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Swear Words in Netflix's Adult Animation "BoJack Horseman" Season 1. A Corpus-Assisted Study

This study has emerged from the research on telecinematic discourse and corpus linguistic studies. The aim of this paper is to provide a socio-pragmatic analysis of swear words in the dialogues of the Season 1 of the TV show "BoJack Horseman", on the basis of the Bojack Horseman Corpus, prepared and compiled by the author. Lemmas such as *crap, fuck, shit, damn, ass, dick, bitch*, and *suck* are analysed, as well as their grammatical forms and functions they serve. The findings illustrate the importance of foul language employed by the show-writers and uncover the sociopragmatic aspect of the distribution of swear words in this particular TV show. The language used by the characters of the show depicts, to some extent real-life conversations, and swear words in them are used alike. The swear words in the dialogues function as an outlet for extreme emotions, a form of catharsis, or an extra emphasis added to the utterance. The offensiveness of swear words in "BoJack Horseman" is described as mild and moderate, but the swear words do occur in nearly every episode of the show. However, they are used not only to carry a negative impact (such as an insult or provocation), but also to convey positive information (the sense of social bonding or camaraderie).

Keywords: foul language, TV show, corpus linguistics, BoJack Horseman

Schimpfwörter in der ersten Folge der Netflix-Erwachsenenanimation „BoJack Horseman". Eine korpusgestützte Studie

Diese Studie ist aus der Erforschung des telecinematischen Diskurses und der Korpuslinguistik hervorgegangen. Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, eine sozialpragmatische Analyse von Schimpfwörtern in den Dialogen der Staffel 1 der TV-Show „BoJack Horseman" auf der Grundlage des vom Autor erstellten und zusammengestellten Bojack Horseman Corpus zu liefern. Lemmas wie *crap*, *fuck*, *shit*, *damn*, *ass*, *dick*, *bitch* und *suck* werden ebenso analysiert wie ihre grammatikalischen Formen und Funktionen, denen sie dienen. Die Ergebnisse verdeutlichen die Bedeutung der Schimpfwörter der Showautoren und decken den soziopragmatischen Aspekt der Verbreitung von Schimpfwörtern in dieser speziellen TV-Show auf. Die Sprache, die von den Charakteren der Show verwendet wird, stellt zu einem gewissen Grad Gespräche aus dem wirklichen Leben dar, und die Obszönitäten darin werden gleichermaßen verwendet. Die Schimpfwörter in den Dialogen funktionieren als: ein Ventil für extreme Emotionen, eine Form der Katharsis oder eine zusätzliche Betonung, die der Äußerung hinzugefügt wird. Die Anstößigkeit von Obszönitäten in „BoJack Horseman" wird als mild und moderat beschrieben, aber die Schimpfwörter kommen in fast jeder Folge der Show vor. Sie werden jedoch nicht nur verwendet, um eine negative Wirkung zu erzielen (z. B. eine Beleidigung oder Provokation), sondern auch um positive Informationen zu vermitteln (das Gefühl der sozialen Bindung oder Kameradschaft).

Schlüsselwörter: Schimpfwörter, Fernsehsendung, Korpuslinguistik, BoJack Horseman

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1. Introduction

"BoJack Horseman" is an animated television show involving dark humour, complex characters, and thought-provoking storytelling. It was created by Raphael Bob-Waks-berg and premiered on Netflix in 2014. It was well-received during its six-season run to its finale in 2020. The show is set in a world where humans and anthropomorphic animals coexist, and it follows the life of BoJack Horseman, a middle-aged horse who struggles with addiction, depression, and a series of personal and professional failures. BoJack is an ex-star of a popular 1990s sitcom "Horsin' Around", but he has fallen out of the spotlight, gained age and weight, and struggles to reinvent his life, to find meaning and happiness in it. Throughout the series, BoJack grapples with the demons of his past and tries to change himself and set order to the complex relationships with his friends, family, and colleagues (cf. Crouch 2015). The show received widespread acclaim for its insightful exploration of mental health and addiction. It has been described as "one of the most depressing TV shows of all time", and a poignant, funny, and thought-provoking exploration of mental health, addiction, and the human condition (cf. Cotroneo 2022). In this show, the characters' language can be described as strong at times, including swear words. They often use language in order to express their emotions or to reflect their personalities and relationships, and they use strong language when they feel stressed, frustrated, or angry. However, the use of strong language in "BoJack Horseman" is neither gratuitous nor excessive. It is rather used to reflect the complex emotions and relationships of the characters and to add authenticity to their conversations.

Swearing is a common form of language that is used by people for a variety of reasons. Some people may use swear words to express strong emotions, such as anger, frustration, or surprise (cf. Jay/Janschewitz 2008). Others may use swear words as a way to shock or offend others or establish dominance, or challenge authority. Generally, swearing is considered to be a detrimental act, connected with impoliteness and rudeness, but leaving its negative power behind, it can also carry a positive meaning. However, speakers also might use vulgar words in a polite way, to build harmony or even compliment something (e.g. *It is a pretty f***ing delicious dinner!*). Some people may use swear words as a form of slang or to communicate informally with friends or peers. Swear words can also be used to convey a sense of informality or camaraderie, or as a way to bond with others who share a common language or cultural background. In some cases, people may use swear words to add emphasis or express their personality or identity (cf. Jay/Janschewitz 2008). Apart from the conscious use of swear-words, there is also non-propositional swearing, which is impossible to be intentional, planned, and controllable. "It involves automatic emotional responses, occurring most frequently in response to sudden bursts of emotion (e.g., surprise) or as a result of brain damage. We do not consider nonpropositional swearing polite or impolite, except to an uninformed listener who may be offended at the content of the utterance. The offense on the part of the speaker is unintentional" (Jay/Janschewitz 2008: 270).

The use of swear words is a personal choice and can be influenced by a variety of factors, including cultural and social norms, personal beliefs and values, and individual preferences. Researchers from a range of disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, have conducted research on swearing and its role in language and communication (cf. Beers Fägersten 2012, Dynel 2012, Hughes 2006, Jay/Janschewitz 2008, Lutzky/Kehoe 2016, Vingerhoets et al. 2013).

As far as swearing in corpus-assisted research is concerned, it has flourished in the recent years. Numerous corpus-assisted studies have been conducted, such as: swearing in informal speech in Spoken British National Corpus 1994 and the Spoken British National Corpus 2014 (cf. Love 2021), swearing in Irish English (cf. Schweinberger 2018), the corpus-driven studies on the use of swear words in telecinematic discourse (cf. Bednarek 2019a), swear words in YouTube commentaries in the light of (im)politeness studies (cf. Dynel 2012). There have also been numerous studies to explore gender representations and their effect on swearing (cf. Güvendir 2015, Methven 2020, Mulac et al. 2013), as well as swear words in telecinematic discourse (cf. Bednarek 2019b, Bednarek 2020, Fägersten/Bednarek 2022).

"BoJack Horseman" TV show has been the object of scholarly analysis but on topics other than linguistics, with the exception of the study of the author herself (cf. Grobelna 2023). Previous studies on it have explored: themes of the animetaphor in animations (cf. Schmuck 2018), trauma (cf. Borin 2019), postmodernism (cf. Sánchez Saura 2019), "BoJack Horseman" as a comedy of remarriage (cf. Terrone 2022), and comparison of "BoJack Horseman" to the show-within-a-show, "Horsin' Around" (cf. Chater 2015). Within the vast realm of contemporary television, "BoJack Horseman" stands as a remarkable and captivating creation that has garnered immense popularity and critical acclaim. In the field of linguistics, the scholarly community has regrettably overlooked this remarkable show, and this research endeavours to fill this void.

2. Methodology

Corpus linguistics, as a methodology employed in linguistics, focuses on the analysis of large collections of naturally occurring language data, known as corpora. Due to the examination of structures and patterns basing on the real-life language samples, it allows researchers to explore language in its authentic context. Thanks to employing computational tools, corpus linguistics offers a data-driven approach which can be extremely useful in investigating and examining language usage and also lays a solid foundation for empirical research (cf. McEnery 2019). The study was conducted in the socio-pragmatic approach, which derives from a wide range of disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, and psychology, to understand the complex relationships between language and society. The social and cultural contexts of language use and the ways in which language shapes and is shaped by these contexts might also be investigated from this perspective. It is an important approach to the study of language

that helps to shed light on the ways in which language is shaped by social and cultural factors such as such as power dynamics, identity, and cultural norms. Socio-pragmatic approach is also concerned with the ways in which language use shapes social identities, and how it is used to convey social status, power, and other social distinctions. Language is used and understood in different social and cultural contexts and how it shapes and is shaped by these contexts (cf. Kádár et al. 2021).

A range of factors was included in the analyses of the swear words: context and purpose of their use, target audience and if possible, societal attitudes. Moreover, in the data analysis, the author employed a corpus linguistics methodology that prescribes the use of corpus tools which were used to extract swearwords used in the dialogues. For the sake of this and previous studies (cf. Grobelna 2023), the author watched 77 episodes of "BoJack Horseman" and then, transcribed the dialogues from 77 episodes of the TV show and converted them into .txt files. In the pre-processing stage, the text data was cleaned and any irrelevant information, such as punctuation and special characters were removed in order to obtain a clean and consistent dataset. Following, employing AntConc software, the BoJack Horseman Corpus (BHC) was compiled. AntConc is a freeware corpus analysis toolkit, created and being developed by Laurence Anthony (cf. Anthony 2022). The research material, the swear words used by the show-writers were identified, searched and extracted from the corpus. Lemmas such as *crap, fuck, shit, damn, ass, dick, jeez,* and *suck* were found and analysed multimodally, in relation to what was presented on the screen.

3. Results and discussion

In the first season of BoJack Horseman, there are in total 159 uses of swear words. The frequency of occurrence of each swear words in the corpus was counted in order to determine their prevalence.

Swear word (lemma):	Frequency of occurrence:
shit	54
damn	38
ass	25
crap	12
dick	9
bitch	7
suck	7
jeez	6
fuck	1
in total: 159	

Tab. 1. List of swear words used in BoJack Horseman season 1

Tab. 1. presents the frequency of occurrence of the swear words in their base forms of words (lemmas) which are used to represent all its inflected forms. The most common one is lemma *shit* which occurs 54 times in various forms. The least popular one is *fuck*, which is used by the show writers in a unique and intentional way, appearing only once in every season of the show. These occurrences are strategically placed during pivotal moments in the story, significantly impacting the main character and shaping the way viewers interpret the events (Grobelna 2023).

The swear word *shit* occurs in the forms: *shit* (43), *shitty* (7), *shits* (3), *shithead* (1). Most often it serves the function of an exclamation *oh shit* or *holy shit*. However, it also undergoes interesting morphological processes and changes its grammatical category, serving a role of an adjective, adverb, noun, or even verb.

(1) *I know that it's very hip these days to* **shit** *all over Horsin' Around, but at the time, I can tell you... Is it okay to say* **"shit"***? - Please don't* ("BoJack Horseman: The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter One").

(2) *Yeah, it's me, straight off your TV screens and into your* **shitty** *lives* ("Prickly-Muffin").

(3) *What the* **shit** *was that? What the* **shit** *is this? It's a phone. Well, a tiny computer, really* ("One Trick Pony").

(4) *Jesus, you look* **shitty***. Have you been eating your guilt this whole time?* ("The Telescope").

Example (1) presents the part of a television interview BoJack Horseman is attending and he is discussing "Horsin' Around", the popular television show from the 1990s that starred BoJack. This example is significant due to the metalinguistic awareness of the eponymous character, who uses the swear word *shit* as a verb in a phrase *to shit all over something* meaning "to harshly or excessively criticize someone or something" (TheFreeDictionary.com 2023) and he is aware that it is not appropriate to swear in a TV interview. However, BoJack's demeanour is far from professional, respectful and suitable for all audiences, which should be while airing the interview. The purpose of using this swear word in such a communicative situation is probably the desire to shock the interlocutor (the journalist), challenge the norms and to prove BoJack's easygoing attitude, as well as to show his emotions toward the show, which used to be his Example (2) and (4) present the use of lemma *shit* in forms of an adjective (2) and adverb (4), while Example (3) shows it in the unchanged form, as a noun. In all these contexts, the target audience of the swear words used is an informal group of peers. The purpose of the use is probably to emphasise a point, to create a bond in the social group or as a form of playful teasing (cf. Jay/Janschewitz 2008).

When it comes to the swear word *damn*, in the majority of cases it occurs as lexical bundles in exclamations such as *damn it, damn!, God Damn, god damn it,* most often aimed at Todd, the best friend and flatmate of BoJack, sometimes in order to pent up emotions cumulating due to misbehaviour or mistakes made by Todd, or as a playful teasing. 16 out of 29 hits of this swear word occur in the form *goddamn,*

functioning as a syntactic interposing (*drive the goddamn car*, *you're a selfish goddamn coward*, *BoJack Goddamn Horseface*, *you'll goddamn kiss me*), as well as an infixation (*unbe-goddamn-liveable*). The use of this swear word varies from the use of *shit*. It is no longer creating a bond in the social group, nor teasing, this time it is rather a form of expression of strong emotions (anger, disappointment, passion) or even aims at insulting others. The swear word *ass* was used in total 25 times in the first season of "BoJack Horseman" and it was 10 times when it was used in the form *asshole*.

(5) *I will give you some pages that'll knock your ass back to the South Pole* ("BoJack Horseman: The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter One").

(6) *I wouldn't wipe my ass with these pages* ("Prickly-Muffin").

(7) *Die alone and unloved, you pompous, affected asshole!* ("Zoës and Zeldas").

The example (5) is the line provided by BoJack during the discussion with Pinky, the owner of the publishing house BoJack was willing to publish his memoirs with. Pinky is upset with BoJack's zero progress in writing and he suggests that BoJack should hire a ghostwriter. BoJack gets angry with the idea of him struggling hence he uses the swear word in order to violate the social norm and show aggression towards Pinky. The Example (6) presents the swear word *ass* used by BoJack during filming "Horsin' Around", in the retrospect to 1990s. In this scene, BoJack is having a break on a set, and sitting next to Sarah Lynn, back then a child star, portrayed as sweet, innocent and talented, later on a close friend, as well as central figure in the show's exploration of fame and substance abuse. BoJack is sitting, smoking a cigarette and complaining about the script of the show. He exhales a smoke straight into her face, making her cough and uses a strong language, while it is generally considered inappropriate to swear in the presence of children. He is angry and swearing serves as an emotional outlet, or it can also be a coping mechanism for dealing with stress. The Example (7) presents BoJack's language aggression aimed at a theatre owner who mistreated his friend, Todd. This is a unique situation when BoJack offends a person, but while defending and standing up for his friend, showing compassion and a sense of loyalty towards his friend. Generally, use of swear words can be perceived as disrespectful, especially in public, and it might escalate a situation by offending others. On the other hand, BoJack uses swear words and verbal aggression for the benefit of Todd and in a worthwhile purpose. He violates a social norm but it can be perceived as a positive action.

The word *crap* is generally perceived as a swear word but it appears not to widely offend (cf. Bergen 2016). In Merriam-Webster dictionary it is labelled as "usually vulgar" or "sometimes vulgar", and despite its main meaning "feces or the act of defecating", it is mostly used as an exclamation or "stuff, nonsense, rubbish" (Merriam Webster Dictionary 2023).

(8) *Todd? Aw, crap. I left him in Malibu* ("Horse Majeure").

(9) *There's something in my food. Aw, crap* ("Our A-Story is a D-Story").

Examples (8) and (9) present the use of the swear word *crap* as an exclamation. Example (8) is a BoJack's line while he is driving and wants to speak to Todd, but he

suddenly remembers that he is alone in the car, because Todd is not present there. BoJack is not in a highly emotional state and he uses this mild swear word to express his annoyance or disappointment. Example (9) presents the words used by Diane, the journalist and a writer, who is having a dinner at an expensive restaurant with BoJack and Mr. Peanutbutter. Diane encounters something strange in her meal, and she uses the exclamation *aw, crap*. Diane is known for her quick wit and sharp tongue and she does not hesitate to express herself in direct manner. However, she is also a writer and she is aware of the great power of language. She uses this mild swear word to show her surprise, probably also due to the fact that swearing in a restaurant is generally considered to be inappropriate and disrespectful.

As aforementioned, the act of swearing can have either positive or negative connotations, depending on the context. The examples (10) and (11) present positive use of swearing.

(10) *Lenny Turteltaub, you skinny bitch. How the hell are you?* ("Say Anything").

(11) *You beautiful dickhead. You finally got Zach Braff?* ("Say Anything").

Swearing in these two situations is used as a form of camaradiere or bonding. Examples (10) and (11) are the words of Princess Carolyn, one of the main characters, the talent agent. She utters these two sentences to Lenny Turteltaub, her colleague and a producent, while discussing a production of a new film. She uses swearwords but in a positive and respectful manner. In both these utterances, she wants to compliment her friend – despite the professional setting, she wants to inject humour into a conversation. She is full of emotions, especially in example (11), having heard good news from him, so in order to express her happiness and put the emphasis on her applaud, she uses the swearword *dickhead* but with a positive adjective *beautiful*.

4. Conclusion

Swearing might be a powerful tool in communication. The use of swear words can have a positive influence on the effectiveness of the communication, but it can also undermine it. The dialogues in TV shows aim to depict a real-life conversations to some extent, but they often simplify or exaggerate them. The show writers commonly employ colloquial and natural language, including swear words, with the aim of entertaining and engaging the audience. Swearing in a TV show dialogues, basing on an example of "BoJack Horseman", fulfils the similar functions to the ones it has in real life (cf. Bednarek 2019a). The characters use swear words to outlet their intense emotions, such as anger, disappointment or sadness. Using swearwords might also serve as a form of catharsis for the person using it (cf. Jay/Janschewitz 2008), or adding an emphasise to the utterance. The swear word use in "BoJack Horseman" is described as mild and moderate (IMDb 2023), but the swear words do occur in nearly every episode of the show. However, they are not only used in order to carry a negative

impact (insult or provocation), but also to convey positive information (social bonding or camaraderie).

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ZITIERNACHWEIS: