematic work at the university level and across society. Authorities and institutions have a key role in creating conditions for integrity and fairness. The educational strategy should not only strengthen control and provide support for learning but also help foster early development of personal responsibility and maturity in students — qualities crucial for their long-term ethics and success.

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SUPPLEMENT

THE ESCAPE HAMLET: TEACHING SHAKESPEARE AND KEY COMPETENCES THROUGH GAMIFICATION

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Escape Hamlet

(English version)

The goal is, through gamification methods and experiential learning, to create conditions for pupils and students to become acquainted with (or refresh their knowledge of) Shakespeare's most famous play, as well as to draw attention to specific moments in it that directly relate to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes every person needs to develop today—not only to successfully integrate into the labor market but also to function fully as individuals and as part of society. An integrative approach is used, also aiming to demonstrate that working with a literary work can incorporate educational objectives related to each of the eight key competencies for lifelong learning.

First task: Digital competence

When Prince Hamlet learns from the ghost of his father, the late King of Denmark (who was also named Hamlet), that he was murdered by his brother Claudius, and that now the prince must avenge this deed, he does not immediately accept this story as true – even though he's already convinced that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark," since his mother, Gertrude, married Claudius too quickly after her husband's death. Hamlet decides to check whether this is true. As a citizen, he knows revenge is prohibited by law, and if he murders his uncle, he will face sanctions. As a Christian, he knows revenge is forbidden by God, and if he murders his uncle, his immortal soul will be doomed to eternal suffering. He also believes that there are demonic forces that tempt humans, causing them to risk their souls.

Today, information reaches us through multiple channels. Based on it, we make decisions – some of them crucial to our lives, our relationships with others, and the environment we live in. Sometimes, the information we receive is not truthful. When false information is spread with the intent of economic or political gain, we speak of disinformation. How can we protect ourselves? By fact-checking, and by verifying if factually correct information has not been presented manipulatively. To do this quickly and easily in everyday life, we use information technology – smartphones, computers, the internet, and various online tools for accessing information.

Using information technology available to you, determine which of the following 4 narratives are true and which are false. In the same order, write down 0 for each false narrative and 1 for each true narrative. The correct sequence of zeros and ones will help you unlock the virtual box, in which you will find information about where to go next and what to do.

1. Claudius had no choice because if he had not killed his brother first—the previous King of Denmark and father of Prince Hamlet, who was also named Hamlet—and taken power, his brother would have killed him.

2. The Danish queen Gertrude marries her brother – in – law Claudius, the new king of Denmark, after the death of her former husband Hamlet—the old king of Denmark.

3. Polonius, Claudius, and to some extent Gertrude, believe they can use Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Ophelia to spy on Hamlet, discover why he is acting strangely, and protect themselves in case he does something dangerous.

4. Polonius suspects that student life in Europe is corrupting Hamlet, Laertes, and Ophelia and the subjects they study, so he sends Reynaldo to secretly inquire about what the situation truly is.

Second task: Personal, social and learning to learn competence

From the very beginning, the play conveys familial, generational, hierarchical, gender-based, and interpersonal tensions. Claudius and Gertrude pressure Hamlet to mourn in a certain, prescribed manner. Laertes instructs his sister, Ophelia, on how she should love. Polonius advises his son, Laertes, how to behave at the university, then sends his own man, Reynaldo, to spy on him. Polonius also uses his daughter, Ophelia, to spy on Hamlet. Claudius and Gertrude summon Hamlet's fellow students, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to spy on the prince. In this context, Hamlet adopts an "antic disposition" - i.e., he behaves and speaks strangely. Other characters interpret his behavior as madness, but the audience, knowing more about the plot, recognizes it as a secret code. Thus, Hamlet can communicate with the audience without the other characters understanding.

To grasp why Hamlet acts strangely, we must apply our social-emotional competence. This process involves awareness of one's own emotions, recognizing and understanding the emotions of others, showing sympathy and empathy, differentiating internal emotional experiences from their external expression, managing unpleasant emotions and stressful circumstances, and taking responsibility for emotional communication.

Read the following conversation between Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern.

HAMLET
[...] What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither?
GUILDENSTERN
Prison, my lord?
HAMLET
Denmark's a prison.
ROSENCRANTZ
Then is the world one.
HAMLET
A goodly one; in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons; Denmark being one o' the worst.
ROSENCRANTZ
We think not so, my lord.
HAMLET
Why, then, 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so: to me it is a prison.
ROSENCRANTZ
Why then, your ambition makes it one; 'tis too narrow for your mind.
HAMLET
O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.
(Act II, Scene 2)

Make an "empathy map" of the character Hamlet, i.e., sort the following sentences into three categories (says, thinks, feels). If you complete the table correctly, each box will contain one unique letter—when arranged in order, these letters will guide you to the next location.

I AM AlARMED I MAY BE GOING CRAZY?

I AM ANGRy THAT I WILL HAVE TO PAY THE PRICE.

WHY THEN, 'TIS NONE TO YOU [...] TO ME IT IS A PRISON.

I WOULD lIKE TO SEE YOU IN MY PLACE.

THEY LITERALLY WON'T LET ME RETURN TO WITTENBERg.

I COULD BE BOUNDED IN A NUTSHELL AND COUNT MYSELF A KING OF INFINITE SPACE, WERE IT NOT THAT I HAVE BAD DrEAMS.

I FEaR I MAY BE STUCK HERE FOR EVER.

FOR THERE IS NOTHING EITHER GOOD OR BAD, BUT THINKING MAKES IT SO.

	says	thinks	feels
1	**DENMARK'S A PRISON.**		
2		**AM I ASSESSING THE SITUATION CORRECTLY?**	
3			**IT IS NOT FAIR THAT IT HAPPeNED TO ME.**
4		**IDIOTS! THEY THINK I'M JUST BEING DRAMATIC.**	

Third Task: Cultural awareness and expression competence

While Hamlet is contemplating how to verify whether the ghost's story is true, a troupe of traveling actors arrives in Elsinore. He decides to ask them to perform a specific play (within the play), The Murder of Gonzago, whose plot resembles the ghost's tale. He also plans to insert additional verses written by himself. Thus, Hamlet devises a plan to catch "the conscience of the king" with this trap-play. The logic of this plan is based on Aristotle's theory of tragedy, according to which a tragedy should provoke a mixture of pity and fear in the viewer. In such a state, Hamlet expects the conscience of Claudius – the place where a person's sense of justice and guilt resides – to be affected, and if he is the murderer, to betray himself.

What is the use of art at all? It has never been just for entertainment. Alongside religion, it is one of humanity's primary sources of solace. Throughout the centuries, art has been primarily concerned with human melancholy and its causes – unrequited love, poverty, discrimination, anxiety, humiliation, rivalry, shame, loneliness, longing. Often, in our relationships with others, we don't dare speak about what troubles us. Our conversations are often superficial. We pretend everything is fine so people won't think we're weak or so we won't feel guilty for not being happy.

Art strives to fix this – it takes our melancholy and transforms it into something normal, legitimate, and worthy. It gives us hope and strength; it purifies us from fear and sorrow by showing us that, by nature, we are imperfect and incapable of permanent happiness.

Take a close look at Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I*. Using your first-grade math skills (adding numbers up to one hundred), you will discover a magical two-digit number. Why is it magical? Use it twice, one next to another, and you will unlock the box located in [location].

Fourth task: Entrepreneurship competence

Even before Hamlet confirms from Claudius's reaction during the play within the play that he truly killed his father, he delivers his most famous soliloquy:

HAMLET
To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die—to sleep,
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart – ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause—there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death—
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns—puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

There are many approaches to interpreting this text. Here we suggest looking at it through the lens of entrepreneurship. What is entrepreneurship? It is acting based on available opportunities and one's own ideas in such a way as to create value for oneself and for others. The value created may be economic, cultural, or social, or any combination of the three. Entrepreneurship as a competence applies to all spheres of life. It allows citizens to grow and to contribute to the development of society. The main challenge Hamlet faces is how to deal with the villain Claudius. To surrender or to fight and perhaps die may not be the only options. Perhaps this is a false dilemma, an artificially limited choice. We all know how the play continues, but can we imagine what might be done so that Hamlet does not die and the story has a happy ending? Here are three possible scenarios. Which one is the most often used solution in other Shakespeare plays? In each scenario, there are certain capitalized letters. If arranged correctly, they will form a word. The word from the correct scenario will tell you the location of the next task.

1. Hamlet organIzes a feAst in ClaudiUs's honor, but first arranges with his father's ghOst to appeaR publicly and accUse hIs brother of Murder. ClauDius is deposed and Thrown in prison.

2. Hamlet accEpts that neither humaN nor Divine law permits him to kill Claudius, so he arms himself with patience and focuses on Gradually and methodically exposing ClaUdius's wrongdOings and winNing over his supporters at court.

3. Hamlet escApes Denmark and pRoposes an alLiance with Fortinbras, based on mutual Benefit – FortinBras will help him overthrow his uncle, and Hamlet will return all the territorIes lost by Fortinbras's father, the foRmer king of NorwaY.

Fifth task: Multilingual competence

Claudius feels threatened by Hamlet. He orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to escort the prince to England, along with a letter to the English king which (as we later learn) commands that Hamlet should be executed. Left alone, unaware that Hamlet is hiding behind him, Claudius speaks aloud, admitting his guilt for killing his brother and attempting to pray. Hamlet prepares to kill him but refrains, deciding that doing so at this moment would send Claudius's soul to heaven. Instead, Hamlet goes to his mother Gertrude's chambers to tell her that Claudius murdered old Hamlet. There, he accidentally kills Polonius, who is hiding behind a tapestry to eavesdrop. Still, the prince manages to speak with his mother and tell her what he knows.

In this scene, Hamlet uses his oratory skills to rebuke his mother and persuade her to separate from Claudius. It's important to keep in mind that the original text of Shakespeare's play is written in English—more precisely, in Early Modern English, a historical form of the language used in the 16th and 17th centuries. At that time, English had not yet been standardized; there were no dictionaries or formal grammars. That's why Shakespeare's work is considered the first known source for around 1,700 words. While he may not have invented most of them, he was likely the first to record them in writing. Moreover, many of the phrases he coined are still used today as idioms.

Compare the original English text with its Bulgarian translation:

QUEEN	КРАЛИЦАТА
O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain!	О, Хамлет, ти сърцето ми разсече на две!
HAMLET	ХАМЛЕТ
O, throw away the worser part of it,	Хвърлете лошата половина
And live the purer with the other half!	и с другата начисто заживейте.
Good night. But go not to my uncle's bed.	Е, лека нощ. Но в чичовото ложе
Assume a virtue if you have it not.	не влизайте. И мъничко приличие
That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,	обличайте пред хората поне.
Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,	Чудовищният навик – този, който
That to the use of actions fair and good	на лошите привички всяко чувство
He likewise gives a frock or livery	изяжда, все пак с милостта на ангел
That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight,	намята върху честните си привички
And that shall lend a kind of easiness	ливрея или роба подходяща

To the next abstinence, the next more easy;

For use almost can change the stamp of nature

And either lodge the devil or throw him out

With wondrous potency. Once more, good night,

And, when you are desirous to be blest,

I'll blessing beg of you. For this same lord

[points at Polonius]

I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so

To punish me with this and this with me,

That **I must be their scourge and minister**.

I will bestow him and will answer well

The death I gave him. So, again, good night.

I must be cruel only to be kind.

This bad begins, and worse remains behind.

за тях. Въздържайте се тази нощ

и тъй на всяко ново изкушение

след туй ще устоявате по-лесно –

защото обичаят в нас донейде

природния печат видоизменя

и дявола приема или с гръм

изстрелва го. Отново – лека нощ!

А благослов когато ви потрябва,

и аз от вас ще си изпрося. Този

старик да ми прости, но небесата с това наказват мен, а с мен това,

та в свой слуга и бич да ме превърнат.

Ще бъде настанен, а за смъртта му

аз сам ще отговарям. Лека нощ!

Душата ми от нежност е корава.

Започна зле и все по-зле ще става.

(Act III, Scene 4)

Pay attention to the bolded phrases in the English text. One of them is still used today as an idiom. It contains: a) a metaphor b) a simile c) an allegory d) a paradox. Once you identify the correct figure, ask about its Bulgarian equivalent, and replace each of its letters with the number that corresponds to its position in the Bulgarian alphabet. Add these numbers together to get a two-digit number. Multiply that number by two, and the resulting three-digit number unlocks the next box, which is located in [location].

Sixth task: Citizenship competence

On the way, Hamlet encounters a large Norwegian army led by Fortinbras, heading to battle to seize from the Poles “a little patch of ground that hath in it no profit but the name.” This encounter prompts Hamlet to deliver his final soliloquy:

HAMLET
How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god – like reason
To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on the event—
A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward—I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do,'
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do't. [...] (Act IV, Scene 4)

In this soliloquy, once again action is contrasted with inaction. Although on the surface the logic of the speech leads to the decision to resort to violence, there is still a sense of regret that justice and the common good cannot be achieved in a more civilized way, one that reflects the achievements of human reason and dignity. Today, solutions to such problems are sought through the development of active citizenship. This means informed and responsible, everyday actions by each citizen to protect their own freedom and rights, as well as the freedom and rights of others. These actions include efforts to uphold democracy, the separation of powers, and the rule of law – factors without which freedom and human rights cannot be protected – as well as striving for a better quality of life based on fair competition and innovation.

Power in Denmark has been usurped by Claudius, meaning everyone in the state serves him. He has committed a serious crime – not just murder, but fratricide and, in killing the king, treason. Hamlet knows about this crime and realizes the state has been captured. Let’s mentally transfer this situation to our own time and this country, making the necessary adjustments – for example, the country is not a monarchy but a democracy with a parliamentary form of government. Which of the following actions could help a modern-day Hamlet, without violating the law or the principles of liberal democracy, to restore justice:

y. To impose change by force. Only radical action can shake the system. If institutions don't work, they must be pressured by all means.

a. To aim for transparency in the actions of those in power and the flow of money through government. To give citizens the ability to track how public funds are spent.

ck. To trust a strong leader who will fix everything. Bulgaria needs a firm hand—someone unafraid to act decisively and independently, without regard for anyone.

d. To demand judicial reform that ensures real independence of judges and prosecutors, and thus guarantees the rule of law.

l. To work toward strengthening anti-corruption bodies and regulatory agencies, staffing them with proven professionals who are free of dependencies and ties to the criminal world.

i. To abstain from voting. They're all the same. Voting is a waste of time. Until a pure candidate comes along, there's no point in participating in the system.

r. To insist that the guilty be punished publicly, even without a trial. When institutions fail, the people have the right to exact justice directly.

f. To use the power of Bulgaria's EU membership to push for real reforms. To insist that access to EU funds be tied to measurable progress based on clear indicators.

o. To seek change through compromise with the lesser evil. Sometimes we have to turn a blind eye to the past if someone has a chance to defeat a greater enemy.

b. To work on building informed and active citizens who value their freedom but also understand their duties to society and the republic.

The next task is at [location]. The letters of the illegitimate actions above will show you where to find the key.

Seventh task: Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering

Hamlet manages to escape his exile by altering the letter to the English king so that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are executed instead of him. Meanwhile, Laertes has returned to Denmark to avenge the death of his father. After losing her sanity in her grief, Ophelia commits suicide. Claudius, realizing that his plan to get rid of Hamlet has failed, turns Laertes against him. Hamlet arrives and first encounters two gravediggers who cynically joke about life and death. The prince joins the conversation, from which it becomes clear that regardless of whether one is a courtier, a lawyer, a royal jester, or even Alexander the Great – in death, we all become the same. This scene continues the theme of rationalism and the search for scientific truth that runs throughout the play.

Shakespeare writes at a time when traditional views on the origin of life, the Earth, the planets, and the structure of the universe – which for at least a millennium had been based primarily on the Bible – are challenged by the forerunners of the scientific revolution. Copernicus (1473–1543), Galileo (1564–1642), and Kepler (1571–1630) begin to demonstrate the untenability of the geocentric model of the universe accepted until then. Thomas Digges (1546–1595) and Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) write about the possibility of an infinite universe. In another field of science, Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564) shocks Europe by publicly demonstrating that men and women have the same number of ribs. All of this, along with other discoveries, comes into conflict with Christian doctrine and, above all, with the superstitions that had grown around it. This situation is also reflected in Shakespeare's play.

Determine whether each of the following statements is currently considered a conspiracy theory, a superstition, a religious belief, or a scientific truth. In the order listed, write: 1 for conspiracy theories, 2 for superstitions, 3 for religious beliefs, and 4 for scientific truths.

1. The Earth is flat, and all photos from space are fake.

2. The soul lives on eternally after death.

3. Vaccines are used to implant microchips in people.

4. Human activity is the main cause of climate change.

5. An envious look or impure admiration can make a person ill.

6. Feminism was created to humiliate and control men.

7. Planes leaving trails in the sky are spraying people with chemicals.

8. GMOs (genetically modified organisms) are safe to consume.

9. Wine can turn into blood and bread into flesh.

10. The Illuminati secretly control governments around the world.

11. Evolution explains the diversity of life on Earth.

12. Accumulated negative energy is the cause of bad luck.

13. A human fetus does not feel pain before the 24th week of pregnancy.

14. Homosexuality is a natural variation in human sexuality.

15. The position of stars and planets at the time of birth affects a person's character, decisions, and life path in general.

The number of answers of each type (1, 2, 3, and 4) in this sequence indicates a word from the columns below. The four words form a phrase that will lead you to the location of the next task:

1. to	1. the café	1. in front of	1. the restaurant
2. at	2. the yard	2. with	2. the café
3. in	3. the ground	3. behind	3. the garden
4. in front of	4. the roof	4. in front of	4. the wall
5. under	5. the entrance	5. above	5. the student

Eighth task: Literacy competence

Claudius urges Laertes to challenge Hamlet to a fencing duel and advises him on how to kill him without raising suspicion. Laertes slightly wounds Hamlet with a poisoned rapier. In the scuffle that follows, the swords are exchanged, and Hamlet wounds Laertes with the same poisoned blade. As a backup plan, Claudius has poisoned a glass of wine, which he intends to offer Hamlet. Gertrude drinks the wine and dies. Realizing he is also dying and that Claudius manipulated the situation, Laertes confesses everything, forgives Hamlet, and dies. Hamlet understands that his end is near, so in a final act of revenge, he forces Claudius to drink the remaining poisoned wine, which instantly kills him. Hamlet asks Horatio to stay alive in order to truthfully tell his story, and then dies.

Imagine you are Horatio and you must correctly piece together the story from the following fragments. On one hand, you need to separate the events that actually happened in the play (ten of the items below) from the ones that are fictional (five of the items below), and on the other hand, arrange the parts of the plot in the correct chronological sequence.

1. During a tense conversation with his mother, Hamlet hears a noise and realizes someone is eavesdropping. In a fit of anger, he stabs the hidden spy, thinking it's Claudius. Instead, he discovers he has killed Polonius – the king's advisor and father of Ophelia and Laertes. Polonius dies.

2. After his death, Polonius appears as a ghost to Laertes, warning him about Claudius's manipulations and urging him to unite with Hamlet for justice. This unexpected alliance leads to new intrigues at the palace.

3. During the duel, Laertes lightly wounds Hamlet with a poisoned sword. In the ensuing scuffle, the swords are exchanged and Hamlet wounds Laertes with the same weapon. As he dies, Laertes realizes he was used, reveals the plot, forgives Hamlet, and dies. As the poison overtakes him, Hamlet finds the strength to fulfill his father's command. He forces Claudius to drink the remaining poison, who dies instantly.

4. The young Danish prince, Hamlet, returns home from university for his father's funeral, also named Hamlet, and soon witnesses his mother Gertrude marrying his uncle Claudius, who becomes the new king.

5. After learning of Prince Fortinbras's intent to attack Denmark, Hamlet secretly meets with him and they form an alliance to overthrow the usurper Claudius. They plan a coordinated attack to restore lawful rule in both kingdoms.

6. After Hamlet cruelly rejects her and she learns of her father's death, Ophelia loses her sanity and eventually drowns. Her brother Laertes returns to the palace at the head of an enraged crowd, determined to find the truth. Claudius convinces him that Hamlet alone is to blame and agrees to help him take revenge.

7. Instead of drowning, Ophelia fakes her death and flees from the palace. She is pregnant by Hamlet and raises the child in England. Years later, the young prince regains the throne, which is why Denmark remains a separate country to this day.

8. Late one night, the ghost of Hamlet's father appears to him, accuses Claudius of his murder, and urges him to seek revenge. This sets off a chain of events that will destroy both the family and the state. Hamlet can no longer trust his own perceptions, the loyalty of his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or even the love of young Ophelia.

9. Afraid of Hamlet's actions, Claudius orders him to be sent to England under guard, where he has arranged for his murder. However, Hamlet manages to escape, returns to Denmark, and ultimately gets his revenge.

10. On the night before the duel, Hamlet dreams of his father's ghost, who asks not for revenge but for mercy and reconciliation, causing a moral dilemma in the son. The dream makes him question the meaning of vengeance, but events are already beyond his control.

11. In his final moments, Hamlet asks Horatio to tell the true story of what happened. Young Fortinbras arrives at the head of his army, ready to take power over a country whose royal dynasty has been destroyed by betrayal, murder, and revenge.

12. The instability caused by the king's death also leads to the threat of an attack from neighboring Norway. Long ago, the old Hamlet challenged the Norwegian king to a duel, killed him, and won territories. Now the young Norwegian prince Fortinbras is gathering a strong army.

13. Just before the final duel, it is revealed that Claudius has poisoned the palace's water supply to clear the way of potential threats and consolidate power through mass poisoning. The discovery is made by a palace doctor who dies soon after revealing the truth to Horatio, but fails to prevent the tragedy.

14. Upon learning that Hamlet has returned to Denmark, Claudius persuades Laertes to challenge him to a friendly duel and instructs him on how to kill him without raising suspicion. As a backup plan, Claudius puts poison in a cup of wine, which he intends to offer Hamlet. Instead, Gertrude drinks from it and dies.

15. To find proof that the ghost is telling the truth, Hamlet pretends to be mad. With the help of his most loyal friend, Horatio, he convinces a traveling troupe of actors to perform a scene reenacting his father's murder before Claudius and Gertrude, hoping Claudius will be shaken by guilt and reveal himself.

After arranging the parts of the plot in the correct order, write down the numbers of the fourth and eighth parts in the sequence, one after the other – the resulting four-digit number will unlock the room.