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Report on a Doctoral Thesis Entitled "An Examination of Taboo Language and the Representation of Incest in the French and British Press (2017–2022). A Cross-Linguistic Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis" by Sophie Eyssette

The thesis written by Sophie Eyssette under the supervision of Prof. Andrzej Łyda (Uniwersytet Śląski w Katowicach) and Prof. Margherita Dore (Sapienza Università di Roma) is well structured and argued with clear research objectives, a thoughtful transdisciplinary approach, and well-devised methodology. My only remark concerns the numbering of subsections within respective chapters. In the thesis, chapters 2– 6 begin with section 1.1., which should only be true of Chapter 1, not Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, in which case the starting sections should be respectively numbered as 2.1, 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1. The same applies to the numbering of chapters 7 and 8, which, though a bit differently organised, should also have their unique numbering. The issue is not trivial for the sake of clarity of in-textual reference. Leaving the numbering as it is renders it inoperative as a prospective navigational tools.

The thesis relates to the incest taboo, particularly its representation in the French and British press between 2017 and 2022. The study focuses on a relatively short time span (2017–2022). This may be seen as limiting from the viewpoint of the research, especially if broader shifts in societal and linguistic attitudes toward incest were to be analyzed on a broader time axis (usually the cultural contexts pertaining to the reception of such sensitive issues as incest evolve slowly). Eyssette, however, justifies her choice for the said span as early as on pp. 2-3 of the thesis. In addition, the Author's focus on press coverage cannot entirely grasp public perceptions or taboos about incest, as press reports are often shaped by specific editorial policies and public opinion. This fact needs to be clearly accounted for in the final version of the text, especially if the Author intends to publish the thesis in the form of a monograph. Thus, it seems that the results presented by Sophie Eyssette need to be constrained to reflect media construals (representations) rather than general public opinion. Notwithstanding this consideration, the theoretical and practical aims are cohesively integrated, providing a solid interdisciplinary contribution to linguistics and sociocultural studies.

This thesis elaborates on taboo language through a fine-grained exploration of a linguistic avoidance strategy, not just focusing on the explicit. The work provides an interesting conceptualisation of the continuum of taboo language from speech to silence, thus offering a new taxonomy that can be applied beyond incest (see Chapter 8 in particular). This continuum

is particularly suited to analysing how language encodes social taboos and reflects cultural attitudes.

Incorporating discursive absence as a methodological focus addresses an essential gap in linguistic research. By highlighting the ways in which social taboos shape silence in discourse, this thesis responds to the existing paradigms and expands the analytic framework of corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS, Chapter 4). The thesis successfully (given the set objectives) employs method and data triangulation to overcome the challenges of investigating silence and absence in discourse through, e.g. frequency analysis, alignment and concordance and critical discourse analysis (CDA). An interesting methodological aspect of Eyssette's work is using repeated search terms (the so-called "iterative approach", p. 7) to identify avoidance strategies and signalling nouns to analyse ambiguities and euphemisms. By examining incest in its sociolinguistic and cultural context, the Author highlights how taboos are perpetuated through language. Worth noting is Eyssette's understanding of how linguistic taboos are linked to social denial and silence. These lead to protecting perpetrators and the critical role of social media (e.g. the #MeToo movement [p. 2]) in breaking taboos and shaping discourse in a context where incest is ignored as a social problem. Considering all this, the study presents an excellent opportunity to ponder over the implications of these interrelations regarding justice, cultural norms and the social responsibility of media. The innovative approach to studying "discursive absence" may, however, present practical challenges, as identifying and analyzing what is intentionally left unsaid can be inherently difficult. Nevertheless, by combining CADS and CDA, Eyssette avoids the risk of interpretative arbitrariness (subjectivity) by minimizing it throughout the thesis.

While images of incest, including sexual abuse of children (together with explicit legal and social terminology), dominate the French press, in the British media, images of incest are less direct, i.e., they are euphemistic, metaphorical or simply omitted. This reflects the cultural avoidance of addressing domestic sexual violence in British society. The cross-cultural perspective adopted in this thesis highlights the way in which linguistic taboos are culturally constructed despite the ubiquity of incest as a taboo area.

While the thesis contributes a lot to our understanding of how a taboo language works, the exclusion by the Author of visual data and other multimodal elements (e.g. video content and social media) somewhat limits the scope of the conclusions, although Eyssette is aware herself of that restriction by making appropriate reservations on p. 160 of the thesis.

Overall, the Author makes an insightful argument about the linguistic framing of incest in the French and British press. Beyond its academic contribution, this thesis has profound social implications and encourages us to reflect on how language shapes our collective understanding of power and violence. The thesis is well-written. Specific suggestions on grammar and style have been made using the track-changes function. In addition, a few comments have been placed directly into the text. These should be understood as areas for further research rather than as necessary shortcomings to be corrected at this stage of the PhD process.

In conclusion, I hold a definitely positive assessment of the thesis and am confident that it merits progression to the subsequent stages of the PhD award process.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "K. J. ...". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'K' and a distinct 'J' at the end.