

”This is how YLE commentates on the World Championships: The Russians were f....g 10 times better!” – Notes on Moral Panic in Finnish Tabloids

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Lehtitekstin tekstilajissa kiro sanat ja muut karkeana pidetyt ilmaisut ovat harvinaisen ilmiö; toisaalta kiroilulla on voimaa ylittää uutiskynnys. Tässä artikkelissa tarkastelen suomalaisista lehdistä, pääasiassa iltapäivälehdistä vuosina 2005–2010 kerättyä aineistoa. Aineisto koostuu lehtijutuista, joissa karkea kielenkäyttö on nostettu uutisaiheeksi tai joissa muutoin esiintyy kiro sanoja. Analyysin kohteeksi nousevat erityisesti sellaiset jutut, joissa karkean kielenkäytön käsittely on arvoväritteistä. Testaan tutkimuksessani McEneryn (2006) tapaan moraalisen paniikin teorian soveltuvuutta kiroilua koskevaan diskurssiin. Pyrin vastaamaan seuraaviin kysymyksiin: millaisia ja kenen karkeitä sanavalintoja jutuissa paheksutaan? Miten rakentuu paheksunnan diskurssi? Millaisia typografisia naamiointikeinoja on käytössä? Aineistossa on monia moraalisen paniikin diskurssin elementtejä ja kiroilu on selvästi tällaisen diskurssin kohteena. Suuria eroja on kuitenkin siinä, kuinka todellisena moraalinen paniikki lopulta esittäytyy: esimerkiksi nuorison kielenkäytöstä tunnutaan kannettavan suurta huolta, kun taas ”miljoonia ihmisiä ja järkyttäviksi ja Suomi-kuvaa uhkaaviksi” kuvatut urheilijoiden sananvalinnat saavat loppujen lopuksi humoristisen alavireen ja keskustelu tyrehtyy voimakkaan ensireaktion jälkeen varsin pian.

Keywords: swearing, swearword, bad language, moral panic, tabloid, Finnish

1 Introduction

Swearwords and other words that are considered to be offensive can rarely be found in the newspaper genre. However, crude talk is something that has the power to make the news, and thus when it does appear in news print, it is most often in a story of an unfortunate choice of words by someone who is not expected to use bad language.

Between 2005 and 2010, I collected approx. 50 news stories where bad language was the topic or where swearwords were used in the headline or the text for some other reason. The material mostly consists of articles published in the Finnish tabloids *Iltasanomat* and *Iltalehti* either in the paper or the online version or both. There are also individual stories from certain other newspapers and magazines. Here, I analyze excerpts from this material qualitatively with particular interest in cases where the discourse on swearing or swearwords is value-laden. I test the applicability of the Moral Panic

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Theory, as applied to swearing by McEnery (2006), and aim to address the following questions: what are the condemned word choices? Who is using these words and who are the people who are or are not allowed to use them? How is the discourse of disapproval constructed in the stories? Are the swearwords printed as such, or are they masked by typographical means, for example?

2 Tabloids and the Theory of Moral Panics

The so-called Moral Panic Theory was originally formulated by the sociologist Stanley Cohen in his 1972 work *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* and later further developed by Cohen and others. According to Cohen (2002: 1), societies occasionally see periods of moral panic, where "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests." The mass media present these in a "stylised and stereotypical manner" and introduce various authoritarian figures of the society to provide analysis and ways of solving the problem at hand, or as Cohen puts it, "the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people" (ibid.).

According to Cohen (1972), moral panic has four basic elements: first of all, there is the object, the thing causing the moral panic; secondly, there is a scapegoat, something or someone that the public can project their fears onto or who they can blame for the situation at hand; thirdly, we have the media that either communicate the disapproval of a moral entrepreneur or act as the moral entrepreneur themselves; and fourthly, there are the often "obsessive, moralistic and alarmist" public debates that arise on account of the object of offence. (ibid.) McEnery (2006: 6), who has applied the theory to swearing in his 2006 book *Swearing in English – Bad language, purity and power from 1586 to the present*, proposes that mass media be defined in loose terms: the phenomenon of moral panic existed before the mass media were invented; a mass medium of the olden times could have been, for example, the pulpit.

McEnery (2006: 6–7) claims to apply the theory to more mundane phenomena than most previous scholars, and this is also the approach taken here. McEnery presents six

roles based on Cohen's elements that are present in moral panic discourse (below). McEnery (ibid.) notes, however, that these are present in the debate as a whole, meaning that not all roles are always present in an individual discourse or text. Therefore, while I look for these roles in the material of this study, I do not aim to find all of them in every text but rather to look for individual excerpts that exemplify moral panic discourse and some of the roles involved. McEnery's six roles are as follows:

- 1) The object of offence – that which is identified as problematic;
- 2) scapegoat – that which is the cause of, or which propagates the cause of, offence;
- 3) moral entrepreneur – the person/group campaigning against the object of offence;
- 4) consequence – the negative results which it is claimed will follow from a failure to eliminate the object of offence;
- 5) corrective action – the actions to be taken to eliminate the object of offence;
- 6) desired outcome – the positive results which will follow from the elimination of the object of offence. (McEnery 2006: 7)

By means of corpus analysis, McEnery (2006) studies the moral panic raised by swearing in two very distant time periods, the 1690's and the 1960's. On the basis of his material, he suggests for example that a class distinction was born in swearing in the English language in the late 1600's because the middle class wanted to distinguish themselves from the lower classes by problematising their speech and purifying the middle class parlance, and he also suggests that similar attempts to apply the discourse for purposes of power have taken place in modern times (2006: 12–13). He provides a number of interesting case examples of discourse surrounding taboo talk and topics at his time periods of interest, comparing a number of purpose-built corpora consisting of texts by some of the moral entrepreneurs of the time with large general corpora of English. McEnery (2006: 229–231) also provides a number of examples of contemporary news stories with similar discourses and reports of punitive measures against swearers, proving that in the 21st century, moral panic discourse on swearing has by no means disappeared from media but keeps appearing regularly.

I propose that elements of moral panic can also be found in the Finnish media, for example in tabloid reports of bad language (swearing, obscenities, name-calling etc). The scapegoats are usually the users of such language but the role may also fall upon the instances representing these people. The original moral entrepreneur is often the newspaper itself but they also bring out a number of "talking heads", moral entrepreneurs to

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comment on the events, and provide codes of behaviour. The tabloids portray themselves as the voice of the people, actors with information on the collective reactions of the population. The following provides some examples of this.

3 Exaggeration: the Cases of Räikkönen, Ahonen and Lindfors & Juusela

The discourse of moral panic is typified by exaggeration of various kinds (cf. Cohen 2002: 19–20), and a plethora of examples of this can be found in my material. A type of exaggeration which appeared several times was the claim that an event had had an impact on the entire audience of a story and that it had been the same on everyone.

On October 23, 2006, the two daily Finnish tabloid newspapers, *Iltasanomat* and *Iltalehti*, reported of an award ceremony where the football legend Pelé presented the Formula 1 driver Michael Schumacher with an award for merit. The Finnish Formula 1 driver Kimi Räikkönen was present at the venue but missed the ceremony. When a British journalist asked Kimi where he had been, Kimi replied "I was having a shit" ("Olin paskalla"). *Iltalehti* wrote in its online version that Kimi's comment "clearly upset the perplexed journalist's apple cart" ("Tokaisusta häkeltyneen Brundlen pasmat silminnähden sekosivat"). Yet the journalist managed to reply rather wittily to Kimi's comment, as he suggested that Kimi must have a good car because he is so confident (*Iltalehti* 2006).

Judging from the amount of coverage given to the story in both tabloids, Kimi's word choice and assumed motives (Räikkönen wanting to understate the significance of the award or the winner) were the most important news relating to the award ceremony. On its front page, *Iltasanomat* sought additional impact for the story by forecasting certain consequences for Kimi's words (the object of offence), the second biggest headline on tabloid's front page screaming:

- (1) Kimin kommentti järkytti miljoonia tv-katsojia: olin p*skalla! (Kimi's comment shocked millions of TV viewers: I was taking a sh*t!) (*Iltasanomat* 2006c)

In the headline of the actual story, OLIN P*SKALLA!” (“I WAS HAVING A SH*T!), the key word is printed in even bigger letters, and the use of the seemingly diluting asterisk may actually be adding taboo and emphasis on the swearword rather than watering it down. Half of the page is covered by an image of Räikkönen with a rather uninterested look on his face, with eyes turned up instead of towards the people who are standing next to him. The title of the photo reads:

- (2) “Kimi Räikkönen puhuu, mitä sylki suuhun tuo. Nyt lörö on todella housussa, sillä Räikkösen vessakommentti pääsi Britanniassa suoraan tv-lähetykseen.” (“Kimi blurts out the first thing that came into his head. Now the poo really hit the fan, as Räikkönen’s toilet comment made live British TV.”) (Iltasanomat 2006c)

The style of the title is rather colloquial, and the tone is far from neutral: Kimi is said to say “the first thing that comes into his head” – hinting that Kimi should be able to control his words better. On the other hand, the writer cannot help but pun on the theme of excrements, using a variation of the Finnish expression “olla paskat housussa” which means to be in trouble or to be scared, replacing the word for ‘shit’ with a humoristic euphemism. The use of humour seems to suggest that maybe the catastrophe is not quite as big as the headlines would indicate, and below we see further evidence for this.

The headline of the Iltasanomat story is followed by a subhead that takes the exaggeration to a new level and presents a new victim of crude language: the national image. The subhead states:

- (3) “Kimi Räikkönen nolasi Suomen suorassa tv-lähetyksessä” (“Kimi Räikkönen embarrassed Finland on live TV”) (Iltasanomat 2006c)

It is typical that the exaggerating statement is based on pure speculation – the tabloid has of course no way of knowing whether the Finnish or British viewers were actually shocked or studies on the decay of the Finnish national image.

In the body of the Iltasanomat text, *shit* is no longer written with an asterisk, which suggests that the word is neither an absolute taboo nor inapplicable to texts of all levels of visibility. The use of the asterisk in the headlines may actually also be a means to draw attention rather than a tool for reducing the potential shock in the readers.

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The text also introduces new moral entrepreneurs. James McLeod, a representative of the TV company that interviewed Räikkönen, apologizes to ”all viewers who have been offended by the story”, and promises that Kimi’s comments will never be broadcast live again. McLeod is reported to state that ”some of the viewers may have been upset”, giving a rather more careful estimate of the number of people offended by Kimi’s words than the journalist. In a way, McLeod has two roles here: on the one hand, he is one of the scapegoats, someone who allowed the unfortunate words to be aired; on the other hand, he is a moral entrepreneur who promises to control the actions of moral-threatening Räikkönen in the future. A second moral entrepreneur in the story is a woman called Karen Ormisto, ”a coach specializing in public image and personal branding”. She is quoted to call Räikkönen’s comments ”strange and very unfortunate”.

The story published by Iltalehti (2006) online on the same day is a commentary of sorts, suggested by the rather subjective and opinionated headline “Bad humour, Kimi!” (Huonoa huumoria, Kimi!). Iltalehti presents their own moral entrepreneur, the late media correspondent Erkki Toivanen, who lived and worked in London for a long time, and was therefore considered as a connoisseur of sorts of British manners. Toivanen’s choice of adjective for Kimi’s comment is “unbelievable”. Thus, in a way, both tabloids outsource and personify their disapproval to outsiders.

Interestingly, on the next day Iltasanomat (2006d) seems to be less upset with the Formula 1 driver’s behaviour, as it publishes a tongue-in-cheek collection of unfortunate word choices by Finnish sportsmen. The story “Tervetuloa kerhoon, Kimi! – Suomalaisurheilijoiden verbaliikka on ollut ennenkin vailla vertaa” (“Join the club, Kimi!” – this was not the first case of unparalleled verbal acrobatics from a Finnish athlete”) offers Kimi the peer support of a number of other Finnish sportsmen who have used dirty words in public or otherwise chosen their words unwisely. The story sports a happy and presentable photo of Räikkönen in the middle and a selection of text boxes with pictures and stories of Kimi’s accomplices, who are referred to collectively as “Suurten Suomalaisten Urheiluajattelijoiden Klubi” (“The Club of Great Finnish Sports Thinkers”). The description of the people and their parlance has taken a turn for the positive, with humoristic, albeit rather ironic terms such as “verbal acrobatics” and

“great thinkers”. The sportsmen are now public figures who are, after all, allowed a few mishaps, perhaps because their main job is a physical performance not involving words. The motive for the change is unknown but perhaps the moral panic of the tabloids failed meet the desired reaction, to gain a sounding board from the audience.

Räikkönen was not the first athlete to shock ”millions of viewers” in 2006. A similar development took place in February, when the Finnish ski jumper Janne Ahonen swore on Finnish evening TV. On February 22, *Iltasanomat* writes:

- (4) “Kaksi miljoonaa katsojaa hätkähti Ahosen kiroilua” (“Two million viewers startled by Ahonen’s swearing”) (*Iltasanomat* 2006a)

In the actual story, the number of startled viewers is reduced to “some”:

- (5) “Yleisradion tv-urheilun päällikön Tarmo Kivikallion mukaan Yleen tuli jonkin verran huolestunutta katsojapalautetta Ahosen kielenkäytöstä.” (“Tarmo Kivikallio, head of TV sports at the Finnish National Broadcasting Company, says that the company got some feedback from viewers who were concerned about Ahonen’s language.”) (2006a)

Again, some days after, the storm calms down: *Iltasanomat* writes that although some people have felt that the “colourful manner” in which some Finnish athletes had recently described their feelings after failed performances was inconsiderate and tactless, other Finnish sports figures refuse to judge them (take the role of the moral entrepreneur) (*Iltasanomat* 2006b). Interestingly, the choice of commentators is rather “purpose-built”, as they rank among famous sports swearers themselves. The commentators are ex-skiers Juha Mieto and Marjo Matikainen-Kallström. The latter got famous for swearing when in the 1987 Oberstdorf World Championships snow stuck on her skis and she was not getting twigs to clean them up as fast as she hoped for. She called out for twigs and put emphasis on her request by adding a relatively strong Finnish swear-word, *perkele* (for a discussion of *perkele*, see e.g. Hjort 2006, 2007). The incident was recorded for posterity by the television cameras, and the phrase “havuja, perkele” (“twigs, goddammit”) became a catchphrase.

A good year earlier, there was a similar sports-related incident that did not involve sportsmen. On May 14, 2005 the moral code was violated by a journalist and a commentator working for YLE, the Finnish National Broadcasting Company. The World

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Ice-Hockey Championships were on, and Finland had just lost against Russia. After the game broadcast in Radio Suomi, the disappointed reporter Niki Juusela and assistant commentator, former goalkeeper Sakari Lindfors vented their anger using rather harsh words. Unfortunately, someone in the sound control room had failed to disconnect online streaming of the show in time and the web listeners who had stayed tuned heard everything. *Iltasanomat* picked up the event and reported in huge headlines:

- (6) "Näin Yle selosti MM-kisoja: Venäläiset oli v...u 10 kertaa parempia!" ("This is how YLE commentates on World Championships: The Russians were f.....g 10 times better!") (*Iltasanomat* 2005)

Here, the violator of the moral code is the entire National Broadcasting Company in addition to Juusela and Lindfors, and the truth is slightly twisted: the headline speaks of commentating while in reality, show was over and Juusela and Lindfors were talking among themselves – at least that is what they thought. The online version of the tabloid follows the same logic, writing that "Yle selosti MM-kisoja kiroillen" ("YLE commentated on World Championships by swearing"). The subhead quotes Juusela and uses a new means of typographical euphemisation, the three dots, quite excessively: "V...u, s...tana, p..kele!" Ei kiinnostasta mennä tekemään mitään v..tun haastatteluja, kun on v...u kaksi matsia tänään jo selostanut! Ylen radioselostaja Niki Juusela" ("G....mn, f.....g, h..! I don't feel like doing any f.....g interviews after having commentated on two f.....g games already! YLE's commentator Niki Juusela.") However, the body of the text describes the events rather lightly:

- (7) Pahaksi onneksi kaksikko ei tiennyt, että he olivat vielä lähetyksessä ja niinpä kirosojen sävyttämät kommentit kuuluivat maailmalle. ("Unfortunately, the pair didn't know they were still on the air and their spiced comments were heard by the world.") (*Iltasanomat* 2005)

Later the impact of the incident is decreased by saying that the "special swearing report" could only be heard by the people who were listening to the online broadcast. No dirty words reached the radio waves. In this news story, external etiquette experts are not consulted, perhaps because the performance was not intended to be public. Instead, the supervisor of the swearers, Arto Teronen, head of radio sports at YLE, is given the word in a short piece attached to the main story. There also Juusela and Lindfors get a chance to defend themselves. Teronen takes a defensive approach, providing also the headline for the piece: "Poijat puivat peliä vähän suomalaiskansalliseen tyyliin." ("The

boys were analyzing the events in the traditional Finnish way”). The subheads contain the commentators’ repent, quoting Lindfors saying that “of course” he is sorry for what happened, while Juusela is reported saying ”En ole siitä millään tavalla ylpeä” (“In no way am I proud of it”). In the body of the text, also Teronen is sorry for what happened. The verb choices of the news story seem value-laden: Teronen ”defends”, ”criticizes” and ”is sorry”. Juusela is also quoted to give several explanations claiming his behaviour was out of his control; Juusela refers to national character as well as stress relief reactions:

”Suomalainen saattaa tiettyssä mielentilassa kiroilla paljon. Kun kaksi peliä selostaa peräjälkeen, keskittyminen on huipussaan. Pelin jälkeen kaikki lataus purkautui.” (“In a certain state of mind, a Finn may swear quite a lot. When you commentate on two matches after one another, your concentration is at its highest. After the game was over, all pressure was relieved.”) (Iltasanomat 2005)

Räikkönen, Ahonen, Juusela, Lindfors and others like them gain negative attention by choosing the words that they do because by doing so, they breach moral values, i.e. internalized social norms, and their acts can therefore be considered immoral (e.g. Culpeper 2011: 37–38). A person who uses taboo words in situations where they are considered inappropriate is seen to show a lack of consideration towards others because he or she thereby imposes negative emotions on others (ibid. 42). Moral panic might be considered a step further, involving a reaction which is out of proportion to the true consequences of the actions involved. The cases above assume reactions that seem highly unlikely and thus seem good candidates for moral panic. On the other hand, the sarcastic and humoristic undertones that were found in some of the stories suggest that the actual moral concerns may not be as great as would appear on the surface.

4 Who is allowed to utter a Dirty Word?

In addition to athletes and sports reporters, my material includes disapproval of the language of, for example, musicians. The majority of the stories in my material that contain disapproval of crude language relate, however, to sports. The target audience is a nation that has been called ”sports crazy”, and whose most famous international figures tend to be athletes. The media is interested in these persons and they are considered to be

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participating in the construction of the abstract concept of national image referred to above. They might be seen as the national heroes of our time. A positive national image and the status a national hero seem to require not only excellent performances but also good behaviour: when a national hero behaves in a socially unacceptable way, for example by using forbidden language, it gets noticed and may meet with disapproval.

There are also other types of protagonists in the material. The tone is not always critical: there is for example a rather playful story about a reality TV star ”making a world record in swearing” (Paloniemi 2010). Sometimes swearing is just a part of a quote and gains no disapproval. For example, workers of a paper mill are interviewed in a few of stories (e.g. Härkönen 2006) after they have just learned they will be laid off. The selected quotes contain swearing but there are no markers of disapproval in the selection or presentation of the quotes: their words are appropriate in their situation.

5 The Scholar and the Youth

An ancient discourse raises its head in the material, namely worry over the parlance of the youth – this concern is so old that even writings on the wall of Pompeii are said to address the issue. In 2006, a book came out called *Rexi on homo ja opettajat hullui! Opettajan päiväkirja* (“The principal is a fag and the teachers are crazy! A teacher’s diary”). The media paid quite a lot of attention to the book and published related stories on the language of modern day youth. One discussion centred round a linguist. A Docent of Finnish from the University of Turku was quoted as an expert as well as portrayed as a scapegoat in the debate. On January 31, Iltasanomat published the story “Suomen kielen dosentti: Vittu ei ole ruma sana” (“Docent of Finnish: Fuck is not a dirty word”). The subhead reads “Too much language cleansing may hurt kids.” The story is a follow-up on a story from January 27 reporting on name-calling and crude language teachers are nowadays subjected to. The Docent, Kari Nahkola, notes in the story that school kids’ language relates to a wider phenomenon of linguistic change and instead of forbidding something all together, it would be better to discuss with kids what kind of language is appropriate for each situation. Nahkola also distinguishes between name calling and other crude language. The story is relatively neutral but it is not the

end of the discussion: in the comment section of the news story, hundreds of comments appear. The youth is both defended and chided for its language, and the topic clearly raises a lot of interest and discussion. The interview also prompted a few columns: former radio and TV host, current MP Maria Guzenina (2006) wrote a rather sarcastic text speculating on new situations where teenagers could use swearwords, like political debates or when studying grammar. The late poet and MP Tommy Tabermann, on the other hand, wrote a column for the customer loyalty magazine *Me* (5/06) which is quite critical of the Docent's comments:

- (8) “Huora, homo ja vittu muodostavat sen pyhän kolmiyhteyden, jonka varaan nousevan sukupolven kielioppi rakentuu. Äskettäin julkisuuteen astui suomen kielen dosentti, joka viileän tieteellisesti todisti, ettei niillä tarkoiteta mitään pahaa, ne ovat vain ikään kuin modernia murrettua. Saatan olla vanhanaikainen ja rajoittunut, mutta en koe kovinkaan suurena ystävällisyytenä ja kehuna sitä, kun joku finninaama homottelee minua, ja haistattelee kovaan ääneen kadulla tai bussissa.” (“Whore, fag and fuck form the holy trinity on which the grammar of the new generation is built. Recently a Docent of the Finnish language came out and proved very coolly and scientifically that these words mean no harm, that they are only a modern dialect of sorts. I might be old-fashioned and narrow-minded but I don't think it's very friendly or polite when a pimply teenager calls me a fag and loudly tells me to go fuck myself on the street or in a bus.”) (Tabermann 2006)

Tabermann's reading of the original is rather like the devil citing scripture, particularly as Nahkola did treat name-calling as a special case. These parallel texts demonstrate that the full picture of the events is more complex than the individual texts imply. It seems that bad language is not a neutral subject even for researchers to comment on: the moral entrepreneurs are immediately there to question their authority.

6 Concluding Remarks

The case studies in this paper indicate that swearing-related discourse of moral panic exists in Finnish papers and tabloids. Examples of the roles, such as the moral entrepreneur, the object of offence and the scapegoat, presented by McEnery (2006) were found in the material studied. A typical initial entrepreneur was a tabloid, either voicing actual concerns of members of the audience or the *assumed* concerns of the greater audience. However, there seemed to be a lot more talk about the objects of offence than the possible consequences, and only rarely were corrective actions suggested. When they were, the solutions were simple: the scapegoat needs to refrain from the actions that cause

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offence, or controls need to be imposed on the scapegoat. Also, there seem to be clear differences in the gravity of the object of offence depending on the scapegoat in question: the threat of moral decay is more evident in cases involving children, while adults are allowed to break the moral code against the use of bad language in certain situations. However, even though moral panic discourse on bad language is a reoccurring text type in the tabloids, most moral disapproval seems to be short-lived, and an element of humour is regularly present. It remains unclear whether the discourse is always based on genuine moral concerns or sometimes just an attempt to capitalize on outdated moral codes, a means to create an attention-catching headline.

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