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**MENSTRUAL X-PHEMISMS IN THE CORPUS OF
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ENGLISH (COCA)
BA thesis**

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to gain insight into the use of menstrual X-phemisms in American English with the assistance of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). This study seeks to determine which X-phemisms are used most frequently and in which contexts they appear. The expressions will be categorised based on the aspect of menstruation they reference. The first section of the thesis demonstrates how taboos influence language and explores euphemisms, dysphemisms, and orthophemisms. Additionally, this thesis covers prominent theories on the origins of the menstrual taboo and examines past research on menstrual expressions. The second section of the thesis utilises COCA to investigate 21 menstrual X-phemisms.

Keywords: X-phemisms, text corpora, menstruation, taboo language, American English

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INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is part of the menstrual cycle that is characterised by vaginal bleeding, and the process aims to prepare the female body for ovulation and potential pregnancy (Thiyagarajan et al 2024: para. 1). Common symptoms of menstruation include abdominal cramps, tender breasts, fluctuating emotions, bloating, headaches, muscle and joint pain, and fatigue (The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada n.d.). Generally, menstruation begins around the age of 12 and ends with menopause around mid-40s to mid-50s, and the vaginal blood released during menstruation is collected with the help of menstrual hygiene products, such as sanitary pads, tampons, menstrual cups, and period underwear (National Health Service 2023). Despite menstruation being a normal bodily function that impacts roughly half the population of the world, it is a widely tabooed subject.

By saying menstruation is taboo, what is meant is that interacting with a menstruating person or menstrual blood is discouraged. As Allan (2018: 1) explains, when something metaphysical or physical is referred to as taboo, interacting with that thing is tabooed. Historically, menstruation has been tabooed around the world, but not all cultures view menstruation disparagingly (Gottlieb 2020: 151–152). However, in liberal Western societies, menstruation is viewed negatively, mainly due to the lingering impacts of old Abrahamic cultural attitudes (Gottlieb 2020: 146). According to Bobel (2010: 32), followers of Judaism once believed that menstruating women were a source of pollution, which caused menstruation to become taboo.

Discussing tabooed subjects may cause embarrassment or offence, and the desire to prevent conflict has influenced language to adopt means of avoiding addressing taboos directly. According to Allan and Burrige (2006: 33), euphemisms are often used to censor oneself to avoid embarrassment or offence. However, sometimes people prefer to use dysphemisms, expressions with offensive connotations (Allan and Burrige 2006: 31–32). It is also possible

to use expressions that do not have strong connotations, which are known as orthophemisms (Allan and Burrige 2006: 33). The term *X-phemism* can be used to encompass euphemisms, dysphemisms, and orthophemisms (Allan and Burrige 2006: 33). Tabooed topics usually have various X-phemisms. For instance, the orthophemism *toilet* can be replaced with the euphemism *loo* or the dysphemism *shithouse* (Allan and Burrige 2006: 32).

Many languages have a variety of menstrual X-phemisms. In general, menstrual expressions often depict menstruation as unpleasant while referencing common aspects of menstruation, such as its cyclical nature and the physical discomfort it causes (Allan and Burrige 2006: 169). Clue (2017) collected over 5,000 menstrual expressions used by speakers of different languages from over 190 countries. The X-phemisms frequently reference the characteristics and symptoms of menstruation and employ clever comparisons. Some expressions collected by Clue (2017) note the red colour of menstrual blood. For example, the Italian *palloncino rosso* ‘red balloon’ and the French *les anglais ont débarqué dans ma culotte* ‘the British army landed in my panty’, which compares the unwanted arrival of menstruation to the arrival of the red-coated English during the Napoleonic wars. X-phemisms that liken menstruation to a visitor can also be found among the expressions Clue (2017) collected. The Russian *гости (из Краснодара)* ‘guests from Krasnodar’, which references both guests and the colour red, in the name of the city, and the Danish *besøg fra Rødby* ‘visitors from Rødby’ compare the temporary nature of menstruation to the temporary stay of a visitor. English, too, has many expressions for menstruation. For instance, the periodical nature of menstruation is noted in *period* and *monthlies* and menstrual hygiene products in *on the rag* and *riding the cotton pony*. Many have observed references to aspects of menstruation among menstrual expressions, including Joffe (1948), who notably created seven categories for American English menstrual X-phemisms based on the aspects they reference.

It is possible to discover which menstrual X-phemisms are used with the assistance of text corpora. A text corpus is a large computer-searchable body of texts which can provide insight into language usage (Davies 2020). There are many types of text corpora, such as monolingual, multilingual, diachronic, synchronic, learner, and specialised corpora (Sketch Engine n.d.a). Text corpora can be used to study many aspects of language, including the frequency of words or phrases, collocations, patterns in which words or phrases appear, syntactic constructions, meanings and usage of words and phrases, how language has changed over time, and dialectal variation (Davies 2020). In short, text corpora are valuable tools for studying different facets of language.

This study will be based on the Corpus of Contemporary American English, or COCA (Davies 2008-). According to Davies (2020: 1), English-Corpora.org is the most widely used collection of corpora, and it hosts a total of seventeen different corpora, including COCA, a genre-balanced corpus that consists of one billion words from texts from 1990–2019 in American English. For this study, COCA proves to be the best option for several reasons. Firstly, a corpus of American English is necessary to study American expressions. Secondly, COCA is a large corpus, which will be beneficial when studying less frequent lexical items, such as X-phemisms. Thirdly, the texts in COCA are evenly divided into eight genres — BLOG, WEB, TV/M, SPOK, FIC, MAG, NEWS, ACAD — each genre containing around 120–130 million words. The genres give a broader overview of American English and may provide insight into what kind of X-phemisms are used and in which contexts. Fourthly, COCA contains texts from 1990–2019, which were written after research into menstrual X-phemisms in American English began. Thus, the opportunity to compare the results from COCA with the results from earlier studies on menstrual X-phemisms emerges, revealing how these expressions have changed. Finally, a corpus will have data, even though menstruation is a delicate subject. Some individuals may be reluctant to answer questions on menstruation due to its sensitive

nature. While texts discussing taboo topics may be less common in corpora than those discussing non-taboo topics, utilising a corpus eliminates the need to depend on questionnaires.

Some notes on the language used in this thesis are necessary. Discussions on menstruation tend to be profoundly gendered. However, this study aims to use gender-neutral language wherever possible to be inclusive of all people who menstruate because, as Kosher et al (2023: 9) emphasise, ‘not all women menstruate, and not all menstruators are women’. Some studies have examined X-phemisms used by transgender and nonbinary menstruators (e.g., the research conducted by Kosher et al 2023), yet this study will not address those expressions, as it focuses on American English in general. Still, this thesis will use gender-neutral language unless the referenced sources use gendered language. Seeing as those studies, such as Joffe (1948) and Ernster (1975), often focus on language use in contrast to men’s and were conducted when gender was viewed solely as binary, the vocabulary from those studies remains unchanged in this thesis. Additionally, many researchers use the term *euphemism* to encompass all X-phemistic expressions. In instances where the authors, such as Joffe (1948) and Ernster (1975), use the term *euphemism* to describe all X-phemisms, the term *X-phemism* will be used instead for clarity, as this study explores the differences between euphemisms, dysphemisms, and orthophemisms.

Scholars argue that the lack of menstrual research hinders the lives of menstruators and the process of normalising menstruation. According to Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2020: 186–187), the lack of discussion on menstruation enforces menstrual stigmas, which negatively impact menstruators’ health and social standing. Because the menstrual cycle is often dismissed, ridiculed, and concealed, there is a significant knowledge gap in menstrual scholarship that prevents effective change in the status of menstruation (Bobel 2020: 1). This thesis will aim to address the gap by exploring contemporary American English menstrual expressions. More specifically, 21 menstrual X-phemisms will be investigated in COCA. This

study will determine which X-phemisms are most frequently used in American English and determine the contexts in which these expressions appear by relying on COCA's genres. In addition, this study will classify the X-phemisms based on Joffe's (1948) categories to identify the aspects of menstruation that are most referenced in menstrual expressions used in American English and determine what they reveal about the use of menstrual X-phemisms.

This thesis is divided into two sections. The first section will explore taboos and X-phemisms, with a particular focus on menstrual taboos and expressions. The second section will begin by outlining the methods for selecting and searching the expressions in COCA. Following this, an overview of the relative frequencies of these X-phemisms will be provided, along with the distribution of menstrual expressions across genres. Finally, the second section will include the classification of the X-phemisms based on the categories created by Joffe (1948), finishing with a discussion of the results.

1. TABOOS, X-PHEMISMS AND TEXT CORPORA

This section of the thesis explains the key terms and concepts relevant to the study. It defines the term *taboo* and describes how taboos shape language. In addition, this section explores X-phemisms and explains how they are used. Furthermore, this section covers the most prevalent theories on how menstruation became a taboo topic, as well as notable studies on menstrual X-phemisms. Lastly, this section examines text corpora and their characteristics.

1.1. Taboos and language

Simply put, a taboo is a prohibition upheld by society against certain behaviours. According to Allan and Burridge (2006: 2), the word *taboo* originates from the Tongan *tabu*, which refers to forbidden behaviour. More specifically, Spears (1981: ix) defines taboos as 'religious prohibitions' that forbid certain behaviours by imposing penalties for violating them;

however, the term is commonly used to describe any proscription supported by social custom. Furthermore, taboos are specific to communities, periods in time, and contexts, and for a behaviour to be prohibited, it must be believed to be harmful (Allan and Burridge 2006: 11). Essentially, a taboo forbids behaviour that is deemed unsafe by threatening anyone who violates it with repercussions. According to Allan and Burridge (2006: 1), the consequences of breaking taboos can be physical or metaphysical. Whether intentional or accidental, violating a taboo can disadvantage or even endanger the offender or the community, for instance, by leading to unsuccessful hunting trips or illnesses and potentially death for the offender or a relative (Allan 2018: 6). In summary, a taboo is the societal prohibition of certain behaviour due to the fear of metaphysical or physical danger or punishment. These prohibitions can be linked with specific times, communities, and contexts; for instance, menstruation is tabooed in many, but not all, cultures.

Language can also be tabooed, and this phenomenon is known as a verbal or a language taboo. Just as taboos apply to behaviour, language taboos refer to ‘instances of language behaviour’ (Allan 2018: 1). Spears (1981: ix) explains that verbal taboos are proscriptions on specific words and topics of discussion, and they are generally sustained by societal etiquette. Indeed, verbal taboos have a specific function in communication. According to Burridge (2006: 455), people typically intend to behave in a way that does not cause offence. Therefore, understanding verbal taboos helps people avoid using expressions that may provoke a negative reaction (Burridge 2006: 461). Using tabooed expressions might result in losing what is referred to in Anglo communities as *face*, or ‘one’s public self-image’ (Allan and Burridge 2006: 32–33). Thus, losing face is the punishment for engaging in tabooed language behaviour. Verbal taboos can also stem from the belief that some words have supernatural power, such as words about death, and uttering powerful words must be avoided (Spears 1981: x). Furthermore, as Allan and Burridge (2006: 38) point out, verbal taboos are avoided to prevent conflict with or

defend oneself from spirits, gods, and other metaphysical beings. Because violating verbal taboos can cause loss of face or conflict with metaphysical powers, it is natural for languages to develop ways to circumvent using tabooed expressions.

One of the ways languages adapt to avoid tabooed expressions is by using euphemisms (Allan 2018: 19). Euphemisms are expressions used to replace ‘harsh or unacceptable’ expressions with ‘milder’ ones (Spears 1981: ix). Furthermore, Cameron (1995: 73) explains that a euphemism helps evade or soften the negative connotations that tabooed words have. To illustrate, *pass away* is a euphemism for *die* (Cameron 1995: 73). Thus, by helping avoid uttering tabooed expressions, euphemisms help save face. They also help prevent metaphysical danger. For instance, in Judaism, using the name of God is considered blasphemous, so the name is written without vowels, which creates the euphemism *YHVH* (Allan and Burridge 2006: 38). In general, a euphemism is understood as a word or expression that functions as a replacement for impolite and offensive language, as well as a means of preventing causing metaphysical danger.

A dysphemism is, in a sense, the opposite of a euphemism. According to Allan and Burridge (2006: 31), dysphemisms are generally tabooed words or phrases with offensive connotations. They are used to shame, demean, or express annoyance or condemnation of something or someone (Allan and Burridge 2006: 31). Dysphemisms intensify negative connotations and are ‘brutally negative’; for instance, a dysphemism for *die* is *kick the bucket* (Cameron 1995: 73). Although fear and dislike can be a motivating factor in both dysphemisms and euphemisms, dysphemisms are also motivated by hatred (Allan and Burridge 2006: 31). In addition, euphemisms are ‘preferred expressions’, or appropriate expressions in the given context, whereas dysphemisms are ‘dispreferred expressions’, or expressions that are not appropriate in the given context (Burridge 2006: 455–458). Essentially, a euphemism and a

dysphemism can both be used as substitutes for the same word or phrase (e.g., *die*), but they convey different attitudes towards the subject and are considered suitable in different contexts.

Some expressions are viewed as neutral, neither softening nor harshening. These expressions are known as orthophemisms and, like euphemisms, orthophemisms are preferred expressions, but they are more direct and less ‘sweet-sounding’ and ‘overly polite’ (Burridge 2006: 457). For example, the neutral term for *pass away* and *kick the bucket* is *die* (Cameron 1995: 73). Both orthophemisms and euphemisms are used for the benefit of the speaker and/or the hearer; however, orthophemisms are generally more literal and formal, whereas euphemisms and dysphemisms tend to be more colloquial and figurative (Allan and Burridge 2006: 33). Together, euphemisms, dysphemisms, and orthophemisms can be referred to as X-phemisms (Allan and Burridge 2006: 33). To illustrate, some X-phemisms for menstruating are the orthophemistic *menstruate*, the euphemistic *have a period* and the dysphemistic *bleed* (Allan and Burridge 2006: 32).

Interestingly, euphemisms can become dysphemisms and vice versa. A negative connotation can reattach itself to a euphemism through ‘contamination by the taboo topic’, causing it to become a dysphemism (Burridge 2006: 460). For instance, *mentally deranged* was once used with the meaning of ‘disturbed in the mind’, but the expressions became contaminated, and without the modifier *mentally*, it reduced to the meaning of ‘mad’ (Burridge 2006: 460). There may also be differences in whether people regard expressions as euphemistic, dysphemistic, or orthophemistic. Burridge (2006: 457) points out that the nature of the expression is determined by the context in which it is used — it is impossible to categorise words or phrases as strictly euphemistic, dysphemistic, or orthophemistic because people interpret expressions differently. However, people normally do sense that expressions are intrinsically somewhat X-phemistic, even out of context, by relying on knowledge of etiquette and social prejudices surrounding the subject (Burridge 2006: 457–458). Furthermore, Allan

and Burrige (2006: 32) claim that generally preferred expressions can be dysphemistic in certain contexts. For example, unironically using *loo* in a hyper-masculine setting may be dysphemistic, and the dysphemistic *shithouse* may be non-dysphemistic (Allan and Burrige 2006: 32). Essentially, a concept can have three forms of X-phemisms, but the choice of which X-phemism to use may depend on the effect the speaker intends to cause or avoid.

1.2. Menstrual taboos

Menstrual taboos are old and not unique to any single community — Coult (1963: 34) suggests that menstrual taboos may have appeared ‘independently and repeatedly’ in many societies due to observations of the potentially harmful effects of menstrual blood. While this study will primarily focus on menstrual taboos in Western societies, exploring the reasons menstruation became taboo may still provide insight into the use of different menstrual X-phemisms. The theories regarding the origins of menstrual taboos can be divided into three categories based on the reasons: 1) menstruation is perceived as something polluting, 2) menstruation functions as a means of exercising control over society, and 3) there is general contempt from non-menstruators toward the capabilities of menstruating bodies.

The first group of theories suggest that menstruation became taboo because it was believed to be polluting and, thus, symbolically dangerous. Such attitudes can be found in the Old Testament. According to Gottlieb (2020: 146), menstruation is often viewed as a curse in Western and Westernised cultures due to many people associating two stories about female bodies in the Book of Genesis and the Book of Leviticus. The Book of Genesis portrays the pain of childbirth as Eve’s punishment, or curse, for eating the forbidden fruit (Gottlieb 2020: 146). Meanwhile, the Book of Leviticus describes the pain of menstruation and outlines behavioural restrictions for menstruating women (Gottlieb 2020: 146). Gottlieb (2020: 146) argues that the two stories became intertwined, leading to the understanding that menstruation,

like the pain of childbirth, is a curse (Gottlieb 2020: 146). With menstruation being viewed as a curse in Jewish, Christian, and later Islamic traditions, it gained the ‘symbolic connotation’ of being polluting (Gottlieb 2020: 146–147). Moreover, the Book of Leviticus on its own also fortifies the understanding of menstruation as a source of pollution. The Book of Leviticus (15: 19–33) characterises the menstruating woman as unclean and as someone who contaminates the objects and people she touches (Delaney et al 1976: 33–34). In sum, the Old Testament has attached the fear of being polluted to menstruation, which has resulted in the menstrual taboo.

It has also been suggested that the menstrual taboo emerged due to fears of physical contagion as well as metaphysical pollution. According to Allan and Burrige (2006: 164), menstrual bleeding was believed to release the body of things that weaken it. During the Middle Ages, it was believed that menstrual blood spread diseases and harboured sullied spirits, which resulted in a menstruator’s participation in society being limited (Allan and Burrige 2006: 164). Delaney et al (1976: 5) also note that the belief that the menstruating woman has a ‘threatening supernatural power’ has caused menstruation to become taboo. The notion that menstrual blood was contagious persisted until less than a century ago. Ashley-Montagu (1940) suggested that the harmful effects of menstrual blood may have strengthened menstrual taboos. However, this theory emerged when the concept of ‘menotoxin’ shaped the understanding of menstrual blood. Dr Bela Schick observed in 1920 that a menstruating woman’s touch caused flowers to wilt more quickly than a non-menstruating woman’s touch, which he attributed to the so-called ‘menotoxin’; however, the idea of menstrual blood being toxic was disproven in the late 1950s (Druet 2024: para. 14). Nonetheless, countless cultures have believed menstrual blood or menstruating people spread illnesses and harmful spirits. Contact with either has been thought to contaminate, which has further enforced the menstrual taboo.

The second group of theories suggest that menstruation became taboo because it was used to exercise control over society. One of the most well-known theories of this kind comes

from Knight (1991), who speculates that women used menstruation to control sexual activity and, thus, influence men to hunt. Knight (1991) connects the lunar cycle with the menstrual cycle, suggesting that women withheld sex from men to motivate them to hunt in moonlight and provide women with food. However, Knight himself acknowledges that he is ‘constructing myth’ (1991: 5). Many aspects of his theory have been scrutinised, particularly the lack of substantial proof linking menstruation and lunar cycles (Science Writers at Clue 2019) and the assumption that all women were manipulative with sex and all men were promiscuous (Gero 1998: 11–12). Similarly to Knight, Lindenbaum (1972) claims that some cultures believe it is vital to distance men from the ‘polluting woman’ (i.e., the menstruating woman) to protect the man’s well-being. Lindenbaum (1972) suggests that separating the ‘polluting woman’ from the rest of the community functions as population control because it limits contact between men and women of fertile age. While Knight’s theory has been contested, Lindenbaum’s seems more credible, as it also relates to menstruation being viewed as a source of pollution. Interestingly, both Knight’s and Lindenbaum’s theories connect menstruation with the absence of sexual activity. Delaney et al (1976: 14–23), too, observe that menstruating women are discouraged from engaging in sexual activity due to various reasons, such as menstrual blood being polluting. It is possible, then, that the association between menstruation and sexual unavailability, assuming that sexual availability is preferable, could have also contributed to menstruation becoming taboo.

The third group includes theories that suggest that the menstrual taboo originates from negative attitudes towards the human body and the female body specifically. Many of the body’s intimate aspects have motivated taboos. For example, sexuality, bodily functions, detritus, and effluvia are private aspects of the human body which are often considered taboo topics (Allan and Burrige 2006: 144). Additionally, Burrige and Benczes (2018: 184) argue that taboos surrounding ‘embarrassing’ topics, such as the body and its functions, were present

in the past and still exist nowadays. As menstruation fits into the categories of sexuality, bodily functions, and human waste, it is, therefore, heavily tabooed. Moreover, the female body's abilities compared to the male body's could also have influenced the menstrual taboo. Montgomery (1974: 138) speculates that Bruno Bettelheim's concept of 'vagina envy' has resulted in menstruation being tabooed due to men supposedly feeling envious and resentful towards women's ability to give birth. The fact that menstruation is an intimate bodily function unique to individuals who can become pregnant has likely strengthened the menstrual taboo.

Despite its ancient origins, scholars argue that the menstrual taboo continues to exist in the modern world. Centuries of missionary work and military action have spread the Old Testament understanding of menstruation, and these interpretations are prominent and accepted around the globe (Gottlieb 2020: 147). Furthermore, although the notion that menstruating women wilt flowers by touching them has been disregarded, the very fact that menstrual X-phemisms exist indicates that discussing menstruation still causes embarrassment (Ernster 1975: 3). Additionally, Bell (2017) argues that despite the efforts to normalise treating menstruation without shame, such as the 2010 Kotex 'Break the Cycle' campaign, it seems that the menstrual taboo remains present in the contemporary world. Thus, it is understandable that people may prefer to use various X-phemisms when discussing menstruation to save themselves or others from discomfort.

1.3. Menstrual X-phemisms

Research into menstrual X-phemisms dates to the last century. One of the earliest notable studies, conducted by Joffe (1948), collected menstrual expressions from interviews and different printed sources in Irish, Polish, French, Italian, German, East European Jewish, and American cultures. Joffe (1948) observes the differences in menstrual X-phemisms over time and between those cultures and argues that the vocabulary used to discuss menstruation

reveals the societal attitudes towards it. She claims that, in the United States, menstrual expressions portray menstruation as something inconvenient (Joffe 1948: 181). Furthermore, Joffe (1948: 183) argues that the older 'veiled' expressions were obsolete, and many new menstrual X-phemisms, like 'slang' words in general, were coined during and after World War II.

Another study suggests menstrual X-phemisms depend on the speaker's identity (Ernster 1975). Ernster (1975: 6) proposes that how a person uses menstrual X-phemisms is influenced by their sex and finds that women use more varied menstrual expressions than men. However, Ernster's sample of informants is not very representative because the expressions were collected from chance acquaintances (Ernster 1975: 5). The functions and nature of menstrual X-phemisms have also been studied. Delaney et al (1976: 100) point out that menstrual expressions often aim to conceal the subject matter and are generally negative or 'overtly gross' to deflect from embarrassment. Delaney et al (1976: 100) argue that most menstrual expressions, especially American ones, have a 'certain crude ingenuity'. In summary, previous research on menstrual X-phemisms has primarily focused on collecting expressions, examining who uses them, and analysing the nature of these X-phemisms.

Menstrual X-phemisms can be divided into categories based on the aspect of menstruation they reference. For instance, Joffe (1948) created the following seven categories for American menstrual X-phemisms: 1) PERIODICITY OR TIME, 2) BLOOD OR THE COLOUR RED, 3) VISITORS, 4) PERSONS (MALE OR FEMALE), 5) ILLNESS, INCONVENIENCE, OR DISABILITY, 6) MATERIAL CULTURE, and 7) SEXUAL UNAVAILABILITY. These categories match some of the theories on why menstruation became taboo, which suggests that the origin of the menstrual taboo impacts the way people create and use menstrual X-phemisms. For example, ILLNESS, INCONVENIENCE, OR DISABILITY could correspond with the group of theories which consider menstruation as a curse, and SEXUAL UNAVAILABILITY could correspond with the theories that

suggest menstruation limits contact between women and men during menstruation. Furthermore, the fact that some menstrual expressions intend to deflect or cause embarrassment may correlate with the group of theories that propose that the menstrual taboo stems from the body, especially the female body, being tabooed and, hence, embarrassing. Although Joffe (1948: 184) acknowledges that some X-phemisms do not fit into any of these categories, and an expression can belong to more than one category, several researchers, such as Boone (1954) and Ernster (1975), have used Joffe's framework.

It is important to remember that as time changes, so do the X-phemisms people use. For instance, despite Joffe's (1948) claim that obscuring expressions were becoming less common, roughly 30 years later, Delaney et al (1976: 100) observed that menstrual X-phemisms generally do conceal the subject matter. Joffe (1948: 183) also noted that the euphemism *period* was considered old-fashioned, whereas Ernster (1975: 4) states that *period* was common during the time of her study. The decline of certain expressions could be related to shifting cultural attitudes. According to Bobel (2010: 8), menstrual activism emerged during the second half of the 20th century and continues to develop nowadays. It is possible that menstrual activism has influenced which expressions are used today compared to a few decades ago.

1.4. Text corpora

A text corpus is a searchable collection of texts (Davies 2020: 1). Text corpora can consist of billions of words, and the data for corpora have been collected from actual language users (Sketch Engine n.d.a: para. 1). It is essential to understand what kind of corpus to use for one's research. One aspect to consider is the representativity of the corpus. Representativity refers to how accurately the corpus and its texts represent actual language usage (English-Corpora.org n.d.). Representativity may refer to time periods, dialects, or genres; for instance, texts in a historical corpus must represent how language was used at that time (English-Corpora.org n.d.). However, total representativity can be impossible to achieve. No corpus can

represent the entirety of English because no corpus can include all texts (English-Corpora.org n.d.). Still, looking at a ‘balanced’ corpus may be helpful. A ‘balanced’ corpus aims to show the frequency of a language feature across different text genres (English-Corpora.org n.d.). Davies (2015: 26) explains that relying only on one genre of text can impact how represented certain words are in a corpus. For instance, looking only at the newspaper genre texts would show some words as highly overrepresented, whereas some would be virtually missing, thus displaying only a small ‘slice’ of language (Davies 2015: 26–27). In the same way, looking only at academic texts would not reveal how common the orthophemism *menstruate* could be in genres with informal speech. COCA, specifically, categorises texts into eight genres based on language from blogs (BLOG), webpages (WEB), TV and movie subtitles (TV/M), spoken conversations from TV and radio programmes (SPOK), fiction writing (FIC), popular magazines (MAG), newspapers (NEWS), and academic journals (ACAD). In addition to representativity and balance, the size of the corpus must also be considered. A large corpus will be more fruitful when studying less frequent features, considering that even a corpus consisting of a million words may not provide enough data for some moderately frequent words (Davies 2015: 13).

2. MENSTRUAL X-PHEMISMS IN COCA

This section will investigate menstrual X-phemisms in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The study is corpus-based and will determine the relative frequencies of 21 menstrual X-phemisms. Additionally, this study will identify the genres within COCA that contain the highest occurrences of menstrual X-phemisms, determine which type of X-phemism (orthophemism, euphemism, or dysphemism) is most prevalent in the genres, and explore the possible reasons why. The X-phemisms will be classified according to

Joffe's (1948) framework to discover which category of menstrual X-phemisms is most frequently referenced in contemporary American English menstrual expressions.

2.1. Selection of X-phemisms

There are numerous menstrual expressions in English, but not all of them can be covered in this study, so a list of 21 menstrual X-phemisms was compiled. The X-phemisms were collected from sources that investigated American menstrual expressions (Joffe 1948; Boone 1954; Ernster 1975), euphemistic language (Holder 2002), or taboo language (Allan and Burrige 2006). Specific criteria were set to determine which expressions to examine. First, the X-phemism must mean 'to menstruate' or 'menstruation'. The study did not include expressions such as *late* 'failing to menstruate when expected' (Holder 2002: 226), which, although related to menstruation, references the absence of menstruation, not the actual process. Second, the X-phemism must be used in American English. Non-American expressions, such as the Australian English *I've got my P-plates* (Allan and Burrige 2006: 167), were excluded. Third, the selection must include one orthophemism, 10 euphemisms and 10 dysphemisms. The higher number of euphemisms and dysphemisms compared to orthophemisms was chosen because more euphemistic and dysphemistic menstrual expressions exist in English. Although X-phemisms can be euphemistic in some contexts and dysphemistic in others, this study categorises expressions into euphemisms and dysphemisms based on how most people would interpret them and how they are marked in the sources from which they were collected. Fourth, X-phemisms that share a form with more literal or general expressions, such as *off-colour* (Holder 2002: 276) and *those days* (Holder 2002: 405), were not included to avoid the results in COCA being potentially too general or vague.

Based on the criteria, the following X-phemisms were chosen: the orthophemism *menstruate*, the euphemisms *monthlies*, *Aunt Flo(w)*, *period* (which encompasses *have one's*

period, get one's period, be one's period, have a period, time of the month, monthly period, have one's courses, it's a red letter day, fly the red flag, my friend's here, old faithful, and the dysphemisms on the rag, curse of Eve, too wet to plough, plugged up, covering the waterfront, closed for repairs, I've got George, wearing the manhole cover, the hammock is swinging, to ride the cotton pony. Out of the X-phemisms that fit the criteria described above, these 21 were chosen as they were either explicitly marked as euphemistic or dysphemistic or frequently appeared in studies and dictionaries examining taboo language, which provides the opportunity to determine if they are still in use. The X-phemisms *have one's period, get one's period, be one's* and *have a period* are analysed as one as they are fundamentally the same, and they will be referred to as *period*, for brevity. Similarly, the various expressions featuring 'Aunt Flo(w)', including *Aunt Flow is coming, My Aunt Flo(w) is coming from Redfield, Pennsylvania* and *Aunt Flow arrives* (Ernster 1975: 8), were shortened to *Aunt Flo(w)*.

Results displayed in COCA that matched the X-phemisms in form but had non-X-phemistic meanings were removed from the study. To determine which uses were X-phemistic, all instances COCA presented for the queries were examined. For example, if the expression *monthlies* was used as a plural of the word *monthly* 'a newspaper or magazine that is published once a month' (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.), it was excluded from the analysis. All other similar cases were treated the same way. If it was impossible to decipher from the concordance or the extended context the corpus provides whether the expression was used in a literal or X-phemistic sense, it was not included in the analysis. The results were collected into a spreadsheet that included the absolute and relative frequencies of the expressions, the forms in which they appeared in COCA, and the genres in which they appeared.

2.2. Searching the expressions in COCA

How to search for an X-phemism in COCA depends on the expression. Some X-phemisms contain words with different forms, such as verbs, and all forms must be included for a total overview of how an expression is used. In COCA, it is possible to search for lemmas by capitalising a word in the query, thus including all word forms. For instance, searching ‘HAVE a period’ will present all verb forms of *have*, such as *had a period* and *have a period*. It is also possible to specify the part of speech of a word in a query, which is helpful in examining expressions with possessives or pronouns. Searching for a specific part of speech can be done by using capitalised abbreviations for the part of speech. For different forms of the expression *get one’s period*, the query used in this study was ‘GET POSS period’, where ‘POSS’ signifies ‘possessive’.

Additionally, attaching an asterisk ‘*’ to a query will present results of the word attached to the asterisk with various endings. For instance, searching for ‘menstruat*’ provides results such as *menstruate*, *menstruating*, and *menstruation*. Using this approach for *menstruate* means that, occasionally, COCA displays results that do not mean ‘to menstruate’ or ‘menstruation’. Those results, such as *menstruator*, were excluded from the study. In some cases, it was necessary to use several queries. *Aunt Flo(w)* required two queries (‘aunt flo’ and ‘aunt flow’), as formatting the query as ‘aunt flo*’ gave many non-X-phemistic results, such as *Aunt Florence*. The queries entered into COCA can be seen in Appendix 1.

2.3. Relative frequencies of the X-phemisms

The first aim of this study was to determine which menstrual X-phemisms are most frequently used in American English. Relative frequency is calculated by dividing the absolute frequency of the token (i.e., the number of times the token appears in a corpus) by the number of tokens in the corpus and then, usually, multiplying it by a million (Sketch Engine n.d.b). The

absolute frequencies of the expressions can be seen in Appendix 2. According to McEney and Hardie (2021: para. 2), relative frequency essentially reveals how often it is reasonable to expect to encounter a specific word within a specified number of words in running text. Usually, relative frequency is calculated per one million tokens. However, in this study, it will be calculated per one billion tokens, given that the resulting relative frequencies will be more comprehensive. As COCA consists of 1,001,610,938 words (Davies 2008-) and the expression *on the rag* occurs in the corpus with an X-phemistic meaning 55 times, the calculation for the relative frequency of the X-phemism *on the rag*, for instance, would look like this:

$$\textit{on the rag} = \frac{55}{1,001,610,938} \cdot 1,000,000,000 \approx 54.91$$

Relative frequencies of different X-phemisms can be compared to determine which expressions are most frequent in the corpus. Table 1 below presents the relative frequencies of the X-phemisms in COCA from the highest relative frequency to the lowest. The results were rounded to two decimal places. Of the 21 expressions, 13 provided results, with all occurrences of menstrual X-phemisms totalling 2,058. Of those 13, seven X-phemisms had a relative frequency of over 10.00 per billion tokens, one expression had a relative frequency of 3.00 per billion tokens, and five expressions had a relative frequency of 1.00 per billion tokens. It seems that menstrual X-phemisms are not very frequent overall. However, it must be noted that most of the texts in COCA feature written language, which may influence how often menstruation as a topic arises.

Table 1 shows that the most common menstrual X-phemism is the orthophemism *menstruate*, which has a relative frequency of 1075.27 per billion tokens. *Menstruate* being the most frequent X-phemism could be so due to it being a clinical term. Thus, it is possible that it is more well-known than figurative expressions, which can be more difficult to understand and, therefore, use. Additionally, *menstruate*, alongside the second most frequent expression,

period, has various forms, likely contributing to the comparatively high relative frequency. *Period* has a relative frequency of 683.90 per billion tokens, one and a half times smaller than the relative frequency of *menstruate*, but it is evidently the most prevalent euphemistic expression. The third most frequent X-phemism is also a euphemism, *time of the month*, with a relative frequency of 179.71 per billion tokens.

Table 1. Relative frequencies of the X-phemisms in COCA

X-phemism	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency (per billion)
<i>menstruate</i>	1076	1074.27
<i>period</i> (various forms)	685	683.90
<i>time of the month</i>	180	179.71
<i>on the rag</i>	55	54.91
<i>Aunt Flo(w)</i>	24	23.97
<i>monthlies</i>	19	18.97
<i>monthly period</i>	11	10.98
<i>curse of Eve</i>	3	3.00
<i>have one's courses</i>	1	1.00
<i>it's a red letter day</i>	1	1.00
<i>fly the red flag</i>	1	1.00
<i>my friend's here</i>	1	1.00
<i>too wet to plough</i>	1	1.00
<i>old faithful</i>	0	0
<i>plugged up</i>	0	0
<i>covering the waterfront</i>	0	0
<i>closed for repairs</i>	0	0
<i>I've got George</i>	0	0
<i>wearing the manhole cover</i>	0	0
<i>the hammock is swinging</i>	0	0
<i>to ride the cotton pony</i>	0	0

It is apparent from Table 1 that dysphemisms are generally less frequent than euphemisms and orthophemisms. In fact, seven out of ten dysphemisms chosen for this study (*plugged up, covering the waterfront, closed for repairs, I've got George, wearing the manhole cover, the hammock is swinging, to ride the cotton pony*) did not provide any results, compared to only one euphemism with no results (*old faithful*). However, what stands out is the dysphemism *on the rag*, which has a relative frequency of 54.91 per billion tokens. It is the most frequent dysphemism and the fourth most frequent X-phemism overall. Still, its relative frequency is slightly over three times smaller than that of *time of the month*, the third most prevalent X-phemism, but it is the only dysphemism which could be considered somewhat common. In comparison, the next most frequent dysphemisms, and the only others to provide any results, are *curse of Eve* and *too wet to plough*, with relative frequencies of 3.00 and 1.00 per billion tokens, respectively.

2.4. Genre distribution of the X-phemisms

The second aim of this study was to determine how often menstrual X-phemisms appeared in each genre. Figure 1 shows the total occurrences of menstrual X-phemisms between genres, and based on the figure, the genre with the most menstrual X-phemisms was TV/M (language from TV and movie subtitles), which had 411 occurrences of menstrual X-phemisms. The MAG (language from magazines) genre, with 410 instances, closely follows the TV/M genre. The genres with the least menstrual X-phemisms are SPOK (spoken language from radio and television programmes) and NEWS (language from newspapers). Considering that euphemisms and dysphemisms are more colloquial and figurative than orthophemisms and that almost all the expressions investigated were either euphemistic or dysphemistic, it is unsurprising that the genres with that feature casual speech have higher numbers. Similarly, genres with lower numbers feature more formal or edited language. Thus, it seems logical that

SPOK and NEWS ranked lowest, considering the register of newspapers, and that people likely consciously adjust their speech to feature less ‘highly stigmatized words and phrases’ when they know they are being recorded (Davies 2008-). It could also be that more casual contexts (i.e., genres) discuss menstruation more openly, contributing to more results in such genres. The ACAD (language from academic journals) genre had 271 instances, which is somewhat unexpected, considering the genre generally utilises formal language, which rarely includes euphemisms and dysphemisms. However, it must be noted that the high number of instances in the ACAD genre is due to the orthophemism *menstruate* being particularly frequent in it. The distribution of X-phemisms between genres on an individual X-phemism basis can be seen in Appendix 3.

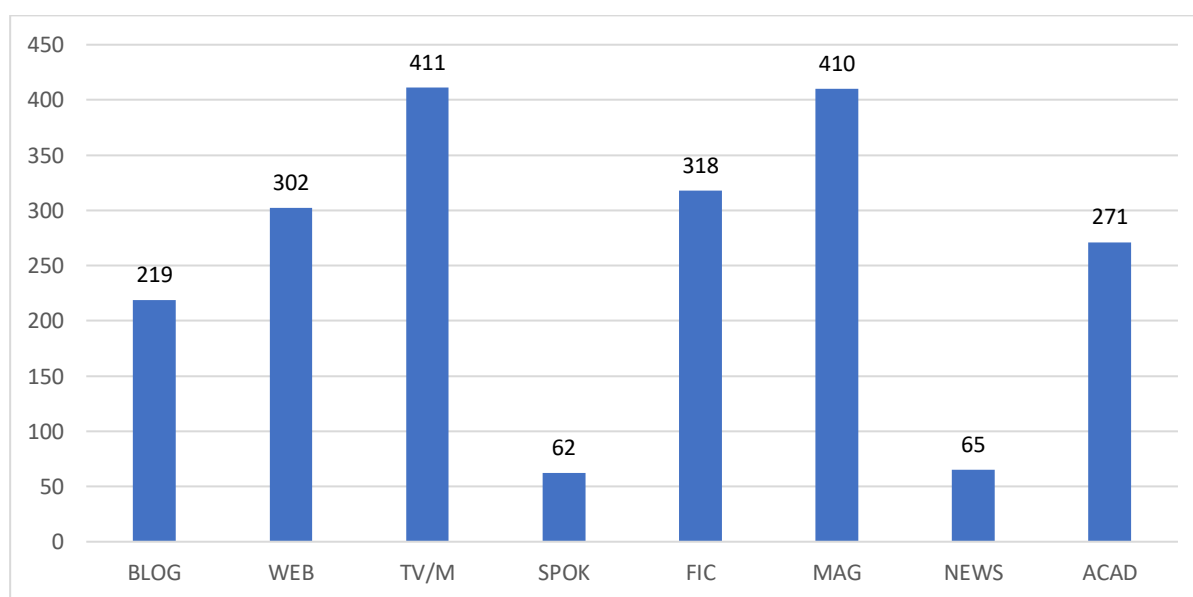


Figure 1. Total occurrences of menstrual X-phemisms per genre in COCA

This study also examined the differences between the genres regarding the use of euphemisms, dysphemisms, and orthophemisms. Figure 2 shows the distribution of orthophemisms, euphemisms, and dysphemisms in each genre, and according to the figure, orthophemisms and euphemisms are the most frequent forms of X-phemism across all genres. Orthophemisms occur as the most common X-phemism in four genres (BLOG, MAG, NEWS,

ACAD), euphemisms in two genres (TV/M, FIC), and orthophemisms and euphemisms have an equal number of instances in the WEB (language from webpages) genre. Orthophemisms were most common in the MAG genre, with 294 occurrences. Considering that the MAG genre consists of popular magazines, including women's and health magazines (Davies 2008-), which likely discuss menstruation and use clinical terminology, respectively, it is possible that they contributed to the high number of orthophemisms. Euphemisms were most common in the TV/M genre, with 299 occurrences, possibly because TV and movie subtitles feature more informal speech and, therefore, more euphemisms than orthophemisms. The genre indeed contains language that is as or more informal than the transcripts of the spoken data (Davies 2008-). Dysphemisms were consistently the least frequent across all genres. However, comparing the number of dysphemisms across the genres, they were most common in the TV/M genre, with 31 occurrences.

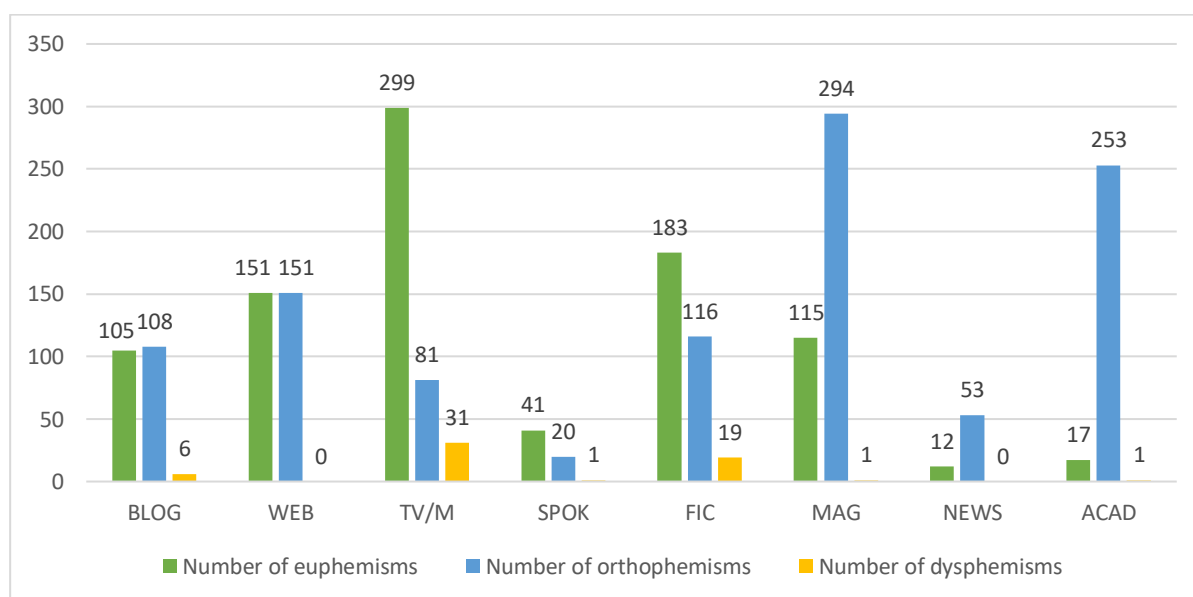


Figure 2. Genre distribution of menstrual X-phemisms

The relation of orthophemisms, euphemisms, and dysphemisms in the BLOG (language from blogs) and WEB genres is similar. The number of euphemisms in the BLOG genre (105 occurrences) seems logical, considering personal blogs may feature more casual and colloquial

language. However, the high number of orthophemisms in the BLOG genre (108 occurrences) may, again, be due to *menstruate* being a clinical and, thus, a more well-known term. Still, both orthophemisms and euphemisms are profoundly more frequent than dysphemisms. Such is also the case in the WEB genre, where both euphemisms and orthophemisms occurred 151 times each and dysphemisms not at all.

In the TV/M genre, almost three-quarters of the X-phemisms are euphemisms. Still, this genre features the most dysphemisms relative to the number of dysphemisms in other genres, with 31 instances, which could be because fictional characters can speak with more freedom. Fictional characters losing face has no real-life consequences, unlike real-life people, who can be punished for using dysphemistic language (compared to the BLOG or SPOK genres, for example, where people share their own thoughts). Similarly, the FIC (language from fiction) genre has the second most dysphemisms (19 instances), potentially due to the same reasons, although euphemisms (183 instances) and orthophemisms (116 instances) are still more frequent. These genres also provide the opportunity to discuss everyday topics, such as menstruation, more often than the less-personal genres, such as NEWS. The SPOK genre also has more euphemisms (41) than orthophemisms (20) but still shows a strong preference for inoffensive language, with only one instance of a dysphemism occurring. Orthophemisms were also most frequent in the NEWS genre, with 53 instances, while euphemisms occurred 12 times and dysphemisms not once. This could be due to the more neutral and formal register often used in newspapers. The ACAD genre, as discussed above, consists logically almost only of orthophemisms (253), with only 17 euphemisms and one dysphemism.

2.5. Classification of menstrual X-phemisms

This study also aimed to classify the X-phemisms into Joffe's (1948) categories. Other scholars have classified some of the menstrual X-phemisms included in this study into Joffe's

(1948) categories. For instance, *Aunt Flo(w)* was classified by Ernster (1975: 7) into the categories of PERSONS, BLOOD, OR THE COLOUR RED and VISITOR (based on the longer and more descriptive versions of the euphemism mentioned in subsection 2.2.). Some menstrual X-phemisms can reference several aspects of menstruation and, thus, belong to several categories. Table 2 shows the number of X-phemisms, which provided results in COCA, in the categories described by Joffe (1948), and an overview of the expressions on a single X-phemism basis can be seen in Appendix 4.

Table 2. Number of X-phemisms in Joffe's (1948) categories

	PERIODICITY OR TIME	BLOOD OR THE COLOUR RED	VISITORS	PERSONS (MALE OR FEMALE)	ILLNESS, INCONVENIENCE, OR DISABILITY	MATERIAL CULTURE	SEXUAL UNAVAILABILITY
Number of references	6	4	2	2	1	1	1

As can be seen from the table above, the category with the most expression was PERIODICITY OR TIME. It was referenced in six X-phemisms (*menstruate, monthlies, period, time of the month, monthly period, have one's courses*), all of which are either orthophemistic or euphemistic expressions. The periodical nature of menstruation is arguably inoffensive, which may explain why these expressions are relatively frequent, except for *have one's courses*. The second most frequently referenced category was BLOOD OR RED COLOUR, which had four expressions (*Aunt Flo(w), it's a red letter day, fly the red flag, too wet to plough*). Most of those expressions were euphemistic, with one being a dysphemism (*too wet to plough*). Red or menstrual blood may be a more recognisable aspect of menstruation compared to aspects, such as sexual unavailability, which could be why this category was the second most referenced in the expressions examined in this study. Similarly to the PERIODICITY OR TIME category, the 'visiting' and personification aspects of menstruation are relatively inoffensive, which may

account for the two euphemistic expressions within the VISITORS and PERSONS categories (*Aunt Flo(w), my friend's here*).

The categories ILLNESS, INCONVENIENCE, OR DISABILITY, MATERIAL CULTURE, and SEXUAL UNAVAILABILITY all featured only one expression each. These categories exclusively included dysphemisms, likely because they represent what are widely considered negative aspects of menstruation. The reason why the MATERIAL CULTURE category features only a dysphemism (*on the rag*) may be because objects that touch menstrual blood, such as menstrual hygiene products, have historically been perceived to be contaminated, thus prompting the use of dysphemistic language. Likewise, as menstruation is cited as a reason for abstaining from sexual activity, it seems logical that the SEXUAL UNAVAILABILITY category would feature a dysphemism (*too wet to plough*). Moreover, the notion of menstruation being a curse and often causing uncomfortable symptoms may also explain the presence of a dysphemism in the ILLNESS, INCONVENIENCE, OR DISABILITY category (*curse of Eve*).

2.6. Discussion

It bears repeating that not all X-phemisms could be investigated in this study, particularly those with additional general meanings. Examining such expressions could provide additional insight into menstrual X-phemisms in American English, which future research could explore. Moreover, the absence of results for some X-phemisms potentially impacts how representative this study is; it is possible that the excluded expressions from this analysis might have yielded different findings. Nevertheless, the relative frequencies determined in this study suggest a general tendency towards the so-called preferred expressions instead of dispreferred expressions. This observation aligns with Burridge's (2006: 457) claim that people tend to prefer orthophemisms and euphemisms over dysphemisms. The fact that the three most frequent X-phemisms were either the orthophemism *menstruate* or euphemisms referencing the

periodical nature of menstruation (*period, time of the month*), all of which are several times more frequent than the most prevalent dysphemism, also suggests that neutral language or references to neutral characteristics of menstruation are preferred. However, the fact that many of the dysphemisms included in this analysis are quite figurative could also explain the higher frequencies of orthophemisms and euphemisms. It is also possible that the expressions that provided no results have simply fallen out of use, as X-phemisms occasionally do. Overall, the fact that most X-phemisms in this study had low relative frequencies suggests that menstruation remains a topic not frequently or explicitly discussed.

Based on the results of this analysis, there were no genres in which the distribution was even somewhat equal between all types of X-phemisms, which, in this case, once more implies a preference towards preferred language. The results also suggest that different contexts influence the kind of expressions speakers use. Situations requiring more formal or neutral vocabulary, such as academic texts or newspapers, prefer orthophemisms. In contrast, casual conversations depicted in TV and movie subtitles prefer euphemisms. The fact that no genre shows a preference towards dysphemisms could imply that people do not use dysphemistic expressions as frequently, or that the expressions analysed in this study are too obscure to be widely used or are no longer in general use.

Comparisons can be made between the results of this study and previous research on menstrual X-phemisms. This study uses data from thousands of texts spanning 30 years, whereas Joffe's (1948) and Ernster's (1975) samples are smaller and from shorter periods of time, which may affect the representativeness of their findings. Despite this limitation, these studies will help investigate how menstrual X-phemisms have evolved over time. Joffe's (1948) research reported that the expression *period* (no verb provided) was considered 'old fashioned' and was becoming replaced by *menstruation* in polite contexts (Joffe 1948: 183). In contrast, this analysis found that *menstruate* was the most frequent X-phemism, while *period* (used with

various verbs) was the second most frequent. Based on this study, it cannot be said that *period* is old-fashioned, given its frequency in COCA. Already in the 1970s, Ernster (1975: 4) observed that *period* was a common expression. This trend suggests that while menstrual expressions may fall out of use, they may also re-emerge.

Both Joffe's (1948) and Ernster's (1975) results imply that dysphemisms were more common than other X-phemisms, although they did not distinguish between dysphemisms, euphemisms, and orthophemisms. The prevalence of dysphemisms in their findings may be due to their method of collecting expressions directly from people and archival materials. Whereas they noted down the expressions they encountered, the corpus used in this study only shows expressions for which one knows to search. Joffe (1948: 181) claims that *the curse* was the most widely used X-phemism for women under 35, and *on the rag* was the most common expression for men. Ernster (1975: 5) also reported that *on the rag* was the expression men used most frequently. Both expressions are generally considered dysphemistic, and while this study investigated only one of them, it still found that, as a rule, orthophemisms and euphemisms are more common than dysphemisms.

The menstrual expressions identified as the most common in this study do not emphasise the negative aspects of menstruation. Based on the number of expressions that fit non-offensive categories (PERIODICITY OR TIME, VISITORS, PERSONS) compared to the number of X-pressions in what can be considered offensive categories (ILLNESS, INCONVENIENCE, OR DISABILITY, MATERIAL CULTURE, SEXUAL UNAVAILABILITY), it is evident that neutral aspects of menstruations are referenced more frequently than 'negative' aspects. The time between Joffe's (1948) and Ernster's (1975) research and this study has likely allowed for menstrual expressions to evolve to become more neutral. While menstruation is still often discussed using euphemistic and, therefore, obscuring language, dysphemistic language seems less prevalent when compared to the studies of the 1940s and 1970s. However, it is also possible that dysphemistic

expressions are more frequent than this analysis indicates, as this study simply did not include all well-known menstrual X-phemism.

CONCLUSION

Taboos are societal prohibitions on specific behaviours that stem from the fear of metaphysical or physical danger. The menstrual taboo stems from ancient understandings of the origins of menstruation and its impacts on the menstruator and the community. The interpretations of stories from the Old Testament portrayed menstruation as a curse placed upon Eve for consuming the forbidden fruit. Due to the severity of the transgression, menstruation obtained the connotation of being a symbolic source of pollution. In addition to spreading metaphysical pollution, it was also believed that menstrual blood spread actual diseases, which further strengthened the menstrual taboo. The potential use of menstruation to influence the behaviour of the community through controlling sexual activity may have also contributed to the menstrual taboo, along with general negative views of (female) bodies. The menstrual taboo has ancient origins, yet it is still prevalent today despite activism to destigmatise it. Since speaking certain words or expressions can also be tabooed, people use alternate expressions, which are not considered taboo, and such is also the case with menstruation. For instance, menstrual euphemisms help people discuss menstruation without causing themselves or others discomfort, and these euphemisms often soften or hide the aspects of menstruation which are generally considered negative. On the other hand, one might use menstrual dysphemisms to express their negative attitudes towards menstruation. There is also neutral terminology, or orthophemisms, for menstruation, such as the word *menstruate* itself, which does not have positive or negative connotations.

This study aimed to gain insight into the menstrual X-phemisms used in American English. This corpus-based study sought to determine which menstrual expressions are most

frequent in COCA and whether the genre of texts influences what kind of X-phemisms are employed. In addition, by relying on Joffe's (1948) categories for menstrual expressions, this study aimed to discover which aspects of menstruation are most referenced in menstrual X-phemisms and what that implies about how menstrual expressions are used. The results of this study show that, in general, orthophemisms and euphemisms are more frequent than dysphemisms. The orthophemism *menstruate* proved to be the most frequently used menstrual X-phemism, with a relative frequency of 1074.27 per billion tokens, followed by two euphemisms: *period*, with a relative frequency of 683.90, and *time of the month*, at 179.71. Based on this study, only one dysphemism can be considered somewhat frequent — the expression *on the rag*, which had a relative frequency of 54.91.

Overall, genres that tend to use more informal language (BLOG, WEB, TV/M, FIC, MAG) exhibited higher numbers of X-phemisms than those that employ formal language (ACAD, NEWS). The TV/M (411 instances) and MAG (410 instances) genres contain the most menstrual X-phemisms, likely due to the register of speech they utilise and the kind of texts they encompass. In contrast, genres with the lowest numbers of X-phemisms include the NEWS genre (65 instances), which typically uses formal language, and the SPOK genre (62), which consists of conversations that people are highly aware of being recorded, which likely influenced them to use less tabooed expressions. Across genres, orthophemistic or euphemistic expressions are more prevalent than dysphemistic expressions. Most orthophemisms were found in the MAG genre (294 instances), which includes health and women's magazines, thus accounting for the number of orthophemisms in the genre. In contrast, the most euphemisms were recorded in the TV/M genre (299 instances), which likely includes the most informal speech in any COCA genre. Notably, no genres featured dysphemisms as frequently as either orthophemisms or euphemisms, further implying that inoffensive language is preferred over offensive language.

Classifying the menstrual X-phemisms into categories created by Joffe (1948) revealed that the most referenced aspect of menstruation is its periodical nature. The colour of menstrual blood or the blood itself is also referenced relatively frequently, along with the notion of menstruation being a visitor and or a person. These aspects can be deemed neutral or inoffensive, especially compared to the categories referencing inconvenience, sexual unavailability, and menstrual hygiene products. Overall, these results suggest a tendency towards using expressions that reference neutral and inoffensive aspects of menstruation. Furthermore, it appears that, over time, there has been a change in the use of menstrual X-phemisms. The results of this study, contrasted with the studies of Joffe (1948) and Ernster (1975), suggest that the prevalence of specific menstrual X-phemisms may change and, while both Joffe's (1948) and Ernster's (1974) findings suggest that dysphemistic expressions were more common than orthophemisms or euphemisms, the results of this study imply the opposite.

It must be acknowledged that the expressions explored in this study may not fully reflect the entire reality of menstrual X-phemisms in American English. While the selection of expressions used in this study was intended to provide as much insight into the use of menstrual X-phemisms as possible, excluding expressions that also have well-known non-X-phemistic uses, such as *those days*, could have impacted the results of this study. This indicates an area for future research that could focus more on menstrual X-phemisms that share a form with common or literal expressions. Additionally, future research could explore how people with different gender identities use menstrual X-phemisms or further investigate how context impacts the use of menstrual expressions. Although the results of this study suggest a preference towards neutral or softening menstrual X-phemisms, more research is required, and other expressions should also be investigated to gain a deeper understanding of the use of menstrual X-phemisms in contemporary American English. More menstrual research may also contribute to normalising menstruation and, thus, allow menstruators to experience less stigma.

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Appendix 1. X-phemism queries in COCA

X-phemism	Query in COCA
<i>menstruate</i>	menstruat*
<i>monthlies</i>	monthlies
<i>Aunt Flo(w)</i>	aunt flo aunt flow
<i>have one's period</i>	HAVE POSS period
<i>get one's period</i>	GET POSS period
<i>be one's period</i>	BE POSS period
<i>have a period</i>	HAVE a period
<i>time of the month</i>	time of the month
<i>monthly period</i>	monthly period
<i>have one's courses</i>	HAVE POSS courses
<i>it's a red letter day</i>	it BE a red letter day it BE a red-letter day
<i>fly the red flag</i>	FLY the red flag
<i>my friend's here</i>	my friend BE here
<i>old faithful</i>	old faithful
<i>on the rag</i>	on the rag
<i>curse of Eve</i>	curse of eve
<i>too wet to plough/plow</i>	too wet to plo*
<i>plugged up</i>	plugged up
<i>covering the waterfront</i>	covering the waterfront
<i>closed for repairs</i>	closed for repairs
<i>I've got George</i>	PRON HAVE GET george
<i>wearing the manhole cover</i>	wearing the manhole cover
<i>the hammock is swinging</i>	the hammock IS swinging
<i>to ride the cotton pony</i>	RIDE the cotton pony

Appendix 2. Absolute frequencies in COCA

Query	Result	Absolute frequency	Dominant genre	Source of the expression
menstruat*	<i>menstruation</i>	708		Allan and Burrige (2006: 32)
	<i>menstruating</i>	245		
	<i>menstruate</i>	84		
	<i>menstruated</i>	24		
	<i>menstruates</i>	13		
	<i>menstruations</i>	2		
			total 1076	MAG
monthlies	<i>monthlies</i>	5		Joffe (1948: 181), Holder (2002:257)
	<i>my monthlies</i>	5		
	<i>her monthlies</i>	5		
	<i>the monthlies</i>	2		
	<i>their monthlies</i>	1		
	<i>your monthlies</i>	1		
			total 19	FIC
aunt flow	<i>aunt flow</i>	3		Ernster (1975: 8)
aunt flo	<i>aunt flo</i>	21		Boone (1954: 298), Ernster (1975: 8), Holder (2002: 15)
		total 24	TV/M	
HAVE POSS period	<i>had my period</i>	37		Allan and Burrige (2006: 167)
	<i>have my period</i>	34		
	<i>have your period</i>	26		
	<i>having your period</i>	24		
	<i>had her period</i>	21		
	<i>having her period</i>	21		
	<i>having my period</i>	15		
	<i>has her period</i>	13		
	<i>having their period</i>	5		
	<i>had your period</i>	5		
	<i>had their period</i>	4		
	<i>having his period</i>	4		
	<i>have her period</i>	3		
	<i>have their period</i>	2		
	<i>has your period</i>	2		
	<i>having our period</i>	1		
	<i>having its period</i>	1		
<i>has his period</i>	1			
GET POSS period	<i>got my period</i>	92		Allan and Burrige (2006: 167)
	<i>get my period</i>	45		
	<i>get your period</i>	45		
	<i>got her period</i>	40		
	<i>getting her period</i>	18		
	<i>getting your period</i>	16		

	<i>got your period</i>	16		
	<i>gets her period</i>	16		
	<i>getting my period</i>	15		
	<i>get her period</i>	13		
	<i>gotten my period</i>	11		
	<i>gotten her period</i>	10		
	<i>get their period</i>	5		
	<i>getting their period</i>	4		
	<i>gotten your period</i>	3		
	<i>get our period</i>	3		
	<i>got their period</i>	2		
	<i>got his period</i>	2		
	<i>gets their period</i>	2		
	<i>gotten their period</i>	1		
	<i>get its period</i>	1		
	<i>get his period</i>	1		
BE POSS period	<i>was my period</i>	6		Allan and Burrige (2006: 167)
	<i>is your period</i>	4		
	<i>is my period</i>	3		
	<i>'s my period</i>	2		
	<i>'s your period</i>	2		
	<i>was your period</i>	2		
	<i>was her period</i>	2		
	<i>'s her period</i>	2		
	<i>be your period</i>	1		
	<i>be my period</i>	1		
	<i>be her period</i>	1		
HAVE a period	<i>had a period</i>	37		Allan and Burrige (2006: 167)
	<i>have a period</i>	19		
	<i>having a period</i>	20		
	<i>has a period</i>	3		
		total 685	TV/M	
time of the month	<i>time of the month</i>	180	TV/M	Ernster (1975: 6), Holder (2002: 407)
monthly period	<i>monthly period</i>	11	WEB	Joffe (1948: 185), Holder (2002: 257)
have one's courses	<i>had their courses</i>	1	BLOG	Holder (2002: 87)
it's a red letter day	<i>it's a red letter day</i>	1	FIC	Joffe (1948: 185), Allan and Burrige (2006: 166)
my friend BE here	<i>my friend's here</i>	1	FIC	Joffe (1948: 185), Ernster (1975: 6)
old faithful	N/A	0	N/A	Boone (1954: 298), Holder (2002: 277)

on the rag	<i>on the rag</i>	55	TV/M	Ernster (1975: 10), Allan and Burrige (2006: 170)
curse of eve	<i>curse of Eve</i>	3	FIC	Boone (1954: 298), Holder (2002: 93)
too wet to plo*	<i>too wet to plow</i>	1	SPOK	Ernster (1975: 9), Allan and Burrige (2006: 170)
plugged up	N/A	0	N/A	Allan and Burrige (2006: 170)
covering the waterfront	N/A	0	N/A	Joffe (1948: 183), Allan and Burrige (2006: 170)
closed for repairs	N/A	0	N/A	Allan and Burrige (2006: 170)
PRON HAVE GET george	N/A	0	N/A	Ernster (1975: 6), Allan and Burrige (2006: 167)
wearing the manhole cover	N/A	0	N/A	Allan and Burrige (2006: 170)
the hammock IS swinging	N/A	0	N/A	Joffe (1948: 183), Allan and Burrige (2006: 170)
RIDE the cotton pony	N/A	0	N/A	Ernster (1975: 6), Allan and Burrige (2006: 170)

Appendix 3. Menstrual X-phemisms in COCA genres

X-phemism	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
<i>menstruate</i>	108	151	81	20	116	294	53	253
<i>monthlies</i>	0	1	2	1	12	0	1	2
<i>Aunt Flo(w)</i>	6	3	11	0	2	2	0	0
<i>period</i>	77	120	197	29	143	96	10	13
<i>time of the month</i>	19	23	89	11	22	15	0	1
<i>monthly period</i>	2	4	0	0	1	2	1	1
<i>have one's courses</i>	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>it's a red letter day</i>	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
<i>fly the red flag</i>	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
<i>my friend's here</i>	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
<i>old faithful</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>on the rag</i>	6	0	30	1	16	1	0	1
<i>curse of Eve</i>	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0
<i>too wet to plough/plow</i>	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
<i>plugged up</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>covering the waterfront</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>closed for repairs</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>I've got George</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>wearing the manhole cover</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>the hammock is swinging</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>ride the cotton pony</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	219	302	411	62	318	410	65	271

Appendix 4. Classification of menstrual X-phemisms

X-phemism	PERIODICITY OR TIME	BLOOD OR THE COLOUR RED	VISITORS	PERSONS (MALE OR FEMALE)	ILLNESS, INCONVENIENCE, OR DISABILITY	MATERIAL CULTURE	SEXUAL UNAVAILABILITY
<i>menstruate</i>	X						
<i>monthlies</i>	X						
<i>Aunt Flo(w)</i>		X	X	X			
<i>period</i>	X						
<i>time of the month</i>	X						
<i>monthly period</i>	X						
<i>have one's courses</i>	X						
<i>it's a red letter day</i>		X					
<i>fly the red flag</i>		X					
<i>my friend's here</i>			X	X			
<i>on the rag</i>						X	
<i>curse of Eve</i>					X		
<i>too wet to plough/plow</i>		X					X
TOTAL	6	4	2	2	1	1	1
<i>old faithful</i>	X						
<i>plugged up</i>						X	X
<i>covering the waterfront</i>						X	X
<i>closed for repairs</i>							X
<i>I've got George</i>			X	X			
<i>wearing the manhole cover</i>						X	X
<i>the hammock is swinging</i>						X	
<i>ride the cotton pony</i>						X	

RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Miina-Triin Hanikat

**Menstrual X-phemisms in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)
Väljendid menstruatsiooni kohta kaasaegse Ameerika inglise keele korpuses (COCA)**

Bakalaureusetöö

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Annotatsioon:

Bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on uurida väljendeid (eufemisme, düsfemisme ja ortofemisme) menstruatsiooni kohta Ameerika inglise keeles. Uurimuse aluseks kasutatakse kaasaegse ameerika inglise keele tekstikorpust Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), mille abiga uuriti 21 väljendit. Töös analüüsitakse väljendite sagedust antud tekstikorpuses, võrreldakse nende esinemiste sagedust omavahel ja erinevates tekstikorpuste žanrites ning jaotatakse väljendid menstruatsiooni väljendite kirjeldamiseks loodud kategooriatesse, et leida, millise olemusega on enim kasutatud väljendid menstruatsiooni kohta Ameerika inglise keeles.

Töö koosneb kahest osast, millest esimene selgitab lahti tabu ning kuidas tabud mõjutavad keelekasutust. Esimene osa keskendub ka tabuteemade või tabusõnade kõnelemisega seotud tagajärgedele ja sellele, kuidas tabusõnade kasutamist enamasti välditakse. Lisaks tutvustab esimene osa eufemismide, düsfemismide ja ortofemismide kasutamist. Esimene osa kirjeldab samuti menstruatsioonitabu ajalugu ja varasemaid uuringuid, mis on keskendunud Ameerika inglise keeles olevatele väljenditele menstruatsiooni kohta.

Töö teine osa keskendub menstruatsiooni väljendite uurimisele COCA tekstikorpuses. Antud uurimuse jaoks valiti 21 väljendit menstruatsiooni kohta vastavalt kindlatele nõuetele. Analüüsist välistati mitteameerikapärased või liiga üldised menstruatsiooni väljendid ja uurimiseks valitud väljendid pidid tähendama menstreeerimist või menstruatsiooni. Analüüsimiseks valiti kümme eufemismi, kümme düsfemismi ning üks ortofemism. Seejärel arvutati välja valitud väljendite suhtelised sagedused, millest selgus, et kõige sagedam väljend oli ortofemism *menstruate*, millele järgnesid sageduselt eufemismid *period* ja *time of the month*. Üldiselt olid düsfemismid harvemini esinevad kui teist tüüpi väljendid, välja arvatud väljend *on the rag*, mis oli sageduselt neljas. Samuti selgus, millistes COCA žanrites esines enim väljendeid. Nendeks olid TV/M žanr, mis koosneb filmide ja telesarjade subtiitritest, ning MAG žanr, mis koosneb ajakirjatekstidest. Lisaks ilmnes, et enamasti kasutatakse igas žanris kõige enam kas eufemisme või ortofemisme. Uurimisel olevad väljendid jaotati Joffe'i (1948) loodud menstruatsiooni väljendite kategooriatesse, mis on moodustatud selle alusel, millisele menstruatsiooniga seotud nähtusele nad viitavad. Kategoriseerimise tulemusena selgus, et kõige sagedamini viitavad menstruatsiooni väljendid menstruatsiooni perioodilisele olemusele. Uurimuse tulemused osutavad asjaolule, et menstruatsioonist rääkides eelistatakse kas neutraalset või pehmendavat sõnavara.

Märksõnad: menstruatsioon, Ameerika inglise keel, tekstikorpus, eufemism, düsfemism

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