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## The Role and Effect of Profanity in Children's Literature

SABINA VIŠČEK<sup>1</sup>

∞ The controversy about using inappropriate language in children's literature is constantly debated and repeatedly attracts the attention of the public. In Slovenia, this happened when the novel *Na zeleno vejo* by Andrej Predin was assigned as the text for the Cankar competition, a Slovenian language competition. Several reading mentors and other readers, specifically adults, were bothered by its use of profanity and vulgar phrases. However, no literature is immune from the use of profanity and cursing, not even children's literature. As seen in various picture books and short illustrated stories, there are instances of adults, children, and even animals using profanity. Through the analysis, synthesis, and comparative method of mostly modern literary Slovenian texts, suitable for the first six years of Slovenia's nine-year primary school, it was found that profanity and expletives are stylistically and semantically diverse, and their pragmatic nature must be considered. It was established that, in most cases, profanity and insults are justifiably placed in Slovenian literary works for children. Most often, they appear as a motif; less often, they are used as the central theme (or motif) in the text. A significant role is played by the reading mentor, who must alert the readers to the function of profanity in the text.

**Keywords:** profanity, expletives, children's literature, taboo, offensive language

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## Vloga in učinek preklinjanja v otroški literaturi

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SABINA VIŠČEK

☞ Polemika o neprimernem jeziku v mladinski literaturi je vedno aktualna tema, ki večkrat pritegne pozornost širše javnosti. V Sloveniji se je to zgodilo z romanom *Na zeleno vejo* Andreja Predina, ko je bilo besedilo predpisano za Cankarjevo tekmovanje, tekmovanje iz znanja slovenščine. Nekateri mentorje branja in druge bralce, predvsem odrasle, so zmotile kletvice in vulgarizmi. Nobena literatura pa ni imuna na preklinjanje, tudi otroška ne. V njej, kot je razvidno iz slikanic in kratkih ilustriranih zgodb, preklinjajo odrasli, otroci in živali. V analizi in sintezi ter komparativni metodi večinoma sodobnih pripovednih slovenskih besedil, primernih za prvo in drugo vzgojno-izobraževalno obdobje osnovne šole, je bilo ugotovljeno, da so kletvice in psovke stilno in semantično raznovrstne, pri čemer je treba nujno upoštevati njihovo pragmatičnost. Ugotovljeno je bilo, da so kletvice in psovke v večini primerov vsebinsko in vizualno upravičeno umeščene v slovenska literarna dela za otroke. Največkrat nastopajo kot motiv, redkeje so osrednja tema (ali motiv) v besedilu. Pomembno vlogo ima mentor branja, ki mora bralce opozoriti na funkcijo kletvice v besedilu.

**Ključne besede:** kletvice, psovke, otroška literatura, tabu, žaljivke

## Introduction

Cursing is associated with problematic and taboo content in children's literature, which is relevant even in modern times (Saksida, 2022); it is an extremely broad and subjective phenomenon, as some definitions (Andresson, Trudgill 2007; Lyung, 2011 as cited in Beers Fägersten, 2017) see it as an expression of language that should not be understood literally, is tabooed, or stigmatised and evokes strong emotions. The most frequently used profanities are usually also the most offensive. In the context of sociolinguistics and linguistic pragmatics, this is known as 'the swearing paradox' (Beers Fägersten, 2012). Thus, cursing also found in children's poetry (we will not focus on it in this article) can be perceived with the negative stylistic characteristics of the words, which are stylistically justified as the aesthetics of ugly or as part of subversive children's literature. It can be seen in the folk literature, but Rozman-Roza stands out among contemporary authors, most prominently in his *Vabilo na Gravžev dan*, which was published in his first book – *Rimanice za predgospodiče* (1993), which was pointed out by Saksida (2001). Blažič sees the aesthetics of ugly in the theatre piece titled *Pika*, where she describes it as being part of the author's 'linguistic and literary style' (Blažič, 2009, p. 463).

Nežmah, in the book *Kletvice in psovke* (1997), divides cursing into two types; one is cursing or insulting, and the other is *profanity in the narrower sense*, and at the same time, points out the essential differences between the two. He defines an insult as 'a word or a phrase that insultingly describes the addressee' (p. 83). In the online version of the *Dictionary of the Slovenian standard language* (SSKJ 2),<sup>2</sup> curse words are defined as crude and very insulting words or expressions, usually uttered in strong emotional situations, and lists examples of usage ('psôvka -e ž (ō) groba, zelo žaljiva beseda, besedna zveza, izrečena navadno v afektu: izreči psovko; odgovoriti s psovko; grda, prostaška, ekspr. sočna psovka; psovke in kletve / ekspr. obkladati, obmetavati se s psovkami') (Fran). Profanities 'do not merely cause a person to get offended; they are considered as a form of verbal aggression shown in portraying projections or negative characteristics onto the addressee' (Nežmah, 1997, p. 84). In the online version of SSKJ 2, profanity is defined as crude and very insulting words or expressions, usually uttered in strong emotional situations ('klétvica -e ž (ē) nav. ekspr. groba beseda, besedna zveza, izrečena navadno v afektu: grda kletvica') (Fran), which indicates that the standard dictionary of the Slovene language does not distinguish between the two. Both curse words and profanities are listed in the SSKJ 2 with the expressive qualifies, indicating a word, meaning or

2 Dictionary of the Slovenian Standard Language, revised and updated edition.

expression which is emotionally marked ('ki označuje besedo, pomen ali zvezo, ki je čustveno zaznamovana') (Slovar novejšega besedja); therefore, dictionary definitions are not the same as definitions of concepts related to a specific use of language in literature and how readers respond to such stylistic devices.

A swear word consists of an entity that is 'metaphorical in the literal sense (ox, swine, dog, bastard, etc.), [...] or metonymic (ass, dick, cunt, etc.)' (Nežmah, 1997, p. 85). Profanity requires a verb in the Slovenian syntax, which provides a negative projection. When a speaker expresses it, the aggression is caused by them but is portrayed by summoning supernatural forces (e.g., *hudič te vzemi!* – *may the devil take you*). Profanity is, therefore, linked to the future, whereas curse words are linked to the present. Both are present in the language in their interpellative and referential form. The latter means that the addressee is not cursed; they are just a witness to the act (Nežmah, 1997, pp. 81–88). Special emphasis needs to be placed on the function of profanity from the linguistic perspective. 'In phraseology, profanity is considered as pragmatic idioms with a strongly emphasized expressive function' (Bratina, 2006, p. 366 as cited in Babič, 2015, p. 41). Jakop explains the difference between exclamations, profanities, and curse words according to their level of negative emotional tension and who these expressions are intended for: 'with exclamations the speaker expresses their feelings, with profanity negative emotions that are not necessarily aimed at the addressee, and curse words are linguistic devices, which are used to reject the addressee' (Jakop, 2006, pp. 127–130).

Nežmah (1997) also tackles the semantic treatment of profane or cursing forms, citing four categories. The first entails profanity in which the speaker 'does not wish to be the object of violence' (p. 100), or rather those in which the speaker declines any form of association (such as *jebi se!* – *fuck you*). The second category is comprised of profanity and curse words, which make the speaker the aggressor at a symbolic level (examples like *jebem ti ...!* – *fuck your ...!* and *pasji sin* – *son of a bitch*). He further defines the third category as a group of profane expressions (such as *mandi te gleda*, which translates *to go to hell*), which are phrases denoting 'ridicule and superiority used by the speaker to decline any form of cooperation in a common act' (Nežmah, 1997, p. 130). The fourth category consists of profanity, such as *mam te polno rit!* – *I am sick of you!*, in which the speaker is so exasperated with the other person that they wish to eliminate their existence and wish they had never been born if it is interpreted in a particularly negative way (Nežmah, 1997). A special place is occupied by insults (*idiot*), which Nežmah classifies as curse words. Since the addressee can be offended by non-offensive words, it is necessary to distinguish insult from the offence. The insulter first marks themselves with an insulting word, as it shows

them as uncultured and rude because they have become linguistically vulgar by using obscene words' (Nežmah, 1997, p. 13). Fran defines insults in Slovene as: '*žaljiva beseda, besedna zveza: izreči, zapisati žaljivko; ekspr. požreti žaljivko; slabš. zabrusiti komu žaljivko; ekspr. obkladati koga z žaljivkami*' (summarised: an insulting word or expression and provides examples of usage).

People use profanity for varied reasons. It is usually tied to a 'traumatic situation an individual is in' (Nežmah, 1997, p. 8). Therefore, it serves the purpose of expressing negative emotions when the subject is angry, disappointed, or frustrated in any way. The function of profanity is the release of emotional tension, as previously noted by Austin (1990, p. 135) since he classifies swearing as a wish in the group of behabitives by their illocutionary force, with which he indicates: 'the concept of reaction to the behaviour and fate of other people, or attitudes and expressions of attitudes towards the past and expected behaviour of someone else.' However, Austin does not have a completely definitive opinion of the group, as there are opportunities for accidents and insincerity. Profanity acts in the role of 'filler words or the obscene term is used to make what is said more expressive (not only negative but positive)' (Babič, 2015, p. 39). Sometimes, they are present in completely neutral situations to provoke humour, even when the context of the statement is not humorous (Beers Fägersten, 2012).

Babič analysed the aesthetic structure of profanity and concluded that they are mostly one-word or shorter fixed phrases, which are characterised by certain stylistic procedures giving them greater expressiveness, such as personification, transfer of (negative) qualities, exaggeration, and oxymoron. The power of profanity that has to do with sexuality is specifically emphasised, but these are most effective if we do not euphemise them. Profanity use depends on the speaker and on the circumstances surrounding the speaker (like the presence of children) (Babič, 2015, p. 42-43). Younger children usually use swear words because they enjoy the sound of these or feel they are learning a new word that seems to be forbidden. The author points out that despite replacing the taboo word with another more acceptable one, adult speakers still recognise the spoken word in the function of cursing (Babič & Voolaid, 2018, p. 157). It would most certainly be worth exploring whether this is recognised by children as well and to what extent. Most people know how to use profanity (Nežmah, 1997) even if they have never practised the skill or were even adamantly against using improper language (Allan & Burrige, 2006).

Children can learn the skill exceedingly early in their development. Most extensive expansion to vocabulary happens between the ages of three and four when children learn to name-call, insult, curse, and use obscene language and gender-related insults. By the time they enter elementary school, they already

know an average of 42 profanities and curse words (Jay & Jay, 2014). In contrast, teenagers tend to use profanities and insults in their slang with the intention of conveying persuasiveness, as determined by Stramljič Breznik (2007).

Profanity and curse words cannot be marked as inappropriate *a priori* since the pragmatic aspect needs to be taken into account, and the profanity or curse word needs to be contextualised, which means looking into who uttered the profanity, the emotional state of the speaker and the function of used profanity, given the fact that children are usually discouraged from swearing. In the classic fairy tale *Sapramiška* by Makarovič, first published in 1976, the main protagonist, Sapramiška, uses profanity to convey her distress, and it somehow gives her more confidence. Makarovič is also far from being the only Slovenian author who uses profanity and curse words in her texts. The rise of swearing in children's literature is also evident in other countries; the UK has even considered introducing special labels to alert readers to the words. In contrast, this type of censorship has never been present in Slovenia; there are no warnings even in the manuals for qualitative reading of children's books, published by the City Library of Ljubljana under the leadership of Pionirska - the Centre for Youth Literature and Librarianship.

## Method

### Materials used in the research

This article analyses the most outstanding examples of children's literature in terms of literary quality, namely shorter fairy tales and nonsensical narratives, realistic problem texts and poems, by explaining how stylistic devices are related to the literary content. Mainly, 16 contemporary narrative children's texts (published from 1981 to 2017) suitable primarily for children in the first six years of primary school<sup>3</sup> were analysed,<sup>4</sup> in which curse words and/or profanity appear. Most of these texts were recipients of the most important Slovenian awards or were nominated for them (*večernica* or *desetnica*). This was also the criterion for choosing appropriate literature for this research.

3 We considered children's texts, which are of high quality in terms of their cognitive, aesthetic, and ethical value (Kos 2001).

4 In alphabetical order: Arnuš Pupis, T. (2017). *Za devetimi gorami*. Komelj, M. (2009). *Kako sta se gospod in gospa pomirila*. *Konc Lorenzutti, N.* (2016). *Avtobus ob treh: (ali Društvo mlajših starejših bratov)*. Koren, M. (2006). *Eva in kozel*. Koren, M. (2011). *Mihec*. Kovačič, L. (1981). *Zgodbe iz mesta Rič-Rač*. Lainšček, F. (2009). *Mišek Miško in Belamiška*. Makarovič, S. (2014). *Zlata mačja preja*. Muck, D. (2001). *Anica in grozovitež*. Pavček, T. (2012). *Juri Muri v Afriki: o fantu, ki se ni maral umivati*. Pikalo, M. (2001). *Luža. Zgodbe za mladino*. Sokolov, C. (2012). *Se bomo zmenili in druge zgodbe*. Svetina, P. (2016). *Sosed pod stropom*. Vegri, S. (2016). *Naročje kamenčkov*. Zupan, D. (2013). *Tinček in tri zlate ribice*. Zupan, D. (2014). *Jaz, Franci Grdi*.

## Instruments for gathering data

A detailed analysis was applied to literary texts, which includes inter-textual comparisons and evaluation of themes and effects of explored children's texts.

In the analysis of the texts, two methods were used to analyse profanity and curse words from the point of view of aesthetic structure, as well as profane and curse forms with a semantic approach: the analysis and the synthesis that explores the justification of using these elements in texts for children. Additionally, the comparative method was employed to compare the chosen by using the Fran<sup>5</sup> website, which provides data about the number of occurrences and their contexts.

## Research design

The quantitative aspect of used profanities, such as the number of occurrences in a given text, is less important, even if that is precisely the reason why we cultivate a taboo around those texts; more interesting are adult readers' reactions to such texts. They complained about inappropriate language in the novel *Na zeleno vejo* (2007) by Predin, which was selected in the Cankar competition<sup>6</sup> for the 2011/12 school year, even though it enables critical, in-depth literary reading in the third educational period of primary school. But regardless of the attempts at a censorship strategy, the mentor 'must also choose literary provocations, socially critical topics, and more demanding texts, [...], which a given curricular reader perceives as taboo (inappropriate) texts precisely because of their incomprehensibility and foreignness!' (Saksida, 2015, p. 112).

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5 The website states it 'includes dictionaries, linguistic resources for Slovenian language and communicates with other websites that were made or are still being developed by the Inštitut za slovenski jezik Frana Ramovša ZRC SAZU (Fran Ramovš Institute of the Slovenian Language ZRC SAZU), and other dictionaries that were digitalised by the same institute. It also enables data mining in other Slovenian linguistic corpora. The purpose of the portal is to provide access to dictionary information to as wide a circle of users as possible, therefore, it enables both completely simple as well as very complex queries.' (Retrieved on November 28th, 2022)

6 The Cankar Award Competition is an optional form of reading competence assessment that motivates pupils and students from the first grade of primary school to the fourth grade of secondary school to read, explore, and evaluate literary texts and to respond to their messages by writing either short texts (in the first educational period) or later complex essays about literature they have read.

## Results and discussion

Among the Slovenian texts in which profanity or insults provide a central theme, a nonsense story titled *Dva zmerjalca* by Kovačič, published in the book *Zgodbe iz mesta Rič-Rač* (1981), stands out. The two brothers in the story use different animal names to insult each other. Every time one of them expresses an insult, it becomes real. A goat and a donkey enter their room first, but the brothers do not seem to understand and just continue by blaming each other and calling each other 'an idiot, an oaf' ('Zdaj pa imaš, ti butec, ti tele'; Kovačič, 1981, p. 68)<sup>7</sup>. The animals send the brothers to the shed but continue insulting each other but taking it to a tenser degree. The insults used by these animals have the aesthetic structure of adult profanities and have a humorous effect. Above all, exaggeration and the transmission of negative traits are in the foreground, using descriptive insults, saying how the other party is cursing like three hundred little brothers - cursers, describing the other as being crude and intolerable just as three hundred circus guards or telling them to leave the house and citing a string of profanities such as three hundred dormice fur hats and roasts (Kovačič, 1981, p. 73). In the text, Kovačič plays with profanities from the point of view of stylistic features, as he understands them literally, which is not allowed (Babič, 2015). By doing so, the author creates an almost grotesque ambience. In Fran, the word *butec* (idiot) is marked with the derogatory qualifier, *tele* (an oaf) with the vulgar slang qualifier. Definition of the word *tristo* (three hundred) in SSKJ includes it being considered a profanity, used in phrases such as three hundred devils, where is it; three hundred hairy ones - there are different variations of the latter, and it is also considered as a reinforcement to an insulting or profane expression ('kot kletvica: tristo hudičev, kje pa je; tristo kosmatih; tristo zelenih, tako pa ne gre / kot podkrepitev tristo mačkov, da ga ne ujameš'). Using this template, children can easily make their own derivatives and create new innovative forms of profanity.

Blažič (2011, p. 77), who wrote about the subversive style, pointed out the stylistic originality of Makarovič's texts, which is also reflected in her use of profanity: 'the author's frequent use of children-like profanities stylistically characterises her attitude towards the world either positively or negatively' (*oh, hell, three hundred fern seeds, three hundred sapramiš devils, three hundred Darwins - o, jebelacesta, tristo praprotnih semen, tristo sapramišjih vragov, tristo darvinov*). Sometimes, these are merely implied, for example: "She screamed Balkan curses, threw a corn cob at her own husband's head, and out of sheer desperation began to smear her head with chicken dung' (Makarovič, 2008a, p.

7 All translations of literary text were made by author of article.

65)” (as cited in Blažič, 2011, p. 77). *Jebelacesta* has the added qualifier colloquial and indicates something that makes the speaker uncomfortable or surprised.

In Makarovič's fairy tales, often the smallest characters, such as Sapramiška, often use profanity or curses. They also use it to defend themselves or stand up for themselves; this is what the bee does in the fairy tale *Medena pravljica*. The book was first published in 1995. The bee threatens the bear when it sits on the flowers: ‘Move your fat ass!’ (*Dvigni svojo debelo rit!*) (Makarovič, 2014, p. 169). Fran defines *ass* (*rit*) as a vulgar qualifier. In the fairy tale, honey is the source of all problems, and the animals release their frustration precisely by using profanity. The little mouse mocks the squirrel by singing: ‘I stick my tongue out to you, squirrel /her calls are following me/little mouse, big tongue, i i i, /what kind do you have?’ (*Kažem jezik veverici,/spremljajo me njeni klici,/majhna miška, velik jezik, i i i,/kakšnega imaš pa ti?*) (Makarovič 2014, pp. 172-173). In the continuation of the story, the inattentive hedgehog dirties up his wife's lair, which causes a big argument. The hedgehog curses and insults on his own: ‘Gosh darn, this woman!’ (*Arduš, kakšna baba!*) (p. 177). Fran defines *arduš* (*gosh darn*) as a colloquial qualifier and ‘expresses strong reinforcement to the claim’, while *baba* (*woman*) has the pejorative qualifier, as does the adjective *zabit* (*stupid*). He pities himself and sings: ‘She calls me: Stupid hedgehog, /you don't even know, /what it means to be a mother, /birth three little hedgehogs to this world [...] more than her spines/and chestnut shells/ I am pricked by her sharp and poisonous/evil tongue ...’ (Makarovič, 2014, p. 178). However, the hedgehog does not surrender and let his wife win; he uses profanity, too. He becomes overwhelmed by anger and curses: ‘Darn drill, sweet Jesus, three hundred chestnut shells, dagnabbit’ and adds ‘son of a gun’ (*Orka svedr, krščenduš, tristo ježic kostanjevih, orka la pipa ferdamana' in še 'arduš nahamol'*) (Makarovič, 2014, p.179). By using such language, the author creates word play and escalates the description of the hedgehog's rage; his emotions are so intense that the author paradoxically best describes him precisely with silence. Fran defines *orka* (*darn*) as ‘reluctance, impatience’ (*'nejevoljo, nestrpnost'*), *krščenduš* (*sweet Jesus*) has the colloquial qualifier and expresses ‘strong reinforcement to the claim’. When the hedgehog's spines also become dirty, the profanity reaches a climax and the narrator (Makarovič, 2014, p. 180) states: ‘It is completely improper, and I dare not repeat what he has said while he disappeared into the forest.’ Honey residue becomes stuck to the badger's paw, who takes advantage of the situation and tries to wipe himself in the fur of the fox. The fox goes crazy and screams: ‘Jeepers! Have you gone insane?! You dare to wipe your paws into my fur? You uncouth beast, you ugly bastard!’ (*Jasasna! Kaj si znorel?! V moj kožuh si drzneš brisati svoje umazane tace? Zverina neotesana,*

*prasec grdi!*) (Makarovič, 2014, p. 181). Makarovič uses every new character to escalate the power of profanity, where the latter expression shows a marked resemblance to human speech. From the badger's perspective, the fox does not humiliate him. By comparing him to a *beast* (*zverina*) or a *bastard* (*prasec*), she places herself to his level, a perspective used by the author to mock the fox (who is a metaphor for an arrogant fool) and the badger (who is a metaphor for the ignorant opportunist). The way the fox uses profanity in the example resembles the strength of profanity used by the chicken homemaker Emilia. Fran provides two definitions for the word *zverina* (*beast*): '2. pejor. a crude, cruel man: *they were afraid that they would get a beast as their commander; it is not good to deal with such a selfish beast / used as a curse word - you beast, you have no heart*' ('2. slabš. surov, okruten človek: *bali so se, da bi dobili za poveljnika kako zverino; ni dobro imeti opravka s tako sebično zverino / kot psovka zverina, nimaš nič srca*'). *Prasec* (*bastard*) bears two distinct meanings pertaining to the text: '2. vulgar slang worthless, useless man: *what bastard betrayed them / used as a curse word - cursed bastard*' ('2. nizko ničvreden, malovreden človek: *kateri prasec jih je izdal / kot psovka prekleti prasec*), 3. vulgar slang - a dirty man: I have to wash this bastard' (3. *nizko umazan človek: umiti moram tega prasca*«).

Vegri used profanity in her poem '*Jebenti*', *reče mulc*, which is quite often heard among adults. By using it, the child expresses their frustration, since they immediately 'pounce into the kids' ('*v mulce zakadi*'), and Fran defines it with the vulgar qualifier and claims that it 'expresses anger, displeasure' ('*izraža jezo, nejevoljo*'). The poem alone serves as a platform for the topics of life and death. Replacing the chosen profanity with a new euphemism, like '*j-word*' (*jebenti*), would not achieve the desired effect, because the latter not only sounds different, but it is also exceedingly difficult to imagine an angry person screaming '*j-word*'. In order for profanities to come across as such, they need to correspond to their phonological image (Bowers & Pleydell-Pearce, 2011). The use of '*jebi ga*' (fuck it), which was considered to be trivial when it was first published, is justified by Novak (1994) in his poem *Marjetične meditacije* by saying:

In my private life I almost never use profanity, and it is not because of respect towards bearing decency on the outside but because I believe that I am incapable of portraying it with enough credibility or in a natural way. [...] As a writer, however, I think that literature must take advantage of every plain of a language. The decisive point of the poem *Marjetične meditacije* cannot be portrayed without any kind of supplement to that profanity. If '*jebi ga*' would have been substituted with an expression like 'Oh, well! What can we do? Such is life!' he would have destroyed it irreversibly. (p. 9)

The statement by Novak relates to the complexity of profanity usage in children's literature, which is by no means intended to merely shock and provoke. It is a well-considered move that needs to be founded in the text in order for it to achieve its intended message, which also immensely and with a great measure of honesty attracts the younger generations. Mihec finds himself in a difficult family situation in a book titled by his name by Koren, who hears quite a few profanities because of his father's drinking. Classmate Leon insults him: 'Go away! You are annoying! And your dad is drunk all the time!' (*Bež stran! Zoprn si! In tvoj oče je kar naprej pijan!*) (Koren, 2011, p. 34). Mihec does not return the favour but instead bites his shoulder. That is how he releases his frustration. By kicking Mihec out of his company, Leon shows a distinct dislike for his company, as if he were uttering a profanity, even though he is not. Even the statement *zoprn* (annoying) can be made into the curse word *zoprnež* (an annoying person, moron). Profanities are used even by the king in the *Juri Muri v Afriki: O fantu, ki se ni maral umivati* (2012) by Pavček. It was first published in 1958. The king orders his people to quickly wash *the dirty boy*. Fran adds an expressive qualifier to the word and adds the example '*watch your mouth, you dirty boy*'; (*kako pa govoriš, umazanec umazani*) (Pavček, 2012, p.17).

Texts that are heavily wrapped around profanity are rare in Slovenia. A visual substitute of profane words with a picture is seen in Zavadlav's illustrations in the book *Tinček in tri zlate ribice* (2013) by Zupan. The illustration shows the canary named Fiko, screaming at the cat and saying: '*There is no greater fool than Feliks the cat.*' (*Ni ga bedačka čez Feliksa mačka.*) (Zupan, 2012, p. 26). There are seven little clouds coming from his mouth, bearing arbitrary characters and letters and little pictures, which could resemble profanity or insults. This is important information for readers when reading a picture book as a multimodal text (Batič & Lebar Kac, 2020). A similar visual upgrade to the text was done by Košir in *Anica in grozovitež* (2001) by Muck, in which the father says, '*God damn it*' (*Sto hudirjev*) (Muck, 2001, p. 57), even if not explicitly stated in the text.

Quite unexpectedly, profanity and swearing appear in Pikalo's stories entitled *Luža* (2001). The tales of Ran the pre-schooler are mostly humorous, even when he finds himself in an uncomfortable situation. When children scold him, he fights back: '*I gave them the middle finger. This means you are in charge.*' (*Jaz sem jim pokazal sredinski prst. To pomeni, da si ti ta glavni.*) (Pikalo, 2001, p. 32). Later, however, he changes his narrative: '*When you show your middle finger, it means that you're like a boar if you know.*' (*Če pokažeš sredinca, to pomeni, da si tak kot merjasec, če veš.*) (p. 54). At certain points, the insults are made indirectly, like here: '*Dad said that when I write, the president needs to have the big P.*' (*Oči*

je rekel, ko to pišem, da predsednik ni mali, ampak veliki »p«) (p. 21). When Ran catches his parents in the bed, Dad is embarrassed: 'Dad said they were playing adults. Shoot, I forgot to turn off the stove!' (*Igrava se očije in mame, je rekel oči. O, mater, v kuhinji sem pozabil ugasnit plin!*;) (p. 68). Luža (boy's nickname) educationally summarises some profanities from the text and formulates a principle: 'In my kindergarten, we are not allowed to say ugly or English words: *drek, šit, ful, kul, tu mač, izi*, and such. But the grown-ups still use them if you know.' (*V mojem vrtcu ne smemo govorit grdih besed in angleških: drek, šit, ful, kul, tu mač, izi in take. Samo ta veliki jih vseeno govorijo, če veš.*) (p. 100). Embarrassed adults also use 'shit on a stick (*drek na palici*)' (p. 38) and the profanity 'Get out of here (*pojdi se solit*)' (p. 46). The irony of the end of this story is when the school psychologist inappropriately reacts during a school aptitude test because she does not understand Luža's joke about the frog. She calls him: 'Fine, you little rascal tadpole ...' (*Prav, paglavec paglavi...*) (p. 103). Fran cites an additional expressive qualifier to the expression *paglavec* (tadpole), whereas *mater* (shoot) and *drek* (shit) have the vulgar slang qualifier, the latter even pejorative, but it is not clear from the text which context was implied.

Curse words are used in their diminutive forms, used intentionally by the author in order to reduce their power but retain the intent of insulting, as was done by Koren in her story titled *Eva in kozel* (2006). Kozel (the goat) says to Eva after she had an unnecessary fight with her classmate: 'Oh, you can be such a goat sometimes!' (*Eh, ti si včasih tudi prava kozica!*) (p. 25). Fran defines the expression *koza* (goat) as pejorative and as 'stupid goat, you goaty goat'.

Insults in children's literature seem to be present in the form of profanity. They are frequently used by adults (animals and people) to reinforce their opinion about something, especially when they are trying to teach the children a lesson. One such example can be seen in *Mišek Miško in Belamiška* (2009) by Lainšček, when the parents forbid their children from socialising with each other. Belamiška's dad says: 'You are going to get it if I catch you again with that grey scoundrel!' he scolds her. 'That is just not appropriate for a lady like you.' (*Gorje ti, če te še kdaj dobim s tem sivim falotom!*) ji žuga. 'To se za gospodično pač ne spodobi.' (Lainšček, 2009, para. 9). Probably the most innovative, even if in the negative sense, and also the most insulting statement, is the one made by Belamiška's dad: 'Grey mice dig in the dirt day and night and that's why mud sticks to them,' he explains. (*Sive miši dan in noč rijejo po zemlji, zato se jih drži blato,* ji pojasni.) (Lainšček, 2009, para. 9). By saying this, the father completely devalues the identity of grey mice, since the profane statement can be understood literally and metaphorically. Grey mice are, according to him, dirty because of the work they do (literal meaning), and dirty because they dig their way through

life (metaphorical meaning). Lainšček uses the insult *falot* (*scoundrel*) (Fran also qualifies it as a curse word) and, thus, creates a linguistic image to reinforce the mentality of grey mice: they are poor, so they must be fraudulent. At the same time, Miško's dad warns his son: '*I do not want you seeing that white gal! he explains. That is just not appropriate for a village boy!*' ('*Nočem, da se še kdaj srečaš s to belo frajlo! mu pojasni. To se za fanta iz vasi pač ne spodobi.*') (Lainšček, 2009, para. 9). He has nothing nice to say about the white mice and thinks they take them for fools. He is relentless in his last statement, as he rudely says: '*We know what is right, and we are not uptight!*' ('*Vemo, kaj je prav, in se ne držimo, kot bi im- ele zlato pero v riti.*') (Lainšček, 2009, para. 10). The mice dads are full of prejudice and despise one another, which is clear from the insults they use. Those clearly convey their social and economic status, which is also present in the illustrations; while the white mouse's dad is fully clothed and wearing glasses, the grey dad is wearing blue overalls, without a T-shirt or glasses. Even though *frajla* (*gal*) is not considered an insult, in the given context, it most certainly functions as such since the dad said it in order to insult Belamiška and hurt Miško (even if for a worthy cause). When the mice dads start arguing when they cannot seem to find their young, the insults become equalised on both ends (Belamiška and Miško are called *brats* - *smrklja*, *smrkavec*).

Anger is present in the picture book by Komelj titled *Kako sta se gospod in gospa pomirila* (2009). Mister (*gospod*) and Madame (*gospa*) insult pigeons on their balcony by calling them 'Trash!' or 'Flying rats!' ('*Nesnaga golobja!*' and '*Leteče podgane!*') (para. 3).

In Slovenian children's literature, we also find an example of an insult uttered at a cemetery. Sokolov, in the story *Enkrat vsak umre*, published in the book *Se bomo zmenili in druge zgodbe* (2012), uses her precise sense of children's curiosity and an indirect indication of education to lead us into thinking about what is appropriate. The undertakers are commenting on a child chewing his gum: '*The undertakers standing in a line with sombre faces shook their heads. [...] I mean ...; Kids these days!; Where are his parents?!; Why do people bring kids like these to funerals?*' ('*Pogrebci v vrsti so mrko gledali in zmajevali z glavo. [...] Mislim ... 'Mularija!' 'Le kje ima starše?!' 'Zakaj take pamže sploh vlačijo na pogrebe?'*' (p. 163). Fran defines the expression *mularija* (*kids*) as colloquial.

In problem literature, cursing (insulting) can be a reason for the marked distress of the literary hero. Such reading demands a sensitive and attentive reader who is capable of close reading. At first, the cat is in a completely unequal speaking position in Zupan's fantastic story entitled *Jaz, Franci Grdi* (2014). He is the last and the weakest kitten in the litter, and he barely survived. Almost every family member picks on him because he is so small. The insults

deeply affect his confidence: *'My tears have run out. I somehow became numb and got used to the insults. I just ignored them. There was nothing left for me to do. I was not the crybaby anymore, just a loser.'* (*Solze so mi presahnile. Postal sem nekako otopel, navadil sem se na žaljivke. Kar preslišal sem jih. Saj mi druga ni preostalo. Nisem bil več Cmera, samo še Zguba.*) (p. 11). We know that the protagonist suffers because of the verbal abuse and neglect. His siblings call him *a rat spawn* or *a rat son* (*podganji izrodek, podganji sin*). By using the latter expression, they insult their mum, who then *'gave the kids a few slaps'* (*je mulcem prisolila nekaj klofut*); p. 15). These are most certainly one of the harshest profanities present in children's literature and are equal to the curse word *son of a bitch* (*pasji sin*) according to their power and semantic structure. According to Nežmah (1997), this is considered to be a triple degradation and even Fran cites the expression *zguba* (*loser*) with the pejorative qualifier and is considered to be a curse word. The siblings use the mentioned curse word to degrade their brother back to a cub or to a creature that has degenerated (being worse than themselves), degrade him to another creature (from a cat to a rat), and insult the mother because this means that she mated with a rat, not a cat. Because there is an accident with coal in the woodshed where the cat's family lives, the cat finds Mato, who names him 'Franci Grdi'. Mato takes care of him, but the mum does not like him at first and calls Franci Grdi *the toothless hairless creature*. With a great measure of self-irony, the cat says to himself: *'Loser, you're an idiot.'* (*Zguba, ti si butec.*) (p. 30) because he just cannot seem to believe how nice he feels next to Mato. Franci gets his biggest win when he hounded out the neighbour's cat, who came from a dysfunctional family and his dad was an alcoholic. He talks about his owner and says: *'He called women names and father Boris was extremely mad, so they frequently fought.'* (*Ženske je obkladal z grdimi imeni, da je bil oče Boris že hudo jezen in sta se večkrat sporekla.*) (p. 47). This motif is established even in interpersonal relations. When the mother becomes upset because Mato compares the gentleman who was interested in the cat to a dummy, the father makes an ironic comment and creates a euphemism: *'You can't say Tavsig is a dummy, but Mr Tavsig is not too open-minded'* (*Ne smeš reči Tavsig je tepec, ampak gospod Tavsig ni preveč odprte glave.*) (p. 35). *Tepec* (*dummy*) Fran cites as pejorative and lists it as a curse word. Zupan very effectively, and, above all, with a great deal of sensitivity and empathy, shows the context of cursing or insulting in different relationships (between animal cubs, siblings, between two adults, and an adult and a child). He confronts his readers without embellishments that sometimes, the most terrible things are said by the family. Whether the profanity is spoken or implied by the person, the writer always takes the side of the victim.

In the novel, *Avtobus ob treh* (2016) by Konc Lorenzutti, Tine Lavrenčič from the coast and Uroš Zajc from the capital Ljubljana spend an interesting summer together. When Uroš overhears his friend's dad curse, Tine explains what the words mean. 'Let me translate for you. *Dio povero* means *poor God*, *porka* means *dirty*, but I do not know what *maštela* (*bucket*) means. It is probably something dirty.' ('*Ti prevedem: Dio povero pomeni revni Bog, porka pomeni umazana, ne vem pa, kaj je maštela. Po moje nekakšna packarija.*') (p. 136). Fran defines the expression *porka* as vulgar slang since it 'denotes a strong reinforcement to the statement: *porka*, everything is going awry / *porka* *madona* *porkamadona*; (*izraža močno podkrepitev trditve: porka, vse gre narobe / porka madona porkamadona*'). This profanity first causes Uroš from Ljubljana to be perplexed and wonder about its foreignness. At the same time, Tine is also curious and can only guess what that last part meant. Uroš keeps repeating the word for so long until he misuses it and insults Tine's brother Nace, who is worried about his father's health. But the use of profanity is nevertheless appropriate, as there is an educational aspect between peers; Tine apologises, saying that Uroš just wanted to release his pain. Profanity connected to God is rare in children's literature. Foreign curse words are usually better received than others since it is the foreign aspect of these expressions that gives them the additional expressiveness (Babič, 2015). Simultaneously, uttering such taboo words, even profanity in your first language, causes much more anxiety than if expressed in a different language (Haris et al. as cited in Bowers and Pleydell-Pearce, 2011). In this novel, the mother and Tine later have a fight, but the profanities become implied. Tine is ashamed after it because of the words he used when speaking to his mother, which is also the reason why he does not dare to repeat them.

The same humorous atmosphere, but in a nonsensical perspective, is created by the cursing phone in the story *O sitnem telefončku*. It is one of the stories published in *Sosed pod stropom* (2016), written by Peter Svetina. The lost telephone insults quite a few passers-by, calling mister Boža an *ugly and improper man* (*grdavž and nemarnež*) and his dog a *monster* (*tolovaj*), *blighter* (*zmenene*) and a *nitwit* (*teslo*). All these expressions carry the expressive qualifier as per Fran, except for *nitwit* (*teslo*), which is defined as pejorative. He additionally insults a student called Gaja and calls her a *brat* (*smrklija*). Even though the text contains no explicit indication, it is relatively easy to imagine a touch-screen phone in the form of an old grumpy complainer. Even more innovative is the use of *jebenti* (*fuck*) in Svetina's story called *Loto in te reči*, published in the book under the same name by Svetina. The reporter Frančišek Požar is surprised by the fact that the Hamburg Blisk implies a beautiful and intelligent woman, not a man. Upon meeting her for the first time, he says: '*Oh, fuck!*' and in the same breath '*Sorry!*' ('*O, jebenti!*' in v

*isti sapi tudi 'Oprostite!'*) (p. 64). What makes the usage of this profanity creative is the fact that Svetina annotated it and wrote: 'This profanity does not belong in children's literature. The editor should be warned. Appropriate expressions to use: *gosh darn it, barnacles, damn, sweet Jesus, and blimey.*' (*To je kletvica, ki v otroško literaturo ne sodi. Nanjo bo treba opozoriti urednico. Kletvice, ki bi v otroško literaturo lahko sodile, so: sakrabort, hejnata, hudimana, presneto, gromska strela in krščen matiček.*) (p. 64). With this, Svetina not only destigmatises the profanity in a humorous way but unobtrusively urges younger and adult readers (and editors) to think about language style. Fran defines *jebenti* as vulgar, the expression *hejnata* is not listed in the dictionary, *hudimana* as a euphemism, and the rest (*gromska strela* and *krščen matiček*) are also missing from the dictionary.

Another example of uttered insults, which do not reach the addressee directly, was used by Arnuš Pupis in her story *Vsega je kriv polh*, published in the book *Za devetimi drevesi* (2017). The forest animals are running out of food after their winter hibernation, so the bear and the wolf blame the dormouse as the thief at the meeting, since he is missing. The rest insult the dormouse with insults they would never say to his face, such as: *sakramenski zlikovec* (*God-damned villain*), *kradljivec potuhnjeni* (*sneaky thief*), *brezdelnež* (*idler*) in *presneti polh* (*damned dormouse*) (p. 89). Fran defines *sakramenski* (*God-damned*) as expressive, 'denoting a negative attitude towards the person or thing' and as an expression that can function 'as a curse word - god-damned hoyden' ('*ki izraža negativen odnos do osebe, stvari*' in *lahko učinkuje tudi 'kot psovka sakramenska frklja'*).

This indicates the influence of the fairy tale *Mojca Pokrajculja*, since the dormouse and the bunny are blamed for something they did not even do (Blažič, 2017). The animals in *Mojca Pokrajculja* apologise to the bunny at the initiative of the squirrel, but they almost blame the little owl. It remains problematic that nobody was punished for their deeds - the bear, the wolf, and neither the fox in *Mojca Pokrajculja*. So, the wolf and the bear, who cunningly assume the role of authority, maintain a violent attitude in the background.

## Conclusions

We have analysed profanity and curse words present in Slovene children's literature; for the most part, their presence seems to be contextually and visually justified. Most frequently, they are present as motifs, on rare occasions as the central theme (or motif) of the text, which can be seen in *Jaz, Franci Grdi*, the nonsensical story *Dva zmerljivca* published in *Zgodbe iz mesta Rič-Rač*, and the fairy tale *Medena pravljica*.

The results of our analysis of the studied literature also indicated that adults, children, and animals use profanity, most often in a family setting or within their closed circle (among friends and neighbours). A gender comparison shows that boys or men tend to curse more. Girls or women characters in Makarovič's work are an exception, however, since they tend to curse even more than their male counterparts. When a given literary person curses in problem literature, such as *Jaz*, *Franci Grdi*, or literature with problematic motives, such as in *Enkrat vsak umre*, the persons present are often silent or hardly say anything, which indicates an unequal position between the speakers. Very rarely do we see the offender (the one using profanity) being rejected (*Avtobus ob treh*, *Mihec*). When characters are equal to each other by intellect and status, using profanity is bilateral. This is the echo principle, as can be seen in real-life situations (Beers Fägersten, 2012). Another response to profanity is laughter, as can be seen in *Eva in kozel*. The texts contain predominately euphemised profanity used by adults in their daily lives (*jebenti*, *jebelacesta*, *drek na palici*, *mater*); there were also some foreign expressions too (*dio povero*, *porka maštela*, *šit*), insults made up by mixing the two (*orka sveder*, *orka la pipa ferdamana*), and neologisms were quite frequent (*tristo ježic kostanjevih*). The latter were mainly minted by Makarovič. Given their stylistic characteristics typical of those used by adults (if we can call them that), they are functional with young readers precisely for their convincing and innovative wordplay. However, the most innovative euphemised profanity (*o*, *jebenti*) was used by Svetina, who added a humorous footnote to the original text, in which he intently alerted the readership to it being inappropriate and, in doing so, listed even more profanities. Analysis of children's novels would have most likely indicated more instances of profanities and curse words, but those would not have been as innovative as those present in children's literature. Literary characters curse because they are angry, surprised, embarrassed, or just to create wordplay, but never during playing. Texts for children also contained expressions such as *kletvica* (profanity), *žaliti* (insult), *zmerjati* (name calling), *preklinjati* (curse), but they do not carry the same definition as those outlined by Nežmah (1997). Frequently, the definitions for profanity and curse words are confused, probably also because they have the same definition in the *Dictionary of the Slovenian Standard Language*.

Profanities, curse words and insults analysed in these texts are mostly defined in Fran; however, curse words and more innovative words are not. Texts also frequently contained colloquialisms used to strongly reinforce the speaker's statement, such as *arduš*, *orka*, *krščenduš*, *porka*, and even *tristo*, and vulgarisms, such as: *jebenti*, *rit*, and *drek*.

Curse words and insults must be read with a certain amount of performativity since these become clear only within the context (*slon* (elephant) and *žirafa*

(giraffe) are not profanities per se). Most frequently used were the metaphorical curse words, such as *kozel* and *kozica* (goat). The reading mentor must make sense of the function of profanities in conversation, especially when children notice or overlook them, but they are essential for understanding a specific textual context. Why did somebody curse? Is every word considered to be inappropriate in certain contexts? Why does one expression insult a person and the other does not?

Insulting among younger children is connected to their non-verbal communication, which is why characters in fairy tales stick their tongues out or give the finger. In instances where insulting is the dominant motif, it is sensible to talk to the readers about the emotions and circumstances of such insults. Who insulted who and why? Are they equal in their relationship? Who is the victim? It is also relevant to note whether the insult is uttered by the character on their own or is aimed at another person whom they are trying to humiliate. It is not recommended to read passages in which profanity occupies the central part of the text (e.g., the fight between the mice in Lainšček's work) without the students knowing the entire context. The readers need to understand that profanities can have a humorous effect on the reader even when the literary character is not in a humorous situation (such as the hedgehog in *Medena pravljica*). When a given profanity or curse word is hidden, this can be implied in a multitude of ways. In the first example, the insult is written only with the first letter (the 'p-word'), and then it is depicted only visually with arbitrary characters that, in each sequence, mean nothing. It happens quite often, especially when the subject is in an intense emotional state of anger, indignation, or rage, that the author merely describes his speech.

Regardless of whether the youngest readers understand the meaning of profanities used (for a six-year-old, 'three hundred Darwins' is demanding), the contextual perception of their expressiveness (in the sense that it is an inappropriate word) and the effect that swearing has on a young reader is essential. With the presence of profanities in children's literature, the tolerance for this kind of language is rising, which is why the reading mentor must be able to evaluate the importance of cursing in texts and be able to argue for such quality texts in literature lessons in front of potential censors. Even if profanity and insults interrupt the conversation in children's texts, it is only momentarily; then, the conversation must continue, which is the essence of any reading event.

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