

Infidelity as a taboo on the albums *folklore* and *evermore* by Taylor Swift

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## Tiivistelmä

Tämä kandidaatintutkielma tarkastelee uskottomuutta kieliopillisena tabuna laulaja-lauluntekijä Taylor Swiftin levyillä *folklore* ja *evermore* (2020). Tabu on aihe, jota pidetään vastenmielisenä, epäkohteliaana tai mauttomana, jolloin puhujat pyrkivät välttelemään tai kiertämään siitä puhumista. Tabukieltä esiintyy kaikissa kielissä ja kulttuureissa, mutta tabun aiheet sekä ilmaisutavat vaihtelevat sosiaalisten arvojen mukaisesti. Koska tabut ovat kulttuuri- ja kielikohtaisia, puheyhteisön jäsenten kielelliset ilmaisut paljastavat mitä pidetään hyväksyttävänä puhujan sosiaalisessa ympäristössä. Mahdollisen tabun tutkiminen lyyrissä kontekstissa paljastaa miten kirjoittaja käyttää lyriikoita itseilmaisuna: miten tabua vältetään kielenkäytöllä, ja miksi aihe saattaa olla tabu. Tabukielen keskeisin ilmiö on eufemismi, eli kiertoilmaus, joka saa eri muotoja kielessä. Tämä tutkielma keskittyy eufemismin muotoihin kriittisen diskurssianalyysin menetelmin, yhdistäen Fairclough'n (2010) kolmeportaisen lähestymistavan Allenin ja Burridden (1991) tutkimuskehikseen. Tutkielma osoittaa, että Swiftin kahdella levyllä uskottomuuteen viitataan lähes aina eufemismilla, joista yleisin tapa on kiertely. Tiheä kiertoilmausten käyttö uskottomuudesta puhuessa viittaa siihen, että puhuja pitää aihetta sopimattomana ja pyrkii suojautumaan haitallisilta tunteilta.

## Abstract

This Bachelor's thesis researches infidelity as a linguistic taboo on two albums, *folklore* and *evermore* (2020) by singer-songwriter Taylor Swift. A taboo is a topic in discourse that speakers find offensive, impolite or distasteful, and therefore the tabooed word or expression is avoided. Taboo language is a phenomenon present in all languages and cultures, but there is variety in which topics are found socially acceptable. Researching a possible taboo in lyrical texts offers insight to why topics become tabooed and how language is used for avoidance. The main device of taboo language is euphemism, which takes various forms that are open for linguistic analysis. To derive social meaning from linguistic elements, the thesis utilizes Fairclough's (2010) three-step method of Critical Discourse Analysis (2010) and the framework of euphemism constructed by Allan and Burrige (1991). The study concludes that on the two albums by Swift, infidelity is referred to with extensive use of euphemism, of which circumlocution is the most applied method. The frequent use of euphemism signals that the writer considers infidelity unfavorable, and aims to cover from harmful emotions.

## 1. Introduction

Communicating through language consists of rules. These rules define how one should act: which acts are considered appropriate and which ones should be avoided. The aim of interactional rules is to keep communication logical for the participants, essentially helping speakers navigate a successful conversation where mutual understanding is present. Some rules are universal to all languages, but there are differences between cultures in what is considered appropriate. Languages have culture-specific configurations that reflect their individual social norms, beliefs and ideologies. Major contributing factors in cultural, interactional and linguistic behavior are history and religion, which are specific to each culture. Therefore, language and culture can be seen to have a relationship where language is shaped by culture, and language constructs the social reality of a culture. Such a view on language further emphasizes that a speaker gains a linguistic and communication competence from their culture through socialization, and this results in the speaker having a unique, innate awareness of social rules.

Cultural differences are an evident aspect in *taboo language*. The definition of a taboo differs between sources, but at the heart, taboos are topics in conversation that are considered impolite or offensive, and that are avoided or implicated with language. Taboos usually center around topics such as religion, body parts, disease, death, incest and other sexual themes. Additionally, there are milder taboos that include, for example income or age. For a subject to become taboo, it possesses a quality that is believed to be harmful for the individual or the group. Some taboo topics are universal to all languages, but some are bound to the cultural setting of the language, and therefore there is variation in taboo language across cultures. The basic function of a taboo is that the word for a subject that is uncomfortable to discuss becomes unacceptable in itself, thus gains a "tainted denotatum" (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 2). The avoidance of taboo topics is important in social behavior, because "social integration is generally oriented towards maintaining face" of a speaker and other participants (Allan & Burrige, 1991, p. 5). While taboos are often avoided in order to save face and adhere to social norms, taboos also have an abusive function as insults and other forms of strong language.

Avoidance in taboo language is managed with the use of euphemism. A euphemism is a way of softening an expression otherwise found distasteful: at the other end of the spectrum is dysphemism, which creates the before-mentioned abusive element. Euphemism helps a speaker stay polite and circumvent unfavorable topics, but dysphemism can be used as a powerful device to shock or insult others, therefore "used for precisely the opposite reason that a euphemism is used"

(Allan & Burrige, 1991, p. 26). Dysphemism is evident for example in swearwords, which in English tend to take inspiration from bodily fluids and functions (for example *shit* or *fuck*). This is the general spectrum that taboo language functions on, but there are subcategories to both concepts. In this thesis, various types of euphemism are discussed further.

The theme and focus of this thesis is infidelity treated as a taboo in song lyrics. Infidelity means pursuing relations outside of a monogamous relationship without permission from a partner, and always contains either a romantic or sexual aspect. As Allan and Burrige (2006) note, specifically in Western societies taboos "rest ultimately on traditions of etiquette, and are therefore defined by culturally sensitive social parameters such as age, sex, education and social status" (p. 237), which means that the sanction of violating a taboo is merely a loss of face. Many Western societies share the norm of monogamy in a relationship, which is why infidelity involves questions of morale. Infidelity is usually condemned and judged because it is inherently wrong to purposefully to hurt another person, especially an intimate partner. In other words, cheating falls outside of generally acceptable behavior and social norms shared by the community, and poses a threat to one's position in a group. Going against social norms and cultural values usually births feelings of regret and guilt, and the person might be subjected to social disdain from others.

Infidelity is a persistent theme on the albums *folklore* and *evermore* (2020) by American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift. After their publication, the two albums received praise from listeners and critics due to the beautiful and poetic songwriting that focuses on telling stories. Even though the albums are not concept albums about infidelity, they consist of several songs that center around the topic. The interest in studying infidelity on *folklore* and *evermore* in effect arises from the fact that a third of the songs discuss cheating using avoidant language. The songs frequently imply cheating through various linguistic devices, but it is mentioned explicitly in only a few cases. The phenomenon of avoidant speech often hints at a taboo topic, and gives reason for an examination of taboo language. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find out if the lyrics in Swift's songs treat infidelity as a taboo and how the language is constructed with the use of euphemism. Furthermore, the analysis of euphemistic expressions and themes is tied to exploring social norms as a reason for a topic becoming taboo and to theorizing why avoidant linguistic choices are made in the song lyrics.

## 2. Research material

The research material examined in this study is eight (8) songs from Taylor Swift. The songs appear on the albums *folklore* and *evermore*, which were both released in 2020 under Republic Records. The albums are indie folk, which is a change of genre in Swift's discography: the previous albums by the singer-songwriter consist of country and pop. On *folklore* and *evermore*, Swift abandons the familiar and lifts imagination as a source for songwriting to the center. Pulling back from the production, the albums are able to tell detailed stories and display Swift's ability to play with language. The title *folklore* hints at the content of both albums that draws inspiration from folktale, culture and stories. What is more, the albums were released only five months apart, which is why they are similar sonically and visually. In addition, they also complete each other thematically and in storytelling. For this reason, *folklore* and *evermore* are sometimes in the media referred to as 'sister records' or as a continuation of each other, which is why both albums are included in the research material.

The study focuses on three (3) songs from *folklore* and five (5) songs from *evermore*, the deluxe editions of the albums each including 17 songs in total. The eight songs were selected because they all either center around or mention infidelity indirectly. The discussion of infidelity on almost a third of the songs on the two albums indicates that the theme is meaningful for the storytelling and provides material for an analysis. Swift has writing credits on every song, but featuring authors include Aaron Dessner, Jack Antonoff and Joe Alwyn. There is also one song with a featuring artist (*no body, no crime*) but they are not included in the songwriting. In figure 1 below are the selected songs with their titles, the album they are from and the year of publication. The songs *right where you left me* and *it's time to go* are bonus tracks from the deluxe editions.

Figure 1. A list of the research material

<b>The title</b>	<b>The album</b>	<b>Year of publication</b>
cardigan	folklore	2020
illicit affairs	folklore	2020
mad woman	folklore	2020
tolerate it	evermore	2020
no body, no crime (featuring Haim)	evermore	2020
ivy	evermore	2020
right where you left me – bonus track	evermore	2020
it’s time to go – bonus track	evermore	2020

### 3. Methodology and key concepts

This study employs methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as presented by Fairclough (2010) and draws on key concepts from the study of euphemism conducted by Allan and Burridge (1991). In this section, the analytical framework is introduced, along with previous critical discourse analytic research on taboo language.

#### 3.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis is an analytical framework that approaches discourse as a social practice that is "coloured by and productive of ideology" (Locke, 2004, p. 1). In other words, language is considered a tool that reflects the values and intentions of the speaker and furthermore, the speech community. While language depicts a speaker's background and linguistic competence, it also assigns meaning outside of language. The aspect of assigning meaning is a key component of the functional view of language. Functionalism views language as having a social function, where speakers and communities build a shared meaning into linguistic elements in interaction, as opposed to the formal tradition that sees language as an independent identity separate from social meaning.

According to one of the central figures in developing critical discourse analysis, Norman Fairclough, discourse brings the aspect of "making meaning" in to social life (Fairclough

2010, p. 3), and therefore language is an inherent part of contributing to ideologies. Fairclough's approach to discourse aims to research discourse as a product of social relations and discursive practices inspired by power and ideology. Therefore, critical discourse analysis adds the element of investigating and showcasing power inequalities and faults in language use. There have been many scholars involved in developing the research approach and each have constructed methodologies of their own: in addition to Fairclough, notable authors include Ruth Wodak and Teun A. van Dijk who have contributed a psychological and social approach (van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 2001, as cited in Locke, 2004).

For the analysis of taboo language, this study utilizes the critical discourse theory by Fairclough (2010) that builds from linguistic elements to social meaning. The threefold model introduced by Fairclough consists of 1. textual analysis, 2. interdiscursive analysis and 3. social analysis (Fairclough, 2010, pp. 6-7), which can be conducted as follows. Textual analysis focuses on linguistic data and features on their own: the analysis begins by pointing out linguistic patterns and concepts that build meaning. In interdiscursive analysis, the linguistic elements are then discussed within the context of the text: meaning is deciphered in relation to the setting, and rhetoric devices and the ways in which a text is built with language use are interpreted. After linguistic analysis follows social analysis, which is theorization of how the texts are a product of the social surroundings. Critical discourse analysis with Fairclough's (2010) threefold thus method offers the study of taboo language a framework in which to examine linguistic features with the cultural setting of the discursive practice taken into account as a major factor in language use.

### 3.2. Previous research on taboo language

Taboo language is not yet a popular topic of research in critical discourse analysis, but properties of it have been studied previously regarding varying forms of discourse. Taboos are ideological in nature: they express social norms and values. According to Ruanglertsilp (2022), "conversational discourse usually express ideologically based opinions" (p. 6), which is justification for why ideologies can be derived from linguistic elements. The connection between linguistics and ideology has been researched in several different branches of study with a discourse analytic approach. From a linguistic standpoint, Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2017) researched graffiti as a way of expressing controversial subjects and ideologies otherwise suppressed. Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2017) applied critical discourse analysis with the concept of euphemism and dysphemism in order to examine college students' attitudes in graffiti. Taking more of a cultural critical discourse analysis



approach, Ruanglertsilp (2022) focused on hidden feminist ideologies on an album by Ariana Grande. The study focused on Grande as a public persona and the themes conveyed with lyrics instead of necessarily taboo topics, but Ruanglertsilp (2022) offers insight into implementing ideological analysis on lyrics. Regardless of the differing approaches, according to the studies by Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2017) and Ruanglertsilp (2022) on ideology, both graffiti and song lyrics are forms of free self-expression with cultural settings as a framing factor.

Many have been attracted to political studies and the use of rhetoric, such as Crespo-Fernández (2018) in a study of euphemism and discursive strategies in the U.S. political system. Political settings provide an effective space for exploring ideology-driven rhetoric for the reason that political speech consists of agendas and representatives need support from their audiences. In pursuit of unraveling political rhetoric, Crespo-Fernández (2018) relies on the groundwork produced by Allan and Burrige (1991) and focuses on euphemism as a way of avoiding topics (i.e. taboos) but also on the contrary, dysphemistic expressions in displaying criticism. Thus, euphemism and dysphemism can be used as “a protective shield or as a weapon” (Crespo-Fernández, 2018, p. 4; Allan and Burrige, 1991). The study of discourse in political practices in the United States by Crespo-Fernández (2018) reveals that euphemism is used in political speech as a tactic to save face, which allows political representatives to direct criticism towards opponents and touchy subjects. Euphemism, in turn, is considered a means of ideological speech in supporting positive self-expression, but extends to a negative dimension as well: in political discourse, euphemism constructs ‘double-speak’, where the expression functions as a malicious way of concealing the truth (Crespo-Fernández, 2018).

The previous studies discussed above display how critical discourse analysis can be employed in research of taboo language in discourse. Song lyrics are a form of free self-expression governed by cultural settings, and euphemism and dysphemism are the linguistic elements that express ideological values. Discourse, ideology and euphemism are always socially and culturally situated, which is why they must be researched in context. Critical discourse analysis studies on lyrics, ideologies and the use of euphemism produce a basis for exploring taboo language in lyrical texts and how taboos are affected by culture.

### 3.3. Euphemism

In order to explain and exemplify the concepts of taboo language found in the research material, this study draws on research conducted by Allan and Burrige (1991), who have tackled the phenomenon from the perspective of linguistics. Their research focuses on euphemism and dysphemism, which are the critical means for taboo language. Allan and Burrige (1991) approach the properties of euphemism and dysphemism with lexicology, a method that I depart from for the analysis of Taylor Swift's albums *folklore* and *evermore*. For the purposes of studying taboo language in the selected song lyrics, I employ a semantic approach.

Taboo language operates with varying linguistic functions. Taboos can be avoided altogether, or discussed with modifying expressions. In order to avoid a dispreferred expression, or "to shield a speaker from the consequences of giving offence" (Allan & Burrige, 1991, p. 1) the speaker comes up with ways to circumvent it and yet imply the intended message. The method in which a taboo can be expressed is called a euphemism. It is important to note that euphemisms are also used for "avoiding the mildly distasteful" (Allan & Burrige, 1991, p. 13), and for that reason taboo topics are not always harsh in nature. Euphemisms are "face-saving ways of communication" (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 29), that can be further divided into subcategories, of which central for these purposes are *verbal play*, *substitution*, *remodeling*, *circumlocution*, *hyperbole* and *understatement*. For the sake of the theme of 'folklore' in this study, the use of a proverb is also considered as a strategy to avoid expressing a taboo. Proverbs are associated with cultural folklore, and have been researched in relation to taboo (e.g. Ackerley, 2007; Palmer, 2007; Sayi, 2019). In what follows, I provide definitions and examples of the different kinds of euphemisms found in the research material.

*Verbal play* includes figurative expression and metaphor. Metaphor is a way of understanding a concept through the properties of another; Allan and Burrige (1991) use 'go to the happy hunting grounds' as a metaphor for 'die' (p. 15). Use of metaphor is sometimes overlooked in everyday conversations: people make use of sayings such as 'cold feet' or 'time is money' without even thinking about it, which might be a contributor in that many euphemisms are metaphoric. Metaphors are usual for settings with lyricism and poetry, where they are called "artful euphemisms" (Allan & Burrige, 1991, p. 210).

It is worth noting that in the analysis section of this thesis, figurative expressions are divided into metaphor and simile. Here is a brief explanation of the two with the help of Ritchie (2012) and my own examples that are common and almost cliché. Standard metaphor is thought of as the

'traditional' comparison between two things: "I was blue" is an expression for feelings of sadness. Simile, by contrast, is recognizable with the use of 'like' or 'as': "You felt like a summer evening" illustrates feelings of light and warmth. Simile makes an explicit comparison between two objects, while standard metaphor is often more difficult to detect.

*Remodeling* is similar to *substitution*, in which a word is replaced with another one (Allan & Burrige, 1991, pp. 15-17): in a remodeling, an unpreferred expression is altered enough to lift the burden of the taboo. An often cited example of a remodelling is the swearword 'fuck' to 'frick', where 'frick' is used in place of an offense, but the altered expression does not carry the same amount of impoliteness. Remodellings make changes to the original expression, but slight enough for it to still be recognizable: in the example of 'frick' to 'fuck', the structure of the word is almost identical and the word begins and ends with the same letters.

*Circumlocution* refers to a tabooed term with a series of related words, which imply the original word. As with wordplay and metaphor, also circumlocutions are often figurative: for example, 'toilet' becomes 'the little girls' room' (Allan & Burrige, 1991, p. 16). Circumlocution is a relatively easy way to make new euphemisms: any word can be referred to with their characteristics. The usually avoided term 'diarrhea' can be circumlocuted as 'having an upset stomach', or 'menstruation' as 'that time of the month.'

*Hyperbole* is overstatement and contrary to *understatement*. Hyperbole is a type of exaggeration that is usually not taken in a literal sense. Hyperbole and understatement are often present in everyday expressions: one could say 'I am so hungry I could eat a cow!' and not mean a literal cow, and for understatement, the verb 'sleep' can replace 'die' (Allan & Burrige, 1991, p. 18). In addition to everyday expressions, overstatement is usual in literary contexts.

*A proverb* is a saying that portrays insight or advice to a topic, often with figurative or poetic elements. Proverbs have existed throughout history and are common in folklore as tools to share insight or knowledge between people. Proverbs are culturally located and therefore have culture-specific variation, but Schipper (2010) notes that proverbs about women are similar throughout the world: in various cultures, there is a proverb about 'the good wife', which is described to be a 'perfect woman and a partner', whereas a bad woman is "blamed endlessly" (Schipper, 2010, p. 105). This is an important remark for the present analysis of proverbs of infidelity, because femininity plays a part in the findings about proverb: the lyrics on the album *folklore* utilize a proverb about 'the good wife' with a feminist approach (in section 4.1.3). The

notion about feminism illustrates how proverbs are used in language, and moreover, in the lyrics by Swift to depict ideologies on subjects.

## 4. Analysis

In this section of research, the analysis is carried out with the methods of critical discourse analysis and the concepts from Allan and Burrige (1991) in mind. The analysis was conducted in steps: First, in the textual and interdiscursive analysis, all euphemistic elements were distinguished and separated into categories of euphemism that they belong to. The categories are verbal play, hyperbole, circumlocution, substitution, remodeling, and proverb. From the cases of euphemism, I drew up themes that contribute to the narration of infidelity, and the examples are explored under the theme they depict. In section 4.1., an interpretation and a semantic analysis of meaning is provided under each euphemism. Second, a social analysis is presented in section 4.2., which provides an explanation and discussion of why Swift may have utilized taboo language in the song lyrics.

There are 24 instances of euphemism in the material, and some of them belong in more than one category. However, in such cases, I have included the euphemisms in only the category that they suit the best. In certain lines there are several tools of euphemism, but the lyrics could not be separated in order to understand context, and for that reason some lyrics appear more than once.

### 4.1. Textual and interdiscursive analysis: identifying and interpreting euphemisms

From the analysis of data, I found two main features that are in contradiction to each other and thus, create a conflict. That is, positive emotions (lust, admiration and passion) are in contrast to negative emotions (guilt, shame, betrayal and loss), but the negative aspect of infidelity is highlighted and emphasized. Contrarily to the depiction of emotions, there is a passive voice that comments on infidelity from a general point of view.

I have divided the euphemisms under the themes they are used for: 1. depiction of conflicting emotions surrounding infidelity; 2. depiction of hiding and understating infidelity; and 3. social commentary on infidelity. The categories of euphemism that display the conflict of emotions are metaphor and hyperbole; for hiding and understating infidelity the categories are circumlocution, substitution and remodelling; and for the commentary on infidelity as a phenomenon, proverb. The

means of euphemism are alphabetized A-F., whereas examples of euphemism from the research material are numbered consecutively, up to 24. The examples of euphemism are introduced in single quotation marks before the lyrics of the song are presented.

#### 4.1.1. Depiction of conflicting emotions surrounding infidelity

This section discusses metaphor and hyperbole as methods for displaying a conflict of emotions. With metaphor and hyperbole, the negative emotions are shown to be in contrast to the positive: in the instances of the speaker feeling lust, they are also accompanied by guilt and shame. The cheater is in a constant inner battle with their emotions, and metaphor and hyperbole are suitable devices for depicting the intensity of it.

##### A. Metaphor

Positive emotions surrounding infidelity arise from songs where the speaker is the one cheating, but they are typically accompanied by the negative. The conflict of desire hand-in-hand with pain is succeeded with metaphor in *illicit affairs*, *ivy*, *willow* and *no body, no crime*, where the speaker describes feeling lust and love as strong as 'fire' or rather 'a blaze', as well as the other person making them 'glow', and them being 'a drug' or 'a prize'. However, these feelings are overshadowed by unhealthiness, dirtiness, bending rules and stealing.

The lyrics of *illicit affairs* employs metaphor to illustrate an inner conflict:

1. 'a drug that provides a high'

A dwindling, mercurial high

A drug that only worked the first few hundred times

(illicit affairs)

The experience associated with a drug is a euphoria, and a high is considered a state of invincibility and power. But after a high comes the low: drugs are addictive and destructive, and usually the user has to increase the dose to achieve the same effects. Swift is aware of the metaphor in *illicit affairs* and utilizes it to convey the powerfulness of the emotions. 'A drug that only worked the first few hundred times' creates a paradox with 'only' and 'first few hundred times', which implies the speaker breaking the rules of commitment several times in chasing 'the high.'

Lines from the song *ivy* contain several metaphors that depict conflict, stealing and passion:

1. 'an incandescent glow that is tarnished but grand',

Your touch brought forth an incandescent glow  
Tarnished but so grand

2. 'hand as a promise to another person',

My pain fits in the palm of your freezing hand  
Taking mine, but it's been promised to another

3. 'begged and borrowed time',

On begged and borrowed time

4. 'love as a fire and a blaze in the dark'

So yeah, it's a fire  
It's a goddamn blaze in the dark

(ivy)

The speaker acknowledges the unfaithfulness they have delved into. The unmarital relationship is pictured with metaphors of light and hotness, which are aspects associated with happiness and passion. There is a contradiction in the speaker's inner feelings: they experience pain having feelings of affection for another person. The speaker being involved in a prior relationship is evident from their hand as promised to another: it implies a proposal of marriage and, thus that the speaker is in a committed relationship. However, the situation does not allow them to be together, and they are pursuing the relationship on time that is not permitted for them: it is 'begged and borrowed.'

The lyrics in *willow* compare a relationship to a game:

5. 'cheating in a game to win the person that is the prize'

Like you were a trophy or a champion ring  
And there was one prize I'd cheat to win

(willow)

Here, simile is used to compare the love interest to a reward usually received after competition. The implication of a competition in itself directs the listener to think that there were multiple competitors for a person, which indicates cheating. The attributions of 'a trophy', 'a champion

ring' and 'prize' imply that the result of the competition is very desirable. Interestingly, the term 'cheat' is mentioned, and in the setting of a competition it is polysemous: on one hand, there is a literal sense of bending the rules to win, but on the other, 'cheat' could be interpreted as a verb for infidelity.

Another instance of simile is in *no body, no crime*:

6. 'it smells like infidelity'

Este's been losing sleep

Her husband's acting different, and it smells like infidelity

(no body, no crime)

The conflict in this metaphor differs from the previous songs, because there is a change in narrative. The change directs the conflict to be on 'Este' who suspects that they are being cheated on, while the man is hiding his infidelity. The line begins with narration of 'Este' losing sleep due to her husband's actions, and this is then explicitly referred to as 'smelling like infidelity.' Even though the mention of infidelity is not completely avoided, the metaphorical way of describing it softens the expression: the speaker is not sure if the husband is cheating and there is only a doubt. The possible reasons for the explicit mention of 'infidelity' in *no body, no crime* are discussed in section 4.2.

## B. Hyperbole

Hyperbole is used to convey similar attributions of conflict as metaphor, but also to overexaggerate the experience.

A line in *illicit affairs* depicts the speaker's inner emotions:

7. 'a godforsaken mess'

Look at this godforsaken mess that you made me

(illicit affairs)

In *illicit affairs*, the speaker directs their feelings of uncertainty and confusion towards the person they are cheating with. With 'godforsaken mess' the speaker acknowledges that they are going against what is generally acceptable in a relationship, but extends it far enough to say that even God would abandon such behavior.

A line in *ivy* is similar to *illicit affairs*:

8. 'a war, goddamn fight for my life'

So yeah, it's a war

It's the goddamn fight for my life

(ivy)

The line in *ivy* utilizes hyperbole metaphorically when comparing the inner conflict to a war. War is typically a fight with two entities and has two possible endings, but the results are destructive in any case. Additionally, the conflict is present with the speaker describing themselves as 'a godforsaken mess' and the feelings as 'the fight of their life.'

#### 4.1.2. Depiction of hiding and understating infidelity

This section discusses circumlocution, substitution and remodeling as methods for displaying secrecy, lying and hiding. Moreover, the concealing of a relationship is depicted with euphemisms that diminish the severity of being unfaithful.

##### C. Circumlocution

Circumlocution is the most applied method found in the research material with nine (9) instances, and it is utilized to illustrate hiding a relationship from others and lying about it. Secrecy and lying are evident from descriptions of meeting places and times: people taking part in the cheating meet in cars, parking lots and secluded bars after night time. Verbs employed to describe cheating include 'acting different', 'sneaking in', 'waiting for a signal to meet' and 'playing hide-and-seek.' Sexuality emerges in a few instances in relation to hiding the relationship from others. Lying is encouraged regarding sexual encounters: telling friends they are going out for a run instead of meeting up with someone. In addition to hiding a secret relationship, the expression of infidelity is understated in cases where it is either already known but accepted (in *mad woman* and *tolerate it*) or where the speaker is cheated on and broken up with.

Lines in *cardigan* states meeting locations:

9. 'playing hide-and-seek'

10. 'kissing in cars and downtown bars'

Playing hide-and-seek and giving me your weekends



To kiss in cars and downtown bars was all we needed

(cardigan)

The lyrics of *cardigan* give the impression that the participants meet in secret with 'playing hide-and-seek' and 'kissing in cars and downtown bars'. The locations where they meet are cars and bars, which both have qualities of privacy and hiding from others.

The song *illicit affairs* continues with secret meetings:

11. 'going for a run'
12. 'meetings in parking lots'

Tell your friends you're out for a run  
You'll be flushed when you return

What started in beautiful rooms  
Ends with meetings in parking lots

(illicit affairs)

The lines of *illicit affairs* imply secrecy with the imperative 'tell your friends you're out for a run' as a request to lie about where they are actually headed. 'You'll be flushed when you return' references a sexual activity that takes place on the secret rendezvous. The song *illicit affair* also makes another reference to the before-mentioned car as a location as they 'meet in parking lots.'

Lines in *willow* focus on verbs that depict secrecy:

13. 'sneaking in'
14. 'meeting after dark'

Head on the pillow, I could feel you sneaking in  
Wait for the signal and I'll meet you after dark

(willow)

The song *willow* continues the theme of a hidden relationship. 'Head on the pillow, I could feel you sneaking in' and 'wait for the signal and I'll meet you after dark' both refer to meetings taking place at night. 'Waiting for a signal' further implies having to look out for a time when it is safe for the two to meet.

In *no body, no crime*, the cheater is investing in someone new:

15. 'drinking alcohol with someone else and bying them jewelry'

She says, "That ain't my Merlot on his mouth,  
that ain't my jewelry on our joint account"

(no body, no crime)

The lyrics of *no body, no crime* and the quotations "That ain't my Merlot on his mouth, that ain't my jewelry on our joint account", in particular, express a woman talking about her husband acting odd. Claiming that it is not 'my Merlot' and 'my jewelry' that the husband is drinking and buying, points out that there is another person in the picture.

Circumlocution in *ivy* is metaphorical:

16. 'hand as a promise to someone else'

My pain fits in the palm of your hand  
Taking mine, but it's been promised to another

(ivy)

The lines in *ivy* apply circumlocution with 'hand as a promise to someone', which is a metaphorical expression that suggests an affair. 'Hand as a promise' contains properties of marriage, since traditionally a man asks for the woman's hand in marriage. The speaker is either engaged or married, but still offering the hand to be taken by someone else.

A line in *it's time to go* plays with implication:

17. 'looking at another person in a certain way'

Or that moment again, he's insisting that friends look each other like that

(it's time to go)

The line in *it's time to go* and, more specifically, the expression 'look at each other like that' requires taking a look at implication. Since the speaker and 'he' are arguing about the way he looked at a friend, there is an existing presupposition that friends usually look at each other in a platonic way. Therefore, people that are 'more than friends' look at each other in a distinct manner, which the speaker has noticed. Additionally, 'that moment again' implies that the discussion of him

looking at a friend in a non-platonic way has been had previously, and there is a suspicion of infidelity.

#### D. Substitution

Substitution is a tricky category for the reason that the examples fit into other categories as well: 'side flings' and 'meeting someone' could count as a circumlocution and counting in 'indiscretions', all three are forms of understatement. However, these examples fit substitution most accurately, which is why I have chosen to examine them here.

The song *mad woman* discusses a husband cheating on his wife:

##### 18. 'side flings'

The master of spin has a couple side flings

(mad woman)

The word substituted for 'side fling' could be for example 'mistress', 'lover' or 'doxy.' 'Side fling' implicates that the nature of the infidelity is casual and insignificant.

The speaker in *tolerate it* is desperate to keep a relationship alive:

##### 19. 'indiscretions'

I take your indiscretions all in good fun

(tolerate it)

'Indiscretions' is similar to 'side flings' in that the term could be replaced with 'cheating', 'love affairs' or 'sexual relationships.' 'Indiscretion' only points out that the other person is committing hurtful and immoral acts towards the speaker, but understating the nature of infidelity.

The speaker in *right where you left me* has been left by a man who cheated:

##### 20. 'met someone'

I could feel the mascara run

You told me that you met someone

(right where you left me)

'Meeting someone' is an idiom and associated with meeting someone in a romantic way. The indication of meeting someone is confirmed with the speaker 'feeling the mascara run' which is a

circumlocutionary way of expressing that they are crying. As with the examples above, ‘met someone’ is an uneventful way to express that someone is cheating.

## E. Remodeling

Not many cases of remodelings were found in the data, but this instance in *cardigan* is of importance.

### 21. Sensual politics

(cardigan)

For context, the song *cardigan* discusses a past relationship that required an element of secrecy and hints at another case of competition between lovers. ‘Sensual’ means subtle or gentle, which could refer to the relationship being delicate, but the phrase ‘sensual politics’ is vastly similar to ‘sexual politics.’ ‘Sexual politics’ is a concept and a theory of feminism that emerged in the 1970’s concerning the inequality regarding attitudes towards sexual relations between genders in a patriarchal society (Millet, 1971). Considering the similarities and themes between the song and the feminist theory, it seems more than a coincidence that the phrase is used in the lyrics. ‘Sexual’ having been changed to ‘sensual’ is a key element of a euphemistic remodeling: it has a similar phonetic structure and meaning, and points the implication to the same direction. The remodeling suggests that ‘sex’ is an unfavorable topic, and that there is a physical relationship that involves some negotiation, and perhaps lying, to work.

### 4.1.3. Social commentary on infidelity

This section discusses proverb as a method for commenting on infidelity as a social phenomenon. Since proverb is usually utilized to express an observation or the state of affairs, it reveals the attitudes and opinions carried by the speaker.

## F. Proverb

With proverb, the lyrics by Swift comment on the events of infidelity from a neutral narrative, but nevertheless remains opinionated. Both proverbs take a stance on the popular beliefs of infidelity. In *cardigan*, the narrative is that the person is judged for entertaining two people at the same time, and it is suggested they stop if they want to find ‘the one’, because the assumption is that people strive for monogamous relationships. In *mad woman*, the approach is feminist: the patriarchal norms tell

a married woman to stay in the marriage with a man even if he cheats and advice her to be aware of it. The narrator in the lyrics does not share these norms and rebels against them, displaying how the opinion on infidelity has shifted in women.

Lines in *cardigan* advice a cheater to stop:

22. 'A friend to all is a friend to none'

A friend to all, is a friend to none

Chase two girls, lose the one

(cardigan)

In *cardigan*, the song's narrator takes a stance towards the events that are unfolding. 'A friend to all is a friend to none' is a common proverb by Aristotle, that claims that a person can only be close to few people to stay reliable and truthful. Swift has extended the proverb with 'chase two girls, lose the one', which makes a straight reference to a person pursuing two women. The speaker is advising the person that if they continue to stay deceitful, they will end up losing 'the one' partner that is meant for them.

The lyrics of *mad woman* take a feminist approach:

23. 'Good wives always know'

The master of spin has a couple side flings

Good wives always know

She should be scathing like me but

No one likes a mad woman

(mad woman)

'Good wives always know' references the common scheme of proverbs that draw inspiration from the Bible and patriarchal norms. In *mad woman*, a good wife is considered to be aware and accept their husband's affairs, which further reinforces the belief that men are allowed to cheat but women have stay faithfully in the relationship. The speaker critiques this belief and claims they are judged to be a 'mad woman' if they require loyalty in a relationship.

## 4.2. Social analysis: explanation to infidelity in society

The themes surrounding discourse on infidelity give reason for why the topic is tabooed. As noted earlier, euphemism is used in language to save face of self and others. Furthermore, breaking a taboo and discussing a topic in an inappropriate manner leads to loss of respect from others. On the albums *folklore* and *evermore* by Taylor Swift, the use of euphemism occurs in instances where infidelity is implied and aspects of inner conflict and hiding are present. However, the song lyrics do not glorify the feelings of lust that arise, and quickly narrates them to produce a guilty conscience. Lying, sexuality, forbidden feelings of desire and feelings of pain are tainted by a dissonance, where a person's values and actions are in disagreement. Lying and deceiving a loved one creates a conflict between desire and morale, therefore birthing feelings of guilt and shame. Aspects of sexuality are muted, which could indicate that the emphasis is on the emotional toll of the cheating, or that it is more tabooed to relish in the sexual interests outside of a relationship. The expression of positive emotions appears to display why cheating occurs and tries to give justification for it, but the validation is contradicted by the description of the negative emotions.

From the inspection of the research material, it can be derived that taboo language and euphemism are utilized in every song on the albums *folklore* and *evermore* where infidelity is mentioned or the main topic. The exception to the pattern is in *no body, no crime*, where I made an interesting observation: Swift mentions infidelity directly. This is not the case with in any other song, which makes the song stand out from the rest. The distinction I made is in the narrative: *no body, no crime* is a story told from a third-person-perspective, whereas in all the other songs the first-person perspective is used. The use of the third-person allows for a more distant voice, which could be why writing about another person can be done more directly. In the other songs the first-person approach is personal and describes the narrator's inner emotions, therefore amplifying the need for taboo language.

Infidelity is a sensitive topic to all participants involved, and as seen from the song lyrics examined in this thesis, it generates emotions of hurt. Therefore, the ideology on infidelity in Swift's writing is that it is taboo to hurt someone by cheating on them. The required utilization of taboo language when talking about infidelity indicates that Swift finds cheating to create passionate emotions, but also distress and pain within both parties in the relationship. The guilt is a result of a inner conflict and fear of judgement from others, which manifests in the negative emotions being emphasized in the songwriting. This leads to the conclusion that the stance taken towards cheating on a partner in the cultural and social environment where the albums *folklore* and *evermore* were written is one of

disapproval: discussing infidelity that one has willingly executed on a partner is found distasteful, and could be harmful to one's face.

## 5. Conclusion

This study began with defining the rules of communication and how there are individual configurations between cultures in how interaction is structured. This results in cultures having specific views on how language should be used in communication. Culture and society are reflected in language use, because speakers gain communicative competence through socialization, which in turn transfers social norms and beliefs from the speech community to a speaker. Culture-specific language is present in taboo language, that is used when discussing topics that are considered to be offensive or unpleasant: commonly taboos surround topics such as bodily functions, sex and death. Taboo language functions with the use of euphemism, where the expression is altered to lift off the tabooed effect from the word.

The focus of this study was to investigate whether infidelity is a taboo on the albums *folklore* and *evermore* by Taylor Swift, and how the topic is discussed with possible taboo language. Applying Fairclough's method of critical discourse analysis (2010) it was concluded that there are 24 instances where euphemism is used to convey infidelity, and with the help of Allan and Burridge (1991) the instances were categorized according to the linguistic elements that were employed in constructing the euphemism. The forms of euphemism found in the eight songs examined in this study are metaphor, hyperbole, remodeling, circumlocution, substitution and proverb. Depending on what the euphemisms depict, they were divided into three themes, i.e. conflict of emotions, lying and secrecy and social commentary, and it was discovered that the categories of euphemism are employed for specific purposes. The conflict of emotions is illustrated with metaphor and hyperbole, lying and secrecy with circumlocution, substitution and remodelling, and social commentary with proverb. In the semantic analysis, it was noted that when using euphemisms, the negative aspect of infidelity is accentuated in comparison to the positive aspects: guilt is heavier than desire.

The songs discussing infidelity on the albums *folklore* and *evermore* showcase taboo language extensively and display ideologies through it: cheating is generally condemned, but some women fall under the expectation that they have to accept their partner's being unloyal. As the first-person narrator, Swift separates herself from this expectation, which demonstrates a contemporary feminist

opinion to infidelity that sees genders as equal. Equality is in this way extended to infidelity, and it is not accepted from either party in a relationship. However, in cases where the cheater is assumably a woman, the utilization of euphemism is more frequent. This could be because the stories of the songs are often narrated in the first-person, but evidence of a gender issue is present in the songs *no body*, *no crime* and *mad woman*. Both songs namely discuss a man as the cheater from a third-person perspective: in the former song the infidelity is suspected by his wife, whereas in the latter the wife is aware and accepts the cheating, which the narrator critiques. The treatment of a man cheating is different from when the cheater is a woman, where the speaker describes more emotions of guilt and a fear of getting caught. The increase in the use of euphemism and the need for saving face within the speaker could signal a contrast between genders: it is more taboo for a woman to cheat, but it is common and expected from a man. Further research on infidelity as a taboo in song lyrics would be beneficial focusing on differences between men and women, and more specifically, on how singer-songwriters of each gender use writing as a form of self-expression and how infidelity is discussed in relation to the gender and cultural background of the writer.



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